

## Mystery of the missing spy chief

K.P. NAYAR

Washington, Aug. 2: Speculation is sweeping the US and Israel about the fate of Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, Saudi Arabia's spy chief, who is said to have planned the July 18 "Damascus Volcano" that killed Syria's defence minister Dawoud Rajiha.

The attack killed several members of President Bashar al Assad's inner circle, including Assad's brother-in-law and deputy defence minister Assef Shawkat. It was the most daring act so far by those who want regime change in Damascus.

The next day King Abdullah named Bandar as chief of general intelligence in addition to his post-2005 job of secretary-general of the kingdom's National Security Council. The new appointment was seen as a reward for the successful Damascus bombing operation.

Three days later, according to reports which have gained currency here and in Israel, Prince Bandar was killed in an equally daring bomb attack on Saudi Arabia's intelligence headquarters in Riyadh.

Strategic analysts with a sense of history here are comparing Bandar's killing, if it is true, to the June 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz



George W. Bush meets Prince Bandar bin Sultan in Texas in 2002

Ferdinand of Austria which was a trigger for World War I four weeks later.

The murders of his brother-in-law and his defence minister have hardened Assad's resolve to go all out in fighting the opposition, whom he describes as Saudi and Qatari-funded terrorists. So far, the President had largely played the "good cop", leaving it to Maher al Assad, his younger brother and commander of the elite Republican Guards and some other openly hard-line members of the Assad clan to play the "bad cops" and lead the fighting.

Yesterday, even as Assad openly urged his army to be "the shield, the wall and fortress of our nation," Sausan Ghosheh, the UN spokeswoman in Damascus, said: "For the first time, our observers saw firing from a fighter aircraft. We also now have confirmation that the opposition is in a position of having heavy weapons, including tanks."

This week, the Syrians managed to capture a Saudi army colonel who is said to have spilled plans for an attack on Damascus by the Mujaheddin-e Khalq, Iranian dissidents based in Iraq and supported by the Saudis and the US. The assault to take over parts of the Syrian capital would have involved 20,000 men.

Israel, now convinced that Assad will not survive, has prepared plans to invade Syria, not as an occupation force, but to take possession of Syria's chemical weapons so that they do not fall into the hands of an unstable and unpredictable successor government in Damascus.

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## Why anyone would think that someone would buy a rakhi for Rs 50 lakh



**BIG BROTHERS AND BIG SISTER** Many children in India were blessed with venerable sibling affection on Thursday. If new President Pranab Mukherjee did not disappoint young citizens, neither did Mamata Banerjee and Anna Hazare. (Pictures by Ramakant Kushwaha and Amit Datta)



## Stronger than power grid

SANKARSHAN THAKUR

New Delhi, Aug. 2: The string of attachment between sister and brother may just have taken a mindless leap to becoming a string with attachments.

A rakhi was advertised this morning for Rs 50 lakh a piece. To look at that length of white gold encrusted with 500 diamonds was to be collared under wondering whether Raksha Bandhan had gone from a ritual of sibling affirmation to a rave of widespread ostentation.

Last heard, that excessive piece of studded metallurgy was still short of takers but the rakhi has recorded an unprecedented roll on the cash tills. Such that Archies, a new-age bauble chain, chose to go retro on its window-dressing this summer, replacing friendship bands with boxes of glittery kitsch.

They were pulling the remainders out this afternoon from a central Delhi outlet, but they are already placing orders for the coming year. "Tremendous product," said salesman Rajesh Bhutani. "Rakhis have sold like nothing else, not even Christmas cards."

He was too taken by profits to bother putting an analysis on it. Eventually, as he busied about supervising the faux gold-dust being swept off the shop-floor, he put out a gem of wisdom — "Our population is increasing, more rakhi buyers, good for us."

But to more detached minds, there is more than mere Malthusian accretion to mounting conquests of the rakhi constituency. "We have an expanding middle class and it has a lot of money to spend on happy things," says sociologist Andre Beteille. "It is much the same thing that is happening to phenomena like Valen-

tine's Day, which we see observed more and more vigorously and in more and more places."

Today, Santa Claus is a harassed Samaritan, having to labour his gifts down every chimney, or drainpipe as the case is more likely to be in these parts. We have half a dozen, if not more, new year's days — to each region or denomination its own from Bihu, to Pongal to Baisakhi to Onam to Diwali to what have you — but new year only becomes Happy New Year around the cusp of the Gregorian calendar year.

This is the all-embracing democracy of the Market, probably the most secular and pluralist, if also profitable, institution of our age.

It isn't easy any more to procure a card simply wishing someone well. Who for? What for? Why? Where? When? Father's Day, Mother's Day,

Granny's Day, Uncle's Day, Friendship Day, Teacher's Day. Of course, but that's Palaeolithic. You are meant to find a card written to a third cousin getting out of hospital following complicated appendectomy. If you don't you're probably in a trash shop.

It matters not quite that inflation is in spike, the markets are depressed and the future still a silver lining with a dark cloud attached to it.

The gloom serves as unlikely prod to make the most of "feel-good" moments, such as the one rakhi represents. No wonder, Raksha Bandhan is no longer about brother-sister ties alone. Hanging down, ceiling-to-floor, of a "Vaastu" store in the trendy Khan Market is a smorgasbord of craftily themed amulets — "good education rakhi", "good career rakhi", "good business rakhi", "good health rakhi", "good karma

rakhi", "mental peace rakhi", even a delectably cheeky "good girlfriend rakhi".

Pay, and panacea has adorned your wrist. It's possible to see through the game, but consumer sentiment is playing ball.

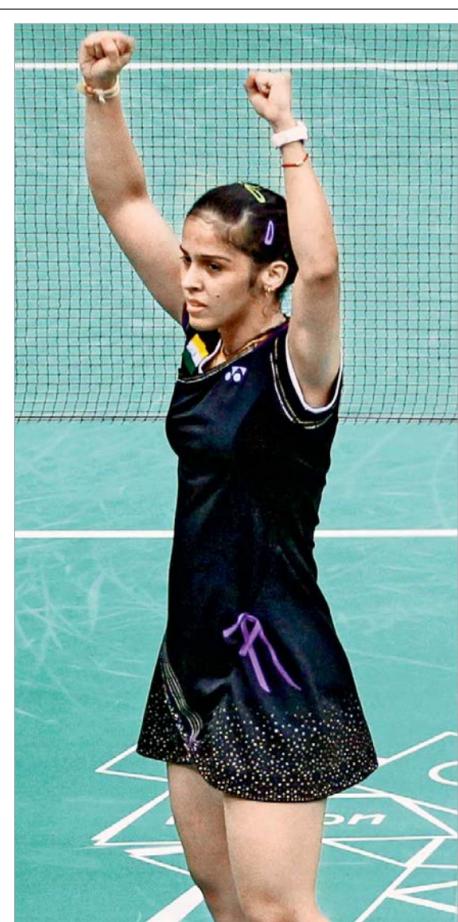
To another sociologist, though, the proliferation of rakhi is not merely about market cunning, it's also about using commerce as vehicle for religious propaganda.

"The way rakhi, in particular, has spread south and east from north India is indicative of efforts to give religious festivals a pan-Indian look. Cinema and television serials are also part of the strategies by which Hinduism is sought to be given almost Semitic standardisation," says sociologist Ashis Nandy. "Festivals like Dhanteras were unheard of in Calcutta but now they have become almost intrinsic to Mahalaya and Diwali rituals.

These offer clues to how the market and mass media are being used to pan-Indianise what is only a north Indian identity."

Kajol performs Karva Chauth in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and meets Shah Rukh Khan in the bargain. Next thing you know, Karva has exploded north Indian frontiers and become an all-India pandemic among some aspiring women.

Some identities, heartily, still come purged of mortal barriers of region, creed, language or caste. There still isn't a notified day for mothers-in-law and no cards dedicated to them in the elaborately catalogued store shelves. Someone smart has probably divined they make a poor marketing proposition. But perhaps a thought to a "good mother-in-law rakhi" next season? That'll be the mother of all strings of attachment.



**SAINA SEMI-FINAL TODAY**

Saina Nehwal celebrates on Thursday after reaching the Olympic badminton semi-finals. On Friday, she will face World No. 1 Yihan Wang of China. Indian men's shuttler Parupalli Kashyap, however, lost 19-21, 11-21 to World No. 2 Lee Chong Wei of Malaysia in the quarter-finals. (AP picture)

See Sport

## Ejection an overreaction

### A taboo but we did it

A confession. I once played a match for the England team — not just any old match, but a defining contest in the European Championships — where we deliberately lost.

We were up against Sweden, the world champions, when two unusual things happened, almost simultaneously. The first was that we got into a winning position against our illustrious opponents. The other was that France defeated Germany on the next table.

In that moment, the die was cast. Defeating Sweden would mean an almost unwinnable semi-final against Germany. But if we lost to Sweden, we would face the French in the semis. And the French were — due to the vagaries of styles — a team we were almost certain to beat.

You see the dilemma? We saw it, too: all of us, in the same flash of insight. We were better off losing.

Donald Parker called the three England players together. Parker was the England coach. He was sweating and seemed uncertain.

The moment was not merely surreal but extraordinarily intense. And then

he said it. The incident was 20 years ago, but I can still hear the words. "France have just beaten Germany. If we lose to Sweden, we'll play France in the semi-finals. I am not giving you instructions. But I want to make you aware of the situation."

We — Carl Prean and Chen Xinhua, the other England team members, and I — looked at each other. We had spent lifetimes dreaming about making the final of a major competition. Prean, a bespectacled 25-year-old, kept blinking, as if his intricate mind were trying to fathom a moral conundrum that he lacked the software to compute.

Chen, a former Chinese player who had married a Yorkshire woman and switched nationalities, stared steadily ahead.

I was next on against Peter Karlsson. Should I try to win or try to lose? I was totally unsure, swimming in a sea of moral confusion. But eventually I did the wrong thing, at least as far as the squad were concerned: I tried to win. More than that, I did win. It was a close match, but I came through. I had put myself before the team.

The burden shifted to Chen, who was playing the climactic contest at 3-3.

● Matthew Syed, a British journalist and broadcaster, used to be a table tennis international and is a two-time Olympian

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## TTMARKETS

INDEX	CHANGE
BSE SENSEX	17224.36 ↓ 33.02
NSE NIFTY	5227.75 ↓ 12.75
RS/\$	55.85 ↓ 0.37
GOLD	30225 +10

## IN BRIEF

### Rain deficiency feared: IMD

■ The monsoon is likely to be deficient this year, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) announced on Thursday. Although the rains are expected to be normal in August, uncertainty looms over that in September because of the El Nino factor, the IMD said.

### Mammography

■ Mammography may benefit some women but harm an even greater number, according to a report that is relevant to India. **NATION P4**

### Anna to end fast

■ Anna Hazare and his team have decided to call off their indefinite fast and focus on providing a "political alternative" by joining electoral politics. **NATION P4**

### SBI cuts deposit rates

■ SBI will lower interest rates on domestic term deposits of five years and more by 25 basis points. **BUSINESS**

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