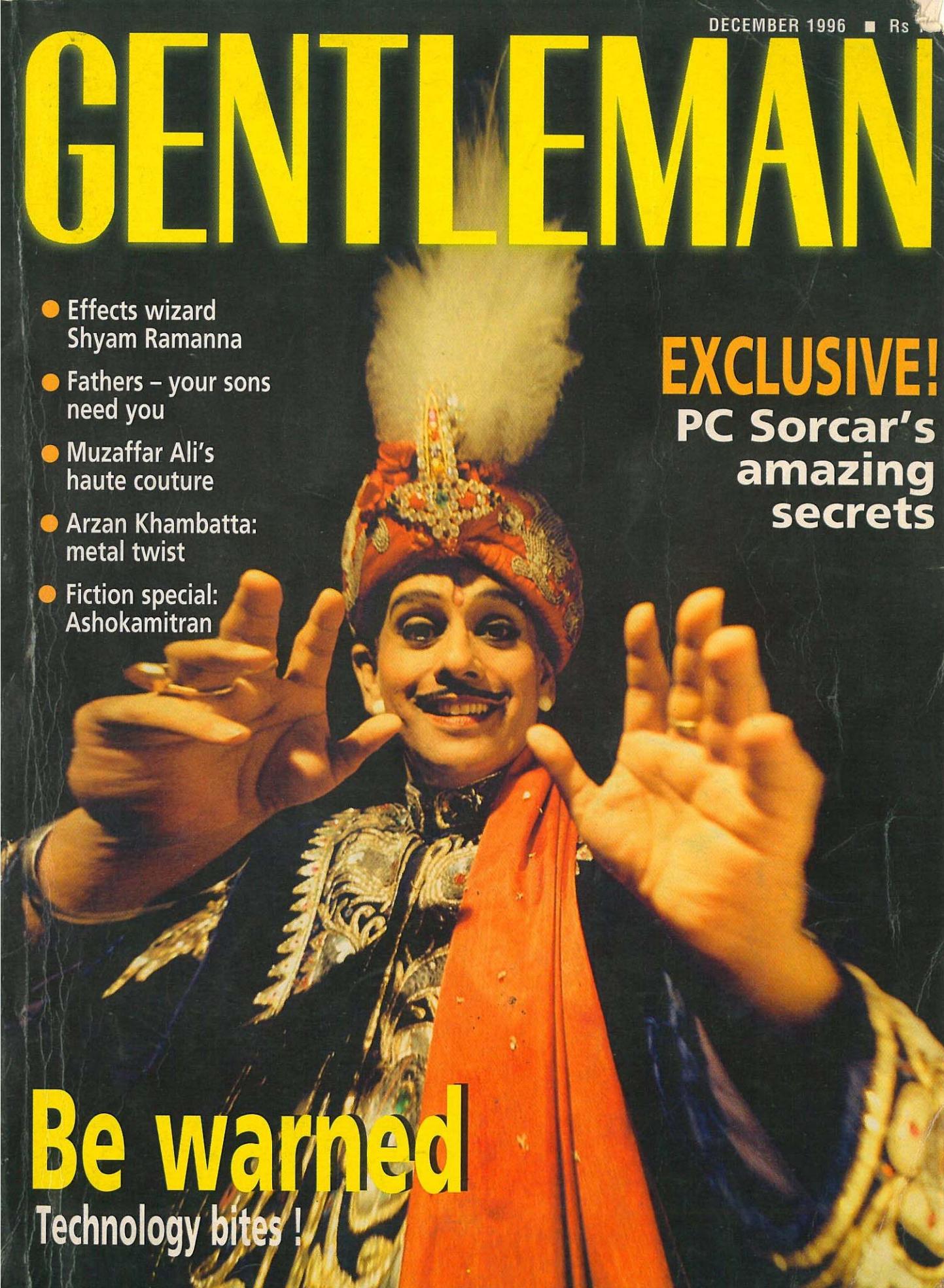


GENTLEMAN

- Effects wizard Shyam Ramanna
- Fathers – your sons need you
- Muzaffar Ali's haute couture
- Arzan Khambatta: metal twist
- Fiction special: Ashokamitran

EXCLUSIVE!
PC Sorcar's
amazing
secrets



Be warned

Technology bites !

Simply Magic!

What kind of a person is a man who cuts up bodies without turning a hair and makes the Amritsar Express full of passengers disappear into thin air? Shiladitya Sarkar, his hands full of *vibhuti*, explains... with a little help from PC Sorcar, the magician himself

LET ME SEE YOUR HAND," PRODIP CHANDRA SORCAR ASKS with an impish grin, and then rubs a finger on my palm. "Smell it," he commands, laughing to see me marvel at the soothing fragrance. I egg him on to reveal the secret – now a part of folklore – of how he showered people with the *vibhuti* (holy ash) he conjured up from thin air to prove a point to Satya Sai Baba and his devotees.

Sorcar is sitting behind his cluttered desk, clad in a short-sleeved T-shirt, his hands in plain view. Suddenly he leans forward and clasps my hands; when I look to see I find *vibhuti* on my palm!



PHOTOGRAPHS: SUBHRASISH SINHA RAY

These sort of gimmicks, however, are passé in Sorcar's repertoire. More so after the success of his major feat: making a train disappear in broad daylight in front of 2000 people – journalists, prominent personalities and television crew included. Picture this: It's July 12, '96. The place, Thana, a few km from Burdwan in West Bengal. The 10-bogey Amritsar Express filled with passengers draws up in front of the gaping crowd. P C Sorcar lets them have a look, holds up an eight by ten foot banner, counts till three and poof! The train disappears.

"I know such a thing cannot take place in reality and there must be a sleight of hand somewhere but I must say

that the train which was there in front of us is no longer there now," said Justice M u k u l G o p a l Mukherjee of the Calcutta High Court.

Retaliating, well-

known magician K Lall, in a missive sent to *The Telegraph*, pinpricked: "I can find no technical clue as to how this could have been done and feel the feat was not performed through magic." Lal felt it involved a camera trick and challenged Sorcar to repeat the performance and win a cash prize of Rs 50,000.

Sorcar declined. "It is a folly to deny physics since scientific laws play a major role in our craft. But tell me why should I repeat an illusionary act which cost Rs 10 lakh to set up just to win Rs 50,000," he asks dismissively.

Sorcar's animosity towards Lall, it is said, stems from the time when two of his father's assistants – J K Nandy and Sankar Das – deserted the troupe, allegedly taking with them the secrets of the equipment used during performances. When their own venture failed, they passed on the secrets to K Lall and Sankar Das became his manager. True or not, the fact remains that P C Sorcar (Sr) found it difficult to perform certain tricks after the duo's departure. P C Sorcar (Jr) who had secretly watched them practise every day – his father detested the idea of his son following in his footsteps and had barred him

from the rehearsal room – finally found the courage to declare his passion for magic when he stated he could easily take their place.

"No one can teach you magic. It is a craft one has to learn on one's own." It was this maxim Sorcar (Jr) learnt early in life as magic was never discussed at home. Prodip, in fact, thought he had two fathers: one, the magician who was already a legend, and the other, a demanding patriarch. "You need to study science to be a magician," had been his stricture. So Sorcar (Jr) got a BSc degree. Then his father demanded that he learn the Arts. After two majors, Prodip was sure he'd earned his place in his father's troupe. But Sorcar (Sr) had other things in mind: a degree in psychology. Prodip had enrolled for the Applied Psychology course when he lost his father.

"My elder brother and I rushed to Japan where my father was to perform and I had to don my father's mantle. At that time, I was nowhere near my father's standards, but got rave reviews. Must have been for emotional reasons," says Sorcar modestly.

There were emotional reasons all right behind Sorcar's offer to treat a bunch of youngsters to some *chaat* at a *paani-puri* stall. His wife-to-be was in that bunch and he had just spotted her. "I made the treat offer and she wouldn't even look at me!" says Sorcar now, likening his behaviour to a roadside Romeo's. "I combed the locality for days and finally spotted her again with her friends. When she ignored me, I snatched her little purse."

That must have stolen her heart too as they've been married since '72. Sorcar rummages through a drawer and pulls out a tattered looking purse and holds it aloft triumphantly, "The same one!"

Sorcar has a tremendous aptitude for storing objects, spending a substantial amount of time and money on this. With a collector's zeal, he gathers everything which is meaningful to him: scraps of paper with his daughter's doodles; an interesting advertisement in a newspaper; a fossilised fish; the jawbones of a shark... He leads our photographer through a virtual gallery of memorabilia collected from all over the world – a replica of a dagger used by cannibals to dig out human hearts, which was presented to him in Fiji; a sword belonging to Vasco da Gama's troops; coins received from the descendants of Tipu Sultan; stones com-

"Magic is nothing if not presented well. Many talented magicians have failed because of poor style"



monly believed to contain imprints of Lord Narayan's feet (the marks have actually been made by fossilised insects); multi-hued butterflies and other insects in glass cases; a fossilised fern; a deadly looking piranha; an ink pot belonging to the Nizam of Hyderabad; shells gathered from beaches all over the world; an array of bonsai; intricate woodcarvings...

And as we come to rows of vintage wine bottles, Sorcar says, "This is a collection whose outer form I like, but dislike its contents." In this myriad feast for the eyes, the absence of books is striking, especially since Sorcar is known to be an avid reader.

"I can't show you my library," Sorcar says, "you won't like the place."

"What's so special about the place," I ask.

"It's in my bathroom!" he laughs.

You can hardly blame the man if he finds the bathroom an ideal refuge – because about 40 to 50 people call on him at his office every day.

A full day's work for him means that from 9.30 onwards, he's busy with discussions with his troupe members, fixing up programme schedules, spending time on his drawing board and planning out new projects. Usually he's so engrossed in his work that his wife has to force him out of the room to make sure he's at Calcutta's Mahajati Stadium – where he's been giving daily performances for the last four months – by six pm.

THE packed auditorium is abuzz with animated discussions about the Sorcars. Someone relates an anecdote: Sorcar (Sr) used to irritate his foreign audiences by simply not turning up on time. Just when they would get up to leave, the magician would arrive, and tell them to check their watches. The hands of the watches always showed the exact time at which the show was supposed to start!

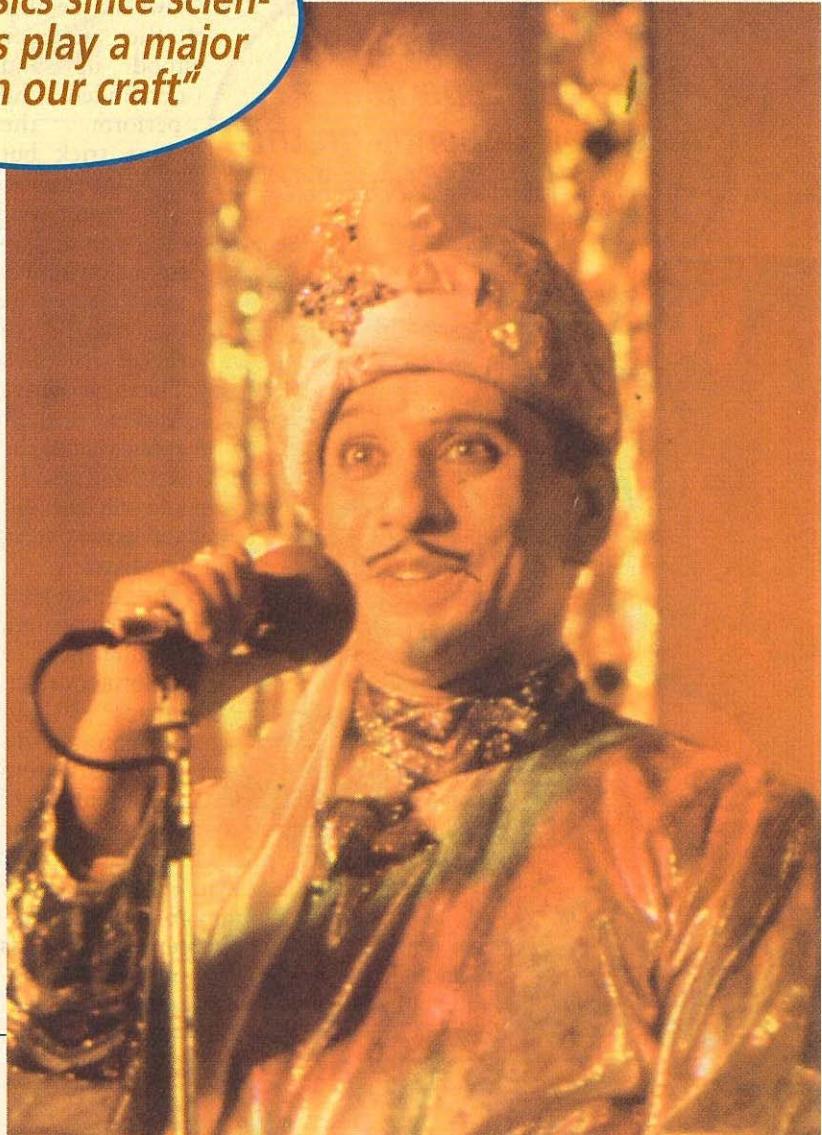
The anticipation of the Calcutta audience heightens. Sorcar's (Jr's) dramatic entrance – all flashing lights and thunderous music – on a flying carpet, doesn't disappoint. He's the ultimate showman who'll do anything to make an impact: he swag-

gers, wallows in Bengali sentimentalism, uses witticisms, lampoons the excesses of commercial cinema, uses the pulsating vibrancy of roadside shows – it is sleek stylisation alongwith erudite yet emotional oratory.

"Magic is nothing if not presented well. Many talented magicians have failed because of poor style," Sorcar tells me later. This magician – apart from relying on his own craftsmanship – has a lot of sophisticated FX and sound equipment and a troupe of 107 members. He forces the audience to suspend disbelief, even though he repeatedly stresses that all his magic tricks are illusion.

There are, however, some performances which simply baffle the senses. Take his last item for instance.

"It is a folly to deny physics since scientific laws play a major role in our craft"



Sorcar's torso is cut in half with a huge revolving saw wielded by his wife, Joyshree, and the halves writhe at the two ends of the stage. Stoically, Joyshree – after the usual abracadabra – makes him whole again.

In the 'Curse of Chemia', Sorcar recreates an Egyptian princess' tomb, makes her come alive, levitates her body in midair and finally puts her back in another tomb.

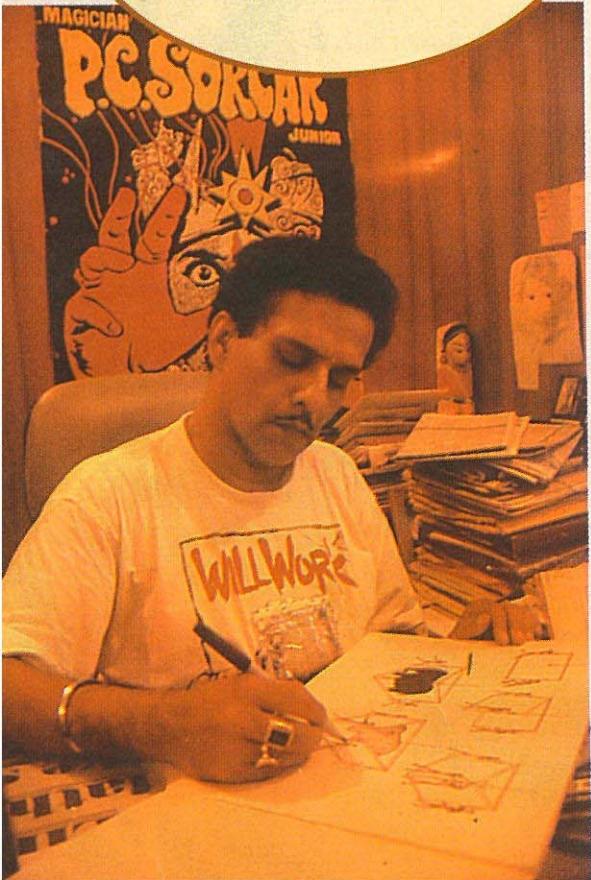
The most mindboggling item is the one called 'X-Ray Eyes'. Sorcar invites 10 people on stage. Doubly blindfolded – first by a thick layer of dough and then with a handkerchief – he starts copying numbers and sentences written by the 10 volunteers on the blackboard.

He loves a responsive audience, and willingly gives in to shouts of "Encore!" During the show we saw – in a fraction of a second – Sorcar made a girl

appear on a huge wooden bowl. A member of the audience stood up and demanded he perform the same trick but at a slower pace. The master conjurer complied – from slowing his speech to opening the lid to reveal the girl. The audience strained their eyes to catch the sleight of hand – and yet the girl appeared out of nowhere!

This globe-trotting showman, who has held 23 performances in Japan, 20 in London, 17 in the USA and toured all over Europe and the former Soviet Union, is quick to gauge the different demands of an international audience.

"It is the bizarre that pulls people. A magician depends on this basic human trait for his craft"



But in India he's in quite a quandary: people believe he can perform miracles offstage. Once, in Allahabad, a boy was bitten by a poisonous snake and his family brought him to Sorcar on the mistaken assumption that he would be healed. The magician begged that the boy be rushed to hospital; arguments ensued... meanwhile the boy died.

Sorcar, on his part, repeatedly points out during his shows – and offstage as well – that magic has nothing to do with any special gifts. He's not a necromancer. Although a deeply religious man, Sorcar is conscious of the fact that charlatans have used magic to woo or create awe in followers of different faiths. As he explains, "The tide of Buddhism nearly swept away the authority of the Brahmins and the Hindu religion was at a low ebb. To win back followers, magic was incorporated into various rituals and practices. Even in the West, witchcraft was often associated with many practices of the Church. The compound effect of all this was the birth of black magic."

To Sorcar magic, however, is entertainment – and something more. "It is the bizarre, not the mundane, that pulls people. A magician depends on this basic human trait for his craft," he says. In this respect he is undaunted by computer graphics and wondrous visual effects and the multimedia. "I don't compete with technology; I either utilise it in my magic or make it appear magical." His troupe is called Indrajal – *indria*, meaning senses, *jal* meaning net. "So, basically," he says "it is the submission of the senses to the web of a magician's charm." To this end he utilises the whole gamut of his production unit. Indrajal has 107 members, some who've worked with PC Sorcar (Sr), and nearly 70 tonnes of equipment – huge wooden capsules, sinister looking sawing machines, cranes, psychedelic lights, sound systems, an indigenous smoke machine... his favourite pet elephant, Badsha, and two lions. All have a role to play in the psychological hoodwinking that Sorcar so deftly employs. He is Magician Extraordinaire!

BUT offstage, with the greasepaint off, and shorn off his *pagri* and glittering brocade outfit, Sorcar metamorphoses into a typical Bengali. He has a gift of the gab and is a brilliant raconteur in the classic Bengali conversational style of *adda*. Seeing

A LITTLE HOCUS-POCUS

PC Sorcar shares a few magical secrets

▲ Animal Magnetism

The magician gently holds a pigeon on a table, with its back against the table and legs in the air as shown in picture No. 1. The pigeon is allowed to roll its head freely. The magician now takes his hands away from the pigeon – real slowly – and, abracadabra, the pigeon gets stuck to the table, as if it is glued to it! The magician claims this is a case of animal magnetism. This feat can also be done with doves, chickens, or lambs.

The secret: Actually it is a trick the mind plays on the body. As the back of the pigeon is touching the table – and its head is in the normal state – it continues to feel as if it's held down even after the hands are taken away. The pressure in its back retains the sensation of captivity. The pigeon surrenders itself and lies motionless.

▲ Tea or Coffee

"Let's have coffee," the magician tells his friend and gives him a cupful of hot drink.

"This is tea!" cries the friend after taking a sip.

"Is it?" asks the magician and apologises. Then he takes an empty spoon and stirs the liquid.



"Have it now," says the magician and lo! it's coffee.

The secret: The spoon has a hollow stem with two holes. The hollow space is filled with concentrated coffee liquor which is released at the time of stirring by removing the finger from the air hole (see illustration No. 2).

▲ Special Power

The magician claims that by special power he can influence anyone's sense organs. To demonstrate it he asks an audience member to place her right hand on the table and he 'hypnotises' it. After that, he holds three matchsticks at a time and says that he is going to touch her arm with one or more matchsticks. And without looking she has to say how many sticks have touched her. The magician then presses all the three sticks down on her arm together.

When he asks how many sticks are there, she answers, "One."

The secret: The threshold of cutaneous sensation at the arm is not fine enough. So if the sticks are not very far from each other then according to psycho-physical reasons the volunteer will always feel the sensation of one stick only.

These three tricks are from PC Sorcar's book on magic entitled *Sorcarrt*. (World Rights Reserved)

him performing on stage and then sitting at his office is like meeting two different people, but then you realise his stage persona is a result of meticulous and often tedious planning. Sorcar keeps various newspaper clippings, "to keep abreast of current events so as to give immediacy to the shows." No detail is too small for his personal attention.

On the wall of his office hangs a large chart titled 'liabilities', on which are figures pertaining to the nitty-gritties of finance. He also maintains a copy titled the 'Golden Book' in which he maintains a detailed record of audience flow, in terms of numbers and turnout in various price categories, every season. The copy matter and the layout for his newspaper advertisements are all done by him. Incidentally, Satyajit Ray, the pioneer of commercial art, had nothing but praise for these advertisements.

All this translates into one obsession: success. He's a man who is not unduly hum-

ble about his aspirations. In his room he has stuck papers with words that inspire: 'opportunity knocks', 'success is a mind game – ask any loser'. He is quite aware of his reputation worldwide and conscious of his position among his national and international peers. The reason he doesn't appear brazen is because of his infectious bubbly nature, and his all-pervasive smile, which has won him the adulation of audiences all over the world: "The grand illusionist... Sorcar (Jr) is a magician of magicians," reads a review from England. From Japan: "The greatest magic show on earth." From Singapore: "Sorcar (Jr) is the pride of India." *The Daily Telegraph* in London commented, "An entire evening of magic and illusion in the theatre is uncommon these days... but Sorcar (Jr) presents magic in a grand manner... his entire show is jolly good entertainment and moves along at a cracking pace."

Audiences in Japan paid an unprece-

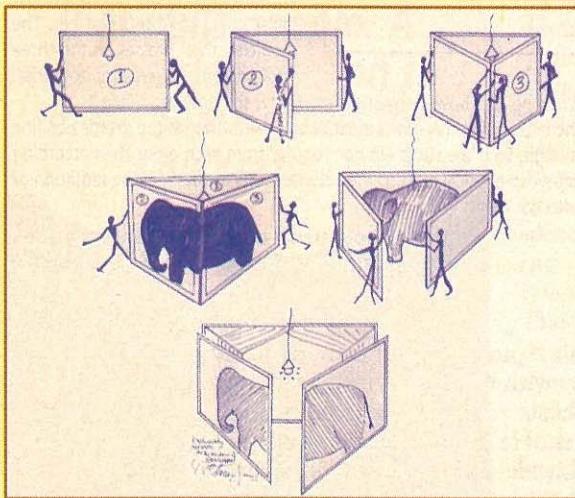
dented 2500 yen for one evening of magic. In the former Soviet Union, he broke the sales and theatre attendance records of all types of stage shows ever visiting that country. The impact of his Indrajal shows have been so spectacular that many world renowned magicians – including legendary American magicians like Goodliffe and J Marshall of the US who watched his show in London – personally congratulated him. It's no wonder that Sorcar is India's single largest foreign exchange earning entertainer. His wife looks after his thorny income tax problems, and together they look after all the expenses incurred in running the extravaganza. He candidly admits that money is important to him. "I can't meet all the expenses for magic by magic," he says with a touch of mock seriousness.

ALL THE activities related to his show are carried out in a sprawling ranch, fondly called 'Jadunagar' in a place called Mallickpur, a two-hour drive out of Calcutta. First Sorcar has to meet his favourite pet, the 25-year-old elephant, Badsha, who has to be placated with a large packet full of cookies. He then visits his lion, Begum. "This one," he says, "and Sultan who I use in my shows are very naughty, unlike Samrat, who unfortunately died and is buried here."

Sorcar is sentimentally attached to this place, because all his father's effects are housed on the first floor of an L shaped building. Each block and room is numbered, so large is the establishment. The nostalgia is evident as we move along the

JAADU DEKHO!

Blink, and you'll miss it

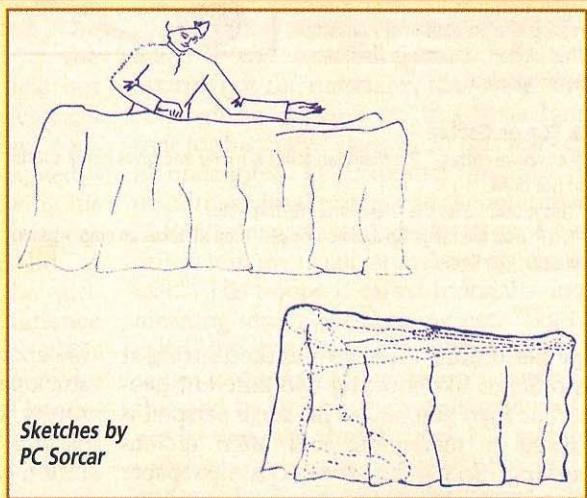


MUMBO JUMBO

This magic has been created exclusively for the readers of *Gentleman*:

1. A 10 by 15 foot cloth stretched on a wooden frame is brought on stage.
2. Another banner (2) of the same size is brought on and placed sideways.
3. Yet another banner (3) of the same size is brought on and placed sideways – the three banners together form a triangle. An overhanging bulb is lowered into the centre of this triangle.
4. The moment the electric bulb is put on, the shadow of an elephant appears on banners 2 and 3.
5. The moment banners 2 and 3 are held apart, a large elephant appears.

The secret: Actually on banners 2 and 3, the cutout in the shape of an elephant was pasted on beforehand. The light



Sketches by
PC Sorcar

overhead makes the shadow appear which is seen by the audience. Meanwhile, while the light bulb is being turned on for the shadow effect, a live elephant is sneaked in from behind the curtain by removing the cloth stretched over the wooden frame of banner 1.

FLOATING A BODY

This is a typical Hindu magic and has been popular from the days of yore. The magician's assistant lies on the floor, covered by a cloth. The magician does some *choo mantar* and the body starts to float at the magician's command.

The secret: The trick is that the body doesn't float at all. The assistant simply sits up in a bent position and finally stands up keeping his two hands outstretched, parallel to the ground, holding two hockey sticks, which resemble the feet when covered by a cloth.

semi dark corridors. He is proud of his lineage and as we browse through items and voluminous equipment, one gets a glimpse of many 'trial and error' experiments carried out to make each magical feat perfect. There is one trick where Sorcar pours milk from a jar into a paper cone and in the next instant the milk vanishes from the paper. The glass jar has a false bottom. Around 20 jars which didn't quite come up to mark are lined methodically on the shelves. In another room there are two wooden boxes, used twice in one of Sorcar's most daring Houdini-like acts: In '69, Sorcar was sealed in a bag and locked in a box and then thrown into the shark-infested rough waters of the Bay of Bengal. He pried himself free within 90 seconds, leaving all the locks intact!

The second act was even more spectacular. On July 27, '80, at the famous sea resort of Port Dickson near Singapore, he was tied and sealed in a bag and locked in a strong wooden crate, which was then nailed down, locked and strapped on all sides with strips of steel by members of the police and the public. The crate, carried in a sling by a helicopter, was air-dropped into the sea from a height of about 100 feet. He was up and bobbing in the water within 40 seconds – and of course all the locks were still sealed. The act raised many questions about how far people were willing to go for the sake of entertainment. A worried reporter asked "Has your wife allowed you to do this?" Sorcar quelled fears for his safety by stating "I will make you believe that something impossible is not that impossible for some people." Nevertheless, he had to sign an indemnity bond in the presence of lawyers before he was allowed to proceed.

In one of his acts on stage, Sorcar's daring item consists of a human bomb act, where he blows himself up in a box – the hall is shaken by a deafening blast – and the very next second he stands smiling near the exit and takes a grand bow.

Besides being a deft hand at performing

magic, he's planning a book on the ABCs of magic. He is also into science fiction writing – with a dose of magic within the story element, naturally. He is also charting out possibilities for a serial on magic for Doordarshan, along similar lines to the programme he's recorded for foreign television stations. On the anvil is a project for Sony TV and a documentary for a German television channel.

Sorcar now looks forward to the day when his three daughters will join him in saying "abracadabra" on stage. "I used to saw my wife in half, but after some time she wanted to cut me in half instead!" he laughs. "Now my daughter Menakshi has mastered the craft. It would be great to see her in the garb of a full-fledged magician."

Fatigue at the end of the

"I don't compete with technology; I either utilise it in my magic or make it appear magical"



day is welcome because the maharaja of magic resurfaces himself by his belief in the entertainment power of his esoteric craft. But when will he put down his wand?

Pat comes the reply: "I can assure you I won't die. I will disappear." ■