

#### 4 Trailing over the top

Travelling on a highway is an enchanting experience, specially along the Karakoram Highway, said to be one of the man-made wonders



#### 8 Licenced to kill

By providing them with sophisticated firearms, have we not given our ill-trained policemen a licence to kill?



# Roots of aggression

BY DR NASIR SULMAN

All of us are familiar with the word, but a closer analysis shows that our common-sense notions about aggression are not as clear as we might think

**A**GGRESSION in its diverse individual and collective forms has long been, and remains, a world-wide problem of the first magnitude. When viewed in global perspective, contemporary aggression takes many guises — violence and vandalism by students in colleges and universities and in their communities; child and spouse abuse and other forms of domestic or familial violence; assaults, muggings and homicides; rape and other sex-related crimes; politically-motivated terrorism; racially, ethnically or economically-motivated mob violence; and aggression in many forms directly or indirectly initiated by the state.

This is far from an exhaustive list. We could add athletic mayhem, clan blood feuds, ritual torture, police brutality, organized warfare, and much, much more. The variety, intensity, frequency and overall prevalence of overt aggressive behaviour throughout the world is starkly and appallingly high.

All of us are familiar with the word 'aggression', and doubtlessly we all feel that we know what we mean by it. Yet when we set out to define it, we encounter diffi-

culties. A closer analysis shows that our common-sense notions about aggression are not as clear as we might think.

Let us start with a working definition: aggression is behaviour that has injury or destruction as its goal, and anger or hatred as it accompanying effects. Social psychologists define aggressive action as behaviour aimed at causing either physical or psychological pain. It is not to be confused with assertiveness — even though people sometimes loosely refer to others as "aggressive" if they stand up for their rights, write letters to newspapers complaining about real or imagined injustices, work extra hard, display a great deal of ambition, or are real go-getters.

The above definition is clear — aggression is an intentional action aimed at doing harm or causing pain. The action might be physical or verbal; it might succeed in its goal or not. It is still aggression. Thus, if someone throws a cold-drink bottle at your head and you duck so that the bottle misses your head, it is still an aggressive act. The important thing is the intention.

By the same token, if someone is a careless driver and unintentionally runs you

down while you are attempting to cross the street, that is not an act of aggression, even though the damage would be far greater than caused by the cold-drink bottle that missed.

Berkowitz (1965) and Feshbach (1971) have attempted to deal with the problem by distinguishing between two types of aggression: hostile and instrumental.

Hostile aggression aims at harming or otherwise injuring another party. In instrumental aggression, harm-

ing another party is carried out only to gain some other object. For most purposes, social psychologists simply view aggression as behaviour that is socially defined as injurious or destructive.

Scientists, philosophers, and other serious thinkers are not in complete agreement with one another about whether aggression is an innate, instinctive phenomenon or whether such behaviour must be learned.

This controversy is not new; it has been raging for centuries. For example, Thomas Hobbes, in his classic work *Leviathan* (first published in 1651), took the view that we, the human beings, in our nature state, are brutes and that only by enforcing the law and order of society could we curb what to Hobbes was a natural instinct towards aggression.



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## Aggression

Scott  
p. 4  
1978

theorized that human beings are born with an instinct towards life, which he called, *eros*, and an equally powerful

aggression energy must come out somehow, lest it continue to build up and produce illness. Freud's notion can best be characterized as a Hydraulic Theory, whose analogy is one of water pres-

instinct and in helping people to sublimate it — that is, to turn the destructive energy into acceptable or useful behaviour.

John Paul Scott (1958) concluded from his survey of the evidence that there is no inborn need for fighting: if an organism can arrange its life so there is no outside stimulation to fight, then it will experience no physiological or mental damage as a result of not expressing aggression. This view

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contradicts Freud's contention and in effect asserts that there is no instinct of aggression.

The argument continues to go back and forth. Scott's conclusion was called into question by the Nobel Prize-winning ethologist Konard Lorenz (1966), who observed the behaviour of cichlids — highly aggressive tropical fish. Male cichlids will attack other males of the same species to establish and

defend their territory. In its natural environment, the male cichlid does not attack female cichlids; nor does it attack males of a different species — it attacks only males of its own species.

sion.

On the other hand, Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of the noble savage (a theory he developed in 1762), suggested that we, the human beings, in our natural state, are benign, happy, and good creatures, and that it is a restrictive society that forces aggression and depravity on us.

Hobbes's more pessimistic view was elaborated in the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud (1930), who

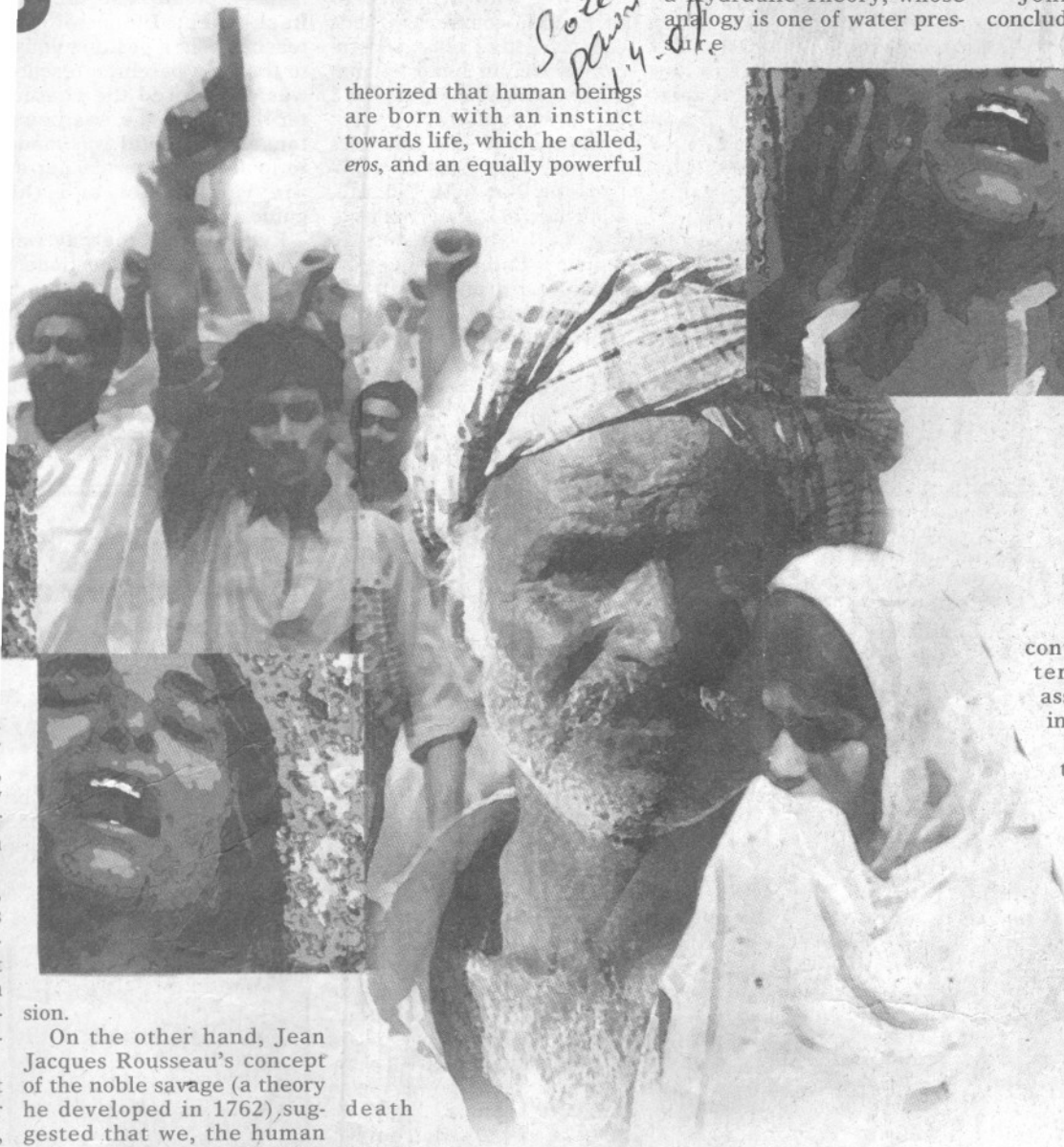
death

instinct,  
*thantos*.

About the death instinct, Freud wrote: "It is at work in every living being and is striving to bring it to ruin and to reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter."

Freud believed this

building up in a container: unless aggression is allowed to drain off, it will produce some sort of explosion. According to Freud, society perform an essential function in regulating this



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What happens if all other male cichlids are removed from an aquarium, leaving only one male alone with no appropriate target?

According to the Hydraulic Theory of instinctive aggression, the need to aggress will build up to the point where the cichlid will attack a fish that does not usually serve as an appropriate stimulus for attack. And that is exactly what happens. In the absence of other males, the cichlid will attack males of other species — males it previously ignored. Moreover, if all other males are removed, the male cichlid will eventually attack and kill females.

More recently, Richard Lore and Tori Shultz (1993) have reported that the apparent universality of aggression among vertebrates strongly suggests that aggressiveness has evolved and been maintained because it has survival value. At the same time, these researchers are quick to point out that nearly all organisms also seem to have evolved strong inhibitory mechanisms that enable them to suppress aggression when it is in their best interest to do so. Thus, even in the most violence-prone species, aggression is an optional strategy — whether or not it is expressed is determined by the animal's previous social experiences, as well as by the special social context in which the animal finds itself.

Social psychologists are in general agreement with the interpretation of the animal research offered by Lorenz, Lore, and Schultz. And where humans are concerned, the social situation becomes even more important. For example, although it is true that many animals, from insects to apes, will usually attack another ani-

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