

# WHY WE DREAM

Researchers in India and abroad have come up with radically new concepts of the function of dreams, what they signify and the way we can use them for our well-being



■ By Shefalee Vasudev

As soon as the human mind's graveyard shift begins, a compelling and fascinating theatre of contradictory realities and totally unchecked emotional energy starts getting played out. Faceless ghosts, creepy black bats, vampires, weapons soaked in blood, hospital wards, shaven heads. Or a pond full of white lotuses, baskets with luscious fruits, gossamer, flowing fabric veiling ivory pillars, temple bells, chanting sounds, a tender touch or perhaps an erotic embrace. Some dreams leave people joyous, others with a grave sense of foreboding.

Mukta Raman, a 38-year-old working woman in Delhi,

had a dream that left her shaken. She dreamt of her husband in an intimate situation with a woman whose face was hidden. The dream left her with a premonition about her divorce. A few days later, Raman came home early from office to find her husband in the arms of her best friend. True to the script of her dream, they were divorced and her husband planned to marry the other woman. But before that marriage, Raman had another dream in which she saw her former friend dressed as a bride waiting in a wedding mandap. She "knew" that the marriage would never take place. Even that dream came true. So was Raman gifted with a special precognitive ability? Or are dreams a built-in early warning system that alert you to an impending crisis? Why do we remember some

dreams so vividly, while others are completely erased out? Could these vivid visions of hell and, at times, even heaven, be a mirror of our waking reality?

A hundred years after Sigmund Freud defined dreams as the "royal road to the unconscious", new research is beginning to provide some answers to the puzzling questions about dreams. An international conference exploring the relevance of "Sleep and Dreams in Indian Culture", held at the University of Paris from April 5 to 7, has come up with some intriguing insights. At the conference, Martin Mittwede of the University of Frankfurt presented a study called "Dreams and Dying in Ayurveda" that explored dreams for symbols of death and sickness as propounded in Ayurveda. He found that the

dream state of ill people is dominated by demons, ghosts, dogs, camels, asses, snakes and elements like fire and water. That is why shamans and medics in the past would treat a dream as a clue in deciphering the entire environment of the sufferer. For instance, a dream of an arm rash will make a doctor look for a skin problem but the traditional healer will use it to peep into the emotional health of the person as well as his family background. Patterns, found Mittwede, emerged between illnesses and dreams. Ancient Ayurvedic texts linked snakes with hypertension. In Delhi, a 31-year-old who was plagued with frightening dreams of snakes and ghosts went to an analyst who recommended medical tests. The final diagnosis was that she suffered from acute stress and had chronic high blood pressure.

Analysts from India and abroad are now updating the dream dictionary. While it retains mythological symbols there is a veritable A-Z of thoughts, images and aspirations of the global citizen (see box). Instead of falling off cliffs, people now dream about falling from multi-storeyed buildings. Incense sticks have given way to perfumes. Erotic dreams haunt those more who live in sexually repressed societies than those who are free to exercise their sexual choices. Couples in premarital relationships have steamy, sexual dreams of their would-be partners. Young girls dream of sexy attires, not red bridal garments which dominated dreams of unmarried women in the past. While the primitive man dreamt of chasing a wild animal in a hunt and the Pandavas dreamt of chariots, the modern man dreams of a Ferrari car. "All signify speed—symbols have changed but the essential conflicts remain the same," explains psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar who uses dream analysis as part of his work.

Simultaneously, a new study done at Harvard and the

STUDIES INDICATE THAT DREAMS MIRROR WAKING HOUR REALITIES AND SOME CAN EVEN HELP FORETELL GOOD AND BAD EVENTS IN PEOPLE'S LIVES.



University of Texas proves through an experiment that dreams are what we suppress during our waking hours and that they express complicated desires and unfulfilled wishes. Daniel Wegner, the team leader, found that his subjects were merely incorporating into their dreams the daytime residue of thoughts and events—much like what Freud had postulated a century ago. Going to bed lifts the lid on all the thoughts that the mind keeps under wraps, especially those that we feel are disturbing or harmful to us.

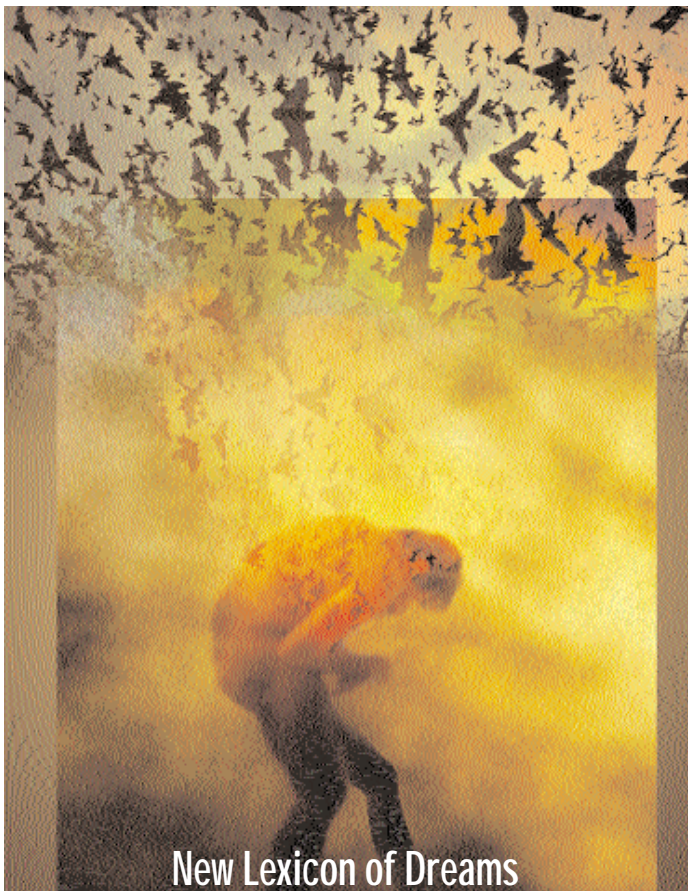
Delhi-based author Madhu Tandon, who presented a paper at the Paris conference, says her interviews with 100-odd people for her forthcoming book *Dialogue with Dreams* reveal that dreams operate at three levels. First, they mirror



mental states and attitudes. At another level, they are a conduit to the paranormal. They help solve problems and inform about coming events—sometimes even death. At the third level they can be the road to attain the highest level of spiritual consciousness.

**M**ore therapists now agree that there is a need to address the spiritual realm within people themselves. They advise patients to pay attention to their dreams. “Most people who come for counselling have no idea that their dreams are the inner voice directing and nudging them forward,” says psychotherapist Rashna Imhasly, adding that helping people decode their dreams is important because they are full of mythic symbols. Imhasly says she is amazed at the way characters resembling Ram, Sita, Durga, Ravana and such others manifest in people’s dreams, regardless of whether they are religious or not. She cites the case of a suppressed wife undergoing therapy whose husband has been largely dismissive of her during the many years of their marriage. “Part of her pent-up rage is unleashed through her violent nightmares, where she mauls her husband. It is a compensatory device because she is not allowed free expression during the day,” says Imhasly, adding, “Myths from the past are a treasure house of information with genuine guidance encoded in them. We would be foolish to miss their significance.”

The perplexing question of the precognitive value of dreams too has found some explanations. Serenity Young, a scholar of Asian culture and Buddhist dreams, found that the



### New Lexicon of Dreams

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| Cell phone= Urge to get in touch, need to know, explore     | Cancer= Deep anxiety and lingering ravaging problems        |
| Fast Cars= Urge for immense speed and ability to control it | Cafeteria= Desire for more friends, indicates loneliness    |
| Cigarettes= Addiction, offering one means prosperity        | Condoms= Psychological protection in relationships          |
| Diamonds= Overly developed ego or feelings of inferiority   | Kissing= Fulfilment of a wish or basic desire being met     |
| Nightclub= Guilt feelings for being in bad company          | Flying= Satisfaction; for men, craving for sexual thrill    |
| Stalker= Unfinished task or unaddressed issues              | Police= Sense of protection or fear of impending punishment |

Source: New books on dream interpretation from India and abroad

more “meditative” the conscious state, the more lucid (aware) will be the dreams. A lucid dream is knowing one is dreaming when the dream is going on. Experiments indicate that lucid dreams have a great potential to become prophetic since there is clarity, exhilaration and a sense of freedom in them. Young extensively studied Buddhist biographies and literary, medical and religious texts. She compared them with interviews done in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Russia and Tibet and found that dreams played a powerful role in foretelling, higher consciousness, esoteric teaching and healing. In India, says Young, she found that the dream realm is very close to the sacred. “Dreams do give us information. And so they are a reliable way to make decisions,” adds Young. However, Kakar, who too has written on dreams in modern and ancient India, adds a note of skepticism. “Prophetic dreams are like astrology—we remember only what turns out to be correct and forget the rest.”

Dreaming occurs in the REM phase—Rapid Eye Movement that starts roughly 90 minutes after falling asleep when the body is paralysed but the brain is active. Then comes the non-REM phase which constitutes four stages of deeper sleep in which the brain is idle. People pass through these states several times in a night in a standard pattern called the sleep architecture which varies with age. But things can go wrong. For instance, in REM behaviour disorder, patients cross the boundaries between the sleep stages in bizarre ways, acting out dreams while they are sleeping.

IN THE NEW DREAM DICTIONARY RAVANA HAS BEEN REPLACED BY TERRORISTS AND CHARIOTS BY FAST CARS AND SPACESHIPS.

## Understanding Dreams Conclusions from Indian and foreign experiments

**REAL, NOT RANDOM:** A new Harvard study corroborates Freud's proposition that dreams are not random illusions or fantasies. They are a residue of daytime thoughts and reflect our inner realities.

**PROPHETIC:** Dream researcher Madhu Tandan says some dreams give information about forthcoming events, illnesses, even death. They are the inner voice, nudging people forward.

**LIFE LINKS:** A study done at the University of Iowa, US, found that late sleepers, those with inconsistent bedtime schedules and people prone to fantasy remember dreams more.

**SUPER HEALERS:** Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar says dreams are the very purpose of sleep. They heal psyches and help people retain sanity by releasing suppressed emotions.

**GURU WITHIN:** Serenity Young, scholar of Buddhist dream interpretation, says in India dreams are closely related to the sacred. They aid esoteric teaching, healing and higher consciousness.



The theatrical detailing and uninhibited nature of dreams is due to the illogical, emotional and visual nature of the right side of brain taking over, completely unhindered by the rational interference of the left brain, which sleeps. The other extreme, say experts, is the deep dreamless state which is induced by barbiturates or psychotic drugs suppressing the REM phases. Speed drugs have been proven to prevent sleep and induce hallucinatory psychedelic states instead.

Dream memory, another confounding aspect, too is being simplified giving answers to why some dreams stick in minds for a lifetime while others vanish as soon as one gets out of bed. A study by David Watson, professor of psychology at the University of Iowa, the US, published last year revealed that the more bizarre a dream, the more likely were people to remember it. Watson asked 193 subjects to record their dreams for three months and relate them with their bedtime habits and consumption of coffee and alcohol. He found that those who had inconsistent bedtime schedules slept little and remembered dreams more. As did those who were creative, imaginative and prone to fantasy. People in withdrawal phases from alcohol or drugs had the most violent

INDIAN RESEARCHERS SAY THAT DREAMS HEAL PEOPLE. WITHOUT THEM, THEY WOULD BE PLAGUED BY SEVERE DISTURBANCES.



the unconscious and fall back on it as they would on a close friend. As Bangalore-based writer Tanushree Podder, whose book *Dreams—A Mystic World* was published recently, says, "If we can hone our sixth sense by relating it to dream analysis, there will be fantastic results." To this Tandan adds that anyone with enough persistence can recall dreams, gain insight and achieve supra awareness. More than anything else, new research points to the fact that dreams are the very purpose of sleep. They help people retain their sanity by playing out their suppressed emotions. Without "dreaming them away" they would be plagued by hallucinations and disturbances. Of course, researchers on dreams will spend many sleepless nights before they unravel some of the deeper mysteries of the dream world. But till then, as Young advises, it is meaningful to "sleep over it". For that's the biggest indicator on what gets settled in the mind and what surfaces. ■

nightmares. Another study has revealed that people who suffer from brain tumours or injuries to the areas of brain activated during dreaming also have more nightmares.

The real turnaround in modern research is perhaps the realisation that people can actually negotiate with