

## CHARBATIA

### Secret Base

FOR THE pilots of the American U-2 spy-planes it turned out to be a fruitless summer holiday in India. Everything was set for the final "go" from the CIA headquarters in Langley when the "stand-down" came from a dejected John Kenneth Galbraith in New Delhi. In spite of his intense, almost desperate persuasion, Nehru had turned down the CIA proposal to base a detachment of the high-streaking snooper planes—one of which was shot down over the Soviet Union—at Charbatia, the fast developing airbase on the outskirts of Cuttack in Orissa, close to the Bay of Bengal and, as the plane flies, not too far from Tibet either.

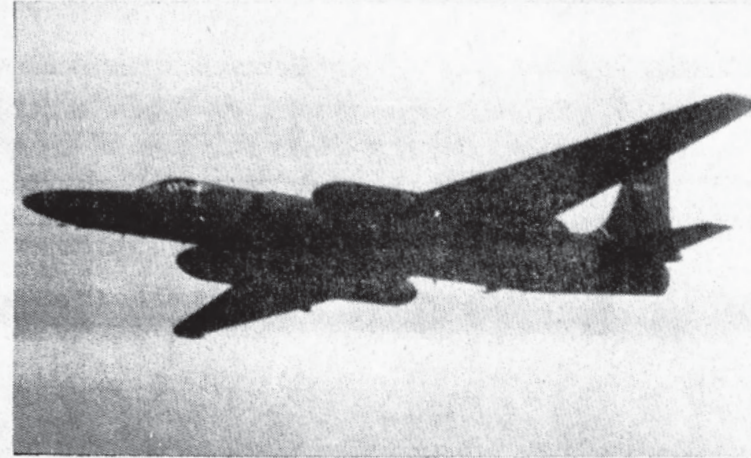
Nehru's objection was not exactly based on moral considerations because

the base at Charbatia was a joint operation by the IB and the CIA. But he had been warned about the operation by B.N. Malik, the all-powerful IB director who was then against the CIA offer. Malik asked Nehru to insist on having all the film shot by the spy planes processed in India and retaining one set of all the photographs. The CIA argued that each U-2 sortie brought back hundreds of miles of film and it was just not possible to set up the technical facility to process and analyse it all in India.

**Continuing Efforts:** The CIA instead offered to give India processed pictures later, but Malik would have none of it. Nehru followed his advice, spurned Galbraith's last minute requests and asked him to go and see Malik instead. The U-2 saga, however, did not end there. In the later part of 1963 when T.T. Krishnamachari, the powerful right-wing minister without portfolio in Nehru's cabinet

visited the US, officials persuaded him to send a long cable to Nehru asking him to change his mind about the U-2s. Nehru ticked him off with a curt "please do not meddle into this".

If the extent of cooperation seems surprising it must not be forgotten that these were the days of the great Indo-US friendship that began in the wake of the 1962 war with China. The Americans were pouring in large amounts of arms, training personnel, organising the Indian intelligence network, training Tibetan guerrillas and setting up facilities for the surveillance of Tibet for reconnaissance and to drop supplies for the Tibetan guer-



The U-2 spy-plane: grounded

rillas, mainly Khampa horsemen. The IAF did not have any aircraft which could be used for the purpose and, in principle, Nehru was not opposed to letting the Americans fly U-2s from Charbatia.

India has, thus been using the Charbatia airstrip exclusively for processing pictures brought in by its own reconnaissance aircraft.

Later, the Americans agreed to build a plant for processing spy aircraft films. Nearly 60 CIA technicians worked round-the-clock at Charbatia to build the huge plant, living in 30 air-conditioned flats built specially for them. But by the time the plant was completed in the late '60s, a certain chill had crept into Indo-US relations. US interest in the project also gradually diminished with the advent of the satellite era.

—SHEKHAR GUPTA