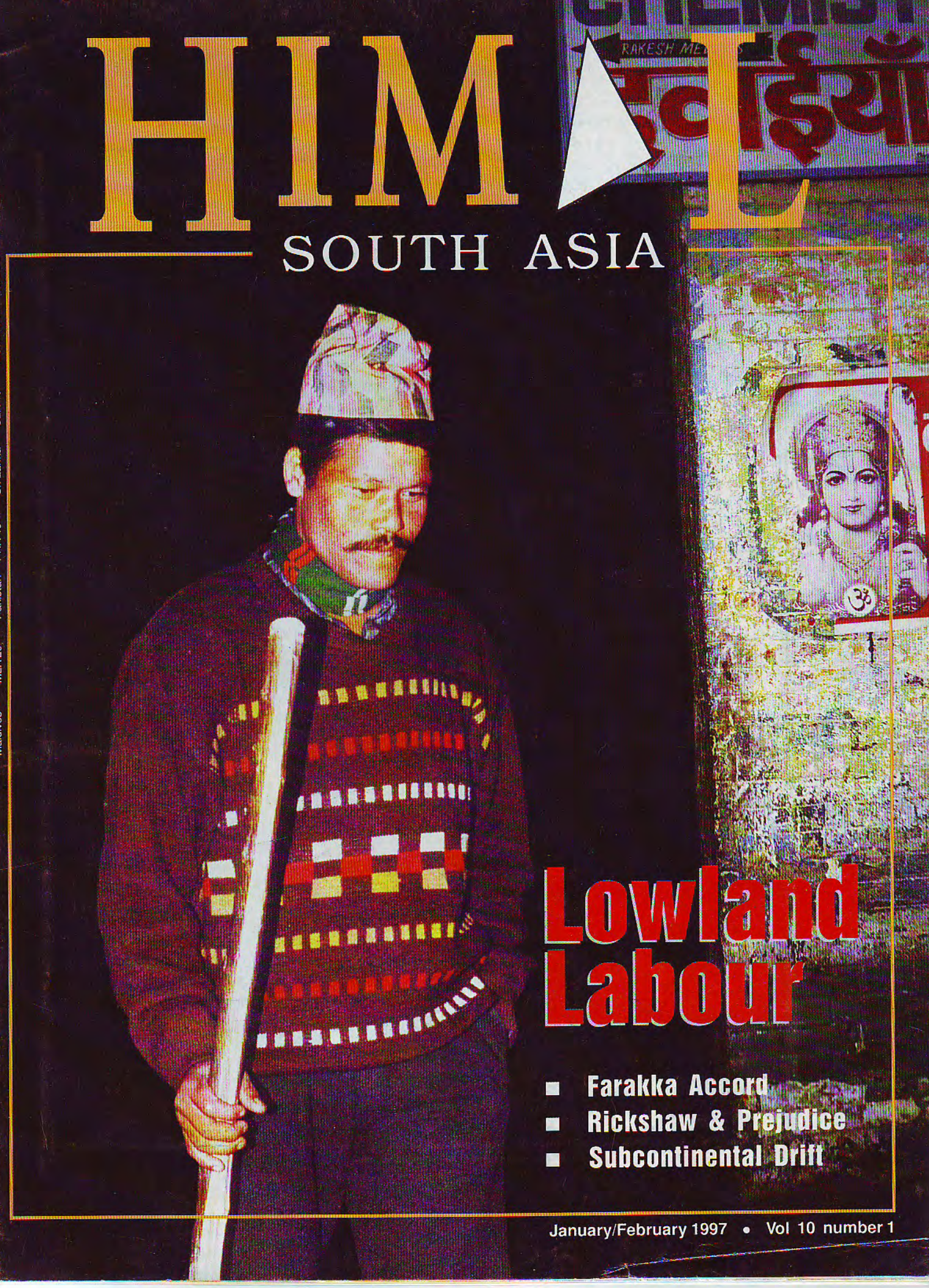
HIMAL

SOUTH ASIA



Lowland Labour

- Farakka Accord
- Rickshaw & Prejudice
- Subcontinental Drift

January/February 1997 • Vol 10 number 1

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HIMAL SOUTH ASIA

Vol 10 No 1 January/February 1997

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Information for New Readers

Himal magazine was started in 1987 as a journal for the Himalayan region. With the March 1996 issue, the magazine transformed into the first and only South Asian magazine. Every two months, HIMAL South Asia provides readers in the Subcontinent and overseas with reportage and commentary on issues and trends that affect the region's 1.3 billion people.

We are on the Web

Himal's latest table of contents, selected articles, subscription information plus other items of interest are accessible on Internet.
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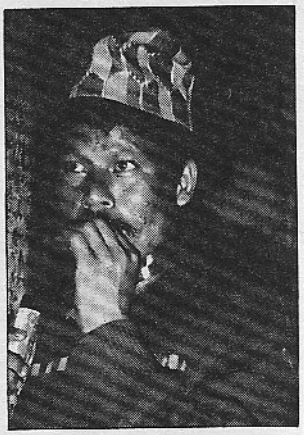
For subscription details, see page 64.

INSIDE

Cover picture by Usha Tiwari

COVER

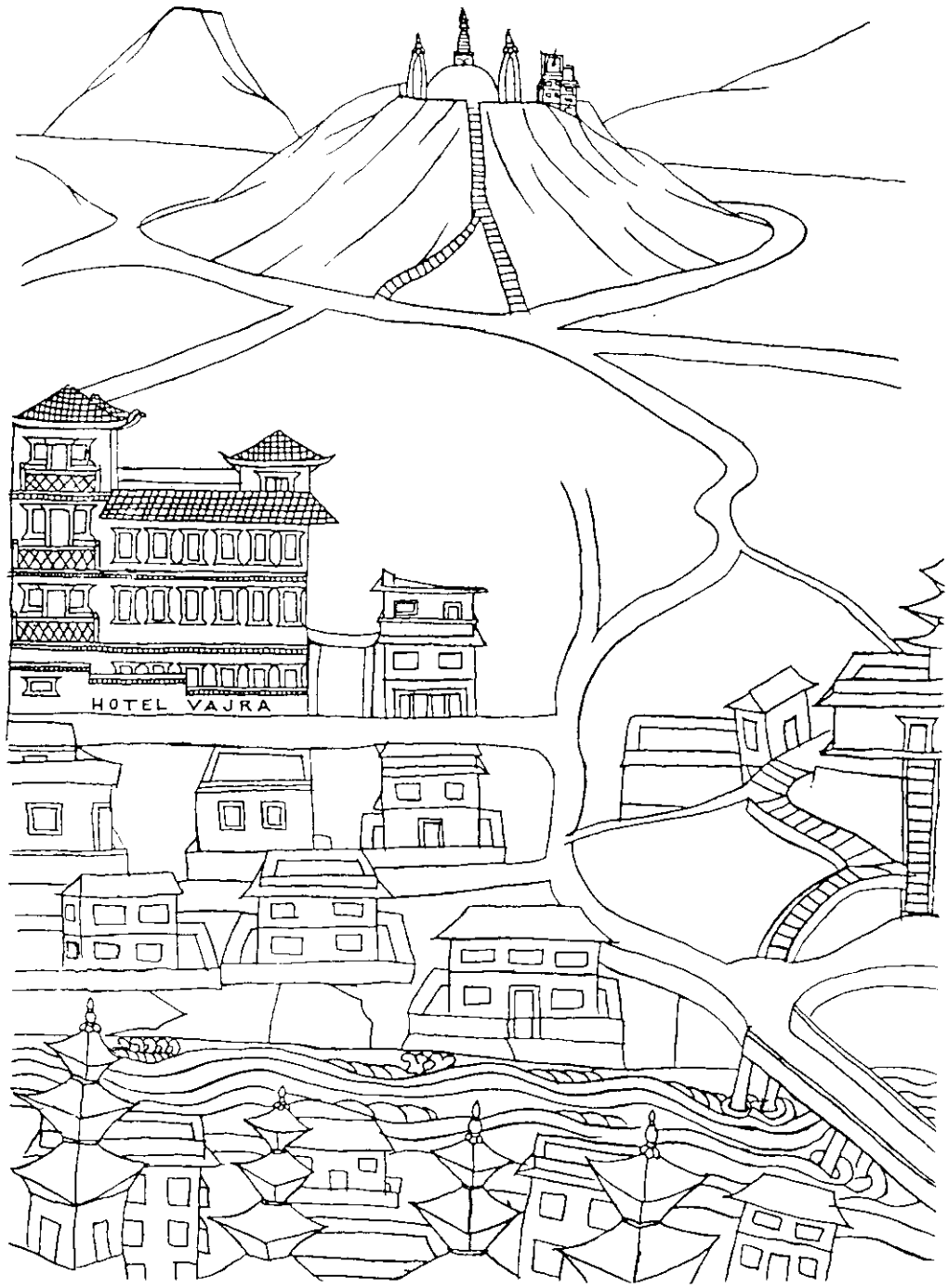


Stick in hand, Chaitay Rana, a Magar man from the West Nepal district of Bajura, walks the darkened streets of Moti Bagh, New Delhi, as a bazaar guard.

Books

Features

Departments



Vajra (literally--flash of lighting), is an artists' condominium, a transit home for many, providing a base during months of hibernation and creative inspiration. Its isolation, graphic splendour and peaceful ambience, make an ideal retreat from the clock of pressure.

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside

I stayed a week at the **Vajra**, by which time I had become so fond of it that I stayed another.

John Collee
The London Observer

in Kathmandu, the Vajra

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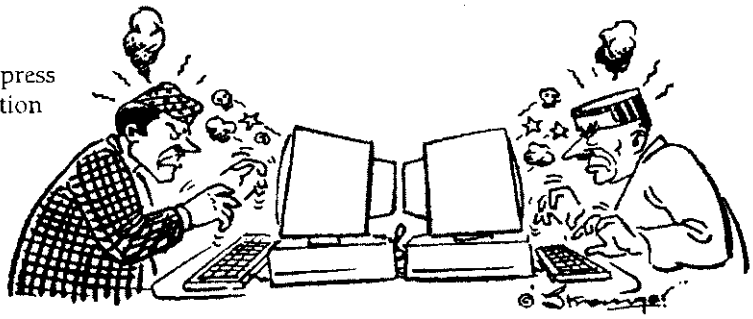

Apology Demand

This note is meant to express my profound dissatisfaction over the poor quality of your editing and complete lack of research effort in printing the article "Virtual Vitriol" (September 1996). The piece covered my tussle with a gentleman named Jai Maharaj on the Internet.

Browsers of the Internet are familiar with the awkward postings of Mr Maharaj, and my own input was a response when he began ranting relentlessly that all South Asian countries should unite under the umbrella of India. He posted one article repeatedly mentioning that Nepal and Pakistan were trying to destabilise India. This annoyed me and I posted the article to teach him something about the history of Nepal. He then stopped posting, but then someone named Prasanna Vijay Pendse started to reply to my posting. His remarks were quite logical so I did not respond.

Himal confused Mr Pendse with Mr Maharaj, and quoted everything Mr Pendse said as Mr Maharaj's reply. You grabbed the postings and, without knowing the context and without consulting me, decided to print them. As everyone knows, the way we write in a news group is totally different from the way we write for a magazine. Besides many other problems, Himal misunderstood the message behind my postings. My rather patriotic message was labeled as a product of bigotry and mistrust. The damage done to my reputation is incalculable and I demand a public apology.

Anil Tuladhar
University of British Columbia
Canada

We apologise for the mixup in the names of the two individuals with whom Mr Tuladhar was in correspondence on the Net. While the cause of Mr Tuladhar's ire might, therefore, not have been immediately apparent in the correspondence we printed, we believe that his words (which were in the public domain) illustrated very well the point being made in the piece "Virtual Vitriol". Eds.

Bhopal Still

Your readers might want to know that the Union Carbide Corporation, responsible for the Bhopal Gas Disaster of 12 years ago, was let off easily by India's apex court on 13 September. The charge of culpable homicide was diluted to death caused by negligence, paving the way for those who are responsible for the disaster to escape trial altogether. Very little succour has been provided in the last 12 years to the survivors of the disaster by way of medical relief, economic rehabilitation, justice and compensation.

We are enclosing a copy of a fact sheet generated by the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udhyog Sanghatan and the Bhopal Group for Information and Action *(see Briefs section. Eds.)* which gives details of the present status of suffering gas victims. We request your readers to kindly express their solidarity and support for the Bhopal gas victims by writing to the Prime Minister of India, the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh and the Union Minister of Chemical and Fertilisers, urging them to respond to the demands of the gas victims relating to compensation, health care and prosecution of the accused. They should write to:

Shri H.D. Deve Gowda
Prime Minister of India
7, Race Course
New Delhi
Fax: 91-11-3019817

Shri Sheesh Ram Ola
Minister of Chemicals and Fertilizers
Shastri Bhawan
315-A, New Delhi
Fax: 91-11-3384020

Shri Digvijay Singh
Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh
Shyamla Hills
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
Fax: 91-755-540 501

Looking forward to your readers' support and cooperation.

Deena Dayalan
The Other Media
New Delhi

Kings of Kitsch

With reference to "Abominably Yours" (November/December 1996), I would like to point out that Michael Jackson and Bal Thackeray are not such surprising bedfellows. Aside from Shaivite leanings of one kind or another, a special inclination for self-promotion, and a shrewd business sense, the Shiv Sena leader and the not-so-"wacko" Jackson also share a common appeal to the aesthetics and politics of kitsch. By kitsch, I mean a superficial appeal to sentiment rather than reason.

Kitsch propaganda has long been used by super-patriotic political movements, be it of the communists or fascists. It has also been used by religious movements to promote a chauvinistic, feel-good sentiment among a particular group or nation. This is why Hindu calendar art, as well as socialist realism, are some of the best examples of kitsch.

When Mr Thackeray and his Hindutva cronies invoke Hindu mythological gods and heroes, he is playing his kitsch card. When Jackson portrays himself as an adorable, vulnerable child (as he does in his HIStory videos), rather than the manipulating showman that he really is, he is also employing kitsch. His songs have little originality or real feeling, and nobody knows what actually lurks beyond the mask of public veneer. With his asexual, androgynous looks and fair coloration, Jackson—or "Jagannath" as you have abominably characterised him—could be a stand-in for a Hindu god as depicted in the calendars, except perhaps that he is too gaunt for Indian tastes.

Daniel B. Haber
Bangkok

Ke Garney

Anirudha Gupta's expose of the "invasion" of "jobbery, intrigue, and patronage [into] every walk of life" in Nepal in the aftermath of the 1990 democracy movement ("Pitfalls of Nepal's Democracy", August 1996) merely repeats what is common wisdom among Kathmandu's knowledgeable. It would have helped if the magazine could have extended this analysis beyond the sense of resigned cynicism expressed by the Nepali middle classes in their oft-heard exclamation of feigned outrage of *"ke garney!"* (what to do!), even as they scramble to benefit from any corruption crumbs that fall their way.

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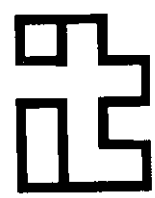
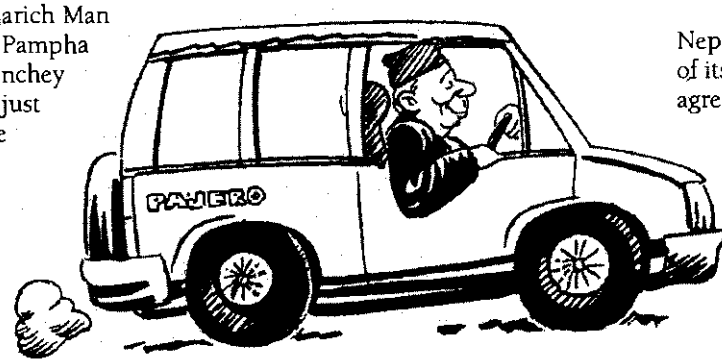


Course Co-ordinator
Asia Regional Workshop on Food Processing as a Small Business
Intermediate Technology Development Group
5, Lionel Edirisinghe Mawatha
Kirulapone, Sri Lanka

Phone : 94 1 852149 Fax : 94 1 856188 Email : itsrilan@sri.lanka.net

Contrary to what Mr Gupta says, the "unprecedented response from the poorer strata of the urban population" in the 1990 democracy movement was not to the cry for *bahudaliya janabad* (multiparty democracy) but was a demand for justice and a settling of scores against those who had abused their positions and used the government as a tool of exploitation and repression: Prime Minister Marich Man Singh, "the smuggler queen" Pampha Devi, the royal palace, the Panchey goons, bureaucrats, etc. But, just a day after the settlement, the "leaders" were already excusing these people—Krishna Prasad Bhattarai's description of the king as a "gentleman" and Girija Prasad Koirala's statement that the victory belonged to the Panchas too.



There was no inquiry into fixing responsibility for the firing on unarmed crowds or what had happened to the bodies that were carted away. Marich Man Singh today, sits comfortably in his giant walled compound north of Kathmandu. The "leaders", most of whom had played negligible roles in the movement but afterwards managed to become its icons, were too busy jostling to realign themselves with the old regime and transnational agency and corporate interests in the interim government.

I also don't think that the "Nepali elite and intelligentsia" ever really concerned themselves about mobilising the system to "work for the benefit of the masses". The "mass" is for them purely a rhetorical device. Isolated socially, spatially, mentally and spiritually from "the masses", they are terrified of and despise them even as they exploit them unmercifully. When at the end of the democracy movement the "masses" were truly beginning to mobilise themselves, the elite and intelligentsia used every device to shut down this mobilisation and domesticate the movement.

Although the statesman Rishikesh Shah may have written back in 1972 that political parties "are the only effective means...of different sections of the people in the determination of policy and selecting candidates for public office", already a century ago liberal social philosophers such as Max Weber were writing that parties provide rather for the election of "chosen masters". Democracy has only been representative when the constituencies possessed the consciousness and organisational means to exert themselves directly in the political process and to enforce accountability of their "representatives".

I did not understand what Mr Gupta was getting at towards the end. The problem is obviously more than merely one of a "minuscule political class" aborting popular revolution. The increase in imports, proliferation of international banks and NGOs, privatisation, activism of foreign embassies, establishment of yet more multinational hotels and foreign airline offices, inundation by M- and Star-TV, the algae-bloom of automobiles, speculation on and expropriation of peasant lands at a greater scale than ever before, devastation of people and the environment, and so on and on, all point to something much bigger: things reproducing themselves in many different versions all over the world.

What is the meaning of these events and processes? What are the social forces at work? Mr Gupta castigates Nepali people for not having learnt lessons from India's experience in democracy. But what of the Indian government's own involvement in the political process in Nepal—to say nothing of other countries (for example, the notorious CIA-front Foundation for Democracy's "Democracy Programme")—and how do the things happening in Nepal help activists understand what's happening elsewhere in the Subcontinent? How can common people go about confronting all this and wrench away control for the larger population? These and similar questions should be the starting point of analysis, not Mr Gupta's patronising ramblings.

Stephen Mikesell
San Francisco

Cost and Benefit of Mahakali

Many articles appearing in the press on the Pancheswar Multipurpose Project seem to be written with the intention of gaining cheap popularity on the basis of false information and misrepresentation of the recent Indo-Nepal Mahakali accord. Your two commentaries on the subject (March and Nov/Dec 1996) are also similarly at fault, and I wish to provide some clarifications for the sake of transparency. While I am Chief of the Pancheswar Project (Nepal), I write in an individual capacity as a water resources engineer.

Because of the received wisdom in Nepal that the country has been deprived of its legitimate rights in the earlier agreements on the Sarada, Kosi and Gandak, it is quite natural for Nepali minds to be suspicious when it comes to water negotiations with a powerful neighbour. However, this in itself should not be an excuse for not doing anything about Nepal's vast and unexploited water resource and hydropower potential.

The Mahakali Treaty represents the finest example of responsible negotiation carried out for the full advantage of both sides. It portends no significant harm to either side, and without doubt you are wrong in saying that the treaty represents a diplomatic victory for India and a surrender on all fronts for Nepal.

The major principles to be discussed in the cooperative development of large hydropower and multipurpose projects have to do with the sharing of benefits, maximisation of mutual advantage, and agreement on methodologies on how to assess benefit in relation to power, irrigation and flood control. Since the 1960s, the stiff and uncompromising attitude of both the Nepali and Indian governments meant that there was little progress in discussing these principles in relation to the proposed bilateral water resources projects such as Karnali (Chisapani) project and the Kosi High Dam.

By the time Mahakali came around, however, both sides felt a need to break the logjam by evincing a liberal attitude. In the end, the Nepali position on the methodology of project design and assessment of benefits were accepted in the Mahakali Treaty, which incorporates a package deal on the Sarada Barrage (a canal system that goes back to British times), the Tanakpur Barrage (built by India on its side in 1975), and the proposed Pancheswar Project. The treaty package was the result of a transparent exercise in which the three main political parties of Nepal signified their consent even before India came into the picture. The treaty itself, of course, was ratified by the Nepali Parliament's required two-third

majority, after a full debate in both Houses.

You have raised questions regarding the inclusion of the controversial Tanakpur project in the package, but the fact is that all three projects were included in the treaty for very good reason. As far as Tanakpur is concerned, Nepal has received a better deal under the package than it would have independently (a supply of 28.35 cumecs and 8.5 cumecs of water in the wet and dry season, respectively, and 70 million kilowatt-hours of energy free of cost).

As a bi-national project on a border river, the Pancheswar Project had received low priority since the 1960s. It was only after the 1990 political changes in Nepal that there was the first exchange of data between Delhi and Kathmandu. In line with the principles of equal partnership and equal entitlement to utilising and benefiting from the waters of the Mahakali, there are clear provisions for accounting the existing consumptive uses of the Mahakali River by both the parties. Nepal has the right on existing consumptive uses of water after the enforcement of the Treaty from 4.25 cumecs to 22.75 cumecs in the lean season and from 13 cumecs to 66.7 cumecs in the wet season. This can be drawn by Nepal at any time after the development and enlargement of its canal system. After the implementation of the Pancheswar Project, Nepal will have the right on 50 percent of the regulated flow from the Mahakali river. The project is to be designed and implemented to produce maximum total net benefits and power benefits to be assessed on the "avoided cost" principle instead of a "cost plus" basis. It is expected that future bilateral projects will follow the same principle.

When it comes to sharing power-related costs from Pancheswar, there is no difficulty because the benefits accrues on a 50:50 basis. However, because of the geomorphological differences between the two countries, India gets much more irrigation and flood control benefits than Nepal with Pancheswar. At present, Indian's irrigation command area for the Mahakali waters is about 1.6 million hectares, whereas the command area in Nepal cannot be developed beyond 93,000 ha. Besides, India's canal system is already well-developed and only needs improvement, whereas Nepal has to build more than 85 percent of the required irrigation infrastructure.

The benefits and cost allocation of the Pancheswar Project, according to the studies carried out by Nepal and based on the principles laid down in the Treaty are shown in the accompanying table.

Benefit and Cost Allocation of Pancheswar Multipurpose Project
WATER SHARING ON 50:50 BASIS

		Nepal		India		Total	
		USD*	%	MUS $	%	USD*	%
1.	**Benefit Allocation**						
	Power (Annual)	313.4	39.1%	313.4	39.1%	626.8	78.2%
	Irrigation (Annual)	37.9	4.7%	133.5	16.7%	171.4	21.4%
	Flood Control (Annula)	0.7	0.1%	3.0	0.4%	3.7	0.5%
	Total Benefit	352.0	43.9%	449.9	56.1%	801.9	0.5%
2.	**Cost Allocation**						
	Power	888.1	29.8%	888.1	29.8%	1776.2	59.5%
	Irrigation & Fllood Control	266.1	8.9%	940.9	31.5%	1207.0	40.5%
	Total	1154.2	38.7%	1829.0	61.3%	2983.2	100.0%
3.	**Irrigation Infrastructure**	213.9	22.8%	724.5	77.2%	938.4	100.0%

*in millions

After implementation of the Pancheswar Project, Nepal and India will share the benefit at 43.9 percent and 56.1 percent respectively of the total benefit. According to the benefit accrued by each party, total cost allocation to Nepal and India will be 38.7 percent and 61.3 percent.

In order to absorb the unused portion of Nepal's share of water, a significant amount of investment will have to be made by India for additional irrigation infrastructures. As for the unused portion of the Nepali share of the regulated water once Pancheswar is built, there is no provision in the treaty to make alternative claims on India. However, it should be kept in mind that Nepal retains every right to withdraw its share of water from the Mahakali River in the years to come. Because there is a provision in the treaty that the cost of the Project shall be borne by the parties in proportion to the benefits accruing to them, accordingly, India has to bear the cost in irrigation and flood control portion as USD 940.9 million and Nepal has to bear only USD 266.1 million.

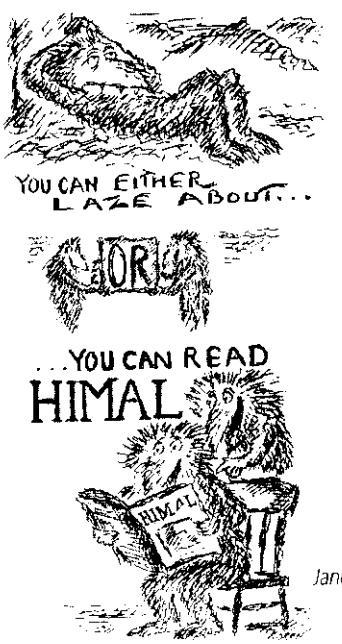
Your idea that Nepal could trade the unused portion of water from Pancheswar in exchange for using water in other rivers of Nepal which flow into India is absurd and impracticable. This kind of barter arrangement is not possible unless one constructs a ring canal from Nepal's western border to the eastern border.

As I have mentioned earlier, the history of Indo-Nepal bilateral talks on water resources since the 1960s have been marked by a rigid and uncompromising attitude on the part of both governments. For too long, the decision-making echelons have been manned by bureaucrats lacking experience in one or the other technical fields, from engineering to diplomacy to finance. These officials were unable to synthesise the multitude of development concerns that go into project formulation.

In today's context of a liberalised and open economy, and the developing positive trend in Indo-Nepal relations, the times seem appropriate for bilateral action to harness the vast water resources of Nepal. Unlike Himal's own views on the matter, the Mahakali treaty and the Pancheswar Project are the first indication that things are now, finally, on track.

Today, there are more than 6000 dams of significant size constructed and delivering benefits to the people of developing countries the world over. Nepal has exploited no more than 0.3 percent of its hydropower potential, and the untamed rivers continue to carry about 225 billions cubic metres of run-off water annually, bringing no advantage to the population. These rivers have to be tamed with proven state-of-the-art technology to benefit the people of the region. The Pancheswar High Dam is a beginning in that direction.

Arjun P. Shrestha
Kathmandu



Readers are invited to comment, criticise or add to information and opinions appearing in HSA. Letters should be brief, to the point, and may be edited. Letters that are unsigned and/or without addresses will not be entertained. Include daytime telephone number, if possible.

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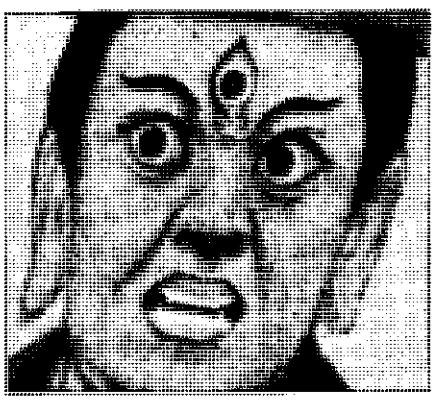
ON HIS HOLINESS' SECRET SERVICE

Himal South Asia had presented a report in its September edition on the accusations and counter-accusations between the Dalai Lama 'camp' and the Shugden Supporters Community (SSC), a Buddhist group based in London. The story had suggested, among other things, that the Dalai Lama's followers might have been a little over-zealous in enforcing his stricture against worshipping the deity Dorje Shugden. Little did we know then that Himal itself would have to face the displeasure of some these followers over the same matter.

Salugara, near Siliguri in the Indian state of West Bengal, was the site where Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, conducted his latest Kalachakra initiation. An estimated 200,000 Buddhists devotees were gathered from all over the Himalayan rimland and overseas. Even though security was tight, the atmosphere in Salugara was carnival-like, and we were glad to be a part of it, through the presence of Himals for sale at a stall.



Dorje Shugden

Little did we know that the Minister of Security of the Tibetan Government in Exile had de facto policing powers in Salugara during the period of the Kalachakra, not that we had done something objectionable. Freedom of speech, after all, is not something that Karunamaya, the compassionate one, would frown upon.

Apparently those in charge of protecting the "living incarnation" of the Compassionate One do not agree. Before less than five copies of the September issue had been sold, Tibetan sleuths swooped on the stall and demanded that Himal be withdrawn from sale. It contained subversive matter, the said. Intimidated, the hapless stall-keeper relinquished the copies of Himal, which the Tibetan officials promised to keep in "safe custody" until after the Kalachakra.

Interestingly enough, those who have read the September issue find that the article on the Shugden controversy was generally favourable to the Dalai Lama. But that is besides the point. What is not, is that the writ of Dharamsala's security apparatus could run on a Nepali citizen in India. Which leads us to wonder if all those stories about immoderate pressure applied on the Tibetan followers of Dorje Shugden followers might just have been true.

CARE TAKERS

Democratic decay in most countries in South Asia has suddenly made it fashionable once more to say some pretty (politically) incorrect things in public. Things like: maybe things were better in the bad old days of Zia-ul Haq, or Gen Ershad, or the Emergency, or the Panchayat.

Three countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal overcame years of dictatorship within a span of a few years in the past decade, and regained democracy. Pakistan's transition was hastened when Gen Zia-ul Haq went down in a C-130 near Bhawalpur in 1988. In Nepal, economic hardships caused by an Indian economic blockade helped fuel an uprising that forced absolute monarch Birendra to grant free elections and a pluralist constitution in 1990. In Bangladesh, Gen Husain Mohamed Ershad found his days numbered and was swept by a popular surge for freedom in 1990.

Six years later, the stench of democracy in decay hangs in the air in all three countries. Pakistan has gone for three elections since 1989 and is preparing for a fourth. Benazir Bhutto has been ignominiously dismissed, twice, in almost identical fashion by piqued presidents. Each Pakistani government scaled ever-higher heights of corruption, mismanagement and nepotism than previous ones. Benazir was given a second chance, and she blew it.

For its part, Nepal has had only two elections, narrowly having averted a third. Like moths, the Communists got their brief flutter near the light in 1995, making Nepal the world's first Marxist-Leninist monarchy. Many countries cannot afford bloated and corrupt governments, but Nepalis cannot even afford the elections to vote kleptocrats out of power. So teetering coalitions held together by tendrils of patronage rule precariously on, while the country itself goes to pot.

Bangladesh mastered the art of The Nationwide Shutdown like no other South Asian country. When Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed of the Awami League brought the country to a halt for weeks on end. The economy ground to a standstill. Sheikh Hasina has now fulfilled her dream of being prime minister, and the economy is getting back on its feet. So, it is Begum Zia's turn to shut down the country for weeks on end, just you watch.

It is said that the people get the politicians they deserve. But politicians also get the opposition they deserve. It is not difficult to see why democracy is getting a bad press lately. People are saying: "What's this democracy? You shuffle the cards and you just get the same old crooks."

It is not surprising, then, that South Asia's adolescent democracies have been looking to the veterans—India and Sri Lanka—for a bit of guidance. Not much help there. The fact that India has for the first time a Parliament that is dominated by non-Hindi, non-cowbelt and non-upper caste government may be a sign that the machinery, though cranky, still works. But the transparency of democracy has also shown that corruption has eaten into the vitals of the polity.

Despite a decade of war and a steady attrition of its politicians to suicide bombers, Sri Lanka's democracy is still alive—but it is in intensive care. Not surprisingly, the role model for most Sri Lankan leaders since 1977 has been Lee Kuan Yew. The

Singaporean guru is also gathering followers among India's business elite, and even Communist technocrats. "Maybe Lee is right," we hear it said in wine and cheese parties in New Delhi's upscale cocktail circuit. "Maybe we do need less democracy and more discipline."

A much more persuasive observation is that the most effective governments that have ever ruled countries in the Subcontinent in recent years have been interim ones—and they were not even elected! Pakistan was ruled by Moeen Quereshi, an ex-World Bank whizkid, who turned the country's economy around in three months flat. The fact that a subsequent elected government took about the same time to wreck it is another story.

Today, Pakistan's caretaker government is setting a different kind of example. Interim prime minister Malik Meraj Khalid flies economy class on PIA, waits with everyone else at the carousel in Lahore for his luggage, and walks around town like an ordinary citizen.

The interim government that ruled Nepal after the fall of the Panchayat, a coalition of pro-multiparty-democracy-wallahs, was arguably the most efficient government in Kathmandu for some time. It managed a transition to democratic rule and delivered a constitution at a time when cynics said Nepal would break apart without the king at the helm. In June 1996, Bangladeshis got what they wanted in the form of a caretaker government run by a former chief justice and a group of competent advisers to supervise elections that were efficient, clean and decisive.

Caretaker governments are what all elected governments should be. They should be taking care of people's wellbeing and looking at human security as a guarantee of their own staying-power. But governments seem to only want to stay in power, whatever the cost. Democratic politics for them is only a means towards that end.

Yes, democracy in South Asia has failed to deliver. But don't damn democracy, damn the politicians who haven't yet grasped what it means.

UNWELCOME MILLENNIUM

H.Y. Sharada Prasad, one-time advisor to Indira Gandhi and now a New Delhi elder, had this to say of the millennium when asked to open a South Asia media conference in New Delhi recently:

The first thing to remember when encountering the 21st century is that except that the numbers of the calendar will change, nothing else will change. It is not as if at that midnight hour when the 20th century will make way to its successor, there will be any surge of wisdom in human minds and of goodness in human hearts. Sure there will be extra revelry in Times Square and other metropolitan spots where people foregather. There will be a great brouhaha on television, in newspapers and magazines. The internet will be crowded with messages. But when the morning dawns after the night of celebration we shall find that the world is as full of hate and hunger and inequality on the first day of the brand-new century as throughout the bad old one.

Exactly. Already, much like the unfathomable two-year countdown to the American elections through which the entire world was dragged until release was obtained in November 1996, the countdown to 2000 has already begun. The flap and flutter over the upcoming millennial watershed will become increasingly louder over the next three years. One cannot but shudder at all the commercialised hype and hoopla that we will have to endure between now and 1999.

The population of South Asia has no connection with the Gregorian calendar except in the most recent nano-second of recorded history.

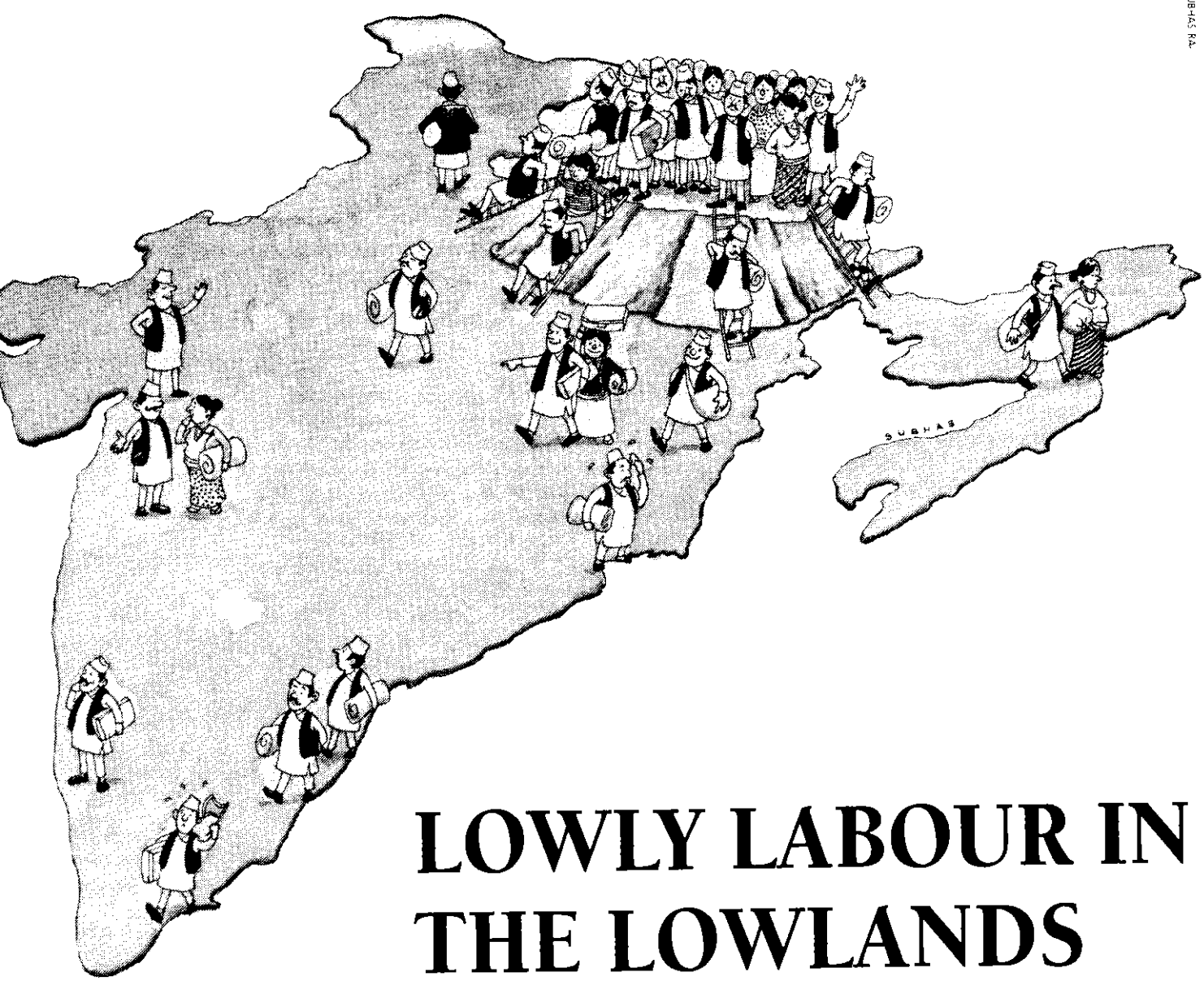
Truth be told, the population of South Asia, and other similar billion-sized chunks of humanity, have no connection with the Gregorian calendar except in the most recent nano-second of recorded history. While the elite of the South certainly are by now very much part of the Gregorian time-set, the commoners are either entirely out of it, or are only tangentially affected by the fact that Baby Jesus was born just about two thousand years ago.

For practical purposes, of course, the Gregorian calendar has become a worldwide measure of time, and the standardisation that this has enforced is all for the good. It is also true that the demands of the unitary modern state means that—like the English language in South Asia—the Gregorian calendar enforces a uniformity that is required to run national government, business, and so on.

What we cannot fathom is the *celebration* of New Year's Day that South Asia's English-speaking upper crusts foist upon the rest of the populace. For, the birth that year and that night in Bethlehem is not part of South Asia's historic culture, and is not significant to an overwhelming portion of the region's population.

The daily rhythms of life among the masses is still dictated by the lunar cycle, on the one hand, and various calendars that were established in far corners of South Asia at different times. These calendars range from the Vikram Sambat, which is in its 2053rd year, to the Tibetan calendar that begins a new cycle every 60 years.

The millennium that three years away as of this writing, is that of the Iswi Sambat. As a secular gauge of time, and as a marker of European historicity, and as a calendar which helps South Asians run their governments and economies more efficiently, we are all for marking the transition. However, do not force us to celebrate, and, more importantly, do not ask us to generate all the anticipatory excitement between now and then.



LOWLY LABOUR IN THE LOWLANDS

It does not seem to shame nor needlessly bother Kathmandu's ruling classes that highland peasants by the hundreds of thousands leave the country every year to work the most wretched jobs in the plains of India.

by Kanak Mani Dixit
with research by Ganesh Khatri, Ramyata Limbu and Sangeeta Lama.

Nepalis migrate to the plains of India for the same reason that migrants have abandoned their homes and hearths the world over through history. It is the economics of desperation. Because their unproductive little farms are unable to provide sustenance, highlanders by the hundreds of thousands descend to India in search of livelihood. In extreme cases, they leave solely for the purpose of removing an extra mouth to feed at home.

At a time when, after decades of neglect, the issue of the export of Nepali women to brothels in metropolitan India is finally getting a degree of notice, the much larger export of menial labour continues to receive scant attention of planners and scholars. Cumulatively, the remittance by migrant labour make a singular contribution to the national economy, but they find no mention in national economic calculations, and certainly not in the figures and forecasts of the National Planning Commission.

The volume of misery that is represented by what is thought to be more than a million individuals from a national population of 21 million leaving home to work as an underclass in the plains is indeed large, and it is lamentable that it should go unremarked. Such is the official and scholarly apathy on the subject of Nepali labour in India—akin to the indifference towards human-

back portering in the hills (see Himal Nov/Dec 1995)—that one can reach no other conclusion than that the phenomenon is regarded as a national embarrassment.

Pretending that migration for basic employment does not exist or does not matter will not make it go away, however, and the Nepali state is dutybound to recognise the issue and address the extreme economic imbalance and lack of progress which makes peasants continue to seek paltry pickings in a neighbouring country.

In the absence of information collection efforts, one has to rely on anecdotal information to gauge the extent of the Nepal-born labour force in India. For example, it is well known that a Kathmandu person can never get lost in metropolitan Delhi's complex maze—he can receive continuous guidance from the Nepali-speaking watchmen, workshop assistants and restaurant boys that populate every neighbourhood of India's capital.

Little Bajhang

Scattered incidents and the occasional research report also give evidence of the spread of Nepali working class across the length and breadth of India. When the New Delhi police combed the Vasant Kunj middle class enclave following the arraignment of Tika Ram on a multiple murder charge *(see following article)*, they found that fully 400 out of 1,200 households kept servants from Nepal. At Saagar Restaurant, a popular South Indian eatery in the city's Defence Colony market, it is possible to order your meal in Nepali—most of the young workers are from the West Nepal districts of Gulmi and Pyuthan.

Punjabi landlords, and also those in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, use Nepali workers as security guards and as seasonal labour for the fields as well. In May this year, Indian newspapers briefly noted the execution-style killing of eight Nepali labourers by militants at a stone-crushing factory in Kashmir Valley.

Across the Himalayan rimland of India, Nepali road gangs build and maintain mountain highways. At the Subcontinent's other extremity, in and around the city of Bangalore, villagers from Bajhang District in Nepal's far west have established a well-organised labour monopoly for themselves. According to a Swiss anthropologist who has studied this trans-South Asian phenomenon, Bajhang *survives* on the basis of remittances from Bangalore.

While the Bajhang-Bangalore hookup has been extraordinary, the distribution of labour tends to be more spatial. The population of the poverty-stricken western hills, for example, migrates to adjacent areas in India. Besides going to the nearby plains, some Nepalis from the far west also hike across into Uttarakhand, whose own menfolk migrate to Delhi to find better work. In Uttarakhand, Nepalis (called Dotiyals) serve as coolies in hill stations like Nainital and Mussoorie and carry loads for pilgrims—and the pilgrims themselves—at holy locations such as Gaumukh and Kedarnath.

USHA TIWARI

Krishna Karki *(left)* of Dhading District, has done well managing a *dhaba* in New Delhi.

Even though the people of east Nepal are somewhat better off than those of the far-west, they too migrate by the tens of thousands to the outlying areas, gravitating to Calcutta and the industrial centres of Bihar and West Bengal, or to the Northeast.

Says Garima Shah, a Delhi-based Nepali activist and social worker: "Young boys in restaurants and *dhabas*, illiterate factory labourers, domestic help, drivers, *chowkidaars*, *ayahs*, this is the lot of the Nepali migrant. A few lucky ones make it to the level of lower division clerk in a government office, cashiers, receptionists, and *hawaldars* in the Indian police." She adds, "Nepalis are everywhere, in the low-paying jobs which are most visible. There is a saying among us here, that *Nepali ra aloo jaha pani painchha* (Nepalis and potatos, they are found everywhere)."

The Perfect Fit

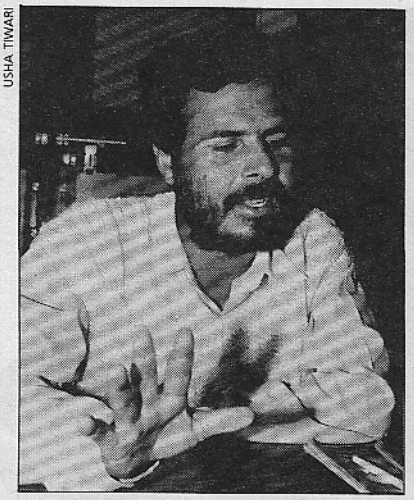
Serving as a domestic and commercial underclass in the plains is not a tradition handed down to the present Nepali generation by earlier ones. If anything, this is a 20th-century phenomenon and is evidence of the relentless economic marginalisation of Nepal's hinterland in the modern era.

The Nepali hillman's travel to *muglan* (plains) for work probably began with recruitment into the army of British India after the 1814-16 Anglo-Nepal war. For the first time, men from the hills of Nepal spent time in the lowlands, in garrison towns. 'Gurkha' evolved as a brand name for integrity and loyalty as the batmen to British officers became the prototypical household help. Ground was being prepared for Nepalis to gain jobs with the Indian middle class households a full century later.

Besides Gurkha recruitment, Nepal also became a

BIKAS RAUNIAR

A Nepali serves as *ayah* in Lucknow.


USHA TIWARI

The Unity Society's Bamdev Chhetri.

source of brawn starting in the mid-1800s, when the peasantry was encouraged to migrate eastwards along the *duars* (the strip of plains below the hills of Darjeeling and Bhutan) to Assam valley, and the far-eastern hills from present-day Arunachal all the way to northern Burma. The colonials required a pliant labour force to help open up forest lands for lumbering, settlement and tea plantations, and the unlettered, unexposed Nepali highlanders provided the perfect fit.

Usurious conditions in Nepal's villages created by taxation levied to finance expansionary wars and occupation, and later the rapacious system of Rana family rule, provided the "push factors" for this process of migration to start and be sustained. In modern times, an expanding population ensured the continuing need for migration to ensure survival.

Indian census reports show that the Nepal-born population increased significantly in India only after 1951, indicating that the volume of migratory labour suddenly expanded in mid-century. According to the 1971 census of India, there were 1.3 million Nepal-born Nepalis living in India. Migrant organisations such as the Emigrant Nepali Association claim that this figure is now up to about three million. *(See accompanying article by Dilli Ram Dahal on the problem with numbers.)*

In the 1960s and 1970s, the eradication of malaria from the Nepal tarai and official encouragement for highlanders to colonise these jungled plains also provided an outlet for migratory pressures. The tarai forests got used up, but there was continuing need for the peasantry to find means for sustenance and survival. In the end, it burst through the open Indo-Nepal border (guaranteed by the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship) to take advantage of work opportunities, however menial, that became available in the modernising economy of independent India.

Among other things, an Indian middle class had grown through the 1950s and 1960s, and Nepalis came in time to provide household help as *darbans* (watchmen) and kitchen help. Industrialisation and the development of roads and other public infrastructure also threw up a great demand for unskilled labour, and willing Nepali hands arrived to take up the chores.

USHA TIWARI

Kul Bahadur Thapa, who lives in Vasant Vihar in New Delhi, considers himself lucky to own his own autorickshaw.

The exodus from the hills has, if anything, escalated over the decades since. Today, at roadheads all over Nepal's tarai, from Mahendranagar on the western border to Kakarbhitta in the east, there is a continuous flow of Nepalis on the way to jobs in India or returning on leave. All over the Nepali hills this past October, as happens every year at the time of the Dasain festival, Nepali menfolk arrived home by the tens of thousands—bringing gifts, trinkets and household items, to snatch a few moments with parents, children, wives—before heading back down for another year of labour.

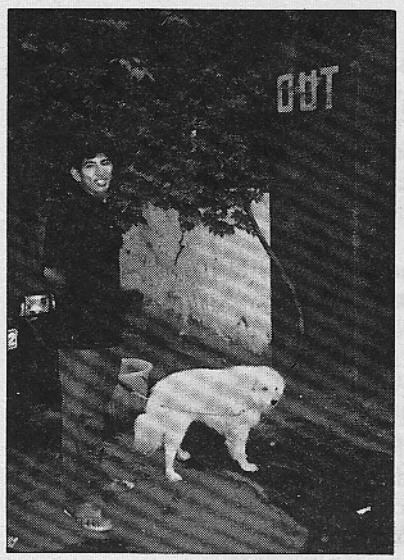
The Migrant and the Social Scientist

The need for a significant proportion of Nepal's population to descend to the Indian plains in search of menial work indicates the depth of the economic depression in the hills, particularly in the west of the country where there is more poverty.

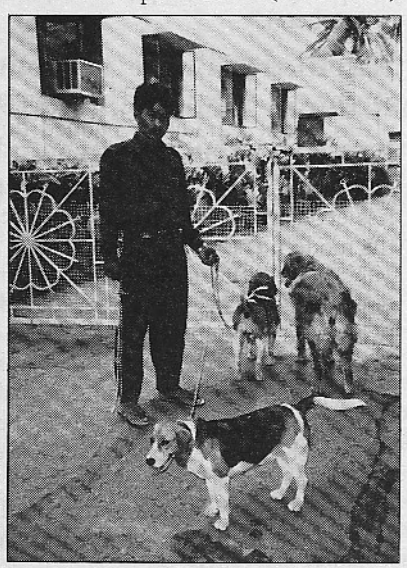
Mahendra Lama, Associate Professor of South Asian Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, lays the blame for the extraordinary situation squarely on the shoulders of the Kathmandu establishment. Says Mr Lama: "Successive Nepali governments are responsible for the plight of the immigrants. The national economic, political and social management has been extremely poor, with the result that even today there are no worthwhile opportunities within the country for the growing population."

K.B. Shahi agrees. A school teacher before he left his district of Bajura to land a job at the Philippines Embassy in Delhi, Mr Shahi says it was economic necessity that forced him to move. "Back home, development is nil," he

A dog outing with Nepali walkers in Bombay *(left)* and Bangalore.



KANAK MANI DIXIT


KANAK MANI DIXIT

says. "Here, at least one is assured of basic amenities. My three sons and one daughter speak and write better Hindi than Nepali, but that is a small price to pay for what we get here that we could not back home in Bajura."

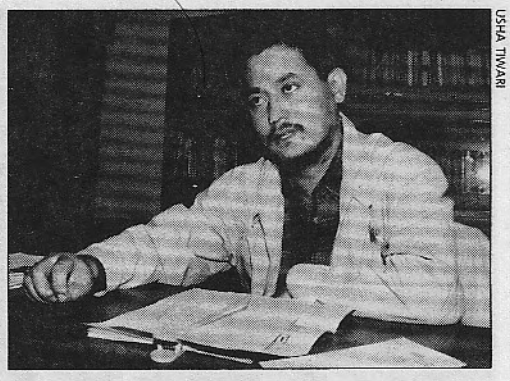
Laxmi Prasad Upadhaya, Chairman of the Karnataka-Kerala Joint State Committee of the Emigrant Nepali Association, says, "Nepalis come to India to work because the socio-economic conditions at home are bad, and also because there is an open border. The government is unable to provide for education and health."

Swiss anthropologist Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, in her study of Bajhang, found that out-migration is "a survival move carried out in response to the inability to eke out a subsistence by adapting to the existing social relations of production, or of their inability to revolt against the existing socio-economic order". In contrast, the members of the dominant class of Bajhang have several alternatives at their disposal and do not need to migrate, she says.

While the socio-economic deprivation facing the Nepali population is well documented and is by now a matter of general knowledge, there is paucity of data on Nepali migrant labour, including its extent and life conditions. While carrying out research for this article, it became clear that even the little social scientific research that has been done is dated. The Nepali academicians interviewed could provide little updated information on the subject. Making generalised comments, they constantly harped on the need for "further study" on the subject.

Ram Chhetri, lecturer in Sociology at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, agrees that there has been little methodical research on Nepalis working in India. He thinks such research is important as it would, besides documenting the life and times of migrants, provide information on how male migration has hit hill agriculture. "Migration doubtless has a grave bearing on our economy. We need to know what the migrant numbers are, what kind of labour they do, and how the country can provide alternative income to keep them from leaving."

Says researcher Dilli Ram Dahal, who with colleague Chaitanya Mishra, conducted an indepth study of Nepali migrants back in 1987 that remains the benchmark on the subject of migrant labour: "We have no idea since when Nepalis began working in India and what they do there. I think we must study at least two generations of workers to understand the situation. In order to remove ambiguity, it is also important to differentiate between the Nepali-speakers who are Indian citizens and Nepalis of Nepal."

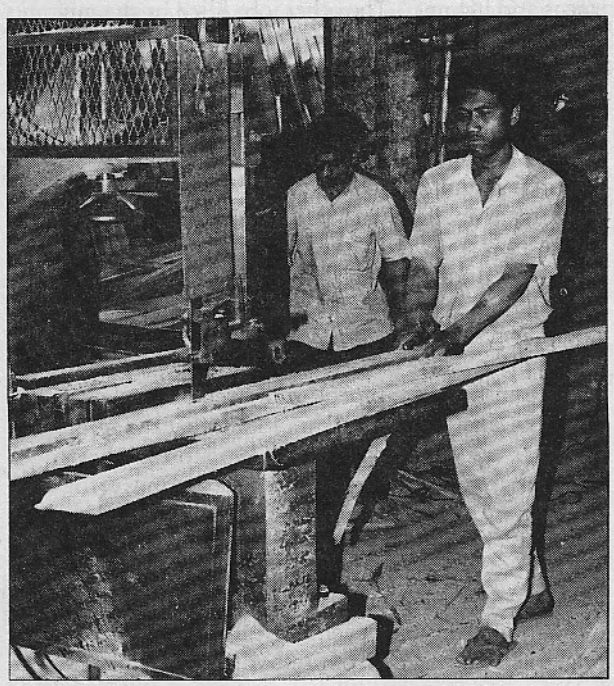

USHA TIWARI

Mahendr a Lama of Jawaharlal Nehru University blames the Kathmandu establishment.

On the whole, the export of able-bodied men to India has enormous negative consequences on Nepali economy and society, says Mr Dahal. "It is futile to discuss human resource development in the country without studying the extent and nature of Nepali job exports to India. As things stand, the Nepalis within Nepal are poor, but those that go to India also get poor jobs."

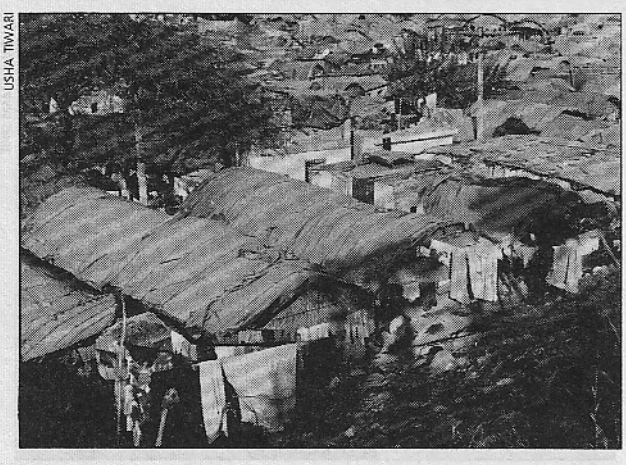
Life Conditions

In their 1987 report, Mr Dahal and Mr Mishra give the following reasons why the Nepali peasantry found it easy to travel to India for employment: "The 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty which among other things, formalised this openness of the border, the blurred citizenship identities, the unregulated nature of the border, the easy convertibility of the currencies, the similarities in the organisation of production and the structure of division of labour and thus the easy transferring of skills..."


USHA TIWARI

Sawmill workers Santa Bahadur Buda of Rolpa District *(in front)* and Jhamak Karki of Dang District.

The migrants studied in 1987 by the two researchers were concentrated in the economically-active age group of 15 to 59. Among them, fully 40 percent worked as guards or night watchmen, "which is a lowly job according to


USHA TIWARI

A *jhuggi* colony in Okhla, where 144 out of 147 shanties house Nepali workers.


USHA TIWARI

Goma Devi Tripathi mans a weighing machine in Thatheri Bazaar, Benaras.

status and income". The other jobs filled by the migrants were as hotel boys (17 percent), technicians (10 percent), sales and business (10 percent), driving and related work (6 percent) and wage labourers (5 percent).

Fully 60 percent of the migrants studied did not manage to send money home—even though that was the reason to migrate in the first place. This figure went up to 80 percent in the state of Bihar, where the income of migrants was lowest. Asked about accumulation of any wealth in India, where they had spent a substantial portion of their working lives, 90 percent of the migrants said they had no landed property, and 84 percent did not have a place to live of their own. Fully 96 percent did not have "transport equipment", not even a bicycle.

Mr Dahal and Mr Mishra found that the number of migrants who emerged between 1955 to 1965 was much higher than subsequent periods. "The stirrings of the Land Reform Act of 1964 and the consequent unsettled situation" which led to the eviction of tenant farmers might have led to the sudden surge, they suggest.

The two researchers also tried to understand the human suffering and psychological hardship faced by the migrants, who come from hill villages to work in alien urban settings as domestics or in factories, suffering the oppressive heat of lowland summers. There is no doubt that Nepali labourers face psychological trauma, Mr Dahal and Mr Mishra reported. Their main problems were insecurity of jobs, lack of social respect, and a sense of separateness from the local community.

"Migration has helped the mountain and hill areas, and Nepal as a whole, to trudge on," Mr Dahal and Mr Mishra concluded in 1987. That remains true today, a decade later, and Nepal trudges on.

Peace and Friendship

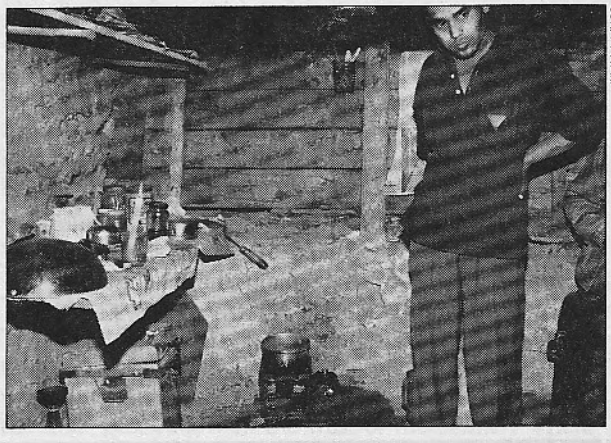
A number of Nepali organisations, mostly of leftist orientation, have been formed in India to carry out cultural and welfare activities for migrants in India *(see accompanying article)*. A few are politically active and have wide membership. Some of these groups—there are 20 in Delhi alone—serve only the Nepalis of Nepal, others claim to represent Nepali-speakers from all over, including India and Bhutan.

One such group is the All India Nepali Unity Society, which lobbied on behalf of the families of the eight Nepalis killed in Kashmir and made possible the payment of INR 100,000 to each. The Society's leaders say that it is presently concentrating on seeing that Articles 6 and 7 of the Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 are put into practice. These provisions refer to giving equal status to each other's citizens in terms of residence, travel, trade, ownership and property.

The easy cross-border migration of Nepali labour to India—*and* Indian labour to Nepal—is made possible by the open border between the two countries, a situation which was formalised by the 1950 Treaty. And yet, the Nepali organisers in India complain that the migrants do not receive the equal treatment that the treaty promises.

Bamdev Chettri, Secretary of the Unity Society, says Nepalis are often prevented from registering their names at the employment offices. They are also not eligible for ration cards for buying essentials, and confront numerous other kinds of discrimination which go against the letter and spirit of the 1950 instrument. According to Mr Chettri, more than 200 petitions filed by the Society on behalf of the Nepali workers are presently pending with the Delhi courts. "Wherever they come from, Nepalis are being discriminated against and we are working for their welfare," he says.

Tek Bahadur K.C., president of the Delhi State Committee of the Emigrant Nepali Association, is also indignant at the treatment of Nepali workers and the various obstacles which hinder their prospects. The Association, which has units all over India, works only with Nepalis from Nepal and provides adult education and skills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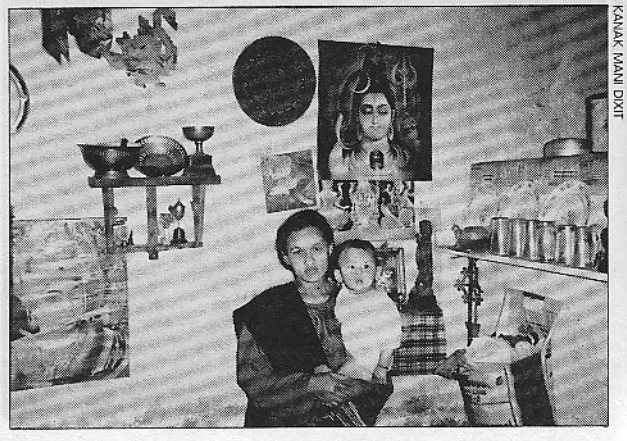

KANAK MANI DIXIT

Well-to-do Nepali habitation in Bangalore *(bottom)* and not so good in Delhi.

Bahadur = Kancha = Gorkha

"PAHILAY IJJAT THIYO, AHILAY CHHAINA (Before we had respect, now we do not)," says **Mohan Bahadur Kunwar**, from Bajhang District, who guards the Raj Mohan Villas housing development in Bangalore. He has been here for more than five years, and earns 2700 rupees a month, whereas his relation **Ram Bahadur Kunwar**, just arrived, earns a thousand a month.

Dandapani Sapkota is just next door to where the Kunwars work. He is from Foksing village in Gulmi District and has worked in the city for 17 years as a house-servant. He says he is tired, and would not recommend his kind of work to anybody. "I save about 12,000 to 15,000 rupees a year, but this is not good *nokari* (service). The starting salary is one thousand a month, without food. I earn 2200 rupees, but it should have been 4000 by now."

"Fully 99 percent of Nepalis in India are in menial jobs," says **C.P. Mainali**, senior Left politician in Nepal, who worked for three years organising migrants in India. "Only one percent might be in technical or skilled fields, and less than 0.1 percent will have an independent income. There is not a *paan* shop in the name of a Nepali in India, and less than one in a thousand is a clerk."

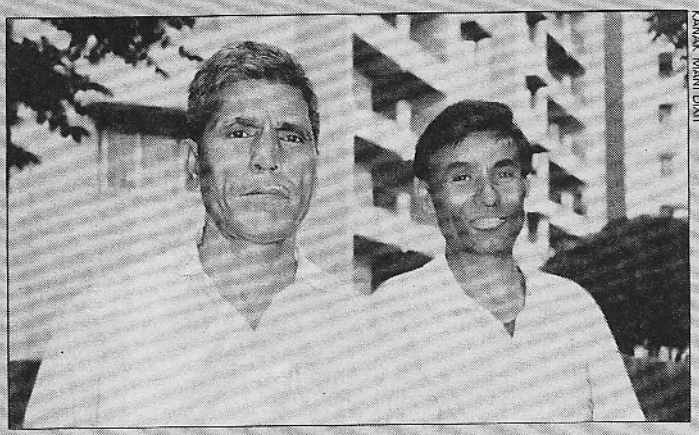
Says **Sudarshan Karki**, Delhi City Committee Secretary of the All India Nepali Unity Society, "The situation of the Nepalis is tenuous. Those with good jobs may earn 2000 rupees, but more are earning 200 rupees. They are on call 24 hours a day, the lucky ones may be for only 12."

Manager Pande, professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, says, "It is fashionable to have Nepali *chowkidaars*, for the sense of security it provides. The ultimate status symbol is to have a little bungalow and a *bahadur* standing guard at the gate."

According to journalist **Kuldip Nayar**, "This tradition of treating Nepalis as synonymous with *bahadur* and *kancha* must be done away with. Nepalis are capable of more than merely working as guards and houseboys."

Shopkeeper **Ganesh Das Agarwal** of Benaras, proprietor of the Saree Karobar Kendra, admits that he does not have Nepali workers, and adds, "But if I get them I will keep them. A business, a Maruti car and a Nepali *chowkidaar*, that is what we all want."

"Wherever there is hardship, you will find Nepalis," says **Krishnamaya Bohara**, preparing her morning meal outside her one-room shanty in Nepali Camp in New Delhi's Vasant Vihar locality. There are altogether 180 shanties (or jhuggies) in Nepali Camp.



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Mohan Bahadur Kunwar *(left)* and Ram Bahadur Kunwar, both from Bajhang District, guard the Raj Mahal Villas in Bangalore.

Kumar Kancha is the son of Nepali migrants working in Calcutta. As a boy, he went to Bombay to try his luck in tinseltown. Before he rose to recognition as a playback singer for Hindi films, he survived as part of Bombay's underclass, graduating from restaurant boy to street tough. The singer says lack of ambition is the greatest failing of the mostly illiterate migrants. "*Dukhha ta painchha ni* (Of course one suffers), but you have to want to get out of your situation. We Nepalis tend to be satisfied with one little job, whereas the Gujaratis, Bengalis or Biharis are very entrepreneurial. Today, he might be a *darban*, but before long he is selling peanuts on the pavement, and the next thing you know he owns a fruit stall."

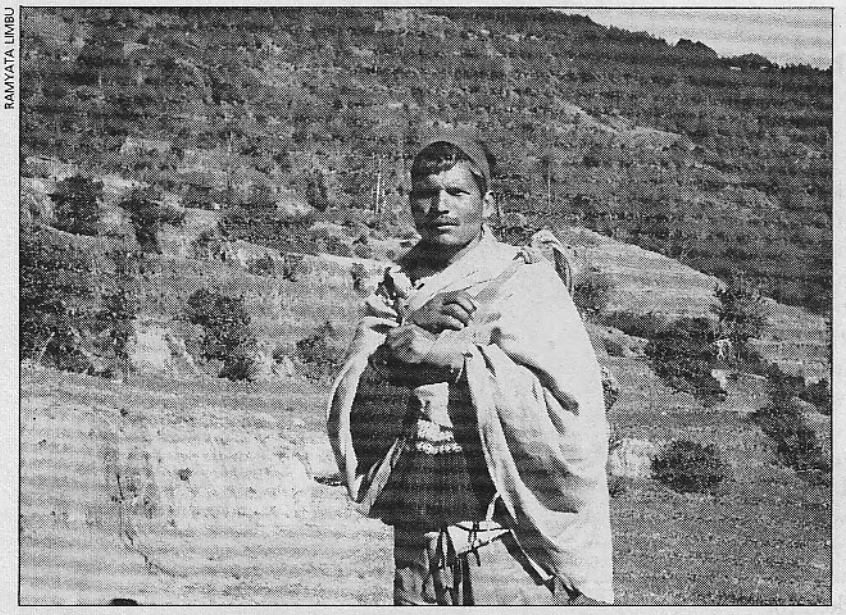
Kumar Kancha says he has deliberately maintained his surname as 'Kancha' (meaning "little boy") in professional life. "I insist on *Kancha* even though my friends have suggested I discard it because of the negative association it has in India. They say it will not help my career, but I will keep the name because I want to prove that the *kancha* not only washes dishes and stands guard, but he can also be a professional and compete. I want to change the very connotation of the word, which is so denigrating of Nepalis and speaks of our condition in India."

training to help them overcome the "*chowkidaar* barrier".

Kathmandu scholars see the need to distinguish between three types of 'Nepalis' in India so as to provide clear focus on migrants as one category. First, there are the Indian citizens of Nepali origin, concentrated in Darjeeling, Sikkim, India's Northeast and elsewhere, whose leaders claim a number of some seven million. The Indian Nepali might face some difficulty because he is wrongly regarded as a foreigner, but he has the rights and privileges of a full-fledged Indian citizen.

KRISHNA BHATTARAI

Licensed porters from districts east of Kathmandu in Gangtok.



RAMYATA LIMBU

Man in Bahjang, the district which exports labour to Bangalore.

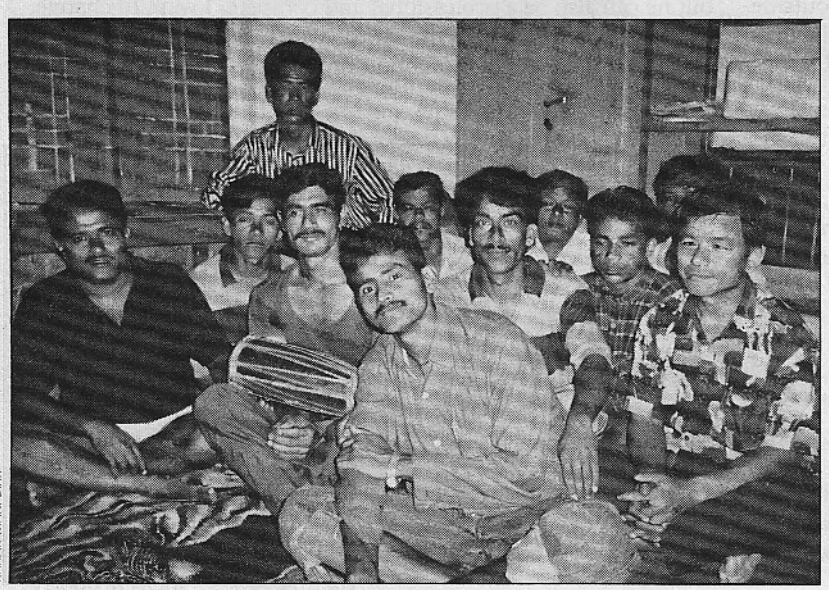
Then there are the long-settled Nepalis, who, while they might still have land and links in their home villages in Nepal, are quite capable of protecting their interests in India. One official of the Emigrant Nepali Association says that these Nepalis who are *"na yata na uta"* (neither here nor there) number about one million.

It is the third group, the migrant labourers from Nepal who make seasonal or longer-lasting forays into India, that is the most destitute and without support. This group makes up the lowest rungs of Nepali-speakers in India, and its interests are not high in anyone's priorities.

Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore

In the Delhi area, most Nepali migrants live in *jhuggies* (shantytowns)—many in low-income "trans-Jamuna" areas—under tin-roofs, with whole families crammed into single rooms. Of the estimated 50,000-60,000 Nepalis in the Delhi region, about half work as unorganised labour in the industrial areas of Wazirpur, Narayana, Okhla and Mayapuri. The imminent forced relocation of about 400 polluting factories out of Delhi region, it is said, will affect these Nepali workers badly.

Members of the Bangalore City Committee of the Emigrant Nepali Association in their club room.



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Similar ghettos of ethnic Nepalis are to be found in other parts of India. A survey conducted in March 1995 by the Unity Society in Faridabad, just outside Delhi, revealed 32,000 labourers from the central Nepal districts of Gulmi, Argakhanchi, Syangja, Tanahu and Palpa (as well as another 1000 Indian Nepalis and 500 Bhutanese Nepalis). A December 1995 survey in Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh) showed 15,000 Nepali citizens from Pyuthan, Dang and Gulmi districts of west Nepal (and 1000 Indian Nepalis).

Sociologist Phanindra Paudyal, who studied Nepali labour in Bombay in 1988, says it is the rural poor of the far-west districts of Doti, Achham, Baitadi and Dadeldhura that land up in India's financial capital. "With little or no education, and no off-farm experience, these migrants do not have access to the skilled jobs that are available. They find what work they can on the basis of their reputation as 'brave, sincere and honest Gorkhas', which means working as watchmen," says Mr Paudyal.

Besides the heroics of the Nepali soldiers in foreign armies, Bombay's Hindi film world itself has played a significant role in popularising the role of the 'Gorkha' as watchman. Quite a few film comedians have earned their spurs by clowning in the role of Nepali watchman in the Hindi cinema, wearing the ubiquitous Nepali cap with crossed-khukuri insignia.

Mr Paudyal's study showed that, on average, Nepali migrants live and work in Bombay for 10 years, starting out as young guards for unregulated housing societies, moving up the ladder as watchmen for private industries, and finally for public sector institutions where perks and facilities are better.

According to Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, Bajhang in of Nepal's far-west exports up to 60 percent of its male population as temporary migrants all over India. Altogether 20 percent land up in Bangalore and nearby cities of southern India. This strange linkage between the two far-removed regions of South Asia came about as a result of Bajhang's turn-of-century philosopher-*raja*, Jai Prithvi Bahadur Singh, having made Bangalore his base upon being exiled by Kathmandu's Rana rulers.

And so, a population from far-west Nepal tries to create a "little Bajhang" 2000 km from home, while working as guards in Bangalore's governmental offices, factories and bazaars. "The ability to find the lucrative jobs as watchmen is the outcome of the reputation which several generations of Bajhangis have acquired as brave and sincere workers," writes Ms Pfaff-Czarnecka.

The researcher says that the Bajhangis' aspirations are rising, with the younger generation increasingly resentful of the fact that their fathers are of such humble occupations. However, few put their meagre savings in bank accounts and possibilities of advance are curtailed. They are involved, instead, in exploitative "lottery" schemes and they also spend heavily in drinking. Says Ms Pfaff-Czarnecka, gambling is a bane among the migrants. The financial entanglements, in turn, keep the men in Bangalore much longer than planned.

Says Ms Pfaff-Czarnecka: "The life of Bajhangis away from their homes consists in working as watchmen, usually when others are sleeping; in enjoying city life, but while living at the very edges of cities; in meeting other Bajhangis while very seldom entering into relationship

USHA TIWARI

Santaraj Gurung from Lamjung, who guards the Ghanaian embassy in New Delhi.

with the Indian population." The Nepalis of Bangalore, she says, do not have ties with the upper strata of society and hence are unable to take advantage of opportunities that do exist in the urban milieu. She concludes: "In Bangalore, the Bajhangis have managed to find an economic niche they are able to exploit, but in this niche their economic marginality is perpetuated."

A Closing Valve

With the continuing flow of Nepali workers to the Indian market, which is already crowded with migrants from various parts of India, attitudes are changing towards Nepali labourers. Discussions with scholars and labour organisers make it clear that the Nepal's socio-economic "safety valve"—which is the ability of hill peasants to pick up and move to the plains—may be closing. This means a building societal crisis within the Nepali state.

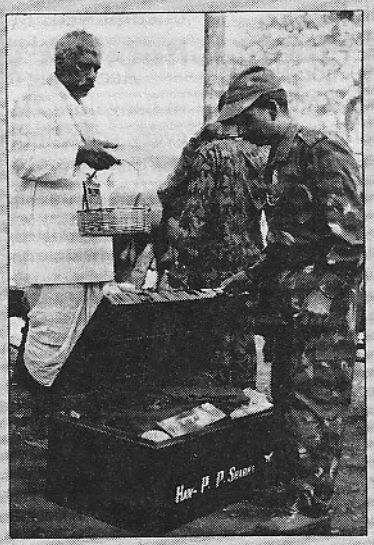
According to Mr Paudyal whose focus was Bombay, it is getting increasingly difficult for Nepalis to get jobs in the regulated sector, such as public institutions and industries. "This indicates that in coming days young migrants who lack education and occupational background, which is true for most Nepalis who come over, may not find jobs except under the poorest and least regulated conditions, dooming them to pauperism."

In Bangalore, Ms Pfaff-Czarnecka found that the local population has begun to resent the fact that jobs were going to foreigners from afar. Besides, the reputation of the Bajhangis as steadfast and reliable was also under stress, as "increasingly, Bajhangis are becoming known as drunkards and gamblers".

"Attitudes have changed towards Nepali workers over the past two decades," concedes Mr K.C. of the Emigrant Nepali Association's Delhi branch. When he arrived in Delhi from Baglung district in 1975, he had no difficulty finding a job as a guard at the Central Archaeological Library. "People only wanted to employ Nepalis then. Today, they think twice," says Mr K.C., who is today a senior library assistant at the same institution.

"Yesterday's Nepalis are different from today's Nepalis, there is no doubt about that," says Mr Bhandari of the ENA in Bangalore. "People have less confidence in us today, and while there will always be menial labour, the standard of jobs available to Nepalis is coming

Gorakhpur Piranhas



ONE OF THE greatest sources of distress for Nepali migrants is the exploitation they face on the way back home on the rare holiday. Says Prem Bahadur Kunwar of Bajhang, a guard in a Marine Drive high-rise in Bombay: "We have to face a lot of *atyachar* (exploitation) all the way to the border. On the train and on railway platforms, police and goondas give us trouble starting from as far away as Jhansi all the way to Gorakhpur and the Sunauli border point."

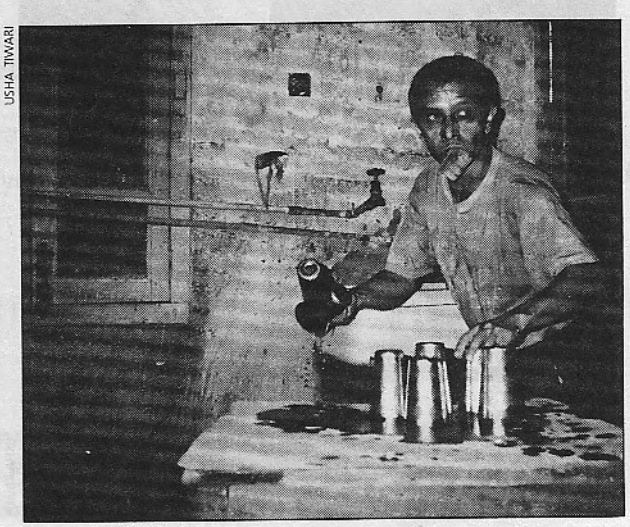
Everyone knows that the Nepalis are returning home with their savings, and that they are aliens without much support while in transit through India. This provides the opportunity for the piranhas to accost the migrants and extort money.

According to Mr Laxmi Prasad Upadhaya, who works in Bangalore, "Gorakhpur is the worst place, where practically everyone, including the railway staff, the police, the CBI and local goondas shake us for money. It is really a tragedy that we cannot even go home with happiness and anticipation, for we know the trouble that awaits."

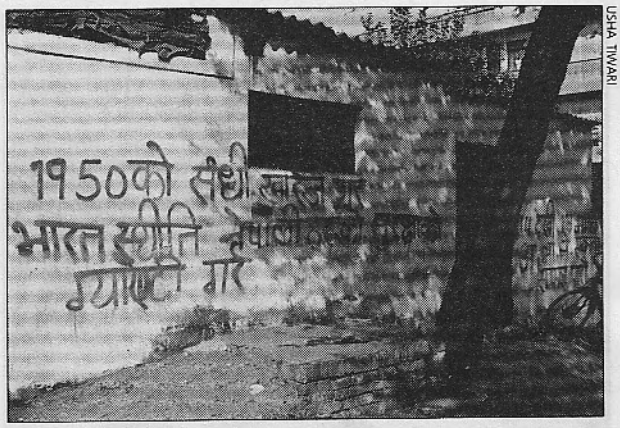
The leaders of the Emigrant Nepali Association say their party leader Man Mohan Adhikari did raise this matter with the Indian side during his official visit to India in 1995 as Prime Minister. However, the harassment on the ground at Gorakhpur continues.

(Above) Havaldar (Sergeant) P.P. Sharma, has luggage checked at border customs returning home on leave from the battle fields of Kashmir.

USHA TIWARI



Dadhi Ram Jaisi, has worked in a college cafetaria in Benaras for two decades.



USHA TIWARI

Graffiti in Delhi calls for revocation of 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty and guarantee of security for migrants.

down. There are already so many uneducated unemployeds in India, how can illiterate Nepalis expect to get good jobs?"

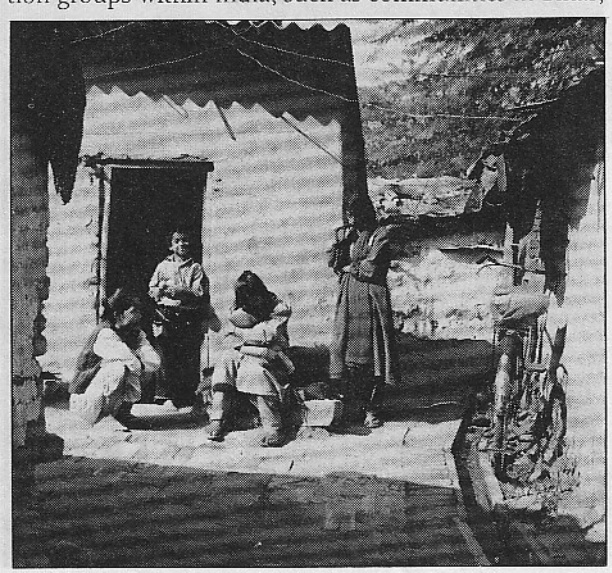
According to Laxmi Prasad Upadhaya, also working in Bangalore, "Most Nepalis work in security, but now in every state, Indian ex-servicemen are opening security companies and supplying jobs on contract." This contractor system has hit the migrants, says Mr Upadhaya, "With a contractor providing the guarantee, employers do not mind who is guarding their gates. Before, they would go only for Nepalis."

The notice issued by the New Delhi police in early 1996 after the highly publicised killings by servants, advising households against employing Nepali domestic help, is also suggestive. While there has been no specific study, the bad press received by the Nepali servant-class is bound to have had an impact in the job market. For many months in the first half of 1996, it is said, the party talk among New Delhi's middle and upper-middle classes revolved around the need to be wary of Nepali manservants.

The possible impact of such negative publicity had some of the Nepali support groups knocking on the doors of the Nepali Embassy in New Delhi. "But what can the embassy do?" asks Ambassador Lok Raj Baral plaintively, when approached by a journalist. A political scientist who has himself studied the problems of migration and refugees in South Asia, Mr Baral could only say, "We are not a social organisation. We do not have the agenda or the funds to tackle such a huge problem."

That remark, indeed, epitomises the stance of the Nepali government and academia with regard to the national haemmorhage that the migration process represents. To begin with, there is little awareness or worry about the great exodus that has now become a trademark of the Nepali hills. Even among those who do know and understand the extent of the problem, as with Ambassador Baral in New Delhi, there is a helplessness and a lack of exertion.

Looking ahead, because the economy of Nepal seems nowhere near 'takeoff', it is clear that out-migration will continue. On the other hand, the space in India will be increasingly more constricted. As more destitute population groups within India, such as communities in Bihar, Bengal and Andhra, and the tribal populations from all over, clamour for those very menial positions that the hillmen have been manning till now, the job-openings for Nepalis will become restricted, or will be lowered to an even more menial level.



USHA TIWARI

Womenfolk at a Nepali jhuggi in Okhla.

The Indian Northeast, which used to be a major employment destination for Nepalis of Nepal, is today out of bounds starting from the Assam-Bengal border. Even Sikkim, that Nepali-speakers haven, has slammed its doors on the Nepalis of Nepal. A special permit is required for Nepalis to work in the state and, in general, anyone who looks like he is of the labouring class, is turned back from the bridge at Rongpu, on the border between Sikkim and West Bengal and .

Even the specific demand for the 'Gorkha' to man the gates, it seems clear, will in future be filled by the Nepali-speaking citizens of India rather than the Nepal-born migrants. All in all, therefore, the economic wellbeing of the migrants from Nepal, and by that token the situation of families back home, is bound to dip rather than rise in the years to come.

As the shine of the "honest bahadur" wears off, as other plains communities begin to take the place of Nepalis in the job market, and as the geopolitical differentiation between Nepalis of Nepal and Nepali-speaking citizens of India becomes sharpened, the window which the plains labour market represents is beginning to swing shut. As the process builds, it will hit the hill communities of Nepal like a long-drawn economic thunderclap.

Says Mr Upadhaya, of Bangalore, "The job opportunities here are becoming constricted, meanwhile the economy of Nepal is still stagnating. The Kathmandu politicians should be made aware that we may be kicked out, then what do we do? We keep asking the *sashaks* (in Nepal), what will happen if all Nepalis working in India are pushed back and there is no work in Nepal?"

The answer, and there is only one, is for the Nepali state to become serious, rather late in the century, about genuine development of the hinterland. A beginning will have been made if, at long last, the Kathmandu intelligentsia—the professor and the politician, the bureaucrat and the social activist—at least recognises that there is a problem of migration and survivability out in the hills.

That, and an effort to do something about it.

G. Khatri is with the Sri Sagarmatha *daily, R. Limbu is a reporter for* The Asian Age *and S. Lama is with the Nepali-language* Himal *magazine. All are Kathmandu-based.*

Vacancy Announcement

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), which has its headquarters in Kathmandu, Nepal, was established in 1983 to address the problems of economic and environmental development in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region covering parts of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. ICIMOD is an independent organisation governed by a Board of Governors and funded by some 20 countries and donor organisations. Its mandatory activities are (i) Documentation and Information Exchange, (ii) Research, (iii) Training, and (iv) Advisory Services. Activities are implemented in close collaboration with partner institutions in the regional member countries. The present annual budget is $ 5 million. The Centre has 3 thematic divisions and 3 support services.

1. Mountain Farming Systems Division
2. Mountain Natural Resources Division
3. Mountain Enterprises and Infrastructure Division.
4. Mountain Environment and Natural Resources' Information Service (MENRIS).
5. Documentation, Information and Training Service.
6. Administration, Finance and Logistical Service

Applications are being invited to fill the following two vacant positions within MENRIS.

Vac. 97/1 Remote Sensing Specialist

Vac. 97/2 Geographical Information System (GIS) Specialist

The common requirements for the posts are as follow.

- Post Graduate degree in the Natural and Environmental Sciences, Engineering and Technology with specialisation in the related field from an internationally recognised university.
- Good writing, presentation and communication skills in English.
- Proven capabilities through publications and experience to take up the respective responsibilities.
- Willingness to travel frequently in the region and work harmoniously with persons of different nations and cultures.
- At least 10 years' work experience, of which a major part should have been in relation to mountain development, preferably in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.
- Proficiency in computer applications.

Detailed Terms of Reference for each position are available on request.
Female Candidates are strongly encouraged to apply.

Remuneration : Salaries and benefits are based on a modified UN System.

Duration : Three years, of which one year is probational, and subject to continuation of present funding levels at ICIMOD.

Starting date : 1 June 1997

Applications : Applications with names of three referees, should be received before 31 March 1997 and addressed to:

Mr. M.R. Tuladhar, Head, Administration and Finance
ICIMOD, G.P.O. Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal
Fax: (977-1) 524509/536747

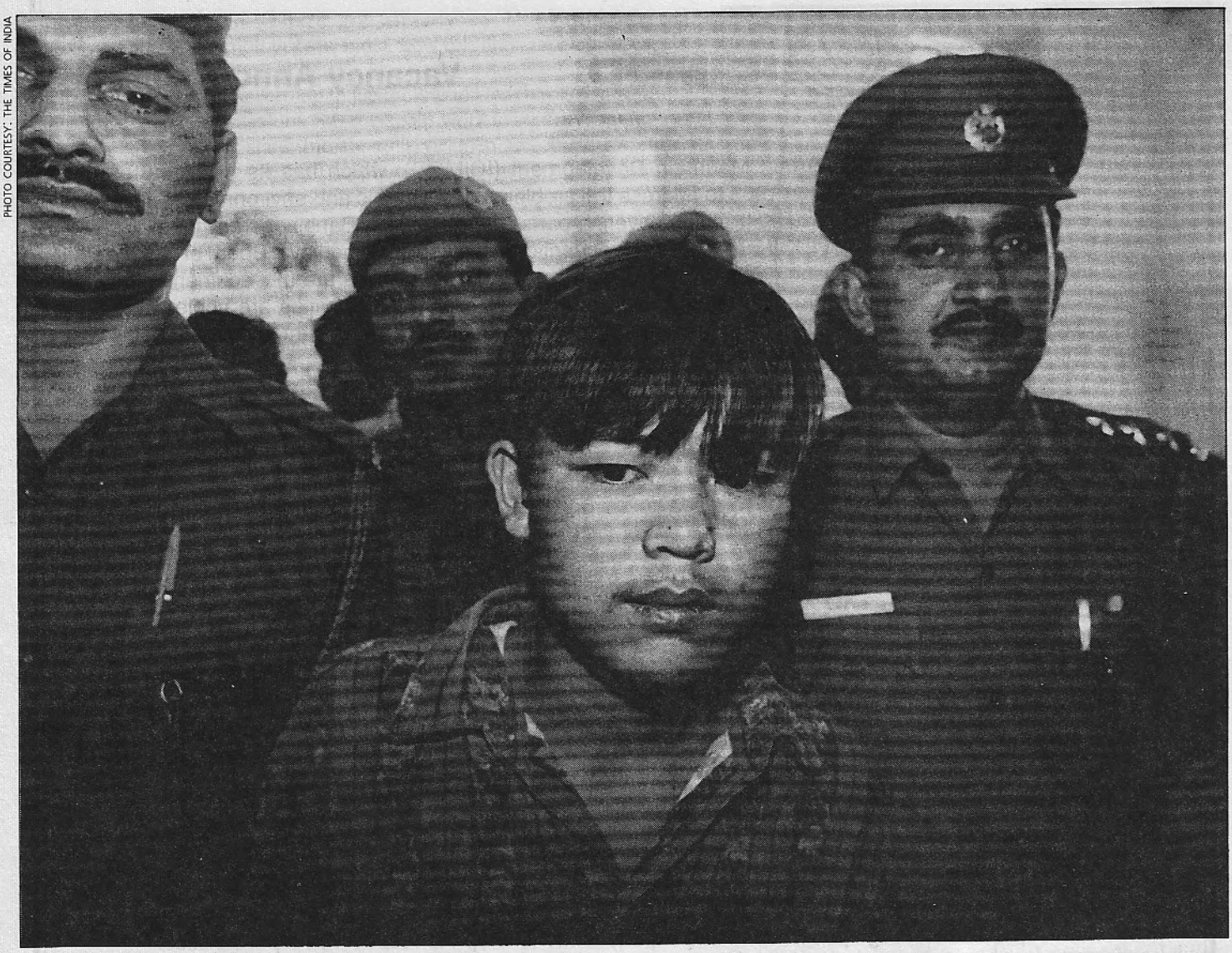


PHOTO COURTESY: THE TIMES OF INDIA

Servant as Murderer

"The fact that Nepalis are by nature straightforward has been proved false."

by ***Mitu Varma***

On the night of 13 January 1996, 48-year-old executive Satya Prakash Sharma, his 42-year-old wife Shobhana, daughter Charu (20), son Puneet (15) and their nine-year-old domestic help, Dinesh, were bludgeoned to death in their flat in the upper middle class locality of Vasant Kunj in South Delhi. Even by the gory standards of the Indian capital, this one shocked the city.

Four months later, police arrested Tika Ram, the 20-year-old servant of the Sharmas. The arrest of the young Nepali made page-one news in all the Delhi newspapers, and pictures showed a dazed Tika Ram in handcuffs being led to the courts. Police said he had confessed to the murders.

The Sharmas' was just one household of scores where family members were killed by domestic helpers in Delhi over the past year. Five of 12 incidents in the first quarter of 1996 are said to have involved Nepali servants, which led the New Delhi police to issue a circular suggesting that Nepalis not be hired as servants because of increasing criminality among them.

The crimes served to erode the stereotype of the Nepali 'bahadur', whose qualities of loyalty and honesty have long been cherished in India. It is an image which goes back to the conscription of Nepali men in the Indian and British armies, and which has been honed by the portrayal of the faithful bahadur in Nepali cap.

Tika Ram at his arraignment in April 1996.

The popular Hindi family magazine *Manohar Kahaniyan*, providing a detailed account of the Tika Ram case, had this to say, with more than a little exaggeration: "The last two or three years has seen hundreds *(saikadon)* of deaths at the hands of Nepali servants. The fact that Nepalis are by nature straightforward has now been proven false."

What, then, has led to the increased criminality among the immigrant Nepalis and, more particularly, those employed as domestic help? Some Nepali observers feel that the New Delhi police and press have exaggerated the issue, and that Nepali helpers are no more or less prone to theft and violence than any other community which serves as the underclass in middle class and rich metropolitan households. Others believe that Nepali criminality easily made the news because it is seen to dispel a myth.

If it is true that criminality is on the rise among Nepali domestics, the explanation probably lies in the fact that there has been a change in the composition of the pool of Nepali labour in India.

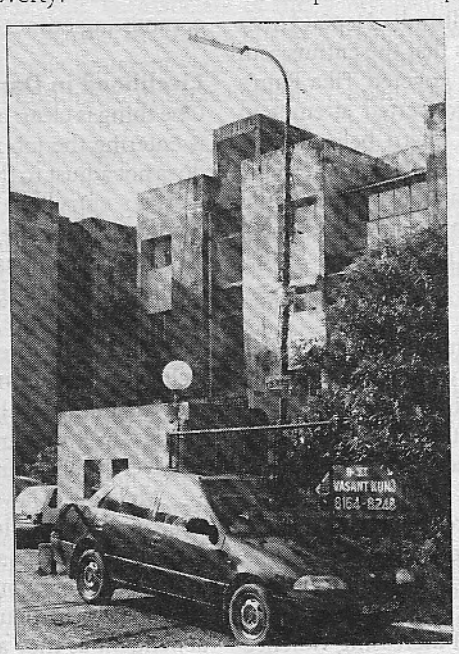
Changing Demography

Every day, an estimated 300 Nepali citizens are said to disembark from the long-haul buses arriving in the Indian capital from towns bordering western Nepal. More economic migrants, fleeing impoverishment in Nepal's midhills, arrive by train, and thousands go to other Indian cities. Most have no education, and many are mere children, sons of subsistence farmers who cannot feed them from their meagre harvests.

The increase in crime among Nepali workers is attributed by some to changing demography. Whereas earlier they came as unknowing visitors from the hills, today roads, highways, and video halls have penetrated the Nepali hinterland and exposed the rural folk to life outside the village. Many of the young who migrate are no longer the ignorant hillbillies of yore, and they have grander visions of what they want to achieve in the city than their fathers and grandfathers. The only factor that remains unchanged is the hill poverty.

The Nepali labour is also more mobile nowadays. Used to be a time when joining the service of a *sethji* meant it was for the rest of one's working life. With Nepali communities having sprung up in many parts of India, it is easier for the migrant workers now to job-hop. Tika Ram, for example, had repeatedly shifted through seven Delhi households within the span of a mere two years, and he had also worked at various times in Noida, Gurgaon, Panipat, Patiala, Ludhiana and Mohali.

Nepalis have, therefore, over the years become more savvy and knowledgeable about plains living. However, the employers' perception remains clouded by their belief of Nepalis as genial, but uncouth, country bumpkins. When the lack of respect becomes evident, the trouble begins. The new stock of young Nepalis are sometimes not willing to take things lying down.



SUMAN PRADHAN

New Delhi's middle-class Vasant Kunj


Indian Express

ultimatum
polluting
its in Delhi

The papers covered Tika Ram's case on page one.

Bewildered Victims

According to social scientist Ashis Nandy, it is in the nature of "the city" that is largely responsible for the escalating crime and violence by Nepali workers. Coming from a close-knit 'moral' universe where family and community ties are all-important, the complete impersonality of a city like Delhi baffles and disorients the migrants, he says. At the same time, the flamboyant lifestyles and conspicuous consumption of their employers can appear vulgar.

The second impression the young Nepali migrants gain, says Mr Nandy, is of a "dog-eat-dog" universe where the law of the jungle prevails. Slowly but surely, the servants begin to grudge their own lot. Added to this are the agents of mass culture in the city in the form of Hindi cinema and television, which serve to heighten the contrast between the quality of life of the immigrant and the trappings of a 'normal' life.

Mahendra Lama, a scholar at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, concurs. The sudden exposure to urban life, along with the soulless glamour depicted in satellite television and cinema and the various vices that are part of the big city culture, often leads the Nepalis to nurture "get-rich-quick" dreams. This pushes some towards a life of crime, says the academic.

But that is only one aspect of the problem, says Mr Lama. The rising crime graph among migrant domestics might also reflect a bid to assert personal dignity. "Often, the Nepalis are employed in homes under harrowingly inhuman conditions. Their basic rights are blatantly violated, salaries are abysmal, and the physical and social conditions are appalling," he says.

Earlier, with limited avenues open to them, the Nepalis drifted naturallly to work as domestics. Today, many Nepalis are also serving as industrial labour, at office jobs, as tailors, and so on. Only about 20 percent now seek domestic work, says Mr Lama. "Over time, these household workers become aware of the degree of exploitation they face and their attitude changes in the face of continuing abuse. When pushed to the wall and finding nowhere to turn to, the basically submissive, honest, polite and hardworking Nepali will show his other face. Being raw and rugged

"Emigrant Nepalis are poor and exploited." A demonstration before the Nepali embassy in New Delhi demands response to the media hype regarding criminalisation.

and not very familiar with the language, they find it easier to hit out than to argue," says the academic.

Not dissimilar is Kathmandu-based economist Pitambar Sharma's observation: "While it could be that the so-called criminality of Nepali servants is getting more publicity than it deserves, it is also likely that many of these acts are conducted by servants responding to maltreatment." In his confession, Tika Ram reportedly told the police that he had killed all the Sharma family members because they abused him physically, and often blamed him for the misdemeanours of the two teenage children.

The General Secretary of the All India Nepali Unity Society, Bamdev Chhetri, maintains that the enthusiasm with which the Indian newspapers covered Tika Ram's case made it seem like part of a concerted attempt to slander the Nepali character. Mr Chhetri believes that Tika Ram's full story is not yet out, and that there must have been some cause for drastic action by the young accused. "Alternatively, Tika Ram must have had some Indian accomplices," says Mr Chhetri.

The Degree of Violence

Maxwell Pereira, the Additional Commissioner of Police for New Delhi's Southern Range, is willing to accept the sociological explanations of rising criminality only partly. According to him, the chief motivating factor for crime among the Nepali immigrants is, quiet simply, the lure of easy money.

"While crime has always been prevalent in the Nepali community because of the stark contrast between the workers' economic status and that of their employers, it is the degree of violence that is new," says Mr Pereira. He attributes this to the general trend of increasing violence in the cities, a situation within which the Nepalis too are by now enmeshed.

The police chief says even in cases like that of Tika Ram, who fled without taking anything from the house, greed seems to have played an important role. If that was not the motivation, asks Mr Pereira, why would Tika Ram have come back to work in a household that he had quit two years ago after an altercation? "He was about to get married and needed money and lied to the Sharma family about his interest in coming back," he says. "It is a different matter that, later, the factor of ill treatment at the hands of the family came into play."

The Nepal-India border is open for the public but closed for police investigation. This provides a protective shield for Nepali workers bent on criminality, a shield that is not available for other domestics in India, explains Mr Pereira. "This seems to act as an additional motivating factor. Once the accused crosses the open border back into his country, it is virtually impossible for Indian authorities to apprehend them to stand trial through regular means." Only the Nepali authorities can prosecute a crime committed outside Nepal when the suspect has returned home. Mr Pereira says that in more than 20 years of police service he has not seen or heard of a single case of a crime committed in India being prosecuted in Nepal.

"Even if a single man goes back safely with the loot, he provides inspiration to many others," says Mr Pereira, cautioning that criminality among Nepalis may therefore be a rising trend.

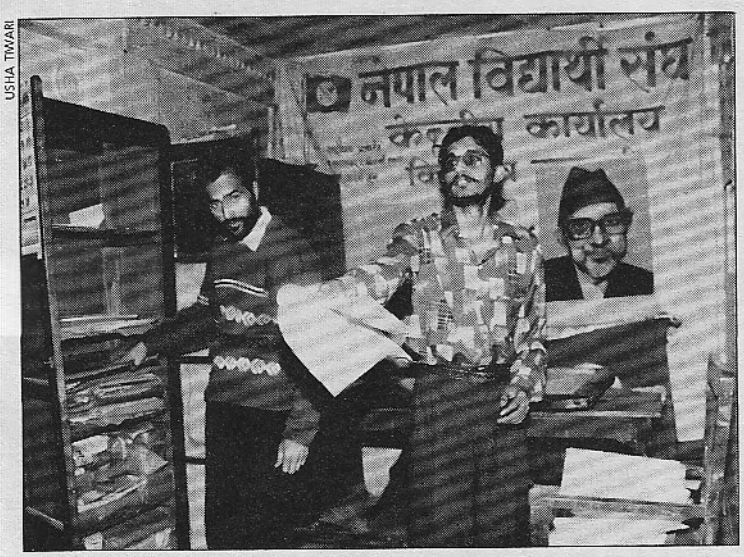
Two years ago, a diplomatic fracas ensued when Indian policemen followed Babloo Srivastava, an underworld figure, into Kathmandu. "Now," says Mr Pereira enigmatically, "the Indian police force has its own methods." In the case of Tika Ram, a policeman whose native village was near boy's village of Lahapi in the Dang Ghorai region of west Nepal, went home, ostensibly on leave. Meanwhile, "friendly" business people of the border region were asked to keep an eye out for Tika Ram. How exactly the suspect was brought across the border, Mr Pereira is unwilling to say, but he adds emphatically, "We want to blast the myth that they can find a save haven after committing crimes in Delhi."

Livelihood in Danger

One thing is clear: a new breed of alert young Nepali men is entering the job market in India. If the Indian market does not adjust to these higher expectations and allow the workers entry into levels other than domestics, there is bound to be some form of reaction. A continued and forced placement as servants without hope for the future would mean that frustrations will be bottled-up, to violently explode at regular intervals.

Mr Nandy predicts that given the nature of New Delhi's society, crime and violence can only increase till they attain the levels witnessed in the cities of the United States. "In a discriminatory society, crime constitutes a relatively egalitarian oasis."

Mr Lama of Jawaharlal Nehru University is fearful that this, in turn, could lead to an indiscriminate media-propelled reaction against Nepalis irrespective of guilt or innocence. This would be disastrous to the economy of the Nepali hills, particularly of the far-west, overwhelmingly dependent as they are on the Indian job market.



USHA TIWARI

The Benaras office of the Nepali Congress' Nepal Student's Union.

Migratory Politics

by Ganesh Khatri

You would not know it seeing lone Nepalis at work on the streets all over India, but there are a number of groups intent upon organising them and providing them a level of protection. Almost all these groups are politicised, however, with links to parties and factions back in Nepal.

While Nepalis have had organisations in India for nearly a century—to fight Rana rule in Kathmandu or to protect the Nepali language, an India-wide organisation for Nepali migrant workers was begun only in 1959 when one D. Ale, an associate of the communist leader Pushpalal Shrestha, started the Akhil Bharat Prabasi Nepali Kalyankari Sangh (All India Emigrant Nepali Welfare Association). Its activities were concentrated in Uttar Pradesh and in Calcutta.

The two most active umbrella organisations of the migrant Nepalis today are both of left orientation, the Emigrant Nepali Association (ENA), associated with the mainstream Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninists), and the All India Nepali Unity Society which is linked with the more radical "Mohan Bickram group", although now divided into two acrimonious factions. The centrist Nepali Congress has floated its own "Nepali Samparka Samitis" (liaison committees) with branches, it is said, in the main cities of India.

"The Unity Society, set up in November 1979, with its Maoist ideology, is the strongest organisation among Nepalis in India," claims its New Delhi-based General Secretary Bamdev Chhetri. The society is spread over 22 Indian states and has a temporary membership of 60,000 and permanent membership of 125,000, he says. Mr Chhetri's claim to supremacy would be challenged by ENA, which has 11 regional organisations all over India and "regular" membership of 30,000. A major distinction between the two is that the Unity Society accepts all Nepali-speakers as members, whereas the latter concentrates on Nepalis from Nepal only.

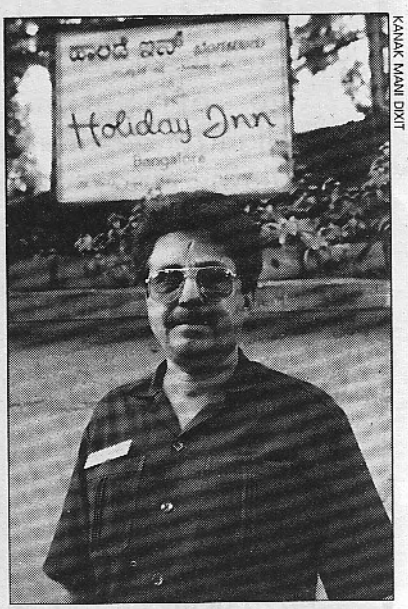
Ram Chandra Bhandari, of Palpa District in central Nepal, is the Bangalore-based member of the Central Committee of the ENA. Mr Bhandari, who works as chief of security of Bangalore's Holiday Inn, says his association's activities are extremely varied, "from organising volleyball games among Nepali teams of various regions, to holding cultural activities during festivals. We respond to police action against Nepalis, confront employers who harass our members, resolve disputes, fight for compensation, help stranded pilgrims, conduct funeral rites of those without family, and so on."

According to Mr Bhandari, the main political plank of the ENA is to fight the Restricted Area Permits (RAP) which restricts Nepalis from travelling to the Indian Northeast. "This clearly goes against the provisions of the 1950 treaty between India and Nepal as it stands, which calls for equal treatment of each other's citizens. As for the RAP, if they did it in Assam and Meghalaya yesterday, tomorrow they will do it to us all over India. Already, in Karnataka, Nepalis cannot get employment cards from government offices."

The ENA also believes that the open border between Nepal and India should be controlled, says Mr Bhandari, and a passport system be put in place between the two countries. Asked whether this will not go against the interests of the migrants, he responds, "We are not asking the border to be closed. The migrant labourers will have passports and will enter India with proper visas. That way we will at least know our numbers and strengths."

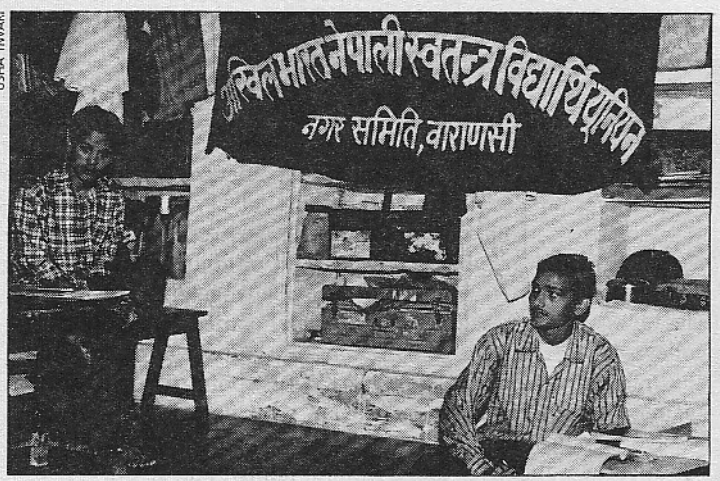
As to why migrant organisations invariably have communist leanings, Mr Bhandari replies, "We migrant Nepalis are entirely made up of the *majdoor barga* (working class), so we support the left." And truth be told, the Foreign Department of the CPN (UML), Nepal's main opposition party, provides guidance to the ENA through a Chief Adviser *(Pramukh Sallahakar)*. That post is presently filled by Gopal Shakya, of the CPN (UML) Central Committee member, who is based in Delhi.

C.P. Mainali, CPN (UML) leader who spent three years in India organising migrants in the early 1980s, says that earlier the party's involvement in India had been concealed. "I would have preferred that our work in a foreign country not be out in the open, but that is how it is now. On the other hand, we have made it clear that we are involved only with the welfare of Nepali workers in India and in seeking application of international labour standards. We will not get involved in Indian politics. As a politically motivated social organisation, the ENA understands that while we must



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Ram Chandra Bhandari of Palpa District, migrant leader in Bangalore.



USHA TIWARI

The Benaras office of the All India Nepali Independent Students' Union.
Right, flag of the left-leaning Emigrant Nepali Association.

agitate for the right of Nepali labour in India, the real fight is back home in Nepal."

"By that token, the Nepalis in exile are very committed politically," says Mr Mainali. "When Nepalis were thrown out of Meghalaya in 1986, or during the Indian blockade of 1988, they were the first to bring out processions. During the People's Movement in 1990, too, they helped with people and money."

And yet, there is much resentment among the migrant leadership against the party functionaries in Kathmandu for having neglected the cause of the workers in India. Says Mr Bhandari, "During the Panchayat era, it was the migrant community which supported the opposition politicians of Nepal during their days in exile and underground. And yet, even the comrades have failed to raise a voice on behalf of the migrants once they gained power." says Mr Bhandari. His colleague in the ENA of Bangalore, Laxman Prasad Upadhaya, claims, "We migrants are more nationalist than the Nepalis of Nepal."

The Chairman of the Nepali Congress-supported Nepal Students Union (India) is Rajaram Pokhrel, who is based in Benaras. He complains that the party leaders, once they ensconced themselves in Kathmandu, have let the organisation go to seed. "All our leaders started politics in India, but now they hardly look back." Pointing at the furniture in the union office, he says, "Bisweswor Prasad Koirala wrote his book on democratic socialism sitting on that chair, using this very table. All these have lost their political significance now."

Conceding that the leftists have stolen the march in organising Nepalis in India, Mr Pokhrel says, "Forget financial support, today we do not even receive intellectual support from the party. How is it possible to organise poor emigrants without some financial backing?"

While it is highly unlikely, whatever their antecedents, that Nepali politicians will in future pay much heed to the migrants in India, there would be some advantage for the divided organisations themselves to join forces. There is such a move afoot, according to Mr Chhetri of the Unity Society, at least at some level. "We are trying to set up an intellectual platform to study the numerous challenges facing migrants. This will be a place for Nepalis of India to gather regardless of their party affiliations."

A good thing, if it happens.

(With reporting by Kanak Mani Dixit)

The Tharu

The arts & crafts of the indigenous people of the Tarai

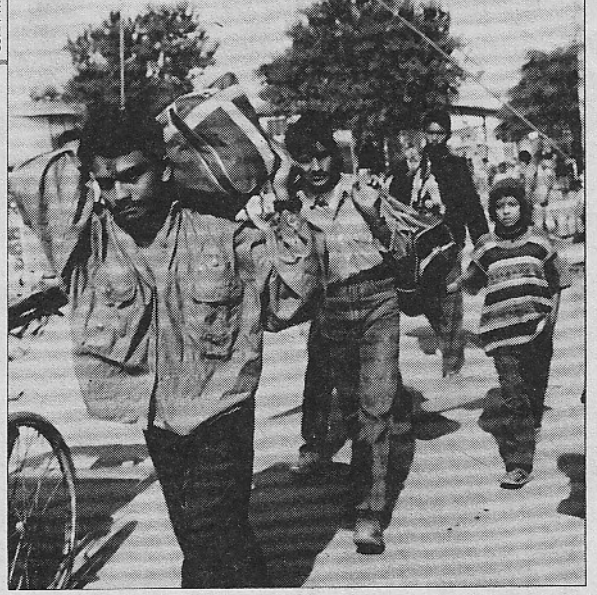
- exhibited in photos by Kurt Meyer
- fullsize replicas of mud relief wall paintings
- crafts and folk art for sale

March 1 - 30th, 97 at Indigo Gallery

See facing page for map

Lies, Damn Lies and Numbers

by Dilli R. Dahal



USHA TIWARI

Auspicious *tikas* on the forehead, Nepali workers leave the Sunauli border point in Nepal for Gorakhpur and beyond.

How many citizens of Nepal are presently working as migrant labourers in India, and how many Indians are working in Nepal? The world of scholarship on this sensitive geopolitical question is not much help with answers. There has been too much loose talk and not enough dedicated research on the subject. There is, therefore, enough reason to treat with caution any number that is proferred as to the population of migrant labour on either side of the border.

In Nepal, the problem with numbers is not unique to counting emigrants. Newspaper columnists, activists and researchers routinely manipulate or exaggerate figures in order to demonstrate the supposed seriousness of a problem. The methodological rigour required in collecting and using data is lacking. It is, therefore, advisable to use Nepali data only with utmost circumspection, in whichever field, be it poverty, water resources, environmental degradation, bonded labour, child labour, sex workers in Indian brothels, or labourers who migrate between India and Nepal.

The numbers of migrant labour on both sides are without doubt highly exaggerated. According to reports (see P.P.Karan *et al*, 1996, the Gorkhaland Movement Report, 1985/86, and numerous newspapers articles) there are anywhere between 1.8 million to 3 million Nepali migrant workers south of the border. Likewise, the writings of Indian scholars such as Jain (1982) and Madhavan (1985) and even the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (1981) or its spokesman (1989) have variously reported that there are between 800,000 and 3.2 million Indians in Nepal.

In bandying about such figures, it is clear that the scholars themselves lack understanding of the subject of their study. In reality, there are two types of Nepali-speakers who live and work in India: first are those whose ancestors arrived a hundred to three hundred years ago and are today by definition Indian citizens even though they speak the Nepali language and celebrate Nepali rituals and festivals. The other group of Nepalis are the migrant workers who go to India to work for a period and return at their convenience. Similarly, two groups of Indians live in Nepal: one which is settled since well over a century and naturalised, and another made up of migrant workers and small-scale businessmen who shuttle easily between the two countries.

Coming to hard figures, a look at Nepal's 1991 national census is instructive:

1991 Census	Economically Active Pop. (15–59 Years)	Only males as Migrant workers
18.1 million	9.6 million	4.8 million

The Nepali migrant labour pool in India is made up overwhelmingly of economically active males. When it is claimed that there are three million Nepali migrant workers in India, we are saying that more than 64 percent of Nepal's 15-59 years age group population are working in India. This is impossible. Even a figure of one million Nepali migrant workers in India seems high, considering that migration is age- and sex-selective—it is mostly males between 20-45 who leave home for seasonal work.

Another reason for scepticism is that there are many hill and tarai districts of Nepal which do not send males to India as seasonal workers. This decreases the migrant pool even further. It also has to be kept in mind that the 1991 Nepali census reported a total of only 658,290 people absent from the country for more than 6 months. Fully 90 percent of this population went to India, and 83.2 percent were males.

To reach their conclusions, some researchers have relied on figures supplied by Nepali organisations in India. This writer's own experience with such organisations is that they lack both the resources as well as methodological background to carry out a proper survey of Nepali migrants. Additionally, there is the possibility of built-in bias as it is in the interest of these organisations to claim large numbers.

The 1971 and 1981 censuses of India reported a Nepal-born population of just over half a million (1971 census: 526,526 and 1981 census: 501,592). Likewise, the Nepali census of 1981 and 1991 reported the India-born population and Indian citizens in Nepal as follows:

Census	India-born Pop.	% of total foreign born	Indian citizens	% of total foreign citizen
1981	222,278	95.0	116,755	24.2
1991	418,982	95.3	68,489	75.7

While no figure of Indian migrant labour in Nepal is thus far available, it is clear that the figures given by various scholars are quite unrealistic. One reason for the wrong estimates is that many Indian scholars tend to consider the tarai's ethnic/caste groups as Indian even though they may be Nepali citizens.

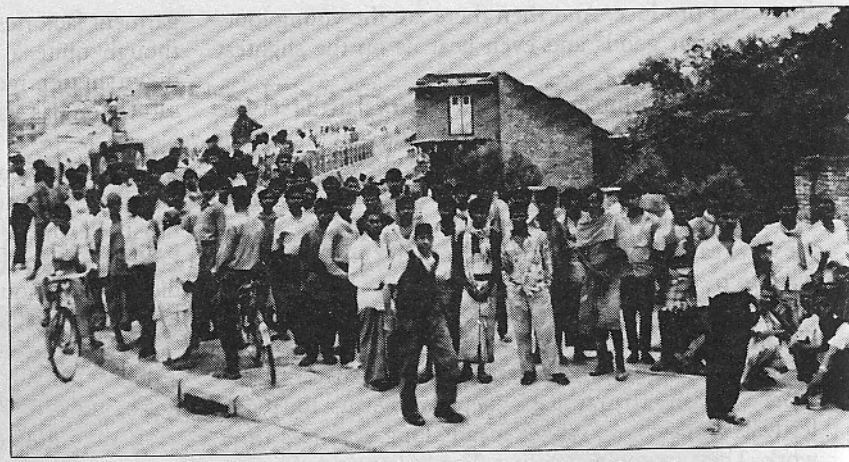
It is a serious drawback when scholars who make confident use of numbers refuse to divulge the methodology used in collecting the data. What, for example, were the drawing samples, the time allocated for research, and the specific questions asked of the informants? When it is clear that the scholars have not bothered with these critical issues, the source must be considered suspect. It is unfortunate that researchers with such poor output—even on a matter of grave geopolitical implications—have no accountability and are able to escape liability for providing spurious data.

D.R. Dahal is with the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Kathmandu.

Out of India

Kathmandu Valley's booming economy has attracted plains labour by the tens of thousand.

by ***Sangeeta Lama***



Bihari gathering place by the Bagmati bridge in Kathmandu.

Kathmandu residents do not need reminding that there is an open border between India and Nepal. They see evidence of it every day in the large number of Indian labourers and small-time merchants who are to be found in all corners of the city, seeking their fortune.

As Indians of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other outlying states share culture and physical characteristics with Nepal's own plains dwellers, it is easy to mistake one for the other. However, social scientists and others acknowledge that those plains people providing the skills and services in Kathmandu are overwhelmingly from south of the border.

These Indians, mostly from Bihar, are involved in a variety of occupations: vending fruits and vegetables; serving as master tailors; surviving as ragpickers; working in brick kilns; making wood furniture; and working as contractors and masons at Kathmandu's ubiquitous construction sites. Thus, while Nepal's unskilled hill people head south to India to work on menial jobs, Biharis head up to the hills to provide these and other skilled services—so much so that, today, they seem to have become an indispensable feature of Kathmandu life.

Since no records are kept, and an attempt to institute a work permit system has been a non-starter, no one knows the actual number of Indian labourers in Kathmandu. Mrigendra Lal Singh, Head of the Department of Statistics at Tribhuvan University, estimates there are around 200,000 Indians in Kathmandu Valley (out of a 1991 population of 1.1 million), but concedes that no survey has been done.

Home in Kathmandu

The demand for workers from Bihar and elsewhere is propelled by the Kathmandu builder's and industrialist's need for a skilled, efficient yet submissive workforce. Other than taking off during festival periods such as the Chhat for Hindus and Eid for Muslims, the Biharis tend to complete the work at hand and quickly move to another. The artisan classes among the indigenous Newars of Kathmandu, on the other hand, tend to be enmeshed in a year-round progression of holidays and festivals, which affects building schedules. Says one building contractor, "This is one main reason why the Nepali employers tend to hire Bihari labour, for even the most basic of assignments." It is also true that Kathmandu's booming economy and sky-high real estate prices provides many other economic opportunities for the Newar artisan class, which make them hesitate to pick up hammer or trowel.

The preference for the Bihari labour has negatively affected the job prospects of the ethnic population from Nepal's hills, however. With few opportunities to learn the skills which would have them replace the Biharis in Kathmandu Valley, they continue to head down to the plains to work as restaurant boys and watchmen.

Interestingly, the trend towards hiring Indians has also affected workers from the Nepal tarai, despite their cultural affinity with Biharis. The construction contractors, who are often from India, prefer to employ labourers from their own regions in Bihar, and this affects the hill and plains Nepalis alike. Says Ramchandra, a labourer from Siraha district which borders on Bihar, "The people of Kathmandu look down upon us as 'Indians', and the Indian contractors refuse us work as Nepalis."

The Indian labourers, by and large, find Kathmandu to their liking. All who were interviewed for this article said there was more than enough work to keep them busy year-round. Sanu Mallik, from West Bengal, has lived in Kathmandu for 10 years working as a petty contractor of marble work. He has had continuous work all the time, as has Purushottam Batra, a plumbing contractor from Orissa in Kathmandu since 1982. All the masons Mr Mallik employs are Bengalis, while Mr Batra's plumbers are all from Orissa.

Says another contractor, "In India we would only get piecemeal work, but here we do not need a license and so can take on the contract for whole buildings. We have to pay taxes in India, whereas here there are no taxes, the air is cooler and the political situation is also very calm."

For Biharis, many of whom deal in vegetables and fruits either as wholesale merchants or as hawkers going around in bicycles, home is still Bihar. They return home when there is work in the fields, but the Valley is convenient for them, too. "Kathmandu is so close to home, just a day away," says Jadulal of West Champaran, who has been selling vegetables here for three years. "In India, to start even a small business you need at least five thousand rupees, whereas here you can do well enough by borrowing just five hundred to start with."

The flip side of being a petty Indian trader in Kathmandu is the animosity that lurks just beneath the surface among some of the locals. Suresh Sohni, a fruit seller from Motihari, says, "The police harass us, the municipality fines us and sometimes even takes away our

fruits and produce. And then there are the young louts who loot our goods and even beat us on the slightest excuse."

But then, Kathmandu housewives revel in the service provided by these door-to-door vegetable vendors. Laxmi Shrestha, one such housewife, admits she does not like *madhises* (the generic term applied to Indians and Nepalis of Indian origin, sometimes pejoratively), but says: "What are we to eat if these *madhises* stop coming? Nepalis do not want to pick up the basket."

Garment Workers

"Nepalis are lazy, work slowly, do not have the skills, are more expensive than Indians. Nepalis have just too many festivals to celebrate which means long absences from work. They are too aggressive. The Indians are diligent, and can even be slapped around." These are common refrains heard all the time among Kathmandu's employers, some of them Indians.

All this perhaps explains why the garment industry hires plains labour by the thousands. When in 1980, the United States slapped quotas on Indian garment exports, many Indian manufacturers moved their entire production units into Nepal. There are almost 1200 registered garment factories in the Valley, although quite a few have pulled down shutters recently as the quota saturation has also caught up with Nepal.

The factory of Binita Garments employs around 200 workers, mostly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. "Nepali workers are not disciplined enough. They do not feel the need to learn more skills," says the manager Kedar Prasad Poudel. "It is not that Nepalis cannot be trained. They're okay for a short time but soon enough they start creating trouble. Also, they do not work at nights and even if they do, they come drunk and create problems."

Whether it is in vegetables, carpets, the crafts or construction, the Bihari, the Bengali and Uttar Pradeshi will continue to provide their skills as long as there is demand in Kathmandu. And as long as Nepalis themselves do not learn those skills. △

VIPLOB PR

Nepalis do not sell bananas on bicycle.

16,000 and Counting...

A FACT SHEET on the status of victims of the Bhopal Gas Disaster of December 1996 reminds one of the continuing horror of that singular event. The information circular, put out by the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udhyog Sanghatan and Bhopal Group for Information and Action, provides an account of the long-lasting effects of the industrial disaster when over 40 tonnes of deadly Methyl Isocyanate, Hydrogen Cyanide and other gases leaked from "a hazardously designed and recklessly managed" pesticide factory of the multinational Union Carbide.

Over half a million adults and children were exposed to the poison clouds, and over six thousand died within the first week of the disaster. According to the fact sheet, the current death toll is well over 16,000 and counting. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) states that nearly one-fourth of the exposed population is chronically ill with diseases of the respiratory, gastro-intestinal, reproductive, musculo-skeletal, neurological and other systems.

There is evidence of a high incidence of cancer, and of genetic defects among the newborn. Medical care has been wholly inadequate for the roughly 4,000 patients who make daily visits to nearby government hospitals, while at the same time there is indiscriminate use of antibiotics, steroids and psychotropic drugs. Because of inadequate public health care, expensive private medical clinics are flourishing. Longterm health monitoring of the Bhopal survivors was abandoned in December 1994.

An estimated 50,000 have been so incapacitated that they have not been able to pursue their regular jobs, says the fact sheet. The government has spent INR 600 million for rehabilitation, but less than 100 people have found jobs through official initiatives. Meanwhile, 380,000 personal injury claims have been awarded an average compensation of INR 23,684, but nearly INR 10,000 of this amount has been routinely deducted against interim monetary relief paid earlier. The remaining money does not cover even half of the medical expenses borne by the claimants in the last several years, let alone provide for future expenses.

Out of the 14,775 death claims adjudicated, 65 percent have been rejected or converted into personal injury cases. Judges at the claims courts are "thoroughly ignorant" of the medical consequences of the toxic exposure, says the fact sheet, and the administration of compensation is riddled with corruption. A claimant's inability to pay bribes often results in denial of compensation.

Those who were minors at the time of the accident have not been allowed to claim compensation, and they make up most of the 150,000 whose claims have not been registered. There is also no means to register a claim related to continuing exposure-related deaths. Meanwhile, claims are not being heard either on behalf of children suffering from exposure-related mental and physical retardation, as identified by the ICMR.

On 13 September 1996, in response to an appeal by the accused officials of Union Carbide India, the Supreme Court passed an order diluting the charge of culpable homicide to death caused by negligence, thereby reducing the maximum sentence from 10 years to 2 years. There is now a possibility that the Carbide officials as well as the prime accused Warren Anderson, ex-Chairman of Union Carbide USA, may evade criminal liability altogether. It has now been more than four years since the Bhopal District Court issued non-bailable arrest warrant against Mr Anderson. Says the fact sheet: "Absconding from trial, he currently resides at 111, Catalina Court, Vero Beach, Florida, United States."

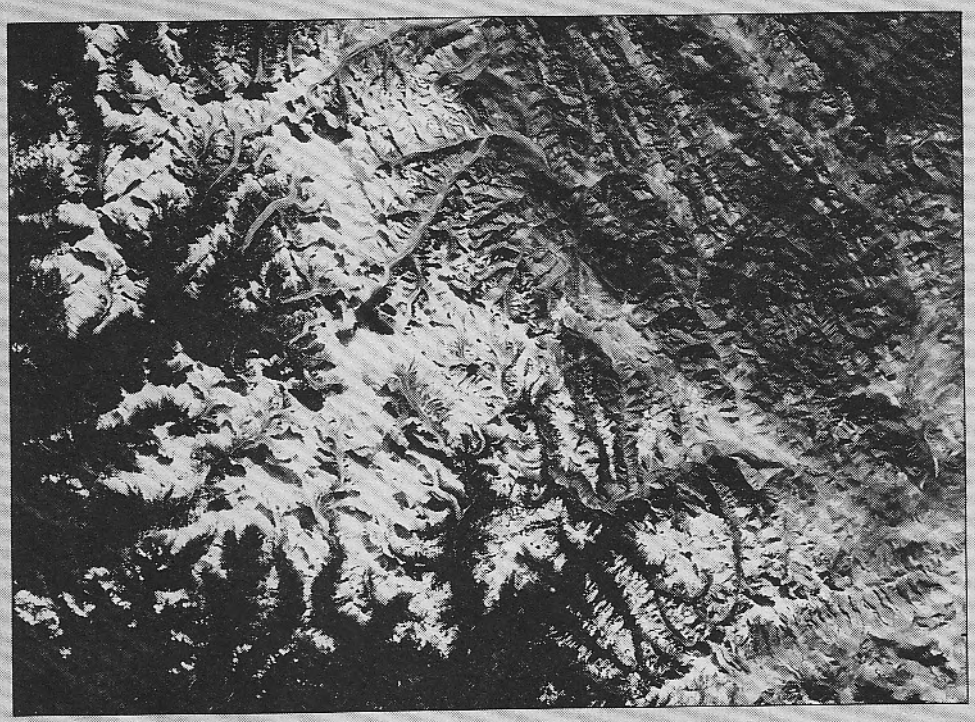
Gnats and Gnationalism


KAMAL MANI DIXIT

THE DAY INDIA signed an INR 60 million defence deal with Russia to buy 40 Sukhoi-30 warplanes, they were gussying up a new display in downtown Bangalore. It was the fighter jet Ajeet, or Gnat, produced by the city's own Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and it was put on display with a fine sense of juxtaposition by the road named after M.K. Gandhi. More military hardware was on display all over a couple of weeks later on "Vijay Diwas", the victory day to celebrate the thrashing of Pakistan during the 1971 war.

We also wonder how the Mahatma himself would have reacted to all this heady glorification of militarisation in South Asia's premier democracy. Or would he, too, have turned apologist for the militarised state? After all, Nelson Mandela does not flinch when he exports guns and armoured vehicles, does he?

Nature Has No Frontier



Satellite imagery showing Everest region.

IN SEPTEMBER 1996, Nepali and Tibetan specialists sipped green tea in Lhasa and discussed a green issue: how to collaborate across the lofty Himalayan frontier in order to preserve the ecosystem around Mount Everest. This was only the second meeting of the Transboundary Conservation Exchange, but the need to work together to protect the region surrounding the world's highest mountain was keenly felt.

On the Tibet side is the massive Qomolongma Nature Reserve which runs along the full length of eastern Nepal north of the border. Under the collaboration programme, the QNP would be linked up with three national parks in Nepal in the regions of Makalu-Barun and Sagarmatha (Everest) in the east, and Langtang, north of Kathmandu.

Says Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa, Nepali coordinator of the project: "This transboundary collaboration is a 'bottom-up' project which is bound to gain strength over the years. Conservation workers on both sides are determined to link hands around Mount Everest despite the language barrier, the political boundaries and archaic bureaucracies."

This transfrontier idea has been pushed by The Mountain Institute, a US-based environmental support agency which has projects in both Tibet and Nepal. Rather than start at the topmost levels of bureaucracy, says Mr Lhakpa Norbu, the project has concentrated on bringing workers at ground-level together to discuss what kind of collaboration they require. "We concretised the concept, and now it is time for the higher-ups to get involved," he says.

The September meeting set up a Transboundary Conservation Action Committee, which will start by helping in the sharing of information across the frontier. In time, the collaboration will move into areas such as opening up cross-frontier tourism, conducting joint scientific studies, cooperating in conservation education and training, preventing cross-border poaching and contraband trade, and controlling the spread of forest fires and livestock diseases. The two sides are also keen on improving the economic condition of the Nepali and Tibetan populations in the park and reserve areas.

Says Mr Lhakpa Norbu, "The progress made with our Tibetan counterparts has encouraged Nepal's National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Department to propose a similar transboundary meeting with neighbouring India, in order to try and protect better the rhinos, tigers and elephants of the tarai."

Mr Norbu has a point: transboundary collaboration is probably even more necessary in the plains.

North and South: Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa with Tibetans *(below left)*; Dolma Yangzom, Tibet coordinator of the Project, with her Nepali counterparts.

Undignified Dignitaries

THE NEWS FROM the mid-December SAARC foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi was heartening. Led by India, the countries of the region agreed on the need to accelerate the regional opening up of trade. The pictures, however, deserve some comment.

Every other day, Indian party politicians are seen in the papers, hands held high in a show of unity. Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda is a past master at the forcible hand-clasp, but he might have thought twice before leading the foreign ministers of SAARC in a school-boy display in which they were visibly uncomfortable.

Not that South Asians are the only ones given to gimmickry. Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) hold hands high at photo-ops. And at this year's summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, leaders even experimented with a football stadium-style "wave".

Speaking of photo-opportunities, New Delhi's *Pioneer* daily chose to highlight Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral's meeting in his South Block office with his Pakistani counterpart, Sahibzada Yakub Khan. Other papers in Delhi printed photographs of the same session, but none had the Pakistani visitor looking like he was about to kiss Gujral's hands. Photo selection can expose a mindset.

Speaking up for the Displaced

SOUTH ASIA HAS the fourth largest refugee population in the world.

There are Afghans in India and Pakistan, Tibetans in India and Nepal, Bhutanese in India and Nepal, Rohingyas in Bangladesh, Tamils in India, etc, etc. Then there are the internally displaced people by the million, who do not qualify for 'refugee' status and deprived of assistance, internationally and nationally.

Governments adopt different standards when dealing with different groups of displaced people. For instance, India has separate policies when dealing with Afghans, Chakmas and Bhutanese. Afghans are accepted as refugees and allowed to receive UNHCR assistance, Chakmas are allowed to live in India but blocked from accepting help of international organisations, while the Lhotshampa refugees emerging from Bhutan are actively pushed out of the country into Nepal.

As far as Nepal is concerned, it has been welcoming to the Lhotshampa, but continues with the practice of accosting and sending back Tibetans fleeing across over the high passes, on their way to the Dalai Lama's Dharamsala.

In order to force states to be more accountable for displaced populations and to encourage regional burden-sharing on what is often a trans-national problem, a gathering South Asian scholars, jurists and activists in late November called for a South Asian regional charter and protocol "on refugees, migrants, displaced and stateless persons".

The seminar, organised in Kathmandu by the South Asia Forum for Human Rights, made a number of recommendations for realising such a regional charter. The meeting asked that "all such persons who have been displaced by natural and/or man-made disasters and the denial of land, food and water security" be recognised as "Persons of Concern".

The participants recognised that some South Asian governments were creating statelessness by arbitrarily changing citizenship laws. Also, while governments do have the right to refuse permanent asylum, they are obliged to take care of persons seeking refuge until a third country is prepared to accept them. Unfortunately, this principle was being widely flouted in the region. The seminar also cautioned against classifying refugees and displaced persons as "economic refugees and migrants', as this all-too-often provide but an excuse to neglect the needs of such people.

Clearly, if the proposed protocol were to be enacted by the governments of South Asia, it would come to the assistance of millions of the presently neglected. The only hitch is that the governments who have actually created mass exodus from their countries can be expected to do all within their powers to diplomatically scuttle any move towards such a binding document.

KANAK MANI DIXIT

Manisha and B.P.

KANAK MANI DIXIT

Granddad and Granddaughter

WITH A STRING of hits over the last two years (*Bombay*, *Agnisakshi*, *Hindustani*), Manisha Koirala is the number one female film star of the moment in Bollywood. This is the first time that a non-Indian actress or actor has made it to those rarified heights. At a time when the ability to shake a leg and a hip, in either the modern or classical mode, is *de rigueur* for a Bollywood actress, Ms Koirala's success is more than amazing—for dancing is certainly not her forte.

One little-known aspect of Ms Koirala's stardom, and hence her fame, is that it puts her nearly at par with her grandfather, the late Bisweswor Prasad Koirala. Undoubtedly grandfather and granddaughter make up Nepal's most famous citizens. 'B.P.' was Nepal's best-known democrat, whose all-too-brief prime ministership back in 1959-60 may be considered Nepal's 'Camelot'. Ousted by a royal coup at the hands of King Birendra's father, Mahendra, Mr Koirala spent years in jail and in exile in India. He stands tallest among the public figures of modern-day Nepal, a person who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Jawaharlal Nehru and Chou En Lai.

A statistical long shot, then, that B.P. Koirala's eldest son's eldest daughter, Ms Koirala, happens to be the one other Nepali to have achieved true international fame together with her grandfather. Granted, one was a politician, and the other is a star. "I am intrigued when you put it that way," Ms Koirala told Himal. "I am proud of my grandfather and what he did for Nepal. I remember he liked playing badminton with us when I was a child."

USHA TIWARI

Children on the Podium

A SEMINAR ON Child Labour in South Asia was held in New Delhi from 30 November to 2 December. If the participants, which included child labourers from Delhi, had ever wondered why they were thus gathered, their misgivings were immediately put to rest by Indian Labour Minister M. Arunachalam. Mr Arunachalam, delivering his inaugural speech at the Bandhua Mukti Morcha-organised meet, said that the Indian Constitution safeguards the right of all children below the age of 14 to study and that any child denied that right can appeal to a court of law. Oh yeah?

BIKAS RAUNIA

BIKAS RAUNIA

Scenes from Bangladesh's Independence Day celebrations: The Pakistani surrender in 1971 is enacted on a Dhaka street *(above)*, while a performance at Shahid Minar memorial captures the heady days of the liberation struggle.

No One Asked Us

TALKING TO NEPALI sex workers in Bombay recently about the 'rescue' of Nepali girls and women from the brothels of Kamathipura and Falkland Road brought forth views totally at variance with what some of the NGOs in Kathmandu would have everyone believe *(see Himal/May 1996)*. In the majority, they are angry with the NGOs who want to rescue them. They are more afraid of the police than before, and they want to be left alone to their work—although all said that children should not be there, they should not come, they should go home. One got similar impressions while talking about the rescue with Nepali prostitutes in Calcutta, and with street social workers and health workers in Kamathipura and Falkland Road.

Their words, reported below, were not recorded and are paraphrased from interviews.

From Nepali sex workers in Bombay:

"We don't know. Maybe the police will come any time."

"I don't want to go back. I live here, these are my friends. After girls are here a few years, most of them don't want to go back."

"They should take the children out of here. This is not good. But you have to take them out within six months, before they get used to this life."

"When they ask, we all say we've been trafficked. None of us is going to say we came here because we wanted to."

"Some girls and women want to go back to Nepal. If they want to go, it's good if organisations can help them."

"Already, some of the women are coming back to Bombay. I think most will come back."

Nepali sex workers in Sonagachi and Khidirpur, Calcutta, said:

"Now they are rescuing women in Calcutta, too. Not as much as in Bombay. Police have been raiding places here. Some women were taken away and put in 'security houses'."

"We don't like police, we don't like lawyers."

From social workers and health workers on the streets of Bombay brothel districts:

"They didn't talk to us before they took the women away. They only talked to the human rights NGOs."

"No one asked the sex workers what they thought."

"Since the raids, the community has been very nervous. Many of the women are afraid that at any moment the police will take them away."

"What are these women going to do in Nepal? In this community they are accepted. Nobody bothers them."

"Children can return to their villages, but if they've been here too long, it's difficult".

"They don't want to do this work. But many think it's better than the life they left."

"Those who know they are HIV-positive are very afraid of being taken away to Nepal. In the village, they have no health care, no friends. They may be excluded. They will have to work even when they are sick. They want to die here. With their friends, in the city, with clinics nearby."

-John Frederick

Fear of Bangladeshis

HAN's logo *(left)* and its message for Bangladeshis

IN NOVEMBER, the Indian embassy in Dhaka announced its decision to allow double-entry visas to Bangladeshi tourists headed for Nepal. This resolved a long-standing problem that Dhakans faced in their efforts to travel overland to Kathmandu and back. The earlier single-entry visa did not allow them to re-enter India on the return leg.

The news was loudly welcomed by Nepal's travel trade in the name of South Asian solidarity and expanded tourism, right? Wrong.

In a carefully worded press release, the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) expressed its concern that "this new procedure can have negative as well as positive impact". Said HAN: "The Government of Nepal has announced its intention of increasing the number of quality tourists visiting the country, whereas the dual-entry system will most likely lead to a flood of low-budget Bangladeshi travellers to Nepal. It is also likely that many will come to Nepal for lengthy stays, which can lead to unwanted situations."

The hoteliers demanded that "His Majesty's Government proceed only after forming a policy to provide short-term visas and confirming its ability to control the spread of unwelcome tourism."

Wonder what Bangladeshi commentators would have to say about these ever-so-xenophobic fears of a fraternal neighbour.

SAARCONOMY

Made In Nepal, Exported to India

THE NEW INDO-NEPAL trade treaty signed on 4 December 1996 will allow, for the first time, goods manufactured in Nepal access to the Indian market free of custom duties. The treaty does not include cigarettes, alcohol, perfumes and cosmetics, but pretty much everything else. The benefits that can accrue to Nepal is therefore immense.

India is Nepal's largest trading partner, but the reverse is hardly true. The trade imbalance is massive, and in India's favour. The trade treaty, with the stroke of a pen, now makes it feasible to set up manufacturing units in Nepal solely for the purpose of exporting across the border. The fragile economy of a landlocked country like Nepal has only this option to correct its adverse balance of payments, and now it is available.

Planners have since long ago suggested that it will be much cheaper to market Indian brand products manufactured in Nepal in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh than to transport from production centres in far corners of India. The Nepal tarai has a tremendous advantage as a manufacturing region because transportation costs would be minimised. At the same time, Nepal's more relaxed laws on import of third-country machinery coupled with cheaper labour provides more competitive advantage.

The signing of the treaty has thus ushered in a new dimension to the regional trade scenario. The treaty was achieved through concerted lobbying by Nepali and Indian businessmen, each in their own capital. The treaty document largely follows the recommendations of a task force set up jointly by the Confederation of Indian Industries and the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

The private sector's active role in the Indo-Nepal treaty's formulation has also provided an precedent for activating the other economic linkages in South Asia. It might be feasible to tackle bilateral trade issues even as work on a regional economic opening up continues through the SAPTA preparations.

-Sujeev Shakya

Who's Afraid of Free Media?

THERE IS A document languishing somewhere in the lowest drawers of the foreign ministries of South Asian countries. It is the draft for a Media Charter for South Asia, which was proposed to the SAARC leaders at their last summit in 1995, in New Delhi. The document was proposed by journalists Enayetullah Khan of Bangladesh, Nikhil Chakravarty of India, and Javed Jabbar of Pakistan (now a minister in the interim government there).

Although the officials in each of the three countries made encouraging noises, when the time came for the Summit, they all looked the other way. The proposed Media Charter was not even discussed in the New Delhi summit, much less adopted.

As the time now draws near for the next summit (scheduled for May in Male), let us see what was so objectionable in that document that it could not be placed before the SAARC summiteers.

The Media Charter would have had the SAARC leaders support:

> the free and unfettered flow of information between the member states of SAARC.
> the exchange of newspapers, journals, books, films, TV programmes and other media material through the removal of procedural obstacles.
> unrestricted travel across frontiers by journalists and media specialists of the region.
> the establishment and growth of regional media organisations, representative bodies, research centres and collaborative processes.
> the formation of an Independent Commission on the Media in South Asia to undertake a study and to make recommendations for action.

That's all. But obviously it was too much for the leaders to chew all at once back in 1995. Could we hope that this time in Male, the Heads of State and Government of South Asia take time off from their onerous duties to approve this small and simple matter?

SUBCONTINENTAL DRIFT

The NRSA of Southeast Asia

TEENA GILL

Bangladeshi children in Rangoon.

By mixing with their host cultures, the Non-Resident South Asians of Southeast Asia would be protecting their own long-term interests, as well as helping bring forth a new culture.

by S. Satyanarayan

For many South Asians, travelling around Southeast Asia provides a continuous feeling of "we've been here before". Whether it is language and scripts, customs and tradition, or religion and superstitions, there is a familiar ring to much that one sees and hears. Not surprising really, to those who know the extent of ancient South Asian influence on countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Burma and Laos.

While the South Asians of yore helped define the spiritual dimensions of Southeast Asians, however, the more worldly and materialistic traits of modern times were shaped by that other great civilisation, China. Nevertheless, a modern-day connection to the ancient South Asian bonds has been established by the over two-million strong population of South Asians from Rangoon to Hanoi. While during earlier eras, South Asians arrived as merchants, travellers, scholars and priests carrying economic, cultural and social concepts and were readily welcomed by local populations, their current presence and status is largely a legacy of British and French colonisation.

Brought here as plantation and manual labour or as traders following the colonial boots, the social composition of the South Asian diaspora in Southeast Asia is strikingly similar to that in the Subcontinent itself. Divided into the very familiar categories of caste, class, region, religion and language, the only thing that binds the community of non-resident South Asians (NRSA) is their common geographical origin in the Subcontinent.

Among the NRSA, Indians predominate in numbers, with around 1.5 million in Malaysia, 0.5 million in Burma, 200,000 in Singapore, 100,000 in Thailand, a few thousands in Indonesia, and a few hundred each in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The second largest South Asian population is Bangladeshi, though these are largely confined to Burma which is also home to a sizeable community of Nepalis. Pakistanis and Sri Lankans are dispersed throughout the region but in very small numbers. A handful of well-to-do immigrants from the Maldives live in Malaysia.

Top, Bottom and Middle

At the top of the NRSA pecking order are the trading families, who over the years have contributed to the region's prosperity and have now graduated to becoming industrialists and businessmen with strings of companies under them. These South Asians have done particularly well in textiles and real estate. In Thailand, for example, Indian businessmen control a large portion of the country's multi-billion dollar textile production and trade, while Pakistanis and Indians together own nearly 40 percent of prime real estate in Bangkok's business districts of Silom and Sukhumvit.

There are examples of successful NRSAs in other business lines, like the Mittal group from Indonesia which has made a fortune in steel, and the Chansrichawla family in Thailand which runs a successful bank of its own. The businessman Rajan Pillai briefly made headlines in Singapore as the "Biscuit King of Asia" before being hounded out by the authorities on financial fraud charges. He died in custody last year at (of all places) New Delhi's Tihar jail.

The base of the NRSA pyramid is, of course, much larger, and is made up of hundreds of thousands of manual and menial labourers. Malaysia and Burma are host to the poorest of these, with the picture of Tamil rubber tappers and Bangladeshi fishing boat crews providing the cliched images. In Thailand, for the past few decades, itinerant peanut, cloth and mosquito-net

vendors from Gorakhpur district in east Uttar Pradesh have become an ubiquitous sight. Called "babus" by the local people, the bulk of Gorakhpuris have come here in recent years searching for livelihood, though the earliest of them came from as far back as the mid-1800s.

There is also a budding NRSA middle class, made up mostly of second and third generation migrants who have virtually studied their way up the social ladder. Apart from becoming prominent professionals, some of them in Singapore and Malaysia have even made it to cabinet positions in government. In Burma, some South Asian intellectuals have played an important political role in first opposing British colonialism and today the despotic rule of the SLORC generals.

Return of the Non-Resident

The attitude of Southeast Asian governments towards NRSA populations encompasses the extremes. While on the one hand the Burmese military regime actively threw out Indian businessmen during the 1960s and continues to persecute citizens of Bangladeshi origin, the Singaporean authorities have gone as far as to make Tamil an official language in the city state.

In Malaysia, along with the Chinese, Indians have also been discriminated against by the Bumiputera policy which lavishes special government attention on ethnic Malays *(see accompanying article)*. Thailand and Indonesia have, however, maintained a liberal policy towards the NRSA, allowing them to carry on a variety of professions unhindered within the purview of domestic laws.

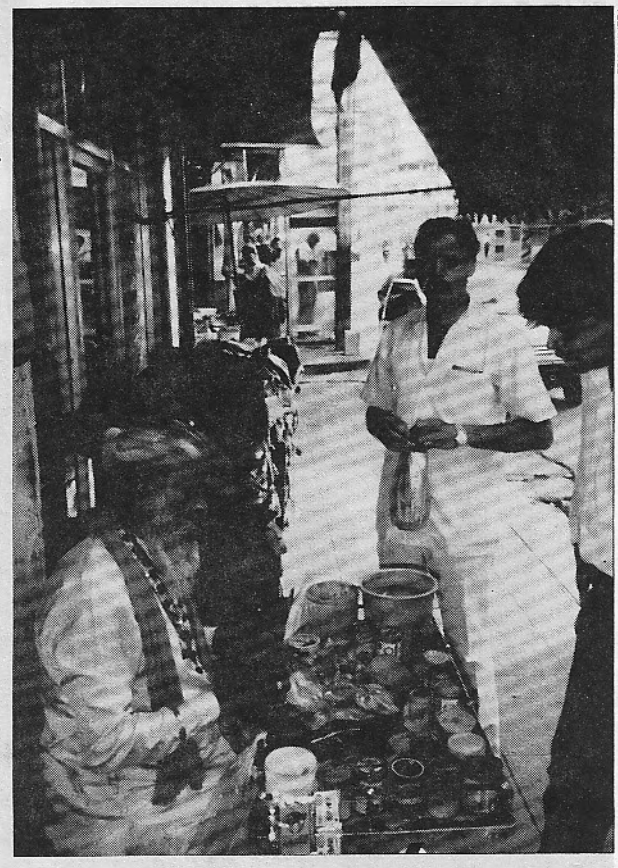
In Vietnam and Laos, there were once quite a few Indian traders and businessmen before the fall of Saigon and Vientiane to communist forces in 1975. While the NRSAs are severely reduced in numbers, however, they are not discriminated vis-a-vis the citizens. With the opening up of these economies since the early nineties, a number of Indian businessmen have started returning, to try and recover old property and launch new ventures.

Indians in Hong Kong have done well for themselves, but are keeping their options open as the handover to China in July nears. Indians have made their way as far away as the Philippines, including an entire village in Luzon made up of an entire crew of a British ship that mutinied in the South China Sea in the 19th century. Filipino Sikhs used to be known semi-derogatorily as "Bumbais" and many were motor-cycle-borne rural money-lenders.

On the cultural and social front, the NRSA have failed by and large to integrate into the host societies of Southeast Asia. This leaves open the possibility of ethnic backlash sometime in the future, which can come for different reasons. In countries like Thailand, Burma and in Indochina, the South Asians themselves maintain a distance from local cultures, because of orthodoxy and even delusions of cultural superiority. In Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, however, the situation is reversed, and the NRSA have been isolated by stronger mainstream cultures. Whereas the Chinese tend to blend well into Southeast Asian societies due to cultural affinity or intermarriage with local populations, the South Asians have found it much more difficult to assimilate.

In the long run, the fate of the NRSA certainly will be defined in the countries they live in and not in the lands of their origin, however attached to it they may be emotionally. Local populations anywhere are extremely sensitive to such misplaced nostalgia on the part of the migrants, and the NRSA would do their own long-term interests a lot of good by understanding this reality. Any move towards assimilation with the host societies would not lead, as is often thought, to a disappearance of the South Asian's individual identity. Instead, it would throw up a synergistic movement which would help develop a melting pot with both South and Southeast Asian ingredients. The ancient spiritual links, then, would live on in a modern-day culture.

S. Satyanarayan is a Bangkok-based journalist.



TEENA GILL

Paanwallah from eastern Uttar Pradesh in Bangkok.

"Indian jugglers" in Singapore, *circa* 1900.

SUBCONTINENTAL DRIFT

Putras of the Bhumi

Tamil women in Wellesley Province, British Malaya, *circa* 1900.

Many Malaysian Indians may feel marginalised, but there is nowhere else they would rather live. Especially not the Subcontinent of their ancestors.

by ***Malini Iyer***

Despite a history of migration that goes back two centuries, a fair representation in the ruling coalition government and enjoying the fruits of the country's economic growth, Malaysia's Indian community sometimes sees itself as a marginalised group.

Malaysians of Subcontinental origin today make up 1.5 million of the country's 20.7 million population. The rest are 12 million *Bumiputeras* (sons of the soil—Malays), 5.3 million Chinese, 600,000 of 'Other' races and 1.3 million non-citizens.

The Indian representation in the Government is via the Malaysian Indian Congress, or MIC, which is led by the authoritarian, often temperamental and embarrassingly emotional S. Samy Vellu. An architect by background, Mr Vellu is not seen as a very serious representative of the minority Indians. Often given to outbursts, threats and tears directed at his own community when he feels his 'rule' is being questioned, Mr Vellu is unfortunately the only official voice of the Indians in government. Challenges have been mounted against his control of the MIC, but these have effectively been squashed with support, it is said, from the highest levels of government.

Two years ago, Mr Vellu took particular umbrage at an Indian university lecturer who had suggested that Tamil-speaking Malaysian Indians came from the labourer class of Tamil Nadu, while Sri Lankan Malaysians were from a better background since they came to Malaysia as clerks. Taking this as an affront to the community as a whole, Mr Vellu threatened to send hit squads after both the the lecturer and the journalist who reported her ideas.

Majority in Minority

By and large, the party which Samy Vellu heads represents the majority-within-a-minority Tamil community. The other identities among Malaysian Indians (they could be called Malaysian South Asians) include Gujaratis, Bengalis, Syrian Christians, Muslims/Tamil Muslims, Malayalees, Punjabis, Sinhalese, Marathis, and so on. As with the case of Mr Vellu, all Indians are very particular on how they are grouped.

For the sake of convenience, the Malaysian government lumps all people of South Asian origin under the category 'Indian'. While this seemed to have worked 25 years ago, Malaysians of Indian origin have now decided to revert to their ethnic communal groups, in order, among other things, to circumvent the official quota system which sometimes makes it difficult for them to acquire housing, education and employment opportunities.

The government's New Economic Policy, which is actually a policy of positive discrimination, sanctions a quota system that favours the Malay community over other races. The Malays are the Bumiputera, and they benefit from reservations in all sectors, from university entrance to government as well as private employment, and home ownership. Up to 70 percent of jobs in government are reserved for the Bumiputera, and they receive five to seven percent discount for purchase of all types of houses. Some Malaysians feel that if there is one group that should really qualify for Bumiputera-hood then it is the indigenous Orang Asli, Malay for "original people". The Malays, on the other hand, are largely descendants of early migrants from the Indonesian archipelago.

While Malaysia's extreme form of affirmative action could be seen as state-sponsored racism, it has partly helped maintain racial calm in this multi-ethnic nation that still remembers with dread the anti-Chinese riots of the early 1970s. The racial harmony has made it possible for Malaysia's economic takeoff—the country hopes to reach "industrialised" status and have the same income level as Western Europe by 2020. The government has invested heavily in social sectors such as higher education and health, and the result of this is evident everywhere. The cultural shock that greets visitors flying in from New Delhi to Kuala Lumpur today is the same as if they were travelling from Africa to Europe.

Success and Segregation

It is not that Indians have not been able to take advantage of this growth. There are more than a few of them who have reached

prominence in Malaysian society. To name a few: Ananda Krishnan, the man behind behind Malaysia's satellite launches Measat I and II, is known to be a close confidant of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (who is himself of part-South Asian descent); Tan Sri Kishu, owner of the extremely old, extremely popular and still thriving Globe Silk Store and Tan Sri Ubaidullah, the mega-millionaire philanthropist, are two of the well-known businessmen of Indian origin; Clifford Herbert is the right-hand man of the Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim (who is also the Deputy Prime Minister).

But even as Malaysia prospers and the standard of living of all its communities soar, many non-Malays see less and less reason for the government reservations. There is dissatisfaction among young non-Malays, who see Malay classmates with lower grades superceding them in medical school or in university.

Since the quota system segregates Malaysians into four groups—Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian or Others—many among the Indian community have chosen to place themselves under 'Others', as this provides better opportunities in education and employment. This category was originally created to cover the Orang Asli and the tiny Portuguese, or Eurasian, community. To be included in 'Others' now, many Punjabis argue that they are not of Indian origin as they hail from Punjab in as much the same way as the Ceylonese effectively argue they come from Sri Lanka, not India. The Indian Muslims have ingeniously grouped themselves as Bumiputera, putting forward as a reason the official Islamic religion of Malaysia.

Plantation Work

The original immigrants from India—now third- and fourth-generation Malaysian citizens—came to the then-Malaya in the early 19th century, soon after the establishment of the Straits Settlements by the East India Company. At that time, the British were in Malaya and immigrant labour came from the three nearby densely populated regions of Java, China and India, in line with the "cheap colonial labour" policy. Indian labour was preferred because it was cheaper than the Javanese and Chinese.

In the beginning, convict labour was brought to develop the colony, but this was suspended in 1860. The flow of Indians increased at turn-of-century with the colonial administration's expanded requirements for the sugar and rubber plantations. The depressed socio-economic conditions in South India (such as pressure on land, the caste system, etc.) made for large numbers

S. Samy Vellu

of willing migrants. The Indians were also used to being colonial subjects to British rule and to low standards of living, which suited their new masters fine.

Well-behaved and docile, the Indians were considered superior labour because, as one historian wrote: "They were quiet, amenable to discipline, and very quick to learn and adapt to most kinds of agricultural work." Finally, the colonial government favoured an increase in the Indian population to counterbalance the growing Chinese population in Malaya.

Even today, a majority of the country's plantation workers are of Indian origin. But they are a forgotten lot, and lag behind other Malaysians in education, housing, sanitation, water supply and access to health services. Plantations Indians (mostly Tamil) helped lay the foundation of Malaysia's strong economic performance after independence.

More than a million labourer families live in the 1300 plantations that dot the Malay Peninsula. With the National Union of Plantation Workers having been largely ineffective in improving their lot, the socio-economic condition of the labourers continues to stagnate even as the rest of the country prospers. While the average per capita income of Malaysians almost trebled in the 20-year period until 1995, that of plantation workers rose only marginally. Studies show that the real income of rubber tappers has actually dipped in the last two decades.

There are examples of plantation "boys" moving out of the traditional occupation of their forefathers, and through hard work and sheer diligence become university lecturers, bank officers and businessmen. But these are the exceptions. Today, the plantation communities are losing their jobs to new Bangladeshi and Indonesian contract workers who are willing to work for less money. The new migrants already make up half the plantation workforce.

The wave of legal and illegal migration from the Subcontinent, while highlighting the status of plantation Indians in Malaysia, is also proof of how far behind the Subcontinent's standard of living and unemployment levels are. (See Himal, November/December 1996). Thus, ironically, the recent South Asian economic migration shows that no matter how tough things may be in Malaysia for some sections of the Indian plantation community, it is still much better than in the Subcontient. The fact that Indian Malaysians are not migrating in droves to Britain, the United States or Australia like their subcontinental cousins—or even Singaporean Indians—is perhaps proof enough.

M. Iyer is the pseudonym for a Kuala Lumpur-based freelance writer.

"Temporary Relationship, Permanent Problem"

In what has been called an effort to prevent the creation of a "fatherless society", the Malaysian Indian Congress has begun distributing pamphlets in rural Malaysia, warning Malaysian Indian girls about the pitfalls of marrying foreign guest workers, particularly Bangladeshis.

The pamphlet, entitled "Temporary Relationship, Permanent Problem", asks the girls not to fall for foreign (Bangladeshi) workers even though they look "like us" and "speak very nicely to our girls". It warns that many Malaysian girls are being cheated by Bangladeshis who have to return home after the completion of their contract but cannot take the girls because they already have wives and children back home.

The problem is an outcome of the government's New Economic Policy, which has opened up growth areas in the hinterland and many factories set up, says an MIC official. Local girls work side by side with foreign workers and "it is but natural that relationships build up and they fall in love". There was an increase in Bangladeshis marrying local girls after the government announced early last year that spouses of Malaysian women could apply for permanent residency in Malaysia.

Under Malaysian law, a marriage is not recognised unless a girl marrying a Muslim also converts. Since Malaysian Indian girls are mainly Hindu, many of the marriages have taken place in rural Hindu temples where the performing priests are not been well informed about the country's marriage laws.

"The consequence will be that the children will be bastardised. They will have no rights here," says the MIC official.

SUBCONTINENTAL DRIFT

Austral(south)asians

by Kalinga Seneviratne

Australia is regarded as a country of "milk and honey" by South Asians, and a large contingent of qualified Indians, Sri Lankans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Afghans and Nepalis have migrated over in the last two decades since the "White Australia" policy was abandoned in 1972. There are today 125,000 South Asian Australians.

A recent study by Canberra's Bureau of Immigration Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR) showed that South Asians—Indians and Sri Lankans in particular—are one of the most highly educated and qualified ethnic groups in the country. Their median annual income of AUD 18,600 (about USD 14,000) in 1991 was above the Australian average of AUD 14,200 (USD 11,000).

This view of an Australian Dream, however, is a bit oversold, and newer arrivals find it harder to find a comfortable, successful and professionally satisfying life down under. For every doctor, accountant and computer specialist with a high salary, there are now many more professionals who arrived after mid-1980s unhappy with their situation. Qualified South Asians are to be found at work as clerical assistants, taxi drivers, restaurants managers and spice shop owners. Many complain of subtle but effective forms of discrimination by professional bodies and employers which keep them on the outside.

Karmal Laha, an engineer from Calcutta with extensive professional experience in Africa and India is a typical case. He came to Sydney at the peak of the Australian recession in the early 1990s, leaving a good job with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Construction. When he applied for a job in Sydney, he was told that he did not have "Australian experience", which is an excuse used to discourage migrant jobseekers. Mr Laha finally found an entry-level position at Sydney airport, working alongside Australian engineers just out of college.

A study done by the University of Woolongong in 1992 found that Australian companies routinely appoint Australian-born applicants over highly trained foreigners. Many companies defend the practice by saying that they fear cultural difficulties in the workplace. The study found that employers used ethnic stereotyping to exclude South Asians (and South Africans), saying that they had authoritarian attitudes and hence were unsuited for senior positions. Australian companies judged the communication skills of South Asians—and West Asians and Filipinos—to be far inferior to those of Australian applicants.

It must be said, though, that while in Britain an "Asian" automatically means someone from the Subcontinent, mention of Asians in Australian media generally connotes East Asians. That is to say: anyone with "Chinese" looks—Vietnamese, Thais, Filipinos, Indonesians, Singaporeans or people from Hong Kong.

Success Story: Yasmine Gooneratne

Pleasures of Conquest

For Professor Yasmine Gooneratne, perhaps the most well-known South Asian in Australia, such barriers did not exist. She migrated to Australia in 1972 with her husband Brendon, a medical doctor. They came over because both had been offered teaching positions at Sydney universities.

Ms Gooneratne, who was born and educated in Sri Lanka and later completed her PhD from Cambridge University, is today professor of English at Macquarie University in Sydney. She is a well-known novelist with her recent novels *Change of Skies* and *Pleasures of Conquest* hitting the bestseller charts in Australia. Both were short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize.

"My time here has been a period of continual personal satisfaction for me," Ms Gooneratne says.

Well-known Indian sarod player Ashok Roy emigrated to Australia in 1989 and now is Artistic Director of the Australian Institute for Eastern Music. He, too, considers his experience in Australia as enriching. The Institute was originally set up by some South Asians as a training centre to teach classical Subcontinental music to the children of migrants. Today, it is a respected institution teaching not only South Asian music, but also helping develop a new form of Australian East-West fusion music.

Mr Roy says that the immigrant community is not very keen on what he has to offer. "It's the (white) Australians who are much more interested," he says. "Those who have migrated here haven't come for a cultural experience. They want to make money, and so cultural activities are not a priority."

But that may be changing. A recent study done by BIMPR has found that many well-educated Indian and Sri Lankan migrants who earlier rejected their Hindu (or Sikh) traditions to pursue a "modern lifestyle" are now beginning to feel an acute loss of identity. They are, therefore, reviving their cultural and religious connections, through festivals and concerts, and by building shrines and temples. There has been a temple and *gurdwara*-building boom all over the country in recent years.

Clash of Cultures

Many South Asian migrants, especially engineers, doctors and architects, who left flourishing professions to start anew down under now feel frustrated with their inability to re-establish careers in Australia. And since they claim it is really the children's education that brought them to Australia, the offspring of the immigrants are held to high expectations. Many parents work long hours in lowly-paid jobs or hold more than one job to send children to expensive private schools. Responding to parental demands, many South Asian children certainly do well in primary schools and get admission to the elite "selective" high schools, which are free.

With many second-generation South Asians now reaching marriageable age, as in migrant South Asian communities in other continents, the preference to choose one's own partner has led to bitter family feuds. A typical example is Sujatha Pillai (not her real name), who came to Australia with her parents from Sri Lanka aged just nine. Of a Catholic Tamil background and daughter of a doctor, she was sent to a private Catholic school in Sydney and later completed an arts degree at Sydney University.

After her graduation, Ms Pillai's parents began looking for a husband for her from back home. "I told them I was not interested in marrying a foreigner, which made my mother very angry," she recalls. "My parents never encouraged me to speak Tamil, didn't take me back to Sri Lanka for the last 15 years, and now they want me to marry a guy who has never left that country." Ms Pillai ended up marrying a white lawyer, and says her parents have made peace with her, "probably because he is in law."

Afghan Australians

Interestingly, the Afghans were one of the first non-British migrant groups to come to Australia. Arriving in the last century as camel drivers, the Afghans played a key role in opening up Australia's dry and rugged interior for mineral exploration. Their great contribution to modern Australia's prosperity has gone largely unacknowledged. Observes Abdullah Ahmadi, who runs a travel agency in Sydney: "There are some books written about the first Afghan migrants, but no official recognition has been given to their contribution to Australian history."

According to Mr Ahmadi, a "second wave" of Afghan migrants has arrived over the last decades, fleeing war in their own country. This group has found it very hard to assimilate and finds it practically impossible to find jobs. "Afghan doctors, engineers, teachers and university professors are doing menial labour."

While there are success stories among the South Asian migrants in Australia, increasingly, they are finding a country which has used up its fund of goodwill for people from afar, particularly if they are coloured anything other than white. That, at least, is the impression from the controversy swirling around Pauline Hanson, a newly elected Member of Parliament, who in her maiden speech to the federal parliament in Canberra in October, said that Australia was being "swamped by Asians".

She meant East Asians. But South Asians beware.

K. Seneviratne is a Sydney-based broadcaster and journalist.

Dhaka rickshaws

BIKAS RAUNIAR

Rickshaw and Prejudice

The rickshaw of Bangladesh, poorly designed and manned by the underclass, plays an important role in propping up the national economy. Its neglect by government officials and researchers can only hurt the country's own interests.

by Robert Gallagher

No one knows how many rickshaws there are in Dhaka, let alone in Bangladesh. The government statistics are not reliable, and there is no other way of finding out. To give one example, in 1987, there were 88,000 rickshaws officially registered with the Dhaka Municipal Corporation. But in addition there was a huge number of unregistered rickshaws, and various government ministers and newspaper correspondents put the true figure at 150,000 to 200,000.

The government's hopes to hold down rickshaw numbers, and thereby limit traffic congestion. However, the policy has never succeeded. Rickshaw numbers have gone on increasing as the demand for them has grown.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the rickshaws in 1985-86 contributed 34 percent of the total value-added by the transport sector in Bangladesh, or roughly BDT 9840 million. This was more than double the contribution of all motorised road transport, 12 times the contribution of Bangladesh Railways, and 12.5 times the contribution of Bangladesh Biman, the national airline.

Even allowing for a margin of error, there is no doubting the rickshaw's importance to the national economy. Rickshaws account for more than half of Dhaka's vehicles, 70 percent of its passengers, and 43 percent of the total passenger mileage. Every day, about 7 million passenger trips are made in Dhaka by rickshaw over a distance of 11 million passenger-miles. This is nearly double the output of London's Underground.

The rickshaw provides one of the largest sources of employment in Bangladesh. In Dhaka, over 400,000 people make rickshaw-related work the largest single form of employment, taking in about 23 percent of the city's workforce. At present, over one million people all over the country find work in them. The great majority are pullers, but there are also *misteris* (repairers),

owners, makers, shopkeepers, tea-stall owners and many others who survive on the basis of the rickshaw. The sheer size of the rickshaw sector has important implications for the national economy. If we consider that for every male employed there are at least three dependents, then nationally around five million people depend directly on the rickshaws, or 4.5 percent of the total population. It would seem impossible that such an important sector could be ignored by the government. Yet it is.

Rickshaws have been totally left out of the government's planning. During the Second Five Year Plan (1980-85), out of 300 transport projects, not one was connected to rickshaws. In the Third Five Year Plan, rickshaws were dismissed in a single sentence: "Slow-moving vehicles such as pedal rickshaws, push and pull carts, etc, should be gradually eliminated through development of automotive vehicles."

The Ministry of Industries once drew up an annual forecast of demand for bicycle components which never once mentioned the word 'rickshaw' (although rickshaws account for most of the bicycle components used in Bangladesh).

The Ideology of Development

Why are rickshaws so completely overlooked? To be fair, all kinds of informal sector activity are left out of the government's thinking, because decision-makers hold, as one scholars wrote, "an ideology of development that acquaints modernisation with mechanisation, and transformation with the replacement of things new. Country-boats, cycle-rickshaws, and bullock carts have little place in this ideology."

But if traditional activities tend to be overlooked, a particular hostility is felt towards rickshaws. Many people *hate* them, because they are seen as a symbol of underdevelopment. "Rickshaws distinguish Dhaka as a study in stunted urban development," said a newspaper editorial. According to one Minister of Local Government, "Dhaka is the slowest city in the world because of uninterrupted growth of unauthorised rickshaws." Such comments are hardly fair. After all, the average speed of traffic in London in the evening rush hour is only 11.6 mph, which is less than what rickshaws can achieve.

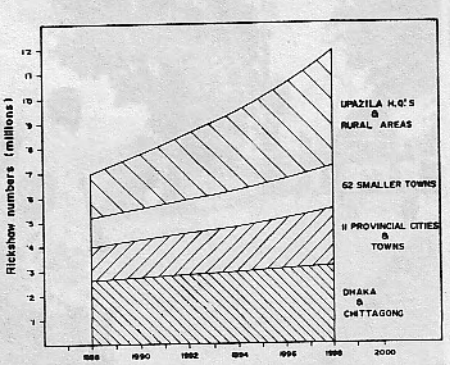
To justify their wish to be rid of rickshaws, many people who are blinded by their prejudice say that rickshaw-pulling is "inhuman" and "degrading". But is rickshaw-pulling a "dishonourable" occupation? There are many other jobs in Bangladesh which are just as arduous, if not worse: brick-breaking, carrying goods by head and shoulder, rowing boats, pulling carts by hand, labouring in forges, foundries and bakeries. Yet no one talks of abolishing these jobs. If we were really concerned for the rickshaw-pullers, we might pay them more for their efforts. But no! Even well-heeled passengers bargain hard for every taka, and complain if the pullers ask for more.

Prejudice leads people to blame the rickshaws for all the urban traffic problems, and many social problems as well. For example, senior police officers once told the Home Minister that the large numbers of rickshaws were a major cause of traffic jams and road accidents within Dhaka.

It is not really true that rickshaws are inefficient, in that they slow down the traffic. On fast roads, a slow-moving vehicle can, of course, greatly slow down other vehicles. On the other hand, on narrow roads, a large vehicle can have difficulty manoeuvring and slow down smaller vehicles. The rickshaw takes up only half the road space of the average car. At first this seems hard to believe, but motor vehicles move at speed, so they need a greater distance between each vehicle for safe stopping. Rickshaws, on the other hand, can travel very close together.

In terms of number of passengers carried, the motor vehicle is clearly the worst offender. The average car passenger in Dhaka uses about 45 percent more road space than the average rickshaw passenger. Hence, it is not fair to blame the rickshaw for causing

Projection of Rickshaw Numbers for Bangladesh
from *The Rickshaws of Bangladesh*

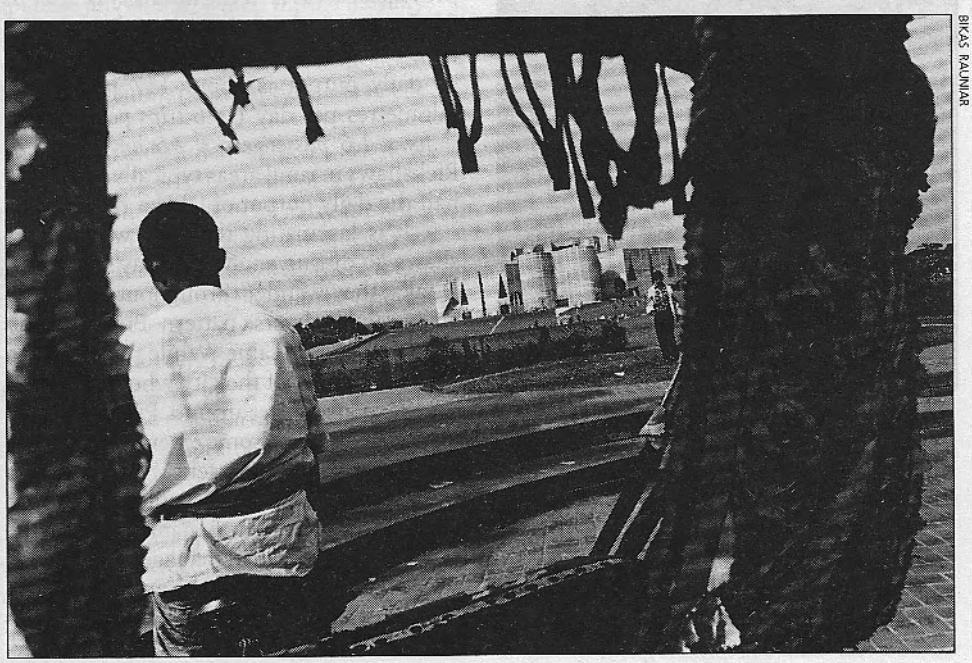


traffic congestion. A traffic count in Old Dhaka recorded 3500 rickshaws passing in one hour in one direction, yet the maximum number of cars that can pass down a similar road is only 1300 per hour. Allowing for their respective passenger loadings, the rickshaw can therefore transport about 50 percent more people than cars, under similar circumstances.

For the needs they cater to, it is unrealistic for government and other officials to talk of abolishing rickshaws. The three-wheelers are going to be with us for the rest of our lives, so we should learn to live with them, and make the best of them. Even if the rickshaw were to disappear from Dhaka (which is unlikely), there would still be hundreds of thousands of them in the rest of the country, and their numbers are increasing. We should accept that rickshaws have a future, and plan for them accordingly.

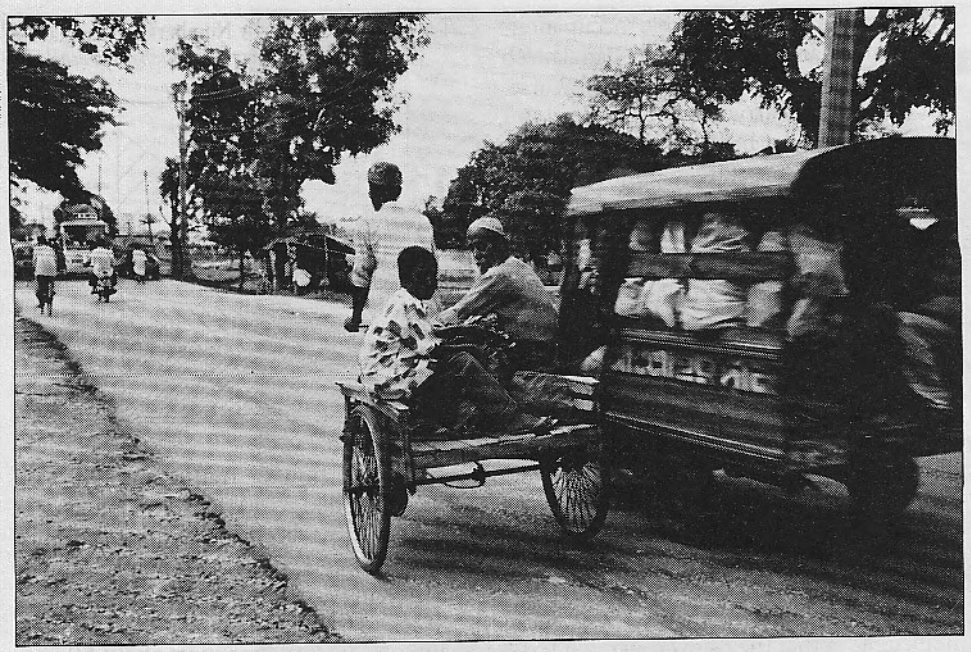
Rickshaws Are Efficient

Although there is no doubt that rickshaw-pulling is hard work, it is certainly not



BIKAS RAUNIAR

Who cares? Rickshaw hood frames puller and the Sangsad Bhawan (Parliament).



KANAK MANI DIXIT

Tempo overtakes rural rickshaw.

"inhumane". Engineers who have studies the Bangladesh rickshaw reckon that a power output of about .12 to .13 horsepower is required to pedal it fast with a normal load. This in itself cannot be considered uncomfortable, and under normal conditions (ie flat ground, little breeze, one or two passengers) rickshaw-pulling is not difficult. Even young boys and elderly men can manage it.

However, as soon as conditions depart from normal, it becomes very hard indeed. A 10 mph wind doubles the power required to maintain the same speed; a slight gradient of two percent similarly doubles it. Hence in adverse conditions, rickshaw-pulling is extremely difficult, raising the power requirement three- to four-fold.

But are rickshaws efficient? They can be very efficient indeed, more so than even buses and motorised three-wheelers, in certain circumstances. Rickshaws are used mainly for shorter distance trips, where speed does not matter much. An average rickshaw trip in Dhaka is 2.5 km (1.6 miles). The main difference between Dhaka and the provincial areas is in the intensity of use. In Dhaka, a typical rickshaw does about 14-15 trips per shift, with two daily shifts. Hence, its daily output is about 117 passenger-kilometres per day *(14.6 trips per shift x 2 shifts x 1.6 passengers x 2.5 km per trip)*. Rickshaws in rural areas typically have only half the daily output of Dhaka rickshaws.

It is fascinating to study where rickshaws go during an average day's work. In Dhaka, they wander throughout the city in an extremely diverse pattern. Practically no two trips are the same. While pullers try to stay on the side of the city where they live, they certainly do get around. Pullers control the destinations to some extent by choosing where to wait for passengers, and which passengers to take. So one puller who made a trip all the way to the Banani sector, on the far side of the city, had managed to work his way back to Lalbagh by the end of the day .

Most of the passengers who ride rickshaws in Dhaka are of middle- and upper-income brackets. In fact, we could speculate that roughly half the city population use rickshaws (ie the upper half), while the other half are the class who operate them. A survey showed that at least half of the low-income people using a rickshaw were travelling on behalf of richer persons. When the poor use the rickshaw themselves, it is usually for an essential purpose, such as transporting household goods, travelling with family and luggage, or taking someone to hospital.

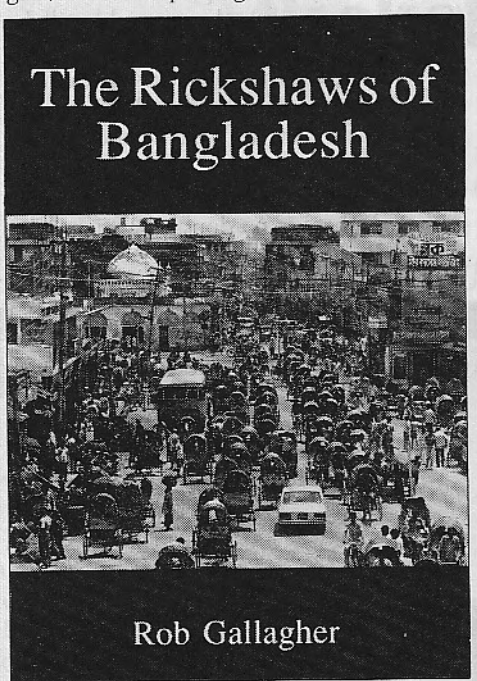
Bad Design, Hard Work

Contrary to what many people think, the rickshaw is not a good example of appropriate technology. On the contrary, it is a crude, inefficient vehicle with plenty of scope for improvement. The basic faults arise because *bicycle* components are used in a *tricycle* role, for which they were not designed. The gear ratio is too low, the wheels and frames are too weak, the brakes inadequate, and the steering inappropriate.

Bangladeshi rickshaws also suffer from inappropriate gear ratio. Special 'two-speed' tricycle gears have been developed in China, where the puller will use his bare toe to lift the chain and transfer it from one chainwheel to the other. In Bangladesh, however, rickshaws use single-speed gears built for bicycles even though they carry up to five times more weight. Additionally the gearing ratio which has been set for Bangladesh rickshaws is too 'high' for most situations except when the rickshaw is empty. In other words, under most conditions, the pullers have to strain unnecessarily hard. A lower gearing ratio is required, for the middle range in which the rickshaw operates.

Anyone who drives a rickshaw for the first time will immediately notice how difficult it is to steer. The reason is that the steering arrangement meant for a bicycle does not work well on a tricycle. Unlike a bicycle, a rickshaw cannot lean when turning. The puller is constantly working with his arms and shoulders to correct the wheel's wild behaviour. The problem is easily solved by changing the geometry of the 'fork' but this has not been done.

Rickshaws are grossly under-braked. While even a bicycle has two brakes, the much heavier rickshaw has but one, on the front wheel. When it comes to suspension, it is true that every rickshaw has a pair or elliptical springs underneath the passenger seat. However, these are merely clever imitations of the original hand-pulled rickshaw



(This article is extracted from The Rickshaws of Bangladesh, *published in 1992 by The University Press Limited (PO Box 2611, Motijheel, Dhaka 1000. ISBN 984 05 1182 3). Eminent economist Rehman Sobhan calls this "the standard work on rickshaws of Bangladesh". It integrates the disciplines of economics, sociology and engineering to produce a highly readable, moving human story about the people, circumstances and economics of the rickshaws of Bangladesh.)*

springs, and actually serve no purpose other than to add dead weight. According to one researcher, the springs (made of mild steel rather than high carbon steel) provide only five percent of the rickshaw's suspension, the rest being provided by frame-flexing and the tyres. Good suspension is important not only for the passenger's comfort but because it conserves the puller's energy.

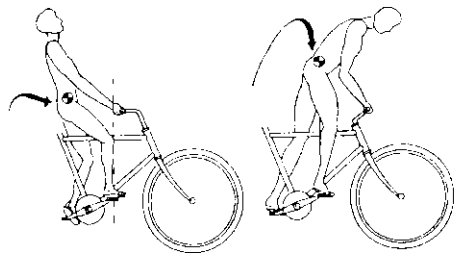
The wheels are the weakest points on a rickshaw, for these bicycle wheels were not designed for heavy loads. The wheels are therefore constantly failing and losing their roundness. A heavily loaded rickshaw which had a wheel only 1/8 inch out-of-round could add five percent to the effort required for pedalling. This is equivalent to asking the puller to do 15 pressups every mile he travelled.

The rickshaw's structural high profile causes severe wind resistance. When there is a stiff headwind, most of the puller's energy is spent in overcoming wind resistance. A small increase in wind speed causes a big increase in the power needed to overcome it. One way to reduce wind resistance is by lowering the height of the passenger seat and getting the hood to lie flat when folded back. The tall structure of the rickshaw also gives it a high centre of gravity which makes the vehicle more liable to topple over.

A typical Bangladesh rickshaw weighs about 92 kg, of which 12 percent is in the springs, which are virtually useless, and 49 percent in the passenger seat and hood, which are very solidly constructed out of wood. The chassis is made of heavy iron and tubes. All in all, the rickshaw could be made much lighter without compromising on structural strength.

The rickshaw's present design does not fit the average Bangladeshi puller very well. The position of the rider's seat is too far back in relation to the pedals so that if he wants to push really hard, he has to come off the seat and stand on the pedals. The seat of the puller is not the proper shape, and the springs underneath actually absorb some of the leg thrust. The handlebars come from a bicycle design that is 100 years old and are inappropriate for a heavily loaded rickshaw because they pull the rider's hands much too close to his body. Rickshaw-pullers have adapted an unusual technique to compensate for this. As one scholar wrote:

> *When pullers pull away from a traffic light, they stand upright on the pedals, and do a funny little motion which involves putting their hip bones close to the handlebar, bending their back in a reflex curve, and then sort of 'shuffle-kicking' the pedals. The resulting motion is terrible, because they are putting the lumbar regions on their back in reverse flexion, while at the same time pushing hard—thus pinching the vertebrae together.*



All in all, there is plenty of scope to improve the rickshaw, and it should be possible to improve its performance efficiency by more than 40 percent. In 1985, rickshaws contributed an estimated BDT 9810 million to the national economy, so a 40 percent improvement would be worth around BDT 3800 million annually.

One reason why rickshaw design has not changed since the 1930s is ownership. Most pullers do not own their own rickshaws, and the owners themselves have very little reason to improve their vehicles because they are already making good profits. Due to the vicious cycle of poverty, the smaller owners, the *misteris* and pullers who may clearly like to improve their vehicles do not have the means to do it. This constraint does not apply to the country's engineers and scientists, and here the principal reason for the lack of progress lies in the prejudice against the rickshaws.

Rickshaw Unionising

Ayat Ali is a 65-year-old rickshaw puller who lives in the town of Comilla. During his lifetime he has pedalled perhaps 170,000 miles, equivalent to seven times around the world, or three-quarters the way to the moon. Although Ayat Ali gets on well with his rickshaw's owner, the relationship is hardly an equal one. The rickshaw rent takes away one-third of his earnings, leaving him barely enough to feed himself and his wife.

Rickshaw ownership makes some people very rich indeed, but it keeps the pullers poor. With the rent he has paid during his lifetime, Ayat Ali could have purchased a rickshaw 40 times over. Of the majority of the 1.25 million people employed in the rickshaw industry in Bangladesh, perhaps 80 percent, are pullers. Only a minority of these pullers own their own rickshaws, with only about 10 percent owner-pullers in Dhaka. More than 9 out of 10 pullers in the city are migrants from outlying regions. The overwhelming majority (85 percent) are landless, and 60

Three-Wheel Evolution

Nowadays, we think of the hand-pulled rickshaws as a cruel and anachronistic form of transport. Yet, when they were first introduced in Japan in the 1870s, they represented real technological progress. They competed with thousands of palanquins, which they soon displaced.

The word 'rickshaw' comes from the Japanese *jin riki sha*, which means literally "man-powered vehicle". At least five people (including an out-of-work samurai and an American missionary) have been credited with inventing the rickshaw in Japan around 1870. But old prints from Europe show that a similar contraption was in use there two centuries earlier.

'Rickshaw', although originally given to the hand-pulled vehicles, is now universally applied to cycle rickshaws. This rickshaw is the result of advances achieved in the development of the bicycle in the 19th century. The early bicycles were crude vehicles propelled by kicking the ground. Then came the improved "penny-farthing" bicycles. Some of these were made into tricycles, and there were attempts to introduce them as rickshaws in both England and Asia. But they never caught on.

Each new technical development quickly led to another. By 1890, the bicycle had taken its modern shape, which meant that rickshaws too became easier to handle. Nevertheless, passenger rickshaws never achieved popularity in Europe and it took a long time for them to be established in Asia. It was not until the emergence of the motor vehicles that road surfaces were made smooth enough for cycle-rickshaws to operate efficiently.

Singapore was the first city to use cycle-rickshaws on a large scale. Calcutta's first cycle-rickshaws appeared around 1930, and they soon spread to other towns in the hinterland. The prototype had reached what is now Bangladesh in the mid-1930s, and made it to Dhaka by 1938.

percent are illiterate.

At a Dhaka seminar, an eminent speaker asked whether the rickshaw-pullers might not be the vanguard in the next socio-political revolution. They certainly have enough reason for wanting change: they are poor in the midst of plenty; they are exploited and abused by owners and passengers; and their livelihood is constantly threatened by the government's mindset to abolish rickshaws. Surely, if only the pullers could organise themselves and act together, they would be strong enough to change their circumstances for the better?

The rickshaw pullers, indeed, possess enormous strength in their numbers, and when this strength has been demonstrated in mass upsurges, an alarmed government has taken notice and acted swiftly to redress grievances. But most of the time, the rickshaw-pullers' movement has remained quiet, like a slumbering giant that is not easily aroused. One reason is the reluctance of union members to take action. The leaders, in particular, tend to be very cautious, saying that because of their economic condition the pullers are not able to take too much risk. Even when strikes are called, they fizzle out very quickly, one reason being the pullers' poverty and need to work.

The rickshaw pullers are also harder to organise than workers in other sectors, for they are scattered among hundreds of employers. They also work independently, which makes it harder to develop a sense of unity, which also explains the proliferation of unions of rickshaw pullers in Dhaka. No single union could claim more than a fraction of the workforce as its members.

Eighty percent of the people who work in the rickshaw industry are pullers, and their lives indeed are full of hardship and uncertainty. The principal aim, therefore, should be to find ways of helping them to help themselves. The pullers can best be helped, firstly, by a change of heart in the government, recognising that the three-wheeled pedalled vehicle has an important role in Bangladesh's transport system and economy. Secondly, a change in the pattern of ownership is essential, so that the pullers own their own rickshaws. Thirdly, a pension-cum-insurance scheme is required which could provide security for the pullers in sickness and in old age.

Too often, rickshaw pullers who are past their prime end up as beggars on the streets of Dhaka.

R. Gallagher is an engineer who has taught at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

Viva Rickshaw

A clean, green, healthy Dhaka will happen with regulation of the internal combustion engine, not by condemning pedal-power.

by Eddie Woo Guo

Let us get one thing straight. Rickshaws came first. Cars later. Cars kill. The rickshaw cannot. Rickshaws do not cause pollution. Cars do. Rickshaws take up less space.Cars more.

Unfortunately, where one stands depends on where one sits. The fact is that all the people in Dhaka who complain about the problem of rickshaws—the municipal authorities, the educated members of the public and typically, the foreigners—are invariably the ones who are seated behind tinted car windscreens, relaxing in air-conditioned comfort and, usually, hurrying to their self-important meetings. Thus, when stuck in a traffic jam caused by their own oversized vehicles, instead of seeing themselves as the cause of the problem, they blame the lowly rickshaw operators. Perhaps these self-centred folks should take a trip to Bangkok or Manila to experience the joys of cities where the car is king, but they might not be able to get back.

Now, if one were to pull out a gun and fired it straight down Mirpur Road in Dhaka, would it be possible to blame the imminent death of an innocent passerby on his or her stupidity and lack of education? Yet, analogously, that is the argument made by many drivers who hurl curses at the unfortunate rickshaw-wallah who gets in the way of their speed fix.

Rickshaws have been plying the roads of Bangladesh since the mid-1930s. Today, there are easily over a million of them, serving the needs of the non-motorised urban population. Yet, because a select powerful few have the means to construct killing machines and charge them along small roads and highways, the rest of the population, the vast majority, are expected to make way.

The educated and privileged prefer the exhilaration of cruising down Manik Mia Avenue at double-digit miles per hour. Their exasperation knows no bounds when their acceleration is abruptly interrupted by a slow-moving rickshaw van plodding along with an overweight load of furniture. "Well, excuse me, madam, sorry if I'm moving too slowly for you, but I've been malnourished since birth and had only one meal yesterday and also not having received any education, I'm afraid I do not know the traffic rules here. So sorry, madam. Here, let me lose my hard-won momentum, pull over into the rough here, despite the additional physical exertion required to regain my pace, to let you pass by in your beautiful white Toyota. Have a good day, madam. Me and my fellow lumpen proletarians must respect your road and your vehicle."

It is a given that the cities of Bangladesh will modernise. How they modernise, however, is up to its people and the city authorities. Other great cities have already come full circle and are trying hard to curtail the proliferation of pollution-emitting motor transportation and are encouraging ecologically sound alternatives. Envisage a not-too-futuristic Dhaka where the core segments of downtown are green zones, completely out of bounds to cars, with service vehicles confined to loading zones. Rickshaws, pedestrians and bicycles move around freely.

Those who travelled merrily through the city during the Non-Cooperation Movement will recall with pleasure the freshness and peacefulness of a Dhaka without noise and air pollution. Yes, the number of rickshaws will have to be regulated, but not as a trade-off for more cars. Manual modes of transportation can be concentrated in some areas and motor-transportation in others, with linking hubs where people transfer from buses or cars to rickshaws.

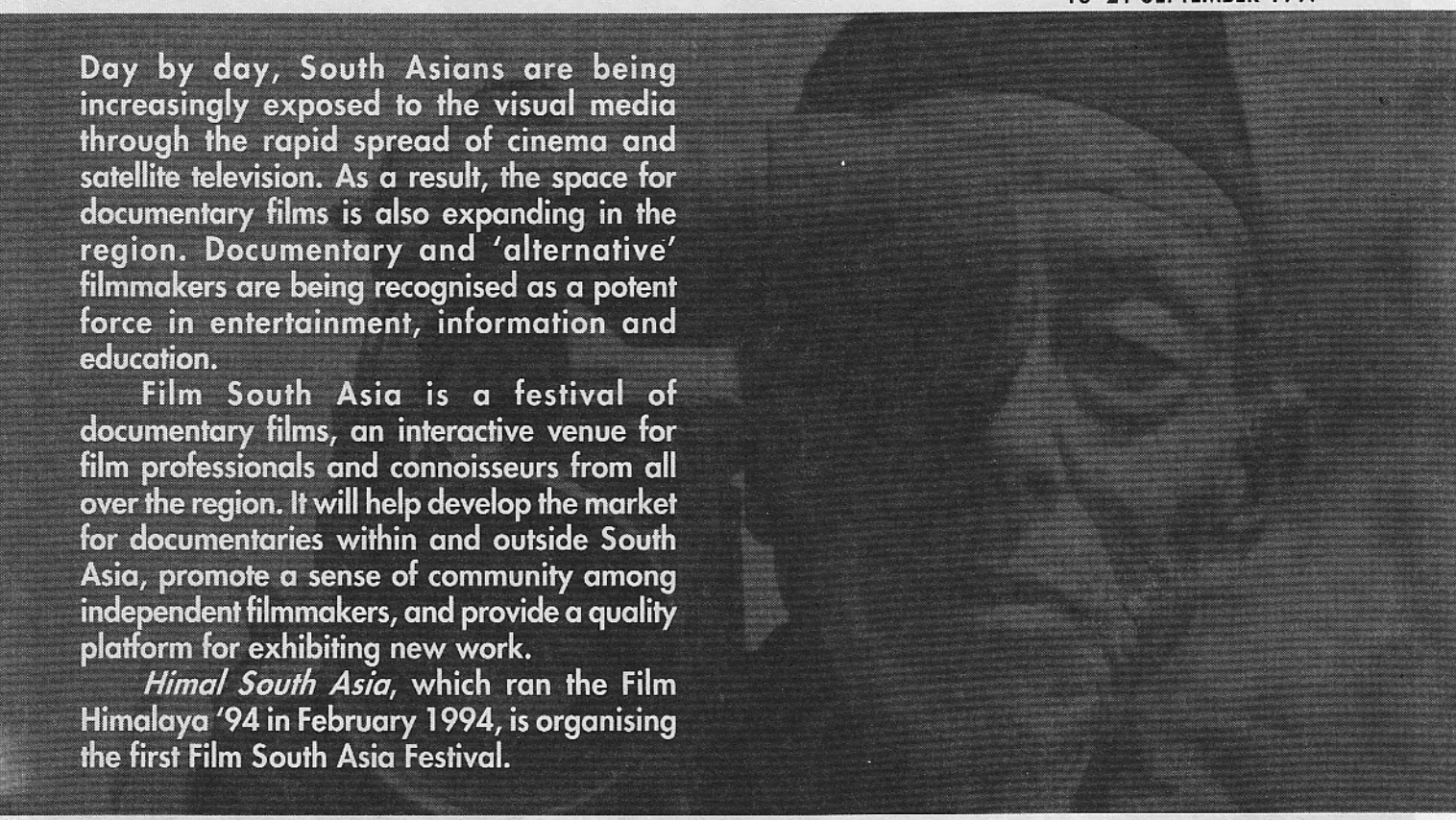
The first step towards a clean, green and healthy Dhaka lies not in the regulation of rickshaws (which is what everyone seems to be after), but in the restrictions on cars and other motorised vehicles, and planning for controlled road use. Only in this manner can "win-win" solutions be found to the traffic problem, rather than the "rich-win" solutions often suggested by many of those in the driver's seat.

E.W. Guo is with UNDP Bangladesh. A version of this article first appeared in the Daily Star *of Dhaka.*

FESTIVAL OF SOUTH ASIAN DOCUMENTARIES

FILM SOUTH ASIA '97

18–21 SEPTEMBER 1997



Day by day, South Asians are being increasingly exposed to the visual media through the rapid spread of cinema and satellite television. As a result, the space for documentary films is also expanding in the region. Documentary and 'alternative' filmmakers are being recognised as a potent force in entertainment, information and education.

Film South Asia is a festival of documentary films, an interactive venue for film professionals and connoisseurs from all over the region. It will help develop the market for documentaries within and outside South Asia, promote a sense of community among independent filmmakers, and provide a quality platform for exhibiting new work.

***Himal South Asia*, which ran the Film Himalaya '94 in February 1994, is organising the first Film South Asia Festival.**

WHY SEPTEMBER WHY KATHMANDU

Kathmandu has been chosen as the venue for the first Film South Asia festival because of its easy accessibility from most regional metropolises, Nepal's convenient visa procedures, affordability of quality hotels, and its growing importance as a centre for all kinds of South Asian activities.

Late September is a time of festivities in Kathmandu Valley, when the monsoon has just lifted and the harvest is being brought in. FSA '97 will be one more carnival to enliven the Valley life in early autumn 1997.

VENUE AND ORGANISATION

The Festival will be held for four days running at the Russian Cultural Centre in downtown Kathmandu. The Festival will open on the evening of 18 September, Thursday. Time will be set aside each evening for up to two discussion groups featuring directors, station owners, critics, etc. There will be maximum interaction among the participants through symposia, talks by special guests, and impromptu sessions. Pigeonholes for individual delegates and entries will help to maximise communication during the event.

FUTURE PLANS

The organisers of Film South Asia plan to hold the festival every two years. Future festivals can be organised in South Asian cities other than Kathmandu. The site for FSA 1999 shall be announced at the closing of FSA '97 following consultation with delegates.

Besides holding future festivals, the organisers are contemplating the setting up of a permanent secretariat which will act as a continuous go-between among South Asian makers of documentaries.

A South Asian Documentary Film Archive is also planned, and filmmakers and right-holders of the FSA '97 entries are requested to donate their films to the archive on a non-circulatory, non-broadcasting, non-rental basis. The Film Himalaya Archive, which grew out of generous contributions during the 1994 festival, will be telescoped into the planned South Asian Archive.

ENTRY FORM

Entry forms are being distributed.
Contact the Festival Office in Kathmandu for your copy.
Forms can also be accessed at http://www.atrav.com/film
Entry deadline 15 May 1997.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

Suman Basnet, Festival Director
GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal
Phone: 977-1-523845/522113, Fax: 521013, email: himal@himpc.mos.com.np

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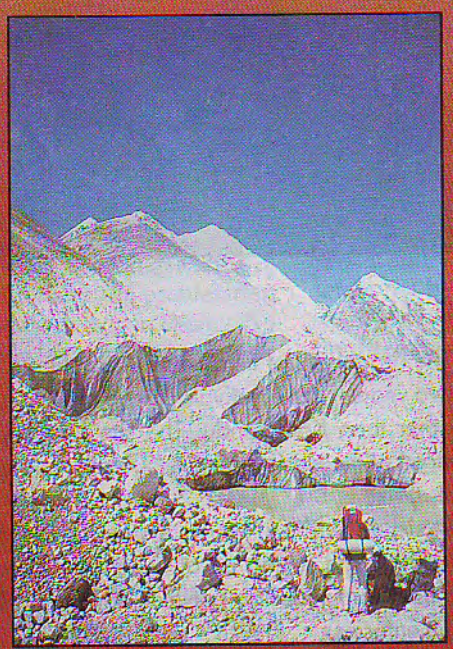

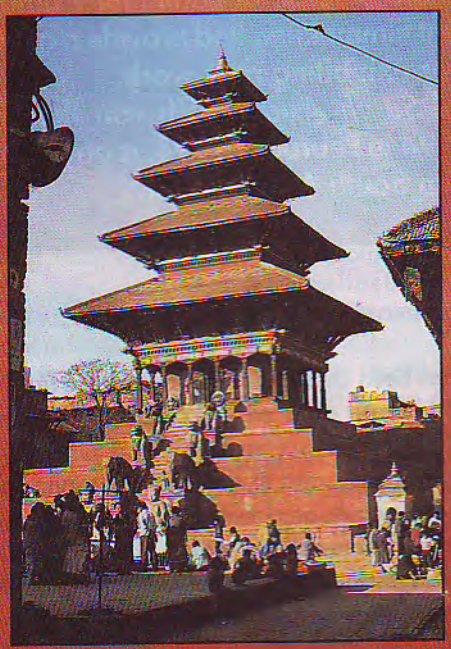

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Condemned to Repeat History

In every case, self-styled prophets of change in Pakistan have failed to deliver on their promises.

by Adil Najam

In the wee hours of the night of 5 November 1996, Pakistan's President Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari summarily dismissed the government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on charges of corruption and ineffective governance. In and of itself, the event was neither unexpected nor necessarily surprising (given the fate of earlier custodians of the prime minister's mantle in Pakistan).

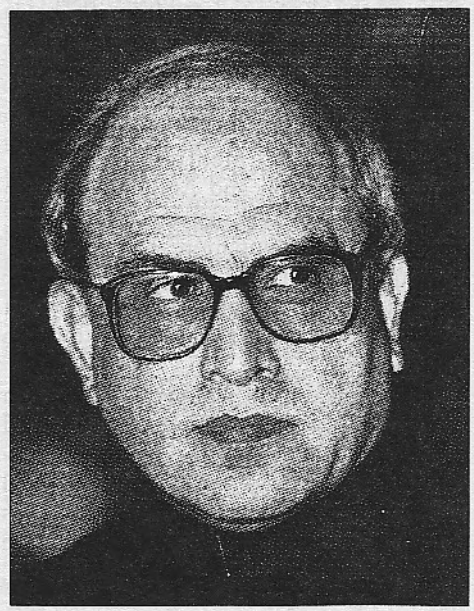
For many Pakistanis, this brought back memories of the earlier power struggle between Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Nawaz Sharif; or, for that matter, between Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Benazir Bhutto. According to Ms Bhutto, an equally relevant precedent was the struggle between General Zia-ul Haq and her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (and, proving once again that ironies do indeed multiply, let us not forget that Zia-ul Haq was chosen by Z.A. Bhutto to become the Chief of Army Staff primarily because he was considered "utterly reliable"—exactly the criterion applied by Ms Bhutto in selecting Farooq Leghari for the presidency).

Others, who tend to take a longer view of things and whose sense of history is not tainted by the partial accounts of events contained in 'official' textbooks, were reminded of further precedents—Mohammad Ali Bogra and Ghulam Mohammad; Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Iskandar Mirza; Malik Feroze Khan Noon and General Ayub Khan *(see table)*. My own thoughts, however, were transported even further back into history to the power struggle for the Moghul throne between Aurangzeb Alamgir and his elder brother Dara Shikoh.

Granted that Benazir Bhutto is no Dara Shikoh, nor Farooq Leghari an Aurangzeb Alamgir. But historical exactitude is not the point—in taking a more historical view of events, a distinct continuum can be traced back, at the very least to Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh, but probably much further back still. This continuum is worth pondering over, for it is likely to tell us something important about us modern-day Pakistanis and our polity. At a minimum, it illustrates how the corrupting influence of power can turn the closest of allies against each other—son against father, brother against brother, protege against mentor. This, however, is also not the point. If it were, we could easily have illustrated it with the fate of Abel at the hands of Cain.

The reasons for tracing this continuum are more subtle, and may be more profound from the perspective of building a stable political system in Pakistan. They relate to the use of self-proclaimed moral rectitude as a political tool and the legitimacy that such rectitude has come to acquire as an acceptable reason to overturn the system at will. This may have been acceptable if those usurping the system in the name of a superior moral fibre had then set out to reform the system so that the essential purpose of their 'crusade' was fulfilled. This, however, has not happened—it did not happen with Aurangzeb; it certainly did not happen with Ghulam Mohammad, Ayub Khan, Zia-ul Haq, or Ghulam Ishaq Khan; and it seems all but unlikely that it will happen with Farooq Leghari.

The test of the success of the crusades that these self-styled reformers embarked upon does not lie in whether the targets of their wrath were indeed morally assailable, corrupt, ineffective, or incompetent. The real test of their success would lie in whether they were able to eventually create a better system by doing what they did—which, in each case, was essentially to subvert the system either by breaking the law or by trampling upon the established norms of behaviour. While Farooq Leghari's case may still be too close to call, in every other case



Aurangzeb *(left)* and Leghari

on this list, the self-styled prophets of change failed to deliver the changes they promised.

Real Tragedies

The real tragedy of the Aurangzeb-Dara Shikoh episode is not simply the cruelty that Aurangzeb demonstrated towards his father and brothers, nor that he stole from Dara a throne that rightfully belonged to Dara. The real tragedy is that, despite doing all this, he failed to do the things on whose basis he had originally justified his actions. In the final analysis, his treatment of his father and brother(s) made the empire no more egalitarian, no more just, and no more longer-lasting than it otherwise would have been. Arguably, Aurangzeb only created the conditions for the eventual dismemberment of the empire.

Similarly, the real tragedy of the musical chairs that has been played out for the prime minister's office in Pakistan over the last 50 years is not simply that we, as a nation, have developed a tendency to elect one government more corrupt, more ineffective, more arrogant, and more ineffectual than the preceding. The real tragedy is that despite all the midnight operations, despite all the martial laws, despite the culture of ad hocism, despite the parade of caretaker prime ministers, and despite having performed so many major surgeries on the Constitution—we are no closer to creating a stable political order than we were at the moment of Independence. Some would say that we are actually more distant from that goal today than in 1947.

We are reminded that nations that do not learn from their history are condemned to repeat it. By extension, one might add that those which actually misrepresent their history tend to fare even worse; they never even get the chance to learn from it! That is particularly true of Pakistan where most of the names of our prime ministers, much less their fate, have been systematically and consciously wiped out from the national historical memory; mentions of Bogra, Chundrigar, Noon and Amin are hard to find. History books, especially academic history books, are no more than 'feel good' inspirational stories of past glories—real or imagined—rather than as an inventory of lessons to be learnt from the past to guide our future.

The 'making' of a history that one can justifiably be proud of cannot be substituted with the rewriting of history to suit our self-serving delusionary goals. The first, and minimum, step to learning from history has to be to acknowledge it. Considering the way Pakistan has treated its own history, history has treated Pakistan amazingly graciously. This, however, cannot last forever.

Farooq Leghari, therefore, has before him an entire lineage of predecessors—from Aurangzeb Alamgir to Ghulam Ishaq Khan—who failed in the test of history. It is now his turn to stand the same test. History will pass judgment on him, not on the basis of whether his charges against the Benazir government turn out to be true—the overwhelming consensus seems to be that they are largely correct. History will pass a judgment on Farooq Leghari on the basis of whether he is able to set in place a suite of systemic changes that will eventually make it unnecessary for his successors to take the steps in the middle of dark nights that he was compelled to take. If he were to fail this test, it would certainly be unfortunate for him; much more than that, it would be unfortunate for Pakistan.

A Fraternity of the Dispossessed

Becoming the Prime Minister of Pakistan is not necessarily the smartest of career moves. The ultimate fate on none of Pakistan's Prime Ministers is exactly enviable.

* Khan Liaquat Ali Khan (15 August 1947 to 16 October 1951). Assassinated.
* Khawaja Nazimuddin (17 October 1951 to 17 April 1953). Dismissed by President Malik Ghulam Mohammad when he refused to resign.
* Mohammad Ali Bogra (17 April 1953 to 11 August 1955). Replaced when President Ghulam Mohammad dissolved 1954 Constituent Assembly.
* Chaudhry Mohammad Ali (11 August 1955 to 12 September 1956). Resigned after losing majority.
* Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy (12 September 1956 to 18 October 1957). Forced to resign by President Iskandar Mirza.
* I.I. Chundrigar (18 October 1957 to 16 December 1957). Removed when Republican Party withdrew support.
* Malik Feroze Khan Noon (18 December 1957 to 7 October 1958). Removed by General Mohammad Ayub Khan when he declared martial law.
* Noorul Amin (7 December 1971 to 20 December 1971). Removed after fall of Dhaka; President Mohammad Yahya Khan stepped down same day.
* Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (14 August 1973 to 5 July 1977). Deposed and subsequently executed by Gen Mohammad Zia-ul Haq.
* Mohammad Khan Junejo (23 March 1985 to 29 May 1988). Dismissed by President Mohammad Zia-ul Haq.
* Benazir Bhutto (2 December 1988 to 6 August 1990). Dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan on corruption charges.
* Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi (6 August 1990 to 6 November 1990). Appointed caretaker Prime Minister to supervise polls.
* Mohammad Nawaz Sharif (6 November 1990 to 18 April 1993). Dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan.
* Balkh Sher Mazari (18 April 1993 to 17 May 1993). Appointed caretaker Prime Minister to supervise polls.
* Mohammad Nawaz Sharif (17 May 1993 to 17 July 1993). Restored by Supreme Court then dismissed again by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan.
* Moeen Qureshi (17 July 1993 to 28 October 1993). Appointed caretaker Prime Minister to supervise polls.
* Benazir Bhutto (28 October 1993 to 5 November 1996). Dismissed by President Farooq Ahmad Khan Leghari.
* Malik Mairaj Khalid. (5 November 1996 to -). The jury still out.

A. Najam, from Pakistan, is currently at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is also affiliated with the Programme on Negotiation at the Harvard Law School.

Steel Frame of India *as* Steel Fetters on Democracy

The Indian Administrative Service remains an imperial institution which has failed to endear itself to the people. It is not indispensable.

by ***Raja Shankar***

A momentous shift has been taking place in India these past few years, with a protected, state-controlled economy relinquishing the stage to globalisation and a market-based system. The state has been shedding many of its traditional responsibilities, to be taken over by the private sector and civil society groups such as NGOs and voluntary organisations. And with the centralised decision-making discredited, there is a growing demand for the devolution of powers and resources to elected bodies at local levels.

All these wrenching changes notwithstanding, there is an extreme reluctance when it comes to modifying the functioning of the Indian bureaucracy. It is taken as a matter of faith that the existing mechanisms of governance, as epitomised by the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), will by themselves, and willingly, adapt to the changing scenario. This is far from assured, however, as will be clear from a study of the genesis of the Indian bureaucratic services, its structure, and the dynamics of its functioning since 1947.

The Indian Civil Service, the precursor to the Indian Administrative Service, was instituted by the British to facilitate their rule over the Indian population. The job of the ICS was to administer the country, collect revenue, maintain law and order, and assist the colonial rulers in the exploitation of India's resources. The ICS was to maintain the ruler-subject relationship—an elite, western-educated bureaucracy exercising control over the illiterate, ignorant Indian natives—ostensibly for their benefit, in reality for their exploitation.

Even when the British started conceding to demands for self-rule through the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 and the Government of India Act of 1935, the civil services were not made accountable to the elected representatives. They continued to be answerable to the central imperial authority in Delhi. As with many other colonial institutions and practices, after Independence, India maintained the ICS almost without alteration for the change in its nomenclature was only symbolic, not structural.

Ill-Fitting Democracy

The continuation of the ICS, albeit as the IAS, was perhaps understandable in the early years after Independence. It could be argued that the new rulers were inexperienced in the art of administration and hence needed the help of time-tested bureaucrats. In fact, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, the first Home Minister, did call the IAS the "steel frame of India".

Over the years, however, instead of gradually implanting more democratic elements into this frame, the character of the IAS was not only maintained, but also allowed to expand and assume truly all-encompassing responsibilities. Today, the IAS remains an imperious institution, having done nothing to endear itself to the people. Neither has it been able to prove its indispensability. In fact, there is a growing perception that the IAS, in its present form, has outlived its purpose.

But why is the IAS incongruous in a democracy? How are the dynamics of its functioning detrimental to the interests of the people? There is more than one explanation.

Inappropriate Decision-Making. The IAS system is based on the centralised concept where planning and development decisions are taken at the top-most levels. And given the elitist composition of the IAS cadre, the administrators are generally unfamiliar with the complex ground realities of a vast country with its diverse peoples. It is little surprise that the IAS hierarchy is insensitive to the needs, constraints and aspirations of local populations. Furthermore, decisions taken at the top have to percolate down through various levels of government to reach the grassroots. As Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Varun Sahni puts it, "By the time a state directive is transmitted from the commanding heights down the intermediate levels of the state to the trenches, it has either metamorphosed beyond recognition, or else has been transmogrified, with only the external shell remaining intact."

This flow of decisions from the top is also accompanied by the flow of resources. In this process, huge frictional losses occur as the money filters through various levels of the bureaucracy, encouraging both corruption and wasteful expenditure. As pointed out by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi himself, only 16 paise out of every rupee reaches the actual beneficiaries, and one of the reasons has to do with the structure of bureaucracy.

At the same time, the bureaucrats are overburdened with work, which affects the quality of their decisions. Considering the many responsibilities they have, it is a marvel that anything gets completed at all. This overload is especially evident in the case of the District Collector, who has more responsibilities than can possibly be borne by one person. It falls upon the District Collector to maintain law and order, look after revenue functions, attend the courts, arrange for VIP security, manage development work, and at the same time take care of the numerous petty issues that affect the people of his district. Even the most conscientious officer would find it impossible to handle all the duties that are his by definition.

Lack of accountability. There is little opportunity for transparency in the way the IAS bureaucracy functions. In addition, there has been a proliferation of departments with conflicting jurisdictions and a multiplicity of authority. Nobody knows who is responsible for what. Files have to travel through numerous tables before decisions are made. In this confusion, it is easy to evade respon-

sibility. Strong vested interests such as big business houses and rich farmers' groups find it easy to manipulate the system for their own benefit. Their potential for mischief is great since everything in the country is centralised and because the state is active in areas that should normally have been reserved for private enterprise. While the increased interaction between the citizens and the bureaucracy has bred corruption, the omnipresence of bureaucratic machinery has suppressed the initiative-taking ability of the people.

Communication Gap. The officers of the erstwhile ICS were always the sahibs, the *burra babus* (big bosses). Their successors today are the *mai baps* (overlords). A symbolic manifestation of this are the sequestered residential arrangements for the bureaucrats. The British had created areas known as the civil lines, where the administrators used to live away from the people. This practice has continued till today with the District Collector and other bureaucrats.

It is no wonder that the people hesitate to approach the bureaucracy, whom they have historically associated with exploitative government. It is also small wonder then that the bureaucracy has not been able to communicate properly with the people. The IAS officer is not able to get accurate information from the public, nor is he able to develop full communication with the population regarding development work to be carried out on its behalf.

Insecurity of Tenure. There are the occasional officers with full commitment to serve the people, but they tend to be pre-empted by the system. IAS officers are not protected from persecution by their political bosses. They have to kow-tow to the dictates of these masters even if that means working against the interests of the people. Officers who protest are transferred or otherwise find their careers in free fall. This has made the IAS servile to the politicians. (This leads to handsome displays of servility, as when after the general elections last year the secretaries of the various ministries were photographed bowing obsequiously to the incoming ministers and greeting them with bouquets.)

Incompatibility with Changing Scenario. The IAS system was not fashioned to cope with the kind of political, social and economic transformations taking place in India today. In the political sphere, although Panchayati Raj (elected local governance) has been instituted through the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, the District Collector and the rest of the local bureaucracy continue to be accountable to the governments in the state capitals. Elected representatives find their initiatives thwarted by an uncooperative bureaucracy through which they have to get their proposals implemented. In this way, the bureaucracy helps the state government to retain an unhealthy control over the local governments.

Similarly, the existing structure of the IAS is out of step with the changing economic context. Even as the state sheds many of its previous responsibilities, especially in the public sector, the continuing relevance of the bureaucracy's given structure has not been examined. The method of appointments are yet to be looked into. Many of the responsibilities in today's altered conditions urgently need specialists, such as economists, planners, engineers, managers and natural resource professionals. But an elite corps which was selected fully 30 years ago through a college-type examination effectively relegates to itself all top appointments. As a result, the vast country continues to suffer from misplaced rulers, and mediocrity.

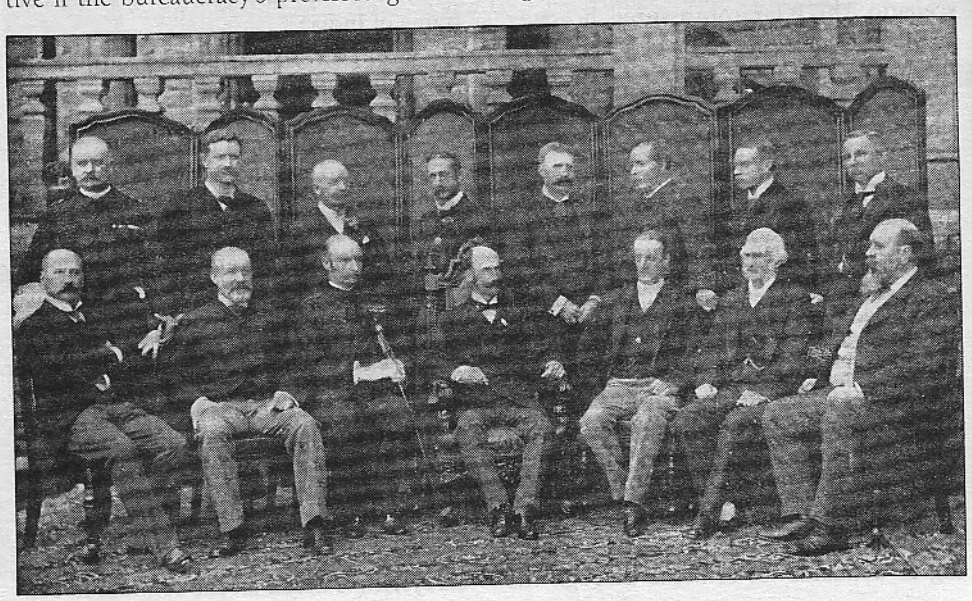
Structural Adjustment

Transformation the IAS structure is imperative if the bureaucracy's professed goal of serving the people is to be at all fulfilled. The restructuring should go deep, and the overhauling must start at the top.

Top appointments. An IAS administrator should be on test at every job and not be given charge simply on the basis of tenureship. In order to help selection of professionals and provide protection against political harassment, high-level administrative and technical appointments, in all governments from local to central, should be through open selection on five-yearly contracts. This is nothing new, and is already being followed by the Government of India in the public sector, with satisfactory results. The awarding, as well as termination or non-extension of the contract, should be through an autonomous selection process or directly by the head of government with approval of a multi-party committee of the legislature.

Secretaries to government. After independence, India retained secretaries to act as go-betweens between the decision-makers and the departmental heads in each ministry. This, too, may have been justified initially due to the inexperience of the political leadership. But 50 years after independence, Indian politicians do not need intermediaries or mechanisms other than to transfer accountability for their own non-performance.

In all departments, the heads should be required to pick up the work presently being done by the secretaries. Only in special circumstances where the logistics require should a coordinating secretary be appointed. In both cases, the appointment should be through open selection or nomination by the head of government (as was done in the case of Sam Pitroda when he was appointed to head the CDOT organisation by Rajiv Gandhi. All appoint-



Forebears of today's *maibaps*. The Government of India in 1890 was run by Lord Lansdowne's Council and secretaries.

ments should, however, be approved by a multiparty committee of the elected body.

This practice of appointment should be followed all the way through the state, district and local governments. Most administrative secretaries to government along with their retinue of special, additional, joint, deputy and under secretaries, will then become redundant. The mammoth-sized central and state secretariats of today are a liability to efficient decision-making. They can and should be largely dispensed with.

Separate services for each government. In a democracy, a hierarchy of governments at the neighbourhood, local, district, state and central levels has to be created, with each accountable to the people it serves. The state bureaucracy has, therefore, necessarily to be structured into separate local services, each accountable to the government it serves.

The all-India services which has been continued since British times violates this key principle of responsible rule. For example, IAS officers are appointed as municipal commissioners with independent powers to neutralise the elected mayors and impose state control. The continuation of this practice today and its extension to the panchayats is a violation of the letter and the spirit of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments.

Other central and state services also suffer from similar infirmities. To take just one example, one reason for illiteracy in villages, despite the large number of schools given in the official statistics, is the lack of administrative services and cadres responsible to local governments. This makes it easy for school teachers to get transferred to urban areas as soon as they are appointed to a village school, or to simply draw salaries without showing up at their place of appointment. An experiment started in Gujarat will be worth watching, for the state is presently engaged in providing panchayat level cadres in their Panchayati Raj legislation.

The state bureaucracy is, of course, likely to resist reassignment under local government, claiming protection under Article 311 of the Constitution (which protects civil servants against dismissal except after an inquiry). But despite beliefs otherwise, the fact of the matter is that government service provides 'regular', and not 'permanent', appointment. Once the principles of restructuring are instituted, state governments should abolish all excess posts, and allow a reasonable period for the personnel thus rendered surplus to get absorbed into local government. Those who are not appointed through open selection by the various local governments can be retained on contract on humanitarian grounds, and allowed to work, for example, with NGOs to whom projects are assigned by the government.

Transparent legislation. There is also a great need for a transparency law, which will provide the people with the right to information. This will act as a check on arbitrary government functioning and also ensure accountability of the administrators to the people.

The above changes cannot by themselves solve all the problems with the governance of India. And, without doubt, the degeneration of the Indian bureaucracy, and especially the IAS, is part of the overall downturn of the national polity. The restructuring of the bureaucracy will have to be carried out as part of an overall reform of the whole political system but it need not wait. And until such a time that it happens, the servants of the people will continue to be their masters.

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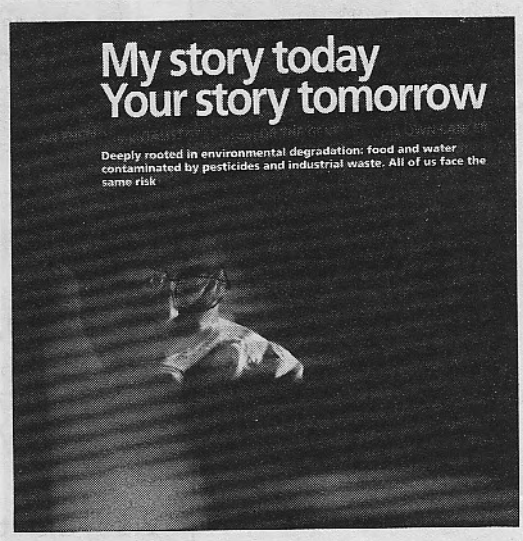
The Lanka Guardian, still as good as ever. But why have they gone and put a **new masthead** on it? I still like the font on 'Guardian', which speaks for the sober and consistent questioning that the paper has done over the two decades of its existence. But what of 'Lanka'? Looks, to me, like blocks of cheddar cheese gnawed through by Lankan rodents.

So, *Asiaweek* has gone ahead and done the exercise for the rest of us, judged the **Best Cities in Asia**, choosing 40 "most-livable" places. South Asia does not make the top ten, but ranked 14th is Islamabad, city of 350,000 with no night-life and a strait-laced bureaucratic-diplomatic elite. Next you have Bangalore at 19th, although its quality of life is dipping by the hour. Then comes Kathmandu, ranked 23rd, which is hard to believe, especially during the monsoon months of garbage pileup and winters of temperature inversion. Bombay, Colombo and Dhaka are all ranked 26th, Delhi and Karachi 29th, and Chittagong 31st. All I can say is, those *Asiaweek* pollsters must know what they are doing, but something does not sound right when dull and dreary desert that is Islamabad is the best in South Asia and the cultural haven of Calcutta does not make the grade.

In these columns the last time around, I had referred to ***Hinduism Today***, a journal brought out from an ashram in Hawaii. The 29 November issue of *Frontline* paints a very unflattering picture of the magazine's publisher, a 69-year-old US-born convert to Hinduism named Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. The article, written by the Madras-based magazine's editor N. Ram, is about how the swamy, head of the Saiva Siddhanta Church, much given to spouting "New Age Hindu mumbo jumbo", conspired to acquire a treasure trove of M.K.Gandhi's personal papers and have them illegally auctioned in London. The profit was to have gone to building a massive temple, built completely of white granite, in Hawaii.

The Far Eastern Economic Review, too, has gone for a **drastic revamp** of its cover, although thankfully the insides do not depart too much from the earlier format. Call me a status-quoist, a pushover for tradition, but I do not like this new cover either. The message I read in it is the editors deciding to join the Americanesque flow, of sacrificing depth for more user-friendliness. And whoever gave them the idea that people say "Review" when they mean F-E-E-R? There was always the thrill in these fast-paced times of forcing people at the newsstand to ask for title in full, or to say, "I read it in the Far Eastern Economic Review.". In fact, it was a real mark of success that the *FEER* was never reduced to a one-word cypher, but now the editors themselves have fallen for it. They want to go to the mass, so why am I complaining?

In 1994, journalist/environmentalist **Anil Agarwal** was stricken with cancer which quickly hit his eyes and nervous system.



Most had given up hope that this dynamic activist would be around for long, but Mr Agarwal is very much here, and tells his story in the 30 November issue of *Down to Earth*, the fortnightly which he edits. The cover article is titled "My Story Today, Your Story Tomorrow" and it is the narration of how Mr Agarwal faced the prospect of "blindness, neurological disorders and death". It takes the reader through his submission to strong doses of medication, a year of "blissful remission" in 1995, the return of the cancer cells, and a bone marrow transplant in mid-1996 which sees Mr Agarwal, hopefully, "rid of the disease". The larger story is of how Mr Agarwal's cancer, like most others, is deeply rooted in the environmental degradation and toxic contamination of the Indian landscape. "The elite of our nation have failed to internalise the ecological principle that every poison we put into the environment comes right back to us in our air, water and food." A good article written, obviously, with feeling.

The editor of Himal South Asia has passed on to me the following letter from the **All Nepal Journalist Association** (Central Office), which I reproduce without prejudice nor comment. "Dear Sir: I, President of the Nepal Journalist Association, request you to kindly provide me a copy of the Himal, South Asia, on a complimentary basis." It is signed by the President Hari Gopal Pradhan, and the address says in parentheses, "Nepal—Everest Country." I'll say.

Grassroots Options is a new magazine put out by some young journalists of the Indian Northeast, meant in the words of the editor Sanat K. Chakraborty of Shillong, "to redefine the major concerns and issues that affect the 35 million people" who live in the region. Says Mr Chakraborty, "We hope to tackle issues which go much deeper than insurgency and drug addiction, which is all that the home and overseas media seem to be interested in." The journal's December issue carries articles on communal identity, a major concern in the Northeast. Writers discuss the "proliferation of tribal identities" and the resulting challenge of "political accommodation", and "the rise of the lesser known tribes". Among other write-ups, an economist says Northeast leaders lack lobbying skills, another which asks

why Mizos are not entrepreneurial, and there is a report on how Bangladeshi businessmen are eyeing the Northeastern market. All in all, a journal that helps study the wrinkles of the Northeast, which vanish in the long view from Delhi or Calcutta.

A faxed press release of the **World Elephant Polo Association**, which announced the results of the World Elephant Polo Championships held in the Chitwan jungle in early December (with the Nepal National Parks team making a clean sweep against assorted others like the Tiger Tops Tuskers, International Mercenaries, Screwy Tuskers, and Loon's Cavalry), also provided WEPA Committee lineup. The President of the India Chapter is apparently His Highness Bhawani Singh, Maharaj of Jaipur. His pedigree certainly allows the gentleman to play polo, but this little bird keeps telling me insistently that the Indian government banned titles of erstwhile princelings, way back then. Or does that stricture only apply to Indian territory? The field on which the WEPA championships was held is, after all, in Nepal.

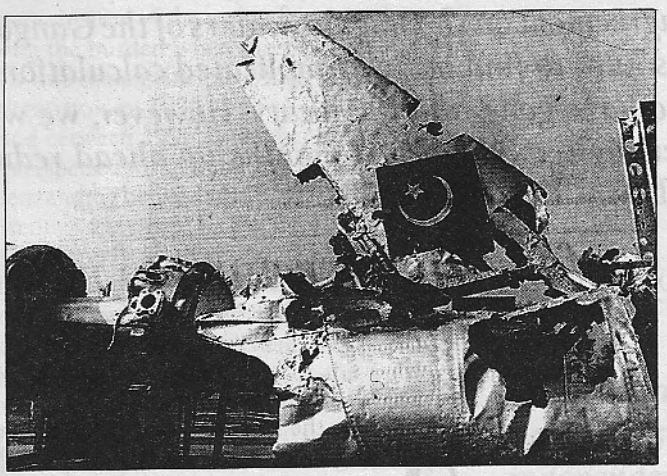
Give credit, therefore, to *Asiaweek's* editors for having carried a lengthy "**Inside Story**" on the Lhotshampa refugee situation by their Kathmandu-based contributor Thomas Laird. Give thanks, also, to the media-phobic Thimphu rulers for having let Mr Laird visit Bhutan, for this is a privilege they extend only to journalists with well-trumpted sympathies for the Drukpa establishment. Mr Laird's presentation is low on polemics. He presents the information and lets the reader decide whether it is the Bhutanese rulers who are at fault in ridding their country of a seventh of its population or whether their action was meant to forestall a Lhotshampa takeover of Druk Yul.

The **Lhotshampa refugees** out of Bhutan have always been told by well-meaning do-gooders that they do something to raise their profile. Well, they have, and a hell of a lot of good it is doing them! For most of 1996, there has been high drama on the Duars, as refugee peace-marchers try to enter Bhutan. They are accosted by Bhutanese police at the border, manhandled by Indian security forces, jailed, pushed back into Nepal, and so on. Now that they are making some waves, are they getting any coverage? No, sir. Forget the Delhi media, even the Calcutta papers are silent. There is definitely an international media conspiracy of silence on the Lhotshampa refugees and not one major South Asia newspaper/magazine editor need feel guilt-free on this matter.

Still on the Lhotshampa, rarely does the voice from the Lhotshampa refugee camps penetrate the **protective media cover** that Thimphu receives. I would therefore like to reproduce part of an email epistle sent around on Christmas Eve by a Jesuit educator who is finishing his tenure in the camps.

...Very many thanks for your involvement with the 91,000 Bhutanese refugees in the seven camps in east Nepal, especially for the 33,500 students who started 1996 in the camp schools, and the c. 900 staff (incl. c. 750 teachers) almost all of them refugees themselves, and very few of them trained teachers. I hope you will keep your interest in these 'unknown' refugees who never hit the newspaper headlines and for whom justice remains elusive, the interests of the 'powers that be' being elsewhere. The government of Bhutan says that there is no room for these people in their inn (country of Bhutan). The government of Nepal has given them temporary (now six years!) lodging.

The carcass of a downed **Pakistani fighter jet** was trotted out in New Delhi on the occasion of Vijay Divas, and the photogenic display got wide coverage in India. I wonder what impact this particular image would carry across the Wagah border at a time when warmongering should be passe.

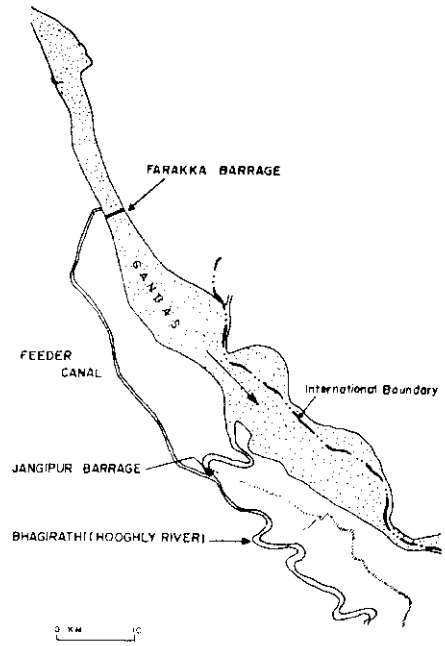


The Asian Age's coverage was especially interesting. On one side was the picture of the Pakistani Sabre. On the flip side of the same picture was one in which Foreign Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was enjoying an interlude with Pakistani college girls.

Haven't had access to the Pakistani media this month, but as far as the rest of South Asia is concerned, Pakistani Nobel Laureate and physicist **Abdus Salam** passed away almost without a trace.

-Chhetria Patrakar

Who's Afraid of Farakka's Accord?



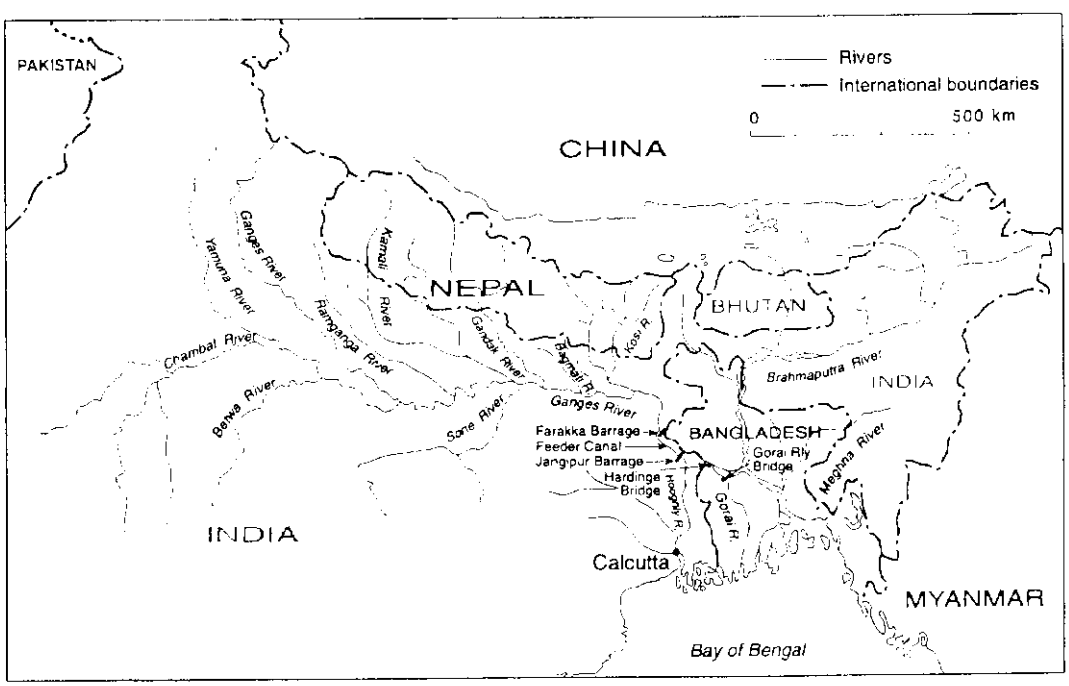
Who 'won' and who 'lost' in December's Indo-Bangla agreement on sharing the waters of the Ganga? The answer is hard to find in the complicated calculations that appear to have gone into the treaty. However, we will know soon enough, as the driest months up ahead reduce the river's flow at Farakka's sluices.

by Ajaya Dixit and Monirul Qader Mirza

At last, the ice on the Ganga has melted. India and Bangladesh seem to have resolved the highly sensitive political problem of sharing the waters of the Ganga in its lower reaches. On 12 December, the two countries signed a 30-year water-sharing treaty, taking advantage of new political equations in both New Delhi and Dhaka. In India, the United Front coalition came to power with the dovish I.K. Gujral as Foreign Minister, and in Bangladesh the purportedly "India-leaning" Awami League of Sheikh Hasina Wajed returned to govern after 21 years in the wilderness. The new treaty was the outcome of six months of shuttle diplomacy between Dhaka, New Delhi *and* Calcutta.

In the main, agreement was possible because of India's backtracking on its insistence on the "transit for water" trade-off *(see accompanying story)*. Bangladesh, meanwhile, proved capable of taking swift diplomatic advantage of the "Gujral Doctrine", in which India says it does not demand reciprocity on dealings with its smaller neighbours. Dhaka was in a hurry because it realised very well that the United Front government survives on borrowed time, at the convenience of the Congress party.

A final breakthrough, in which Chief Minister Jyoti Basu of West Bengal seems to have played a central role, was achieved at the penultimate moment when Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina arrived in New Delhi on 10 December for the signing. Thus ended a protracted and often-acrimonious dialogue between the two countries, spanning almost two and half decades. The period saw the expiration of one five-year agreement and several short-term understandings.



On both sides of the Indo-Bangla border, reaction to the December accord has ranged from the euphoric to the condemnatory. Much of this response to the treaty was, of course, nothing more than obligatory political reaction. Such is the complexity of the water-sharing formulae in the treaty that the nay-sayers do not seem to know on what grounds to criticise the document. On the other hand, even the euphoric supporters can do nothing more than point to the treaty's very signing as a positive exercise. And because

it is so hard to say at the moment who has gained and who has not, each side was able to claim advantage for itself.

The verdict on who 'won' and who 'lost' may only be possible after careful study of the treaty document and the assumptions made therein regarding the volume of water flow during the lean season. All in all, the definitive word may not be out on the December accord until the upcoming dry season period of minimal flow, and then in the following years.

Unilateral Action

Construction of the Farakka barrage on the Ganga was started in 1966, and was nearing completion when Bangladesh became independent with Indian military support in 1971. While differences over dividing the Ganga's flow had already surfaced back in 1947, the reality of the barrage's completion by India brought matters to a head. There was no evading discussion with Dhaka on riparian rights and allocations.

The Farakka project as built consisted of a 2245 m long barrage across the Ganga's main channel, just above where it becomes a border river. A feeder canal which is 38 km long, 150 m wide, and 6 m deep, was to take a maximum of 40,000 cusecs (cubic feet per second) of the Ganga's flow into the Bhagirathi, a distributary of the great river. The rationale for Farakka was to "flush" the Bhagirathi (which later becomes the Hooghly) of silt so as to make Calcutta port more efficient, which was the reason for Chief Minister Basu's being part of the negotiations.

Four years after Bangladeshi independence, in 1975, New Delhi sought Dhaka's agreement to do a test run of the feeder canal. With New Delhi presenting the barrage as a *fait accompli*, the Awami League government was forced to regard it as a political reality. It could not object, if only to show gratitude for India's role in the support for independence. For India, unilateral appropriation of water without Dhaka's concurrence would have been bad public relations. At the same time, it would have provided a precedent for Nepal or Bhutan to follow as upper-riparian states vis-a-vis India itself. So, New Delhi was constrained to make a try at reaching agreement on drawing water from the Ganga.

The agreement of 1975 was officially valid only for a test period of 41 days, signed as it was to allow the commissioning of the barrage. The agreement allowed India to divert 11,000 cusecs flow into the feeder canal in April and 16,000 cusecs in May of 1975, and no follow-up action was taken when the test run ended on 31 May 1975. Incredibly, however, the diversion of waters continued in the absence of further understanding.

The bilateral bonhomie achieved at independence evaporated soon enough as each country set about the business of asserting its national right to a limited physical resource. Infuriated by what it called "unilateral withdrawal" by upstream India, Dhaka internationalised the issue by taking it to the United Nations in 1976. While that initiative proved futile, the prospects improved in 1977 when Indira Gandhi was voted out of power and the Janata Party briefly held the reins. The accord signed the same year was meant for five years and covered the annual lean season between 1 January and 31 May. It specified the shares of both countries on a 10-day schedule. On the leanest ten-day period of April, India was to get 20,500 cusecs and Bangladesh 34,500 cusecs. The agreement expired in November 1982.

The 1977 agreement initially contained a "guarantee clause" which stated that if the Ganga's flow at Farakka came down to such a level that the share of Bangladesh is lower than the 80 percent of the quantum pledged to it, then India would be obliged to release enough water to make up that 80 percent share. It seems Indira Gandhi, who had by then come back to power, disliked such a commitment, and Gen Ershad, who was by then ruling in Dhaka, agreed to carry out a surgical operation on the 1977 agreement. Instead of the earlier formula, the principle of sharing the burden when the river ran low was adopted. (It is this same principle which seems to have guided the negotiators in 1996.)

The period between 1996 December and 1982 November was interspersed with several water-sharing memoranda of understanding between the two countries. Many rounds of meetings were held to discuss the augmentation of the lean season flow at Farakka, the need for joint studies, and the importance of exchanging data. These meetings could achieve little more than ad hoc short-term arrangements, and there was stalemate on all matters related to permanent measures. One of the points of disagreement was on augmenting the amount of water in the Ganga, with Bangladesh insisting on upstream reservoir projects, including in Nepal, while the Indian proposal was to transfer some of the Brahmaputra's flow through a canal to the Farakka barrage.

Each side rejected the other's suggestion. New Delhi felt that the "regulated waters" from any upstream storage should be reserved for its own future requirements in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. Dhaka believed that a canal from the Brahmaputra (Jamuna in Bangladesh) to the Ganga would exact all kinds of unacceptable social, technical, economic, political, ecological and strategic fallout.

In the absence of a negotiated long-term settlement, India continued to divert the Ganga waters into the Bhagirathi on the basis of the ad hoc arrangements. During the dry season, the river's flow at downstream Hardinge Bridge across the border dropped to a fraction of its earlier volume. The mighty Padma—the main channel of the Ganga—became almost fordable during the winter months.

The reduction of flow into the main channel delivered a many-sided blow to the region downstream from Farakka: it lowered groundwater levels, changed the river morphology, disturbed riverine navigation, increased salinity, upset the natural balance in the mangrove forests of the Sundarban, and severely affected fisheries, forestry, agriculture and public health.

It is clear that the Farakka diversion over the last decade was one of the reasons that contributed to the creation of poverty among the downstream Ganga population. Meanwhile, the hullabaloo over the impact on the lower-riparian Bangladesh quite diverted the attention of planners and activists alike from the grievous fallout of Farakka on upstream West Bengal and Bihar. The area above the barrage became additionally vulnerable to floods as a result of the new construction, and a host of problems related to "drainage congestion" arose, such

The bilateral bonhomie achieved at Bangladesh's independence evaporated soon enough as each country set about asserting its national right to a limited physical resource.

Transit for Water

Truck in transit awaits at the Bangladesh border point of Budimari

by ***Monirul Qader Mirza***

India's proposal for allowing more dry seasonal flow of the Ganga into Bangladesh in exchange for gaining the right of transit to reach the Northeast from the Indian mainland is a subject readymade to pull down precariously situated governments in Dhaka. It was perhaps this late realisation that led the Indian side in the recent negotiations to back-pedal on what has been a constant in New Delhi's stance vis-a-vis Dhaka.

In fact, the "transit for water" issue was very much a part of the Indian position at the beginning of the most recent negotiations which led to the Farakka accord of December. During his first visit to Dhaka in July, Indian Foreign Secretary Salman Haider unequivocably linked Ganga water-sharing with overland access to the Northeast. When asked about the link between transit and sharing water, Mr Haider said, "Transit occupies a pivotal consideration in our thinking."

During the time of Begum Khaleda Zia's government in August 1992, India proposed that Bangladesh allow rail and road traffic rights, the use of the seaport and airport in Chittagong, and export of Bangladeshi natural gas to India, all in return for increasing the Ganga's flow for Bangladesh at Farakka. Early 1994 saw some new features added to the old proposal: supply of electricity to India from gas-operated power plants in Bangladesh and setting up of petroleum, chemical and fertiliser factories along the border to supply the Indian market.

Export of natural gas was not really a new proposal, India having asked Bangladesh in 1980 to examine the possibility. Even the mere consideration of such a suggestion incited such a backlash that President Ziaur Rahman was forced to reject India's proposal out of hand. The railway transit matter was raised by New Delhi several times during the period of Gen H.M. Ershad (1982-1990), and the World Bank too brought it up during the feasibility study of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge(which crosses the Jamuna/Brahmaputra west of Dhaka, *see Nov/Dec 1996 Himal*). Gen Ershad, in his turn, refused to consider the proposal after deliberating over the likely political fallout.

The matter of transit for water created a huge outcry in Bangladesh once again, most vociferously from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party of Khaleda Zia, this time sitting in the opposition. The ruling coalition headed by Sheikh Hasina Wajed and supported by Gen Ershad handled the matter very gingerly. In the course of negotiations, the Indian side seemed finally to have understood the need not to insist on transit.

And so, during his visit to Dhaka in September, Foreign Minister Inder Kumar Gujral insisted that India was not considering transit in exchange of water. This was a significant swing from the previous stance as reiterated by his own Foreign Secretary—in all probability, India was trying to bail out the new government in Dhaka, which is regarded as more sympathetic to New Delhi than the other political forces in the country.

Country to Standstill

It is the perception of threats to security, of course, that is behind the Bangladeshi sensitivity on the question of water and transit. Firstly, as a lower-riparian country, Bangladesh regards its right to the Ganga waters as non-negotiable. Any attempt to link this historical right with a modern need of India is, obviously, a non-starter.

There is concern that "transit" could emerge as a security threat for Bangladesh. India wants transit for the faster transportation of goods and passengers to and from its seven Northeastern states of Assam, Arunachal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Insurgency has been a long-term problem in most of this region, and the proposed transit may also be used for transportation of military hardware and soldiers. This will have serious repercussions in Bangladesh's internal security and may destabilise the government, it is felt.

With its widely-regarded soft spot for India, the Awami League would have found it even harder to accept the transit-for-water deal for how it would be read domestically. It would also have been difficult for such an agreement to have the backing of its junior partner in the ruling coalition, the Jatiya Party of Gen Ershad. Even if this coalition were to have agreed to the initial Indian proposal, the opposition BNP could have been expected to bring the country to a standstill.

There is also widespread agreement among the Bangladeshi intelligentsia that if Dhaka were to sign a transit-for-water deal, it will be impossible to walk away from it in future, even if India were to stop releasing the promised water at Farakka due to its own domestic compulsions. The belief is that Bangladesh's attempt to close the future transit corridor—howsoever justified—would lead to Indian intervention.

All in all, a transit-for-water deal would have been a unique situation even on a global context, in which a powerful upper-riparian exacts unreasonable concessions from a weaker downstream state. It is fortuitous, therefore, that the Indian Foreign Minister should have understood the need not to pressure Bangladesh on the matter. Whether there has been any undisclosed understanding between Dhaka and New Delhi, however, is not known.

as waterlogging and spread of the disease kaalazar (black fever).

Formulae for Sharing

The subjects relating to allocation of waters of the Ganga as an international river, the process of negotiations, the impact of declining flow, the creation and sustenance of scientific and environmental myths, have all been the subject of research, analyses and interpretations by scholar from within and outside South Asia. The late 1980s saw the initiation of several collaborative studies by scholars of the region, who attempted to arrive at an alternative framework for development and management of the waters of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers.

What these studies show clearly is that even though it was a solution proposed and unilaterally implemented to solve a technical problem (that of "flushing" Calcutta port), from its very inception, Farakka gained a personality that was exclusively political. South Block in New Delhi became the maker and breaker of dreams for a faraway population which saw the historical flow of a river suddenly diminish through a manmade diversion. And for a decade and a half, policy-makers in the Indian Foreign Ministry stood their position on Farakka.

What, then, made the new agreement of 1996 possible after such a long impasse? While the window of opportunity created by the change of guard in both Delhi and Dhaka clearly was one factor, this in itself does not explain the amenability of both sides to agreement. Careful examination of the treaty document leads to the conclusion that this was more due to the fact that higher flow was seen to be available at Farakka than the 1977 data indicated. This meant that each side was able to claim before their individual constituencies that it was receiving more water than before.

The treaty of December 1996, like its 1977 predecessor, covers the sharing of the Ganga waters between the period of 1 January and 31 May, there being no need to have a sharing agreement during the other seasons when there is flow aplenty (often excessive and unwanted) on the river. The accord has stipulated three primary formulae for allocating share of the water to each country subject to availability. Whereas the 1977 accord based its calculations on 24 years' of flow data from 1949 to 1973, the 1996 treaty's formulae are based on mean discharge at Farakka for the period 1949-1988. The 1977 agreement was based on 75 percent availability (i.e. the stated quantity of water would be available three times out of four) of flow, whereas this factor is not mentioned in the new treaty.

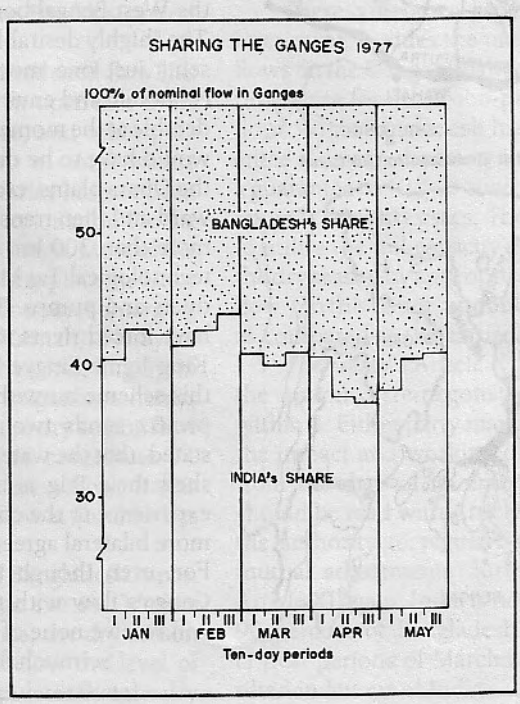
The following, then, are the formulae for sharing as contained in Annexure-I of the 1996 instrument, for individual 10-day periods between 1 January and 31 May:

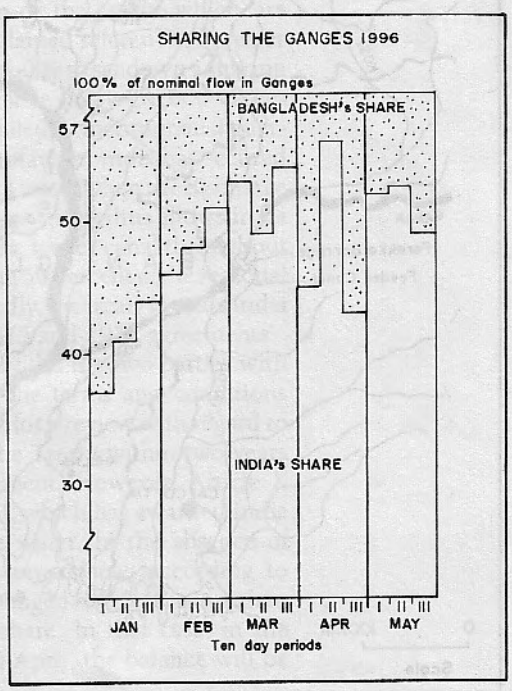
In case there is more than 75,000 cusecs available at Farakka, India will get 40,000 cusecs and Bangladesh the rest. If the flow is between 70,000-75,000 cusecs, Bangladesh will get 35,000 cusecs and India the balance. The flow will be shared on a 50:50 basis when the quantity in consecutive 10-day periods is 70,000 cusecs or less, subject to the condition that each will receive guaranteed 35,000 cusecs of water in three alternate ten days from 11 March to 10 May.

An understanding of who gained and who lost in 1996 can only be achieved through a thorough analysis of these calculations. What has been touted as a 50:50 formula overall is definitely not as straight-forward as it seems. The treaty allocates the total quantum from 11 March–10 May equally between the two countries with a stipulation that each receive a minimum of 35,000 cusecs in alternate ten-day periods. But the treaty is silent on the need for sharing when the flow is less than 70,000 cusecs in any other ten-day period than the 60-day stretch specified above.

Understandably, on both sides, those who were involved in concluding the treaty are jubilant, each being able to claim that it has delivered more water than before. Also, Bangladesh may now proceed with its irrigation development plan in the lower Ganga basin, and the water salinity levels in southwest Bangladesh is expected to go down. There is the challenge, however, of establishing an institutional mechanism for fair allocation of water received as a result of the accord on the various affected claimants. On the Indian side, as minimum flow has been guaranteed, the West Bengal government may take up modernisation plans for Calcutta port with more confidence.

Discussion of the possible longterm implications are, unfortunately, being drowned out by the continuing hype and hoopla over the treaty-signing. This has been fed by the lack of understanding among media commentators of the intricate nature of this agreement. So, on the one hand, you have those who trumpet the equal "50:50" nature of the agreement that has been achieved, and on



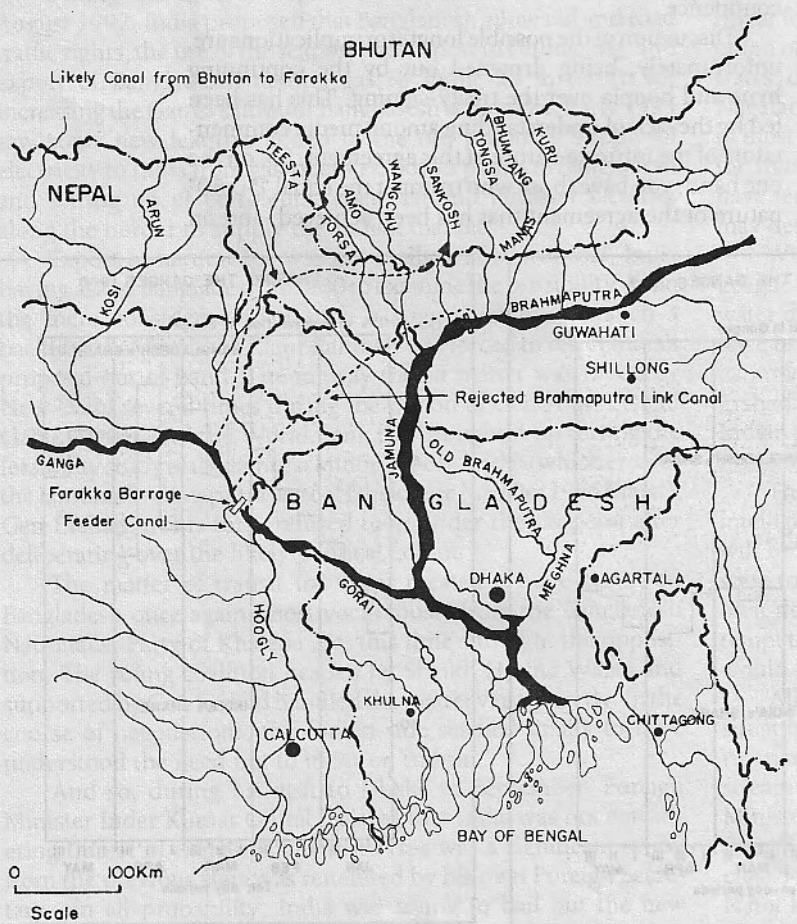


Regionalism Washed Away

by Ajaya Dixit

An important element which was included in the 1977 agreement, and a point that has come up again and again in the Indo-Bangla water talks, was the need for "augmentation" of the Ganga's flow. This meant, essentially, adding to the river's volume by building dams and reservoirs on the Himalayan tributaries to trap excess monsoon flow for release during the dry winter months. The bilateral Indo-Bangla 1977 treaty specifically mentioned Nepal, a third party, by stating that the proposals for augmentation "do not exclude any schemes or schemes for building storage in the upper reaches of the Ganges in Nepal."

That very year, in 1977, King Birendra of Nepal also put forth the concept of regional cooperation in development of the significant Nepali water resources. His proposal would supposedly mesh well with Bangladesh's own proposal for upstream storage dams. In fact, Kathmandu was already in discussion with New Delhi on the feasibility of four "mega-storage" reservoir projects in Nepal. However, the government in Kathmandu remained an onlooker when it came to the many years of discussions on Farakka, even though its role would have been paramount under the Bangladeshi proposal. There was only one trilateral meeting between India, Bangladesh and Nepal, in 1986, and that failed to proceed beyond pleasantries.



While augmentation through storage in Nepal was thus a specific part of the previous agreement on the Ganga, the new 1996 treaty makes no such reference. All that the instrument does is encourage the two signatory governments to cooperate in finding solutions to the long-term problem of augmenting the flow of the Ganga in the dry season.

It was Bangladesh which had always insisted on the regionalisation of Ganga water talks. India, for its part, has consistently maintained that Ganga water-sharing is a bilateral problem into which a third party (i.e. Nepal) should not be dragged. It was only in September 1996 at the UN General Assembly that Dhaka formally indicated that it might be willing to acquiesce to this point and be agreeable to resolving the matter through bilateral discussion.

Even though there is increasing talk of regionalism in South Asia under the aegis of SAARC, by barring any third-party involvement on discussions relating to an international river, the Farakka agreement represents a deliberate step in the other direction. Bilateralism would, therefore, seem to henceforth guide cooperation in South Asian waters. That this is a definitive trend is also indicated by the conclusion of the Indo-Nepal Mahakali treaty of January 1996 on the construction of a storage-cum-power scheme on a border river between the two countries. This Pancheswar storage scheme was, after all, one of the seven dams in Nepal proposed by Dhaka for flood control and augmentation.

Several other proposals that India has with Nepal and Bhutan fit into this bilateral matrix. One that has come into the limelight immediately after the signing of the Farakka agreement is the dam and reservoir project on the Sankosh river, in Bhutan near the border with India. This project, it is said, will allow diversion of about 10,000 extra cusecs to meet water requirements of Calcutta port during the lean period. A "highly desirable" project wrote Indian analyst Bhabani Sen Gupta in *Dhaka Courier* after the treaty was signed. "...India will have to dig a small canal from a river flowing down the western flanks of Bhutan quite close to the West Bengal border."

The "highly desirable" Sankosh diversion scheme represents just one more "technological fix" whose socio-economic and environmental consequences are imponderable at the moment. For, the waters from the Sankosh would have to be diverted first to the Teesta barrage on the Duars plains, crossing several rivers that flow southward and then transferred to Farakka via a "small canal" more than 300 km long. This construction would be a technological Taj Mahal with numerous siphons, aqueducts and pumps. This, in a region where cloudbursts have forced rivers to change course at will.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck's apparent blessing for this scheme notwithstanding, the plan for the Sankosh project sends two significant messages. One, as just stated, that the water managers of South Asia have yet to shed their "big is better" attitude, despite decades of experience to the contrary. Two, that this would be one more bilateral agreement on a possibly regional subject. For, even though there will be augmentation of the Ganga's flow with the Sankosh diversion, Bangladesh will receive none of it.

So much for regionalism in South Asia.

the other are those arrayed against the treaty who use any which argument to condemn it.

Rather than give in to the nationalist and/or partisan bias so evident on all sides, it is better to fall back upon the dispassionate study of the 15-year experience of Farakka that has been done by South Asian and overseas scholars. A study of the work by such scholars regarding the management of water resources generally and international rivers in particular is bound to be more educational than the blinkered spoutings of media commentators. In this context, two important issues deserve analysis in terms of the December 1996 instrument: a) the quantum of water available at Farakka, and b) the broader lessons for water management in South Asia.

Water Quantum

Two ambiguities emerge with regard to the flow data in the 1996 instrument. Firstly, why did the negotiators decide to use only the discharge data up to 1988 when data up to 1995 was available? This ambiguity may be cleared rather easily: it was in 1988 that the last memorandum of understanding on water-sharing expired, when Bangladesh also, incidentally, experienced its worst flood. There was no sharing of data on the Ganga's flow after 1988, and so negotiators seem to have decided to go only with the figures which has been mutually verified.

The second ambiguity, more difficult to fathom, has to do with the fact that the quantum of dry season flow in the Ganga accepted by the 1996 treaty is greater by 12 percent than the figure given in the 1977 treaty. (Both pre- and post-Farakka discharges were taken together in the calculations of the 1996 treaty.)

This reported increase is most incongruous because Bangladesh has consistently held that the flow of the Ganga has been declining continuously in the post-Farakka period. Also, according to the Indo-Bangla Joint Rivers Commission, the January, February and March discharges of the Ganga at Farakka were less by 8, 10, and 12 per cent, respectively, in the post-Farakka period (1975-1988) compared with the pre-Farakka period (1949-1973) flow.

The explanation for this reported reduced flow has been the increased diversion of water in upstream India for irrigation, urban and industrial use, and other purposes. Even though actual inventory of total waters diverted from the Ganga and its tributaries has not been carried out, this has been the logical explanation for the declining volume of the downstream Ganga. Most of the 'extraction' of water upstream has taken place in Uttar Pradesh and on the four main Ganga tributaries emerging from Nepal—the Mahakali, Ghagra (Karnali), Narayani and Kosi—which are diverted for irrigation, largely in India, as they enter the plains. These irrigation schemes on or near the Nepal border all exceed the dry season flow of these rivers, which is estimated to contribute 71 percent of the Ganga's natural lean season flow. It was quite logical, then, to believe that the flow at Farakka has declined progressively over the years.

And yet, the Joint Expert Team of Bangladesh, upon their return from the Farakka barrage site in October 1996, reported that, for natural reasons, the dry season discharge at Farakka has not fallen below the level of 1977. Furthermore, the treaty now stipulates that the dry season flow on the Ganga is actually higher than in 1977. This, then, adds a most confusing element in the effort to analyse the 1996 instrument.

Studies of monsoon precipitation in India for the better part of a century and in Nepal since 1971 do not indicate any increasing or decreasing trend. The net amount of rainfall has remained more or less constant, so it is unlikely that there has been increased flow at Farakka due to heavier monsoons in the last 15 years.

The mystery of this reported rise in the Ganga's flow remains, at this writing, unresolved. If the lean season flow at Farakka were available as stipulated in the treaty, then there would of course be no problem in implementing the three-tier formulae that has been set by the instrument. However, if one regards all the data otherwise available on the steadily decreasing dry season flows of the Ganga as credible, then the treaty will be put to severe test. The entire edifice of the 1996 instrument rests on this reported availability of increased dry-season flow.

Meanwhile, no sharing arrangement has been stipulated if the discharge were to fall below 50,000 cusecs. Article III of the treaty says that in such cases the "the two governments will enter into immediate consultations to make adjustments", a provision which has been reproduced from the 1982 memorandum of understanding. The reference to consultations is quite meaningless in this context, as water does not wait and will be lost by the time a meeting is held. In 1983, for example, the low flow occurred in March-April and the consultation was held in July, by which time the damage had long been done through continuing unilateral diversion.

The fact is that a discharge below 50,000 cusecs is not at all uncommon at Farakka. For example, the mean discharge for two months in the spring of 1980 was below this threshold, and this was again true in March-April 1983. Statistical evidence also suggests that it is highly unlikely that the flow will exceed this quantity in March and April of an average year. This, incidentally, is a most critical period as far as Bangladesh is concerned.

There are other aspects of the treaty which are interesting, besides the unexplained reference to greater flows on the Ganga and the inability to set down a sharing procedure for an all-too-probable below-50,000 cusecs flow. While Bangladesh has failed to incorporate a guarantee clause in the treaty in its favour, India has secured a guarantee of 40,000 cusecs of water when the discharge exceeds 75,000 cusecs. The new treaty thus allows India to utilise the full capacity of the feeder canal throughout the dry season by appropriating 50 percent of the seasonal flow. On this count, undoubtedly, the treaty favours India as compared to the earlier 1975 and 1977 agreements.

The treaty's Article X provides the two parties with the option of re-negotiating the terms and conditions within it. Either party may ask for a review with regard to the impact and working of the Treaty within two years from the date of its enforcement. However, Article X should be read with Article XI, which has awarded India the authority to regulate the water. In the absence of mutual adjustments during any review, according to Article XI again, India is not obliged to release more than 90 percent of Bangladesh's share. In that case, in the critical periods of March and April, the balance will be tilted in favour of India.

The entire edifice of the 1996 treaty rests on the reported availability of increased dry-season flow in the Ganga.

Operationalising Water Management

Despite the ambiguities and questions that remain unanswered, the 1996 Treaty should perhaps be seen at this juncture as a geopolitical instrument which seeks to remove an irritant in Indo-Bangladesh relations, which will in turn allow cooperation to take place between the two countries in other areas, including water management. And there are, to be sure, two clauses which give cause for some optimism regarding the operationalisation of the treaty.

Firstly, Article II (ii) of the Treaty says that every effort will be made by the upper riparian to protect flow of water at Farakka as per the data available over 40 years. The whole range of questions that govern water management not considered central so far—quality, allocation, rising competition among various users, and the role of institutions—will now have to be considered seriously by India as an upper riparian. While the treaty commitments may well initiate a more conservation-oriented practice in water management in India, the commitments may also necessitate some severe institutional changes within India's federal structure to redefine the role of the Centre vis-a-vis state governments when it comes to water management.

Even while the water bureaucrats in all South Asian countries continue to be guided by the colonial, non-participatory prototype, events on the ground are quickly marginalising their guiding philosophies.

The Constitution of India gives state governments the authority to legislate regulations and plan the development of inter-state rivers. While the Union Government has the authority to be involved in such regulation and development, to the extent that Parliament declares it to be in the public interest, no law to such effect has yet been enacted in India. Parliament may now face the need to pass such a law in order to assure Bangladesh the quantum of water stipulated in an internationally binding treaty.

The efforts to implement the 1996 instrument is therefore likely to give rise to a protracted constitutional debate in India, especially given that the Hindi heartland states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar would be the 'losers' in trying to maintain the promised flow for Bangladesh. Initial indications are that Uttar Pradeshis may be placated by a New Delhi pointing to the Indo-Nepal Mahakali Treaty which safeguards their "prior use" of the significant flow of the Mahakali river. It is Bihar, which has always felt that its interests go unheeded by New Delhi and others, which is already grumbling about the Farakka accord.

Secondly, the role of the Joint Rivers Commission as set out in the Treaty also offers some hope. It is this body which will have to demystify the elements of the treaty that remain shrouded in riverine mist. How the Commission comports itself in the months and years to come, and how efficiently it will tackle the challenges that lie ahead in the interpretation and implementation of the 1996 treaty, will to a significant extent define Indo-Bangla relations in coming years. At the same time, the Commission's ability to resolve the existing ambiguities in the treaty document will set an example for international water-sharing agreements of the future.

On the whole, the Bangladeshi and Indian individuals who make up the Joint Rivers Commission would do well to make a clean break from past convention when it comes to water management. South Asia has long suffered from an engineering-based elite running its large water projects, without heeding the social, economic, cultural and environmental implications. These old exclusively technocratic attitudes are based on principles inherited—all over South Asia—from colonial times and internalised through *swaraj*. Such a perspective is by now thoroughly discredited among those who have studied the impact of mega-irrigation projects such as on the Kosi and the Gandak.

Farakka, too, is a mega-project with exactly such antecedents, envisioned in geopolitical hubris and constructed by an engineering elite with no interest in socio-political processes and unmindful of the long-term societal and geopolitical backlash that such projects invite. The barrage was the infrastructural fallout of an era when the business of water was decided behind closed doors. The arrogance and the secrecy of bureaucrats and engineers, one after another, led to entanglements that confused the public, retarded development, and pitted governments against each other.

Fortunately, even while the water bureaucrats in all South Asian countries have continued to be guided by the colonial, non-participatory prototype, events on the ground are quickly marginalising their guiding philosophies. The scrapping of the Flood Action Plan in Bangladesh, the continued delays of Narmada and Tehri dams in India, and the cancellation of Arun III dam in Nepal, all define the boundaries within which the actual debate about approaches to water management and preferred solutions will occur in future. This, notwithstanding the most recent agreement—on whose heels came the Farakka accord with essentially the same elements of ambiguities and unknowns—on the Mahakali river between India and Nepal.

These new realities, which question the very need for large water projects in the present South Asian socio-economic context, are no indication of doomsday, which is how many alarmists would like to make them appear to an uncomprehending public. Instead, those who question these large projects are—in essence—seeking equitable ways to progress and challenging the propensity in developing countries just to consume more and more.

Farakka, of course, is a project that has already been built. For that very reason, now that an accord has been signed, it will be important for the members of the Commission to be guided by new principles of water management. This is essential if fairness is to be assured between the two countries, and *within* each country. The challenge is that of making "wholesome water" available to all claimants on an equitable basis; the failure to do so will only mean that the stalemate in regional water management as embodied by Farakka will continue despite the December treaty.

In conclusion, while the long-term management of Farakka under the 1996 treaty will depend upon the competence and commitment of the members of the Joint Rivers Commission, some early indication of the fate of this agreement will be evident during the upcoming dry season. Will the volume of water which arrives at Farakka be enough to do with it what the treaty stipulates, or not?

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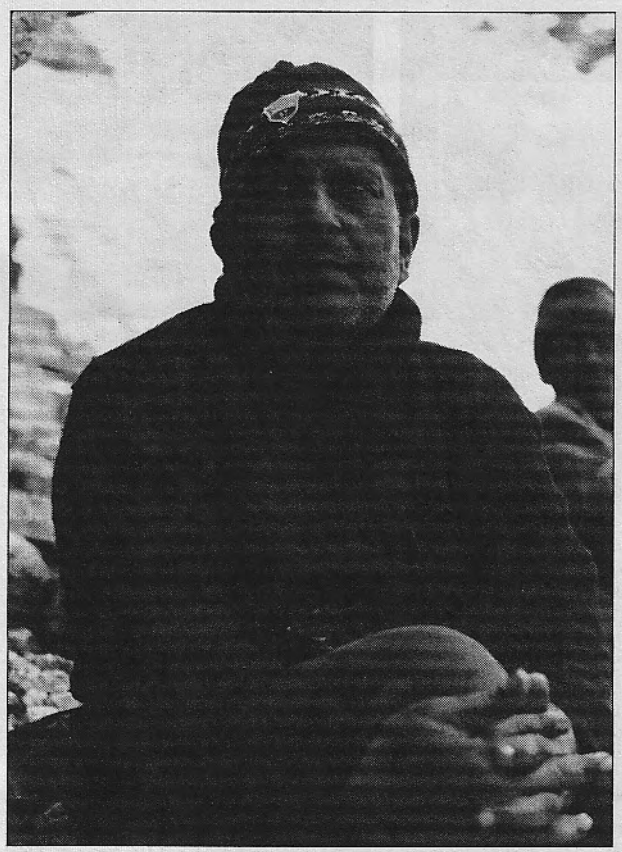


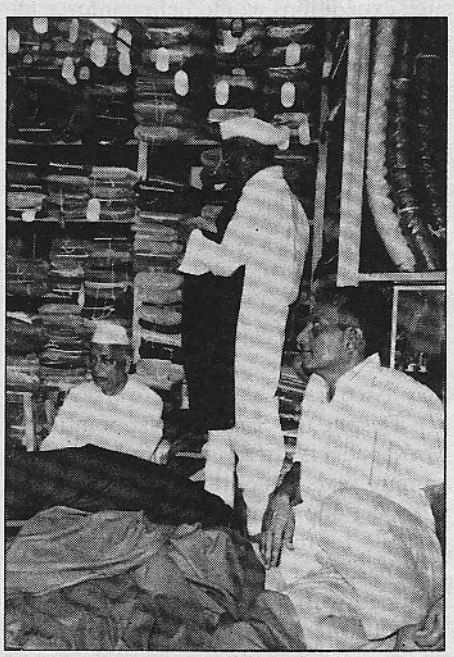
A Cloth Merchant Who Knows His Ropes

When Harish Kapadia's businessmen friends think he is attending a dealers' conference in Kanpur, he may well be melting ice for tea on a pass up at 18,000 feet in Kashmir.

by ***Kanak Mani Dixit***

Harish Kapadia, as his name suggests, is a *kapada* merchant. Sitting crosslegged in his shop, M/s Ramdas Bhagwandas, from noon till about ten at night, he sells cloth. Stacks of them, wholesale, for the calico giant Raymonds. The shop is located in the Vithalwadi locality of Bombay, the largest and oldest cloth market in Asia.

But this *kapadia* has another life, something his businessmen colleagues and clients would frown upon if they only knew. Harish Kapadia is India's best-known mountain climber and adventurer, who regularly disappears from his Vithalwadi shop and Malabar Hill apartment to go exploring in the deep Himalaya. He has climbed everywhere in the Indian Himalaya from Kashmir to the Northeast, summitting hard summits in the company of some of the world's best climbers, such as Chris Bonington, Dick Renshaw, Victor Saunders and Stephen Venables. Mr Kapadia has also almost single-handedly helped inculcate a passion for the mountains and a sense of adventure among India's urban professionals, who today make a small but dedicated group. The Indian climbers Mr Kapadia is closest to are Muslim Contractor, Zerksis Boga and Monesh Devjani. Among Sherpas, he climbs often with Pasang Temba.



CHRIS BONINGTON

The mountaineer on the mountain (above) and, at right, in his cloth shop.

"I have always climbed in my own group of friends and do not go with national teams and so on," says Mr Kapadia, whose expedition support staff invariably come from Harkot village in Almora which lies on the famous trail to the Pindari Glacier.

Since he started climbing 35 years ago, after undergoing training at India's two mountaineering institutes in Darjeeling and Uttarkashi, Mr Kapadia has concentrated on interesting peaks rather than the "big names". He has climbed a total of 33 peaks so far. His main contribution to Himalayan climbing has been to explore unknown areas and to open up "climbing possibilities", as he terms it. Some of Mr Kapadia's major ascents have been Devtoli (6788m), Bandarpunch West (6102m), Parilungbi (6166m) and Lungser Kangri (6666m), the highest peak of the Rupshu range in Ladakh.

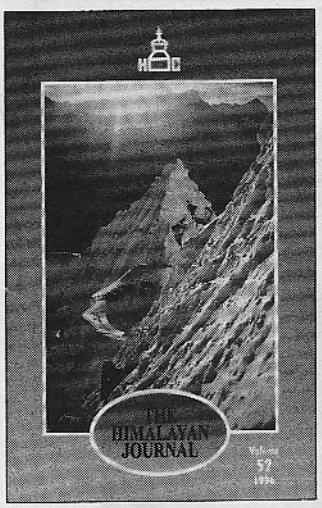
Not limiting himself to climbing, Mr Kapadia is also an Himalayan archivist and editor, and a custodian of Indian mountaineering lore. He edits the respected *Himalayan Journal*, published by the Himalayan Club, which was started by gentle-

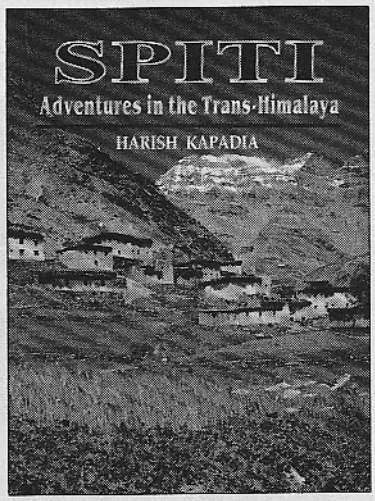
men climbers of British India back in 1928. Unlike the 'official mountaineering' promoted by government, military, police and paramilitary units, the Himalayan Club is the centre of true 'amateur climbing' in India. The mountaineers of Mr Kapadia's strain head for the rock and ice because of love of adventure and personal achievement, rather than in response to the commandant's bark.

Come weekends, when he is not hanging off the side of some over-exposed Himalayan rock face, Mr Kapadia and his sketch-artist spouse Geeta, two sons Sonam and Ngawang (so named to mark their father's Sherpa associations), and friends can be found bouldering and climbing just north of Bombay's Andheri suburb. While the beaches themselves are filthy with oil slicks and overboard garbage of oceangoing ships, the low cliffs that overlook the Arabian Sea have rocks that are firm and inviting.

Farther afield, Mr Kapadia also gets the credit for popularising the Sahyadris, a part of the Western Ghats. Years of hiking in this escarpment-rich range led Mr Kapadia to write, in 1977, a detailed handbook, *Trek the Sahyadris*, which has now become a standard reference for a generation of Bombay trekkers. His other books, which include *Exploring the Hidden Himalaya* (with Soli Mehta) and *High Himalaya, Unknown Valleys*, have been equally instrumental in making mountain lovers aware of little-known areas in the Himalaya.

The Himalayan Journal (left) and Mr Kapadia's latest Himalayan book.





Up Short in Siachen

In June 1996, Mr Kapadia and a team of Bombay climbers got permission from the foreign and defence ministries in New Delhi to venture up the Siachen region of Kashmir, which has been the subject of a longstanding dispute with Pakistan. After making their way up from Leh, the group was about to start up the snout of the Siachen Glacier when the army blocked its path. Mr Kapadia and his friends were asked to "vacate" the area. Civilian approval did not matter, they were told, it was the military hierarchy which must allow permission to climb in the super-sensitive border area. "Faced with many questions, heavy expenses, and puzzled at the army's behaviour, we returned to Bombay," recalls Mr Kapadia.

Looking back on the misadventure, Mr Kapadia is critical of the restrictions put on climbing in the Indian frontier regions. He notes that while India restricts even Indian climbers from Siachen, Pakistan has allowed more than 18 expeditions to climb in the area. "India's neighbours are more open about allowing climbing in the border areas," he says, and points out with some amusement that this year the Chinese gave quick clearance to an Indo-Tibetan Border Police team to climb Everest from the North, "even though the ITBP has the word 'Tibet' in their name and as a force was raised specifically to fight the Chinese!"

Regarding Siachen, Mr Kapadia says: "The military commitment has not solved the dispute to India's advantage, and it has caused untold misery, expense and loss of lives. It is essential that India's national security interests are reinforced by other cost-effective means, such as allowing more Indian and foreign civilian expeditions on this range." According to Mr Kapadia, such expeditions would help reinforce Indian claim over the area and the country's "sovereign rights over the entire East Karakoram belt".

Many More Peaks

But Mr Kapadia is not one to be despondent for long after a setback. In June 1974, while climbing Devtoli in the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, he dislocated his hip at 22,000 ft, and was carried for 13 days before being evacuated by helicopter. He spent two years in crutches and was ready for Sikkim by May 1976.

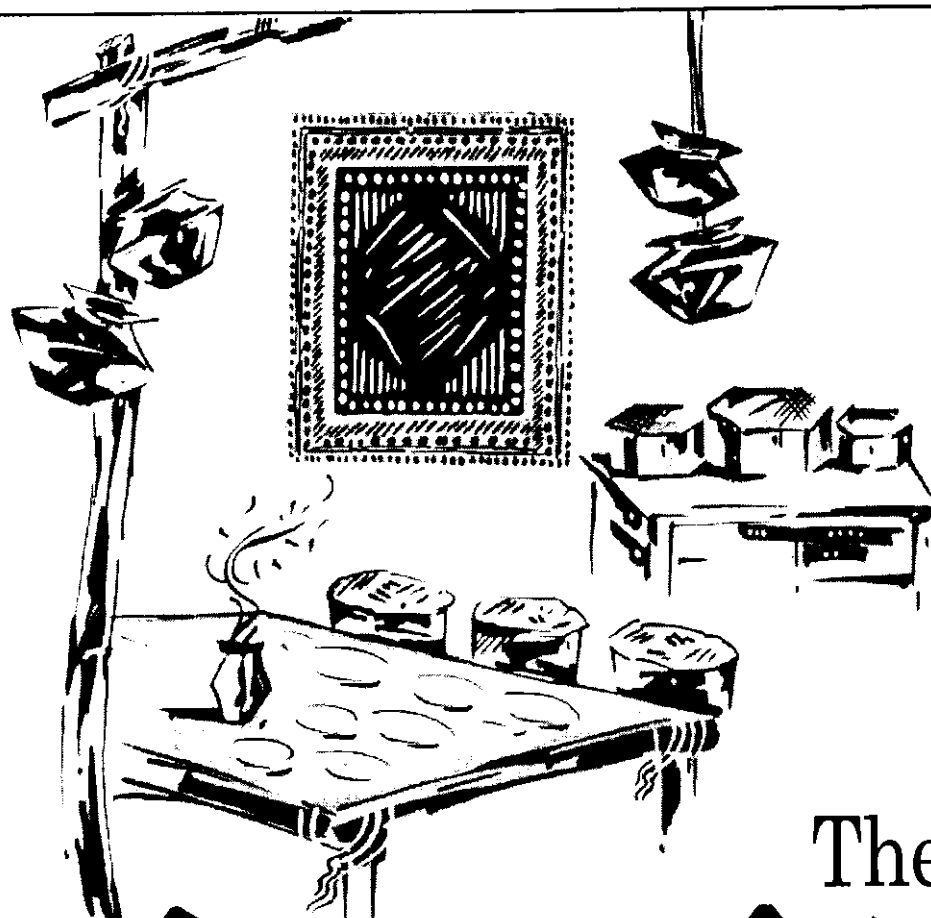
Despite the Siachen disappointment, Mr Kapadia is already full of plans for the coming years. As of this writing, he is off with just one companion, climber Rajesh Gadgil, to make a winter attempt of Hansbeshan Peak in Kinnaur. This coming summer, with three other friends and the Harkot porters, Mr Kapadia plans a traverse from Badrinath to Gangotri which entails crossing over a high col and negotiating the entire Gangotri glacier. This traverse has been done only once before, by Eric Shipton and Harold William Tilman in 1934. In 1998, Mr Kapadia plans to go with Chris Bonington to the East Karakoram for an attempt on the unclimbed Chong Kumdan II (7000m).

Mr Kapadia, who was recently elected Honorary Member of the UK-based The Alpine Club (one of only two Asians among 23 honorary members, and a young one at that), has plans to complete two books during 1997. One is *Trek the Himalaya*, on 30 new treks in the Indian Himalaya, and another the classification of all the peaks of the India, Bhutan and Nepal Himalaya, grouped in sections.

Asked about his life's mission, Mr Kapadia replies, "Life's mission! To see all of the Himalayan ranges with my own eyes, and to write about it all. *Abode of Snow* by Kenneth Mason is the bible of Himalayan history till 1953. I would like to bring the information up-to-date, but according to region, based on my own travels."

Why are there not more Indians interested in mountaineering? "It is hard for amateurs to juggle the finances, the interest, and jobs, and so mountaineering loses out. In my own case, I have to balance my cloth business, family, writing, active climbing, and other interests like music, drama and films. But the way I see it, you have to utilise the time you have to the fullest."

As for Siachen (*Sia* means "rose" and *chen* is "where is grows" in Balti), this cloth merchant from Bombay proposes that the mountaineers of the world together lobby India and Pakistan to withdraw their armies in order to establish there an "International Park of the Rose".



The BUKHARA

Renowned for its Tandoori cooking from the North West Frontier Region of India, the Bukhara is now open at the Soaltee Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza.

The Bukhara, located by the Poolside, is open for Lunch and Dinner seven days a week. The meal in the rugged interiors of the restaurant, is quite an experience !! You may even take back a picture of yourself with the Chef.

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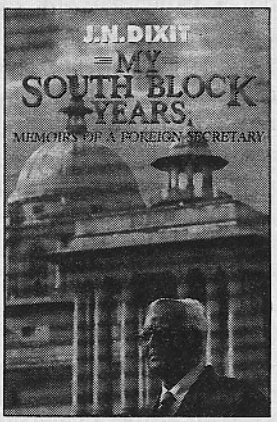
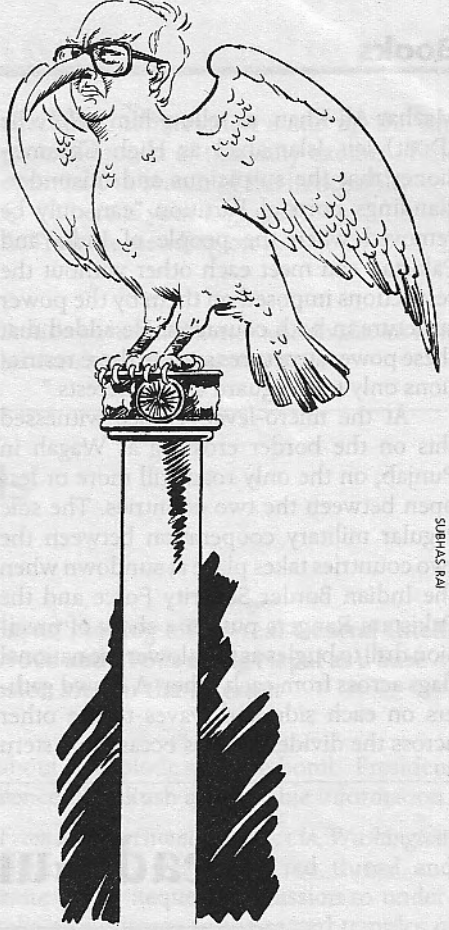


My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Secretary

by J.N. Dixit
UBS Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 1996
INR 395, ISBN 81 7476 132 2

review by **John Rettie**


SUBHAS RAI

Indira Gandhi listened attentively as Henry Kissinger urged her to comply with Washington's wishes, implying that otherwise US aid to India might be at risk. When he had finished, without a word, she reached for the telephone and spoke to a senior official. "Mr Kissinger has just told me that he has no further need for his aid office in Delhi," she said. "Please arrange for it to be closed down within 24 hours." She beamed at the Secretary of State. "I think that deals with your problem, Mr Secretary."

For once, the great man was reduced to stuttering protest. But another, less elevated, Indian official sitting in the corner of the Prime Minister's office could scarcely repress a chortle. Years later, he tells the tale with relish. The exercise of power in defence of India's interests comes very gladly to J.N. Dixit's heart—and he has had experience of that himself. Not for nothing was he known in Sri Lanka as "The Viceroy" at the time when the Indian Peace-Keeping Force was operating on the island.

After 34 years of service in missions from Washington to Tokyo and all over South Asia, as well as in international organisations, and with an unrivalled reputation in the Indian Foreign Service, Mr Dixit was the natural choice for the top job of Foreign Secretary. This came at a time when the world was in turmoil and India virtually had to create its foreign policy anew, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War certainties.

Now he has published his memoirs, though only for the 26 months that he was Foreign Secretary. All the same, the book is a *tour de force*; in his preface Mr Dixit says he wrote it entirely from memory, jogged only by his daily engagement diaries. Consulting official documents could have brought him up against the Official Secrets Act. The details he recalls from his hectic schedule and the immense variety of topics, places and people he dealt with is vast—perhaps too vast, and at times repetitive. Thirty-six years as a civil servant, however distinguished, does little for one's literary style and, except for a few hilarious anecdotes, much of the book reads like a series of official reports. But on hearing how Mr Dixit defended their country's interests—at least as he and his political masters saw them, with skill, guile and at times the ferocity of a tiger—many Indians will conclude that he was indeed the right man for the job.

Other South Asians may not be so sure. But none can deny that Mr Dixit was one of the most brilliant, likeable and flamboyant foreign secretaries India has had. And there is more than enough meat to chew on in this book for anyone interested in how India tried to cope with the new problems of a world in ferment. The comforting political and economic support of the utterly reliable Soviet Union was gone; there was now only one super-power and it wanted to impose its world agenda, which did not include independent-minded countries like India developing their own nuclear weapons and missiles; the Non-Aligned Movement was a broken reed; and although "there were no overt threats to our territorial integrity and security, covert threats persisted through violent, secessionist subversion in Kashmir and the Northeastern states" backed by—you guessed it—Pakistan.

Dixit the Hawk

For all the complex negotiations and new tasks around the world, the book demonstrates with blinding clarity that Pakistan and Kashmir constitute the two poison weeds that entwine and often throttle India's foreign—and, indeed, domestic—policy. Dixit, confesses himself frankly and unashamedly, to being a hawk on Kashmir. He would take the battle into Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, and even Pakistan proper, if necessary. He once advised flooding the Kashmir Valley with Hindu settlers—an extraordinary view for a man who witnessed at close quarters the catastrophic consequences of settling Sinhalese villagers on former Tamil lands in Sri Lanka.

But the fear, verging on paranoia, of losing one's country's unity and territorial integrity can drive even brilliant and liberal-minded men to extremes. The former Foreign Secretary even suggests that India should go ahead and develop nuclear weapons, which some observers regard as mere threatening propaganda that India finds useful for others to believe. Strangely, enough, Germany and Japan, for instance, do not seem as worried as Mr Dixit is for India, about their position in the international community. (Bizarrely, he also quotes the then Japanese Prime Minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, as having "acknowledged to Prime Minister (P.V. Narasimha) Rao that Japan possessed nuclear weapons..." during Mr Rao's visit to Tokyo in June 1992. This is hard to credit.)

But Mr Dixit is far too intelligent to be a hawk on all subjects. He virtually accepts that in various parts of the country and aspects of life, the real threats to India's security and unity come from within, merely enabling external forces to exploit them. As for the Subcontinent's two bitter rivals, he quotes an old friend of Jawaharlal Nehru's,

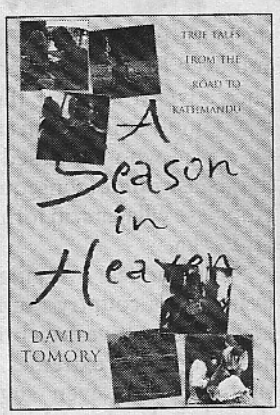
Mazhar Ali Khan, as telling him before he (Dixit) left Islamabad as High Commissioner that the suspicions and misunderstandings born of Partition "can only be removed when the people of India and Pakistan can meet each other without the restrictions imposed on them by the power structure in both countries. He added that these power structures sustain these restrictions only to safeguard their interests."

At the micro-level, I once witnessed this on the border crossing at Wagah in Punjab, on the only road still more or less open between the two countries. The sole regular military cooperation between the two countries takes place at sundown when the Indian Border Security Force and the Pakistani Rangers put on a show of precision drill to bugles as they lower the national flags across from each other. A crowd gathers on each side and waves to the other across the divide. On this occasion, a stern sergeant admonished a Gujarati woman: "Stop waving. That's the enemy over there."

But Mazhar Ali Khan "was right in objective terms," Mr Dixit writes dryly. "The limitations of my professional experience prevent me from reaching the high moral ground from which he spoke." *Realpolitik* is the name of Mr Dixit's game. But one could not help feel a pang of sadness back in 1994, as this warm, loyal and courageous patriot stepped for the last time out of his South Block office and drove away from 36 years' service. Could not the government find him, as it has for so many other retired IFS men, a post where his vast knowledge, experience and intelligence could be put to good use?

J. Rettie was the BBC correspondent in Colombo 1987-89 and served as the South Asia correspondent of The Guardian *till 1995.*

Dead Gurus Don't Kick Ass



A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Kathmandu

by David Tomory
Harper Collins, London, 1996
pp 237, GBP 4.95
ISBN 1 85538 444 2

review by **Bill Aitken**

This entertaining reconstruction of the days of the hippie circuit from the survivors seeks to fix the flavour of the gypsy generation of Western youth engaged in colonisation-in-reverse, of white mendicants demanding cultural alms from the East. David Tomory has edited the diaries and the disaster reports adroitly and keeps the narrative moving in its cyclic fulfillment—back in the West—with linking commentary. But it is a pity that a writer of Mr Tomory's depth, range and punch did not allow more of his background knowledge to illuminate the field. Nevertheless, this anthology of travellers' highlights would make a brilliant script for a TV documentary, what with the exotic background visuals of Goa, Manali and Kabul.

As a book, it is asking too much of the reader who has not done the hippie overland beat to come up with the pictures to go with the text. But so colourful was that generation of Kamikaze crusaders freaking out to claim the freedom that was supposed to lie in the mystic East, that you find yourself laughing outright at their gauche confrontation with the non-Christian world.

However, the very success of this book in conjuring up the idealism and energy of the Sixties diaspora also manages to suppress what is equally true: that for an awful lot of travellers the road to Kathmandu was a season in hell. As someone who came overland on a theological assignment before the Sixties (and stayed on to record with pleasure the continuing success of the freak centres established all over the Subcontinent), I tend to agree that the movement was educational rather than religious. It was more of a Grand Tour of post-war peace-seeking internationalists than a crusade of anti-material revivalists.

It is significant that neither the gurus nor the *shishyas* of the flower power era have survived. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi went giggling to his Zurich bank and Bhagwan Rajneesh's final therapy was to break into gales of laughter. Neem Karoli Baba and his neighbour Hera Khan Maharaj have passed on, made famous briefly by their foreign acolytes. The people's own choice like Shirdi Sai, Ramana Maharishi and Sathya Sai did not appeal to the cultists from the West, perhaps because their ashrams invoked the discipline of serious *sadhana*.

"Dead gurus no kick ass," went a revealing remark. Characteristically, the hippie did the rounds of all the ashrams not committing himself to any one guru or teaching. Whereas the traditional understanding is that the path to enlightenment is long and hard with plenty of kicks in the ass, the youthful adventurers from Vilayat preferred lectures on Buddhist meditation techniques or, better still, Zen with its promise of instant Big Mac satori.

Thank the Hippy

They were young then, and now through Mr Tomory they look back fondly on their rash presumptions. I am glad this book has brought out their courage and self-belief. Hippies have had a uniformly bad press yet they were the trend-setters of an age. Their liberty-loving ways have now extended, decades later, to even fuddy-duddy Delhi bureaucrats who find themselves wearing jeans and sneakers. India has so much to thank the hippies for. They pin-pointed the best tourist destinations, and created by their enthusiasm an infrastructure that official tourist investment is now seeking to imitate and further.

I hope David Tomory will give us more on the hippie movement and explain its genesis in sociological terms. I note that his contributors have names like "Kevin, Gavin, Calvin and Mervyn" which sound to my generation (born before the Second World War) as GI-inspired. In other words, their English stay-at-home parents had exotic longings impregnated in their wombs. The insular ideals of islolationism had already been rejected. The great Indian rope trick was how these thousands of angry young offspring of discordantly disposed parents managed to reconcile their disgust at Daddy's capitalist earnings with spending it on furthering their own prodigal sons' tours. Forever hostile Daddy always stumped up! Alas, in these accounts we are left to wallow in the assumption that Daddy remained a

filthy capitalist pig indifferent to the fate of his draft-dodging heir.

I lived in Almora during the heyday of the hippie arrivals and remember Ralph Metzner's enthusiastic reference to the area's "salubrious vibes". What he really meant was the spectacle of *charas* growing wild on the town's edge. At an academic level, Ralph was charmingly convincing, but when he had to explain his creed to a Gandhian worker, he reverted to defensive definitions. Then, one sensed that this was just another enthusiasm whose efficacy even its sponsors doubted. (Tim Leary, Alan Watts, Yogananda, Ronald Reagan. Has anything good ever come out of California?)

The joy of this book is in the understanding of the foreigner's earthy involvement with the Subcontinent. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the hippy movement was to shatter the colonial myth of the invariably superior sahib. The invasion of white have-nots was an eye-opener to the illiterate Asian brought up on a diet of superman myths. The advent of the hippie, for this reason, infuriated the Brown Sahib. By letting the side down and exposing the vulnerability of the Western civilisation in producing bums and drug addicts, it was India's middle classes that felt humiliated.

Could it be that the cosmic catalyst of the movement was the advent of Tricky Dick? (Which self-respecting denizen of our planet would not think of opting out of home and hearth when such ultimate affronts were offered?) The King of Nepal apparently considered the first hippies at Dhulikhel a wandering tribe and invited representatives over for a pow-wow. But back then, to live in Kathmandu was like being part of a Brueghel painting.

BIKAR BAJNIAR

Freaking out in Kathmandu.
Local sadhu on left, hippy at right

This book is, too. Lighthearted and moving, it is low on the horror of guys who died of hepatitis or girls who never got out of the desert alive. It is rich in hilarity and the abandoned ingenuity of youth.

So you need a visa and the police chief does not like your face? Go paint a flattering portrait of him to be hung in his office and you have got yourself a visa! This frontier checkpost conversation sums up the improbable mood of this zany exodus of the optimistic in search of the impossible:
Q. "Where is your luggage?"
A. "You are standing on it."

B. Aitken is a travel writer who divides his time between Mussorie and New Delhi.

Declassified Records from the Net

A spoof on "CIA Operations in the Himalayas", taking off on real Central Intelligence Agency activities in Tibet in the 1950s and 1960s using Nepal as a base of operations. This was picked up from discussion site on the Internet

Transcripts of messages between the agent and CIA headquaters in Washington have only recently been declassified. Some initial excerpts follow:

From: Agent, Himalayas/To: CIA, Washington: Am in place. Have been accepted as a devotee fed up with Western materialism and as a seeker of truth and godhead. Have 'kutir' for myself. Have enrolled in the Rig Veda class.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Good show. Collect intelligence on Chinese troop dispositions in Tibet. Any dope on the power struggle within the Chinese People's Liberation Army? What about Chairman Mao's health?

From: Agent, Himalayas/To: CIA, Washington: Have reports that the Chinese have moved an armoured brigade into Tibet. Can you send me stonewashed saffron robes, meditation beads and deer skin? Have started Vedanta studies and am attaining peace of mind.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Saffron robe and meditation beads with hidden microphones being sent air-freight. Can't understand why you need deer skin. Any idea what's happening on the Sino-Soviet border?

From: Agent, Himalayas/To: CIA, Washington: Have reports of a clash between Chinese and Soviet troops in Sinkiang. Have finished *Bhagavad Gita* and am on to *Atharva Veda*. Have shaved off my head and discarded my Levi's. Am now wearing only loin cloth. Think am on the right path to truth and godhead.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Have serious reports that the Chinese are about to explode an atom bomb. President concerned. Rush all available information.

From: Agent, Himalayas/To: CIA, Washington: Have started wearing sacred thread and caste mark. Request permission to undertake a pilgrimage to the sacred temples of South India, followed by a dip in Hardwar on Ardh Kumbh day.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Request denied. If you need a holy dip, take a shower bath. Lay off Vedas and stick to CIA manual for snoopers. What about Chinese atom bomb?

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Hello, why the long silence? Establish contact immediately.

From: Agent 007, Himalayas/To: CIA, Langley: Sorry about long silence. Was sitting cross-legged on deer skin, concentrating on my yogic third eye and muttering to myself Om, Namashivaya when I went into Nirbikalpa Samadahi. About the Chinese atom bomb, last evening, as I was going to Sat Sang, saw a brilliant orange flash and mushroom cloud. Will ask my Timeless Guru about it.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Have reports that the Chinese have exploded an atom bomb. President concerned. US Security in serious jeopardy. Rush all available information.

From: CIA, Washington/To: Agent, Himalayas: Hello, establish cable traffic immediately.

From: Agent, Himalayas/To: CIA, Langley: Am closing station. Have turned my back on the world and the CIA. Have embraced Hinduism and assumed the name Swami Maharaj. Am off to Kashi. Om shanti, shanti!

Abominably Yours,

Here is the official text of an actual speech given at a recent session of the United Nations General Assembly by a South Asian delegate whose identity and nationality shall remain anonymous to protect the person from parcel bomb attacks:

Now, Sir, in conclusion, I humbly submit that the dilemma for the resolution of the conscious outlook is the only remedy. It is said that abhorrence for the learned in his infidelities and the inept in his devotions– our times are impatient of both and especially the last.

Let us not be pestered with assertions and half-truths, with emotion and scuffle. In the closing decades of the 20th century, these cannot conceivably solve any problem and indeed it is the source of positive danger to mankind—or words to that effect.

It declares that this community of interest, in interests makes all men, otherwise differently interested partners in the great enterprise of replacing evil with good and good with better, so as to achieve the best possible. It is proverb that to cut the cackles is never conducive to mankind. Also, it is not humanitarian to be with faraggo of twisted facts. God save us from the sprangles of cataclysm. And the scuttles of the ship should be repaired expeditiously by this august body. It is said that one man's mickle is another's muckle.

Sir, in conclusion, I greatly appreciate and express my warm gratitude to you, by giving me the floor of this august house. Thank you.

There are some who say the verbosity of South Asians, especially when they find themselves inside some 'august' house, is a genetic marker from our Gondwana forebearers. Our propensity to hold forth and obfuscate is descended directly from a rich oral tradition of passing great traditional wisdom by word of mouth from generation to generation. Later, when verbal communication gave way to the printed word, the proclivity to expound lengthily on any subject under the sun and do so till the cows came home to regurgitate got a further boost.

This is what makes us South Asians refrain from calling a spade a shovel. Instead, we refer to it as a manually-leveraged excavating equipment, and refer to Diwali as a festival with embellishments of an illuminatory nature. Subcontinental subeditors give headlines that read "Legislators Cling to Legal Nebulosity on Corruption Act" (actual headline). Sounds more like nebulous subeditors who deserve to be charge sheeted and nabbed by thugs and/or dacoits disguised as miscreants.

Sustainable Human Development is the buzzword of the decade, and provides a livelihood for so many that it is now known endearingly to those in the business as bull-SHD. Developmentalese has by now developed into a linguistic art form, and fluency in it shows sophisticated erudition. Ipso facto, it is the sine qua non for every quid pro quo.

In the end, I suppose, it boils down to how we as marginalised nations and peoples internalise the totality of the changing paradigms. We are not just paying lip-service here to end-degree refinement—benefits will accrue, but will these benefits enable communities, empower constituencies only in the much longer term? If so, what do we do in the

short-term? I think the answer is: we have to mobilise, conscientise and organise—by word of mouth, and even mouth to mouth, if necessary. Society's polarisation and inequities must be pinpointed with accuracy and tackled surgically, there must be a broad people-initiated and mass-based consciousness so that we can confront this challenge head-on at the grassroots, nationally, regionally and internationally. And we may well ask: how are we going to institutionalise the multilateral monitoring mechanisms? This is a very pertinent question at this juncture.

In this endeavour, training and facilitation are of paramount importance. We stand here at the crossroads, there is no doubt about it. And the alternative is the end of civilisation as we know it. Let me be perfectly clear here: giving a few speeches and writing a few theses is not enough, we must doubly redouble our efforts in those directions. According to me, we have to analyse and interpret the data and statistics as they become available so that policy-makers at all levels will have the tools with which to realise sustainable human development and genuine empowerment.

What is this new paradigm, then? In a nutshell (and if you will allow me just for a moment to simplify the complex dynamics of underdevelopment) it means taking a holistic initiative, a strategic bottom-up approach from the grassroots to the treetops in disseminating the macro-economic message. It means the re-intermediarisation of well-intentioned interventions within the framework of creating the necessary enabling environment and galvanisation of all sectors of society.

This is not an easy task. As we approach the beginning of a new millennium, the responsibility presents itself as a policy-polity dichotomy. I am using these words very carefully and deliberately here: how do we create the enabling mechanisms for policy change through exchange of experiences, action research and the sweat of the masses of our people who live in grinding poverty and struggle daily to make ends meet? History is replete with examples of failed promises and we must keep their lessons in mind as we come to grips with the poverty trap. We cannot do it alone. After all, as Mao Zedong said, women hold up half the sky and we must not forget this as we go about our daily business.

So, to summarise, I would like to once more re-emphasise and reiterate my conviction that social consciousness and self-correcting participatory monitoring and evaluation through multi-stakeholder constitutencies (and this is very important) which are linked closely to operational programmes hold the key to true societal advancement. If we carry out this work, then, by partnering community-based voluntary organisations with specific action agendas, we are already halfway there. And then, all that remains to be done is to replicate this in a national-level framework. If we cast a Nelsonian eye to this imperative, we will only have a Pyrrhic victory, let there be no two opinions on that score.

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