HIMAL

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May/June 1997 • Vol 10 number 3

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Vol 10 No 3 May/June 1997

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Contributing Editors Afsan Chowdhury DHAKA
Manik de Silva COLOMBO
Beena Sarwar LAHORE
Mitu Varma NEW DELHI

Senior Executive Basanta Thapa
Marketing Suman Shakya
Sujata Chhetri
Administration Balaram Sharma
Mamata Manandhar
Anil Shrestha
Layout Chandra Khatiwada

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INSIDE

COVER

South Asians are all in it together. They must collectively decide which direction they want the region to go, and how fast.

by Subhas Rai

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1997.

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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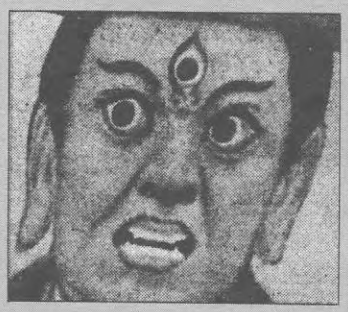
No Censorship

Having come across the commentary "On His Holiness' Secret Service" in your Jan/Feb 1997 issue, we believe we owe you an explanation. In your article you have mentioned that "Tibetan sleuths swooped on the stall and demanded that Himal be withdrawn from sale" during the last Kalachakra teachings given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Salugara.



We have been informed by the Tibetan Security office that they did not do anything of the sort. In fact, they told the stallkeepers who were selling the concerned issue of Himal that, for their own security, they shouldn't sell that particular issue which contained an article about the Dorje Shugden controversy, because the Shugden issue is a very sensitive one among Tibetans. It wasn't an attempt to censor anybody nor was it an attempt to curb the freedom of speech of anyone, leave alone Nepali citizens, who have a vibrant democracy going on back in their own country.

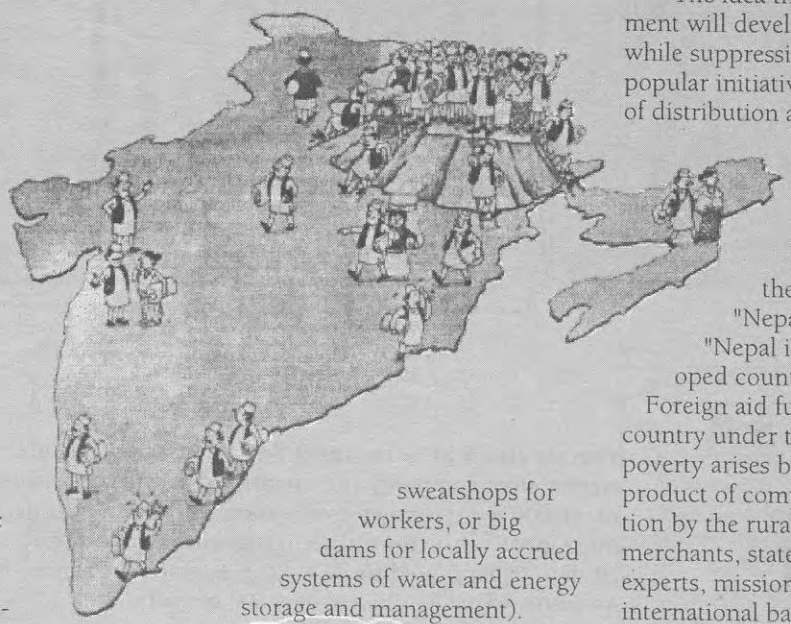
Thubten Samphel
Department of Information and International Relations
Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamshala

Blaming the Victim

Kanak Dixit's "Lowly Labour in the Lowlands" (Jan/Feb 1997) begins by stating that "the reason migrants have abandoned their homes and hearths...is...because their unproductive little farms are unable to provide sustenance", and that "the Nepali state is dutybound to ...address the extreme economic imbalance and lack of progress which makes peasants continue to seek paltry pickings in a neighbouring country." The article concludes by saying "the answer [to decreasing demand for Nepali migrants] is for the Nepali state to become serious...about genuine development in the hinterland."

I don't understand what the writer means by "genuine development" or by the state becoming serious about it. "Development" has been everywhere (except where people have resisted it) the replacing of "little farms" and small industries with corporate farms and factories; the counterbalancing of the "economic imbalance" with international finance capital and economic and social restructuring in place of restructuring unjust distribution of power and wealth; making progress of "lack of progress" with chemical fertilisers, insecticides, dams and high technology in place of environment- and community-sustaining practices; and imposing international markets on local distribution to redress the "economic marginalisation". The problems of migration decried by this issue are a product of the massive population and sociocultural displacement brought about by this "development".

Yes, the problem is the "state", but the state as a collection of people, prescriptions, powers and aggregated interests; it is not in itself a conscious being that can suddenly "become serious" about genuinely developing. Until power and initiative devolve downwards into Mr Dixit's "hinterland", which will only happen through initiative from that hinterland itself, there won't be the kind of development the writer calls for (which I presume to mean people's own development of themselves, their cultures and their communities, not of beef for rainforests, factory ships for fisheries,



sweatshops for workers, or big dams for locally accrued systems of water and energy storage and management).

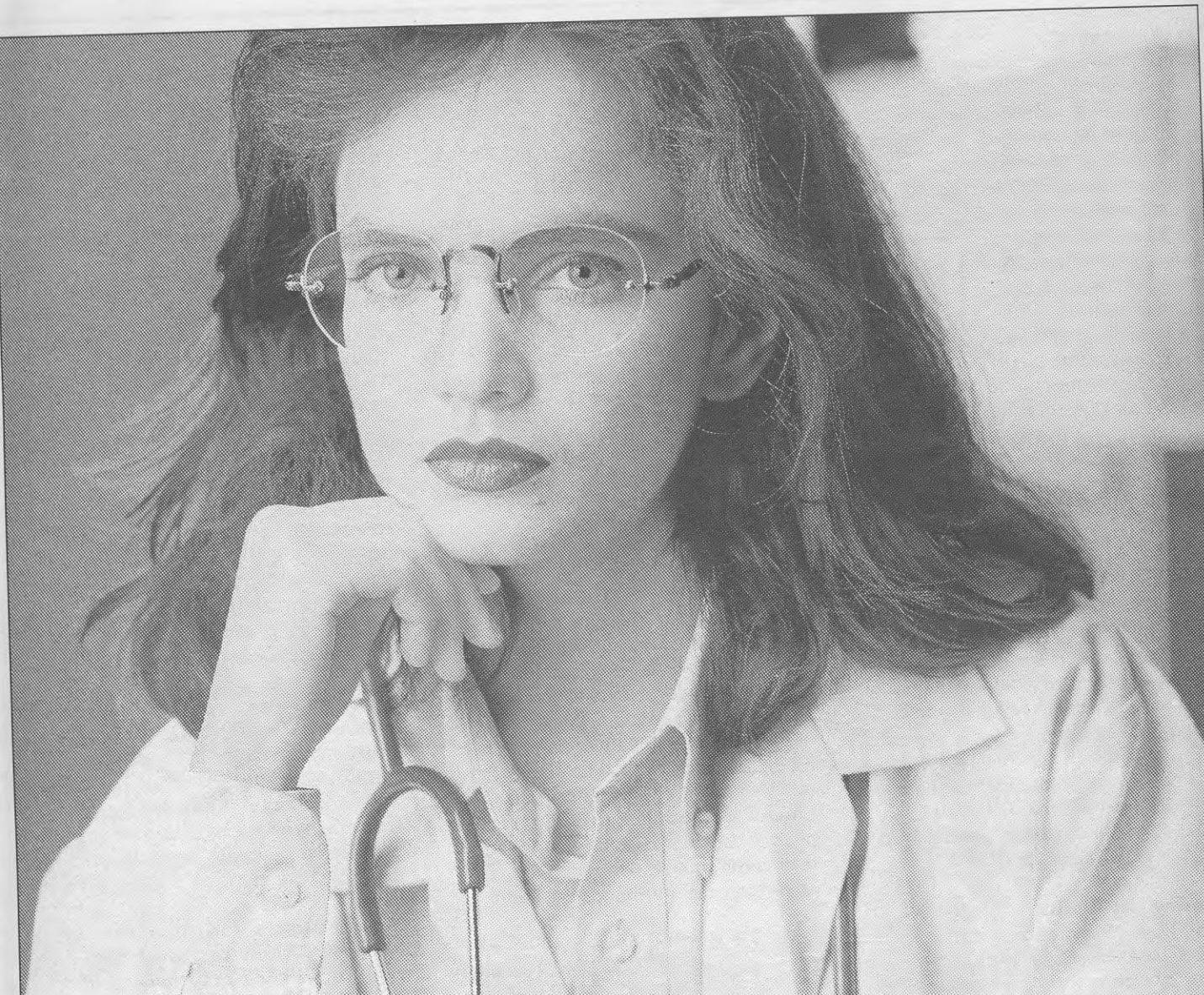
Mr Dixit initially provides an inkling of these vested interests in his attribution of the push factors of migration to the "usurious conditions in Nepal's villages created by taxation...and later the rapacious system of Rana family rule". But the next sentence relegates these concerns to the past: "In modern times, an expanding population ensured the continuing need for migration to ensure survival." This blames the victim; after all, "expanding population" and population (read *control*) programmes never refer to the rich. A look at the history of the state and what composes it shows that rapacious conditions neither began nor ended with Rana rule (1846-1951), and that it is the rich and their manner of agglomerating wealth out of Nepal's "hinterland" that has been the primary cause of migration.

This agglomeration has consisted of the historical appropriation of community resources, labour and products by a growing array of *rentier*-type groups which once transferred this wealth to building 104 palaces in the Kathmandu Valley alone. Now they not only continue to build palaces and urban artifices but purchase everything from automobiles to TV dish antennae, to say nothing of taking the very land and resources out from under the villages, using the appropriated wealth to do so. Today's situation is an intensification of a centuries-long process of taking the products out of communities rather than returning it back into natural and social production to sustain, nourish, build and develop the communities with their own labour.

The idea that foreign aid or investment will develop these communities while suppressing or stopping short popular initiatives to change the systems of distribution and exploitation of labour which are siphoning the wealth out of them is a mirage. (Note that it is always these human siphons that predicate their speeches with the saw, "Nepal is a poor country", "Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world", etc.)

Foreign aid funding, entering the country under the assumption that poverty arises by itself and is not the product of complex structures of exploitation by the rural and urban landlords, merchants, state officials, contractors, experts, missionaries, and now a flood of international banks and entrepreneurs, has generally gone to expanding these groups and strengthening their ability to expropriate products and resources from the communities.

Politically, foreign governments have



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not only underwritten and allied with these groups, usually in terms of the highest rhetoric of "democracy", "human rights", etc, but always imposed compromises that preserved the position of these groups and sustained their day-to-day violence against the villagers, forests, land and water in the name of peace. If yesterday's Nepalis are different from today's Nepalis, it is because what is being done to Nepali workers is finding a mirror in them. And I don't mean this in purely a negative sense, as popularly presented; much of their reaction takes the form of initiatives to recapture and protect community, resources, and moral imperative in the hinterland, today and in the past. And it is only in this hinterland, not "the state", the academy, foreign agencies or foreign corporations in which the possibility of getting serious about "genuine development" lies.

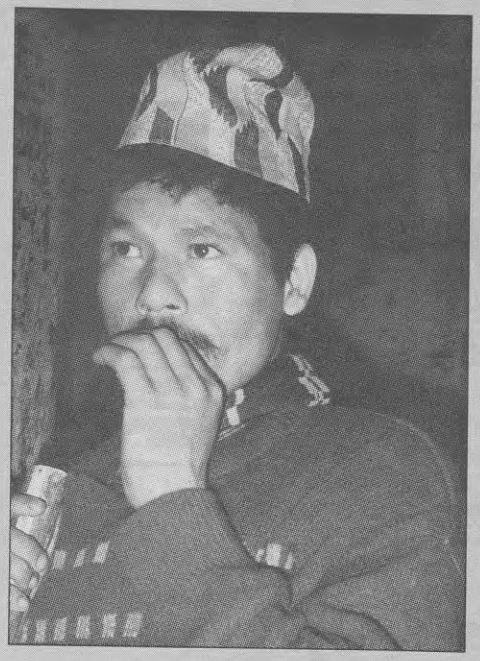
Stephen Mikesell
Madison, Wisconsin

Report from the West

Why do adult males from Nepal's western hill districts migrate to India? This question has always been ignored by Nepali academicians and that includes demographers. While it has been traditionally convenient to indicate "poverty" as the factor responsible for the exodus of Nepal's upland-dwellers to the urban centres of the Indian plains, that alone cannot explain migration that takes place in this scale. And the plea for the need for further study should not serve as an excuse any more.

Coming back to Kathmandu from a three-month-long field study in Achham, Dailekh, Doti and Jajarkot, hill districts of west Nepal, I was happy to see the Jan/Feb 1997 issue of Himal dealing with the problems I had been confronted with during my research. The magazine's effort to look into the problem of migration of Nepali hillmen is quite appreciable, but it has not done a good job analysing the "push factors". I would like to share some of my notes which could complement the magazine story.

I observed many instances in the western districts which would have me argue against the "common sense presumption" that those who migrate are only the poor. The simple response of the migrant population, rather, would help to simplify the intricacy. They say: *Khet le anna dinchha, Bharat le paisa dinchha* (Land gives us food, India provides cash). And cash is needed by the rich as well.



In search of migration history, I was informed in Bayalpata (Achham) that Singha Bire Lohar, a young ironsmith, was one of the pioneer migrants to explore the labour market in India. Back in 1931, he had visited Bombay and soon sent word back home that there was a good prospect for menial jobs. Prem Jung Swar, the then *rajawar* (head) of Bayalpata, encouraged some "lower caste" people to go, providing them with travel expenses up to Bombay, with a hope that they would be able to repay his loans.

Such anecdotal and personalised accounts can be considered suspect, but it is interesting to note that a) the migrants from Achham have a better position in the Indian labour market, and b) once well-to-do families are now in debt to the descendants of these pioneer migrants. Many of the "lower caste" families of Achham now own considerable amount of land on *mate*, land obtained as collateral for an agreed upon amount of loan. And despite their comparatively better economic status, the "lower caste" males continue to migrate even today.

In Achham and Doti, there are numerous indigenous self-help savings groups, locally called "society" (pronounced "suciety"). Such societies, formed in India to meet contingencies of the migrants, are also replicated back in the villages. Some 40 to 50 migrant families get together to form a society with each family contributing a minimum share. Some such societies now possess funds of more than three lakhs, to be used either as loans or in collective local work.

These societies have helped the traditionally indebted families to extricate themselves from the exploitative interests of the local money lenders. A widespread interest rates in the area is *"neru ko bharu"* (the same amount as borrowed in Nepali currency to be repaid in Indian currency, which at the current exchange rate works out to be 60 percent per annum).

Despite the tradition of migrating, in many cases the problems inherent remain as they are and at times can lead to difficulties of other kinds. That the intensity of migration in these hilly areas is very heavy can be seen from the example of Layati, a hamlet of 155 households in Dailekh district, from where 100 adult males left for India on a single day on 6 December 1996. In some villages of Doti district, disposing a corpse during winter becomes a problem for the lack of able males at home. Sometimes, women join their menfolk in the Indian plains, preferring this to living alone at home.

The long-time absence of males from home has other effects as well. Cases of *jari*, elopement of married women, is common in these hill districts. It is estimated that half of all marriages in these areas are the result of *jari*. These instances lead to fragile marriage unions, family breakdowns and ultimately threaten family life itself as a reliable social unit. Again, the *jar*, the man who elopes, is forced to migrate because he has to pay *jari* compensation, which sometimes is negotiated to upto sixty thousand rupees, depending on the beauty, charm and age of the woman he has eloped with.

Youba Raj Luintel
Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Tribhuvan University, 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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Neglect of Northeast

Your cover story in the Jan/Feb 1997 issue dealing with Nepali migrants in India also seemed to veer towards, to quote Dilli Ram Dahal in the same issue, "too much loose talk and not enough dedicated research on the subject". The details given about Nepalis in Delhi was adequate enough but your coverage of Bangalore seemed without logic. Surely, Madras and Calcutta have bigger populations and a look at Nepalis in those two cities would have been more representative of the entire lowlands—north, west, south and east—since you had already covered Delhi and Bombay. Alternately, the writer should also have covered the bordering cities of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, since they are nearer to Nepal and the concentration of migrant workers are obviously more in those areas.

What was most amiss was the inattention given to the Indian Northeast about which there were just two or three cursory references. The problems faced by Nepali migrants in that region justified a more thorough investigation.

All the seven states of Northeast India have been driving away "foreign nationals" and that includes Nepalis. Recently, there were cases of arson, clashes and murders in Shillong, Meghalaya. A 70-year-old Nepali woman was killed and most of the other sufferers were "foreigners" (mainly Nepalis). "*O, Nepali, pass hai?* (Nepali, do you have a valid document?) is the constant refrain from officials on a journey to the Northeast. Why do Nepalis need a pass and, if they do, what is the standing of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which guarantees free movement of each other's citizens in each other's country? The Treaty's provisions are openly flouted, yet the Indian and Nepali governments are adamant that the Treaty should remain intact.

While Nepal would not dare go against the spirit of the Treaty for obvious reasons, it is unfortunate that Lok Raj Baral, Nepal's ambassador in New Delhi, said what he did. "But what can the embassy do? We are not a social organisation," he is reported to have said when asked about the possibility of his embassy helping Nepalis in India. If his expression does not reflect the views of his government, and I hope it doesn't, it is a matter for the Nepali cabinet to consider recalling Ambassador Baral.

Mangal Singh Subba
Darjeeling

Not Only Pakistan

I see a lot of writing on Pakistan's possible "failure as a state" and India's 50th anniversary of freedom cropping up in this magazine as in others. In Pakistan, the state may be close to having "failed", but, across the border in India also, there is no evidence of the prerequisite for sustained survival in a new era—a modern state.

The withdrawal of the Congress party's support for the government in April was to me a case in point. In many countries, the fact that a budget had to be passed and two national governments that have fought three wars over the last 50 years were once again talking about some sort of reconciliation would have been enough to encourage politicians to keep the boat afloat. But Sitaram Kesri did not think so and, in what was clearly a personal gambit, upset the boat. Do we need any more evidence to tell us that with India's politicians, the national interest is *not* a priority?

India is not a modern state. It has no strategy, no roadmap, no blueprint. Malaysia has one, the Philippines has one, Singapore has one. Even America had concepts like the New Deal. In essence, these countries have leadership. India has none. The last true leader was Nehru, but when his own vision ran out it was never replaced.

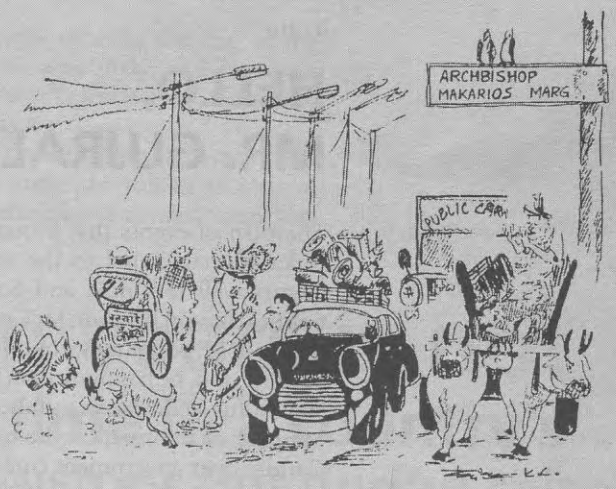
What has India achieved in 50 years of freedom to decide for itself, to set its own priorities, to do whatever it likes? Not much; other countries—from liberal democracies to "guided" or authoritarian democracies—have achieved far more. The "Abominably Yours" column in the March/April 1997 issue about the Ambassador car is telling. The Ambassador is an analogy for the country. It has not changed in 50 years. You can put in a new engine, new brake and suspension systems, but there is a limit to what you can do--and as long as the frame remains the same it cannot compete with modern automotive technology. This is being proved in the Indian marketplace every day.

With the current political paralysis and what many believe will be a long period of political and social turmoil and restructuring in India, the country runs the risk (despite ad hoc attempts at reform and market-driven liberalisation) of being relegated to a backwater. The only reason it is not considered one already is because of the size of its market—a dubious distinction as what it actually reflects is India's failure to control population growth.

I am tempted to agree with T.N. Seshan who says there is a crisis of leadership and a degeneration in India. In the world of the next century, it will not be enough merely to keep the ship afloat, even if it is a supertanker like India. A specific course must be steered.

Democracy has been kind to Indian politicians. So have voters. But one day the kindness may run out. I only hope the turmoil throws up a new, enlightened and modern leader before it is too late. The last one we had—Rajiv Gandhi—failed; such is the pervasive power of the system.

Nirmal Ghosh
Manila



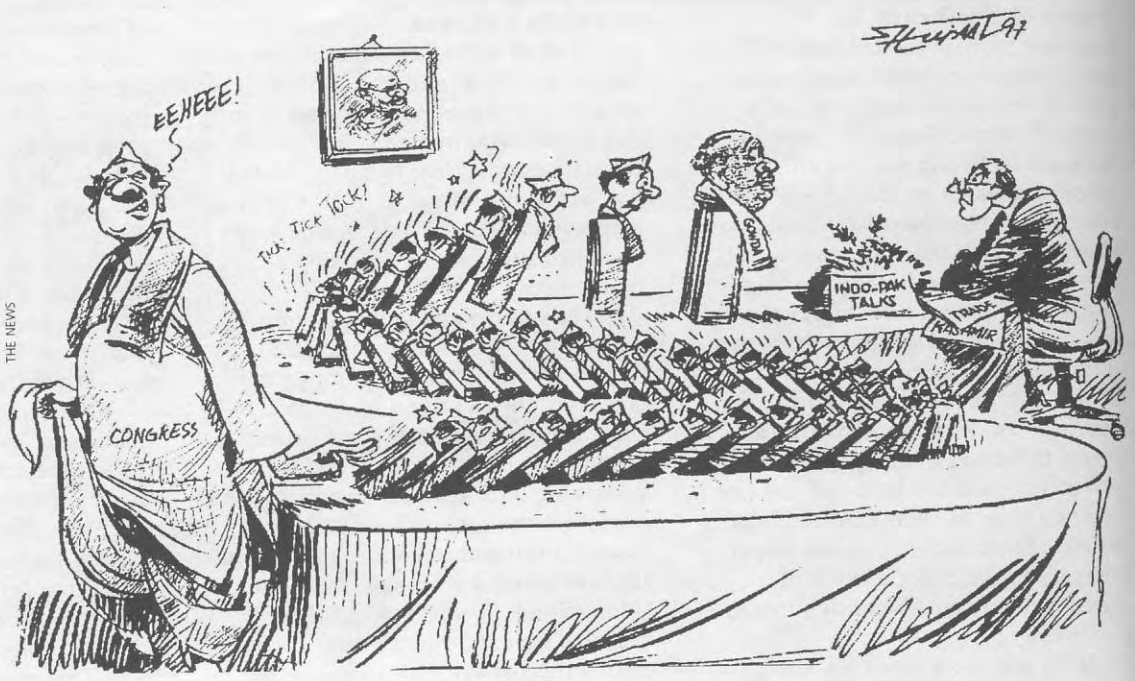
Viva Amby

Being one of the few expats in New Delhi who actually owns and loves his Ambassador, I was pleased to see that your last-page columnist (Abominably Yours, Mar/Apr 1997) feels the same way about the Old Geysers. The point about de-cloning the machines is well taken, and I'm sure you've given HM's architects a lot of good ideas. I was especially tickled by the bullock-cart proximity radar warning and the MultiBelt. Jolly good stuff.

However, I must add that the American Ambassador in Delhi, Frank Wisner, does not drive around in a Ford Escort. In fact, he rides a GM Opel Astra. Not that it makes much of a difference, either way. None of these new models comes anywhere near the trusty old Ambassador.

Kula Shaker
New Delhi

1997.



India

HELLO, MR. GUJRAL ...

The turn of events that brought the Pakistan-born Inder Kumar Gujral to the seat of Prime Minister augurs well for India and South Asia. Without a political base of his own, Mr Gujral has little to lose by taking bold, potentially unpopular measures. By personality, too, he has more than once in his long career shown his willingness to take a stand, as when, as Minister of Information, he had a spat with Sanjay Gandhi over government control of media, or when he opposed the Soviets' Afghan adventure while ambassador to Moscow.

On a South Asian plane, Mr Gujral is the architect of India's benign face to its neighbours, the drafter of the Gujral Doctrine of Non-Reciprocity. He is someone who has been derided by one Indian commentator as a member of the nefarious "Lahore Club" for being friendly with those who are promoting Indo-Pakistan people-to-people connectivity.

It was a surprise when this confirmed dove was given the high office of foreign minister of India by the previous government. And now, incredibly, he is Prime Minister of India!

Even more than in his previous role, Mr Gujral has the opportunity more than anyone else to remake South Asia. Besides setting in stone the liberal-minded non-domineering approach already incorporated in the Gujral Doctrine, he is in a position to do several other things.

First, as an intellectual who has become Prime Minister of India, Mr Gujral can promote a legitimation of regionalism within India, so that the power of the monolithic state is ratcheted down for the multiple voices of the vast and diverse multitude to be heard in the running of the state. Second, to take governance to the people at the village level, Mr Gujral needs to give teeth to the Panchayati Raj process, something started by earlier governments. Third, we would suggest that Mr Gujral pick up the Kashmir tangle and try to do something no other leader has done before him—try to solve it rather than let the wound fester further. As everyone realises, Kashmir's problem is that the Kashmiris themselves are not being given a voice in their future. The establishments, both in Islamabad and New Delhi, do not want to hear this, and Mr Gujral knows this to be true. Even if he does not succeed, he might at least raise the level of debate and lower the threshold for an eventual solution.

Mr Gujral did not come to his new job as part of any political "machine", to use an Americanism. He can, therefore, afford to tinker with the machinery.

India

GOODBYE, MR KESRI ...

Indo-Pakistan relations have always had to contend with hiccups, but what the Congress party did by pulling the rug from under the United Front government of H.D. Deve Gowda shows—among many other things—its contempt for Indian doves' efforts to mend relations with Pakistan. Bilateral talks, taking place after a hiatus of three years were ongoing across town as the Congress President Sitaram Kesri

carried out his surprise move.

In retrospect, there was no reason why the move could not have waited a few days at least. What Mr Kesri did was definitely in his personal interest, probably in the interest of the party, but definitely not in the national or regional interest. For, while Indian commentators were definitely more agitated about the national political ramifications of Mr Kesri's bid for power, those who follow geopolitics got the message loud and clear: India's premier political party, with a history of 112 years and the longest period at the helm of affairs since 1947 (including the period when all wars with Pakistan were fought), does not think talks with Pakistan to be a priority.

The irony of Mr Kesri's action is only more obvious when you take into account the widely held (and correct) assertion that Indo-Pakistan cold war is holding both the economies hostage. Hostilities between these two South Asian powers also retards socioeconomic advancement of the whole region. Nor did Mr Kesri seem to care that Inder Kumar Gujral, certainly one of the ablest foreign ministers the country has had, had invested a lot of non-partisan national political capital in resuming the high-level talks, or that Pakistan, with Mian Nawaz Sharif's strong government leading it, was responsive and had taken up the proffered olive branch.

We do not believe that the timing of Mr Kesri's announcement was the result of a conspiracy hatched in some deep recess of the Indian establishment, meant to scuttle the talks because they looked promising. That, at least, would have had the saving grace of an indication that this was a priority. The reality is that no one among the Congress party who was party to the decision even thought about the bilateral talks as they went for it—it was not a factor, it made it nowhere in the hierarchy of personal, party and domestic interests.

What is troubling about this line of analysis is that if it is true of the Congress party, then it must in varying degrees be true of all the political groupings of India as well. Relations with Pakistan assume importance as a negatively charged issue to be used whenever chauvinism needs to be stoked for political reasons. There is not nearly as much support to be had by championing the cause of reconciliation with a neighbour. This, we believe, explains why Mr Kesri and his party did not even give a passing thought to the timing of their move. It was not important, there was no mileage.

What of Mr Kesri, the man? In walking up to the Indian President and retracting his support for Mr Deve Gowda's government, the one-time Treasurer and backroom boy of the Congress was obviously concerned: first, about moving into the Prime Minister's mansion as quickly as possible, and this might or might not have had something to do with a) his age and b) a murder charge then being investigated; secondly, Mr Kesri had to find a way to keep his fractious, power-hungry flock together. What ever the reason no one could accuse the politician from Bihar of statesman-like behaviour.

Nepal

LEFT-RIGHT-LEFT-RIGHT

It is, to some, a horrific reflection of the state of Nepali politics that Lokendra Bahadur Chand is back in the prime minister's chair. Mr Chand's earlier appointment as prime minister towards the culmination of the 1990 "People's Movement" saw the largest-ever mass protest in Nepal's history. Granted, the non-menacing Mr Chand's appointment then was meant to be seen as a conciliatory move by King Birendra. But that day, 6 April 1990, saw the massacre of unarmed demonstrators by security forces in front of the royal palace.

Mr. Chand, as leader of the "royalists" went on to establish the Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP). He represented the palace in negotiations with leaders of the popular movement and the smashing of his limousine by agitated cadres of the Nepali Congress and the communists during the talks indicated the depth to which the Panchayat pols had fallen in public esteem.

The 6 April massacre ushered the end of the King's legitimacy to rule absolutely, and two days later he lifted the ban on political parties, effectively ending the Panchayat system.

The period when the new Nepali Constitution was being drafted was under the rule of an interim government, which included two royalist members, but was essentially a Congress-Leftist alliance. This government, headed by the then president of the Congress, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, failed to carry out a cathartic cleansing of the system by punishing wrongdoers of the old regime; however, it did bring in a Constitution and in June 1991 delivered the first free democratic elections in more than three decades.

Seven years is not a long time in a country's political history. But during this period Nepal has seen unfettered political promiscuity.

A majority Congress government took office, but it fell to internal squabbles barely three years into its rule. The directionlessness of subsequent years up to today began with the inability of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala to conduct political management. He took dissidence within the party as attacks on his person and over-reacted, to the extent that a sizeable chunk of the Congress party voted against him in Parliament. Mr Koirala was forced to call elections,

which resulted in a hung house with the Left romping home with more numbers.

It was then the turn of a minority government of the communists led by Man Mohan Adhikari. They were able to stay all of nine months in power—time enough for them to understand the exigencies of rule.

GOPAL CHITRAKAR

Public anger against Lokendra Bahadur Chand in April 1990.

But even as they were rapidly engaged in backtracking from their populist sloganeering, a Supreme Court verdict on a minority government's right to call elections wrested power from their hands.

The communists sputtered with rage, but could do nothing but allow a coalition of the Congress and the RPP to assume government. This Centre-Right coalition, which had the Congress party's Sher Bahadur Deuba as prime minister, enjoyed a majority in the house. During the 18 months it lasted, it increased the perks of MPs, pushed through Parliament the contentious Mahakali Treaty with India, and initiated political horse-trading that would shame horse thieves. Most importantly, this coalition rescued the RPP, as a party of the Panchayat-era personalities, from its pariah status. This centre-right coalition, crumbled on 6 March, for the simple reason that it was not possible to provide perks to everyone.

Now in power is the last of the permutations possible: the communists and the RPP in bed together. The communists are in this unlikely left-right coalition for the one pragmatic reason, to be in a position to supervise the upcoming local elections, and the subsequent mid-term polls which they are bound to be call. Indeed, if there is any further evidence required to prove that politics is all about getting or retaining power, it is by this incongruous partnership between monarchists and communists.

Being honed in the school of dialectical materialism, the latter have once again shown their mastery at wordplay. The current arrangement is sought to be justified as the means towards the attainment of *bahudaliya janabad* (multi-party people's democracy), whereby they have joined a *rashtrabadi shakti* (nationalist force) to set up a *janamukhi sarkar* (people-oriented government). The attempt is made to divert the people (and the cadre's) attention from the fact that a rightwing Prime Minister heads a leftwing government.

The Nepali experiment of the last seven years has been democracy in fast forward. What became in England the Westminster model, was the result of a seven-century evolution. Nepal saw an authoritarian king transformed overnight into a constitutional monarch, and the political classes themselves are left befuddled with the rapid changes.

Seven years is not a long time in a country's political history. But during this period Nepal has seen unfettered political promiscuity. Result: apathy towards politicians, growing disillusionment the democratic process among most Nepalis. All this takes politics even further from its real purpose: ensuring good government so living standards can be raised.

Pakistan

TAKING COURTSHIP TO COURT

An adult woman, well-educated by Pakistani standards, left her parents declaring that she wished to live with the man she had quietly married. For reasons of security, the woman, 22-year-old Saima Waheed took refuge in a half-way house for women in distress.

Her father filed a *habeas corpus* petition in the Lahore High Court. Pakistani law and practice required the court only to ascertain whether the woman had attained the age when she could have decided on her future by herself and whether she had acted of her free will. The matter appeared to have been settled when Ms Waheed was found to be *sui juris* (legally competent to manage one's own affairs) and when she declared in court that she had voluntarily entered into matrimony.

A criminal case was then instituted against her husband on charges of tampering with a marriage record, but this was a different matter that had no bearing on Ms Waheed's freedom of choice. Yet the issue developed into a long-drawn out legal battle, the one-member High Court bench was enlarged to three judges, while Ms Waheed's counsel, the widely respected human rights campaigner Asma Jahangir became the target of harassment and calumny. Instead of being treated as a *habeas corpus* matter, the case revolved around the question of whether a *nikah* (marriage contract) undertaken without the consent of parents, even if the girl was *sui juris*, could be considered valid, and whether such a marriage could be invalidated by the court.

While this case was pending, a single judge of the

Lahore High Court gave a judgement on petitions filed by two women who had married of their own accord and pleaded for the annulment of criminal cases filed against them and their husbands by their parents. The court held that the marriages were void and that no Muslim woman could marry without the consent of her *wali* (guardian). The ruling was stayed by the Supreme Court where the case is currently pending and where Ms Waheed's case will also be heard.

The cases have attracted attention because of the challenge they put to the belief held by most Muslims, if not all, that Islam allows adult women the freedom to choose their own spouses. In a split two-one judgement in the Saima Waheed case, the Lahore High Court conceded her right to freedom of movement and residence, and also allowed her to go with her husband—but on the grounds that it did not find the sanction to declare her marriage invalid. That was the part that gave relief. But at the same time, the court not only disapproved of women marrying without their parents' concurrence, it appeared to be laying down a new law, pending fresh legislation, to empower the courts to determine the validity of such marriages. This cannot but cause anxiety.

The settled law, inspired by respect for women's rights as well as the considerations of a happy family life, allows women the freedom to choose their husbands; it holds that girls cannot be married before they are able to make sound choices, and that if given in marriage at a small age, a girl has the right to get the contract annulled on reaching puberty; lastly, women also have as much right to seek divorce as men have the freedom to pronounce it. Why is it considered necessary to deviate from this law? The reason given is that Pakistani Muslim women should not be allowed to deviate from the injunctions of common belief (not necessarily theirs) and social morality. Both assumptions may not be valid. Regarding the notion of belief, women are being subjected to a code which is not unanimously accepted and whose reinterpretation in today's context is denied only by obscurantists. Pleas for social morality proceed from the erroneous assumption that social mores do not change.

Saima Waheed in court.

The crucial issue that needs to be debated is whether Pakistani society will be better off by adapting itself to the call of the age of human rights and freedom—or whether it is necessary and at all possible to legislate the maintenance of social attitudes that the current intellectual climate and scale of economic activity have rendered untenable. This matter does not concern one woman, or even just a few women. Nor does it concern Pakistani women alone. It is an issue that will determine the future of Pakistani society itself.

–I.A. Rehman

South Asia

TEST OF THE TREATY

Expectations were high in Bangladesh when the newly-signed Farakka Treaty came into effect on 1 January 1997. Bangladeshis swung into action to take advantage of the additional flows as the control gates at Farakka opened to release the waters. Work was begun to restore the lean season flows on the Gorai, a distributary of the Ganga, and the long-silent pumps on the Ganga-Kobadak project were restarted to prepare for the Kharif crop plantation. There was also new hope for inland navigation, fisheries and fresh water supplies to the southern Khulna region.

But everyone knew that, euphoric government pronouncements notwithstanding, the true test of the Farakka Treaty signed in December 1996 between India and Bangladesh would lie in the water levels in March. And as the dry days of March approached, the Ganga's flow progressively dwindled. On the last week of the month, the discharge at Farakka was only 46,000 cubic feet per second (cusec), much lower than the 50,000 cusec minimum threshold mentioned in the Treaty. As it was insufficient to fulfill the allocation specified in the Treaty, Indian and Bangladeshi officials met to seek a solution and immediately went into a deadlock.

The entire edifice of the 1996 Treaty actually rests on the stated availability of dry season flow in the Ganga at Farakka. The 1997 lean season, serving as its first litmus test, showed that there was not enough water to meet its elaborate allocation schedule *(for more details of the Treaty, see Himal Jan/Feb 1997)*. All in all, it became evident that the architects of the Treaty had been rather optimistic in assessing water quantum available at Farakka.

The low flow of the Ganga required a culprit, and bureaucrats and politicians began flailing at every which direction—blaming low rainfall in Nepal, pointing the finger at inadequate melting of snow in the Himalayan catchments, or withdrawal of water by upstream states of India.

While the cause and effect of snowmelt and catchment rainfall and their impact on the Ganga's dry season levels remains an inexact science, it seemed unlikely that these were the cause of the low flows of

spring 1997, show that snowmelt and rainfall were "average". The more likely cause for the declining flow of the Ganga is limitless withdrawal by upstream Indian states (which also use some barrages just within Nepal or on the border). But to verify that one would need government reports and data sheets which are still considered state secrets in India.

In the meantime, other political dynamics that have direct bearing on the Farakka Accord have begun to emerge. A glimpse is provided in a recent publication of the Government of Bihar. The state was not made party to the discussions that led to the 1996 Treaty and that is why the critical tone of the Bihari document assumes importance. The report calls for cessation of continuing upstream water withdrawals in Uttar Pradesh as well as creation of a Ganga River Basin Organisation to facilitate agreement between the co-basin states regarding allocation of Ganga waters. In a sense, it seeks region-wide discussion of Ganga as a resource which New Delhi has always been leery of. Even more important is the implication of "region-wide". In its earlier definition, it meant Bangladesh, India and Nepal, whereas in future—if Bihar's stance is any guide—it will include the affected states of India as well, each with its own set of problems and priorities.

March 1997: Bangladesh's Hardinge Bridge with Ganga at "low flow" in far distance.

A statement made in the Bihar Legislature by the State Water Resources Minister Jagadanda Singh is instructive. Responding to the situation arising out of the Farakka accord, Mr Singh said: "As the Government of Bihar has made arrangements for using all the flow of the Kosi, Gandak, Mahananda and other rivers in the dry season, the central government will have to seek Bihar's cooperation in maintaining the agreement." This position of Bihar is a stark reflection of the complexity of water management in the days ahead, for the Ganga basin involves not only the Hindi heartland states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, but also Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Haryana and West Bengal. Nepal and Bangladesh, of course, bring in the international dimension.

It remains to be seen how the problem of low flow at Farakka will be handled. There is no magic formula that offers a way out to meet water needs of all parties in the lean season. The stated quantum, in all probability, is unavailable.

Several proposals for augmenting water volume have been made, each of which has its own attendant social and environmental costs as well as high risks. But do they offer a way out? Even if construction of major infrastructure were to begin immediately, it will take at least a decade to be completed. Until that happens, water will still have to be provided to Bangladesh as per the Treaty in the years ahead. Inability to fulfill the commitment would be at the cost of credibility to the Indian state.

To meet the obligation in the intervening period, New Delhi has no option but to look "inward" and confront the challenges of water management head on. For its part Bangladesh should remain sensitive to India's heterogeneity. And Nepal has to show more interest in the whole debate. After all, it sits on the Himalayan "water towers" where sites of the several proposed storage dams are located.

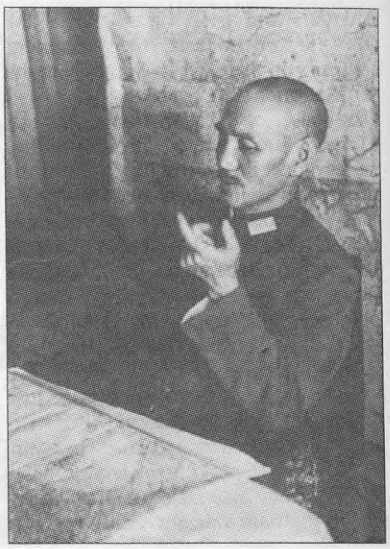
Despite hurdles, concluding the 30-year agreement with Bangladesh, would have been the best Golden Jubilee gift by the Indian state to its own people and the region. But the disputes seething under the surface of the Ganga, within India and across its borders, may spill out with serious consequences for the future.

–Ajay Dixit

China • Tibet

BUDDHISM ON THE MAINLAND

The Dalai Lama's trip to Taiwan gives an inkling of the future, and a faint lining of hope. Thus far, for all the euphoria associated with the discovery of Tibetan-Buddhism-In-Exile by a soul-starved West, the prognosis for Tibetans within Tibet was nothing but bleak. Even if Richard Gere says so, the fact is that cultural inundation is going on there.



Chiang Kai-Shek might not have approved.

What has been so frustrating of the Tibetan encounter with the Han has been the latter's blanket refusal to consider the case for "genuine autonomy", which is the Dalai Lama's demand, and represents a card he should have kept close to his chest but disclosed back in 1988. Beijing has stonewalled every effort by Tenzin Gyatso to shove an olive branch into its hands, which represents extreme (Han) nationalism and not a little bit a racism on the part of the Middle Kingdom towards its peripheral minorities.

Even while the Dalai Lama jets around the world as the most liked spiritual statesman of our times, the compassion he preaches falls among brambles over in Beijing. The Chinese phalanx against the Tibetans include not only the aged commissars, but the reformers *and* the dissidents as well. While a few of the last category, in exile in the West, might make some genuflections, that is only momentary compassion.

The joyous reception which the Taiwanese Chinese accorded the Dalai Lama cannot be explained only in terms of welcoming one's enemy's enemy as a friend. By all accounts, there was a fair degree of spontaneity with which the *Chinese* took to Tenzin Gyatso.

Taiwan's Chinese represent an economically comfortable population seeking some spiritual sustenance and some amount of fashionable posturing. In the Dalai Lama, they found a person who could give them both. More significantly, perhaps, these 'exiled' Chinese seem to have also been tugged by the subliminal tug of Tibetan Buddhism, which entered Chinese society as the official religion of the Qing dynasty.

What has apparently happened in Taiwan is that historical distance and the broadmindedness which is the privilege of the well-off has overcome the nationalist need (of the old Kuomingdang) to insist on subjugating Tibetan society to the extent that it loses all its attributes. It is possible that the same can happen in the mainland, and this is the 'lining' referred to earlier.

As the mainland prospers, and here is the hope, will the mainland Chinese rediscover their own cultural and 'spiritual' links to old Tibet? Will there emerge a lobby at long last to demand a go slow on the continuous cultural revolution which has been foisted on the high plateau for four decades? For this reason alone, it would help if Tibetans prayed and organised Kalachakra ceremonies—wishing quick and voluminous prosperity for all Chinese.

The Dalai Lama's welcome in Taiwan represents an economically comfortable Chinese population seeking some spiritual sustenance.

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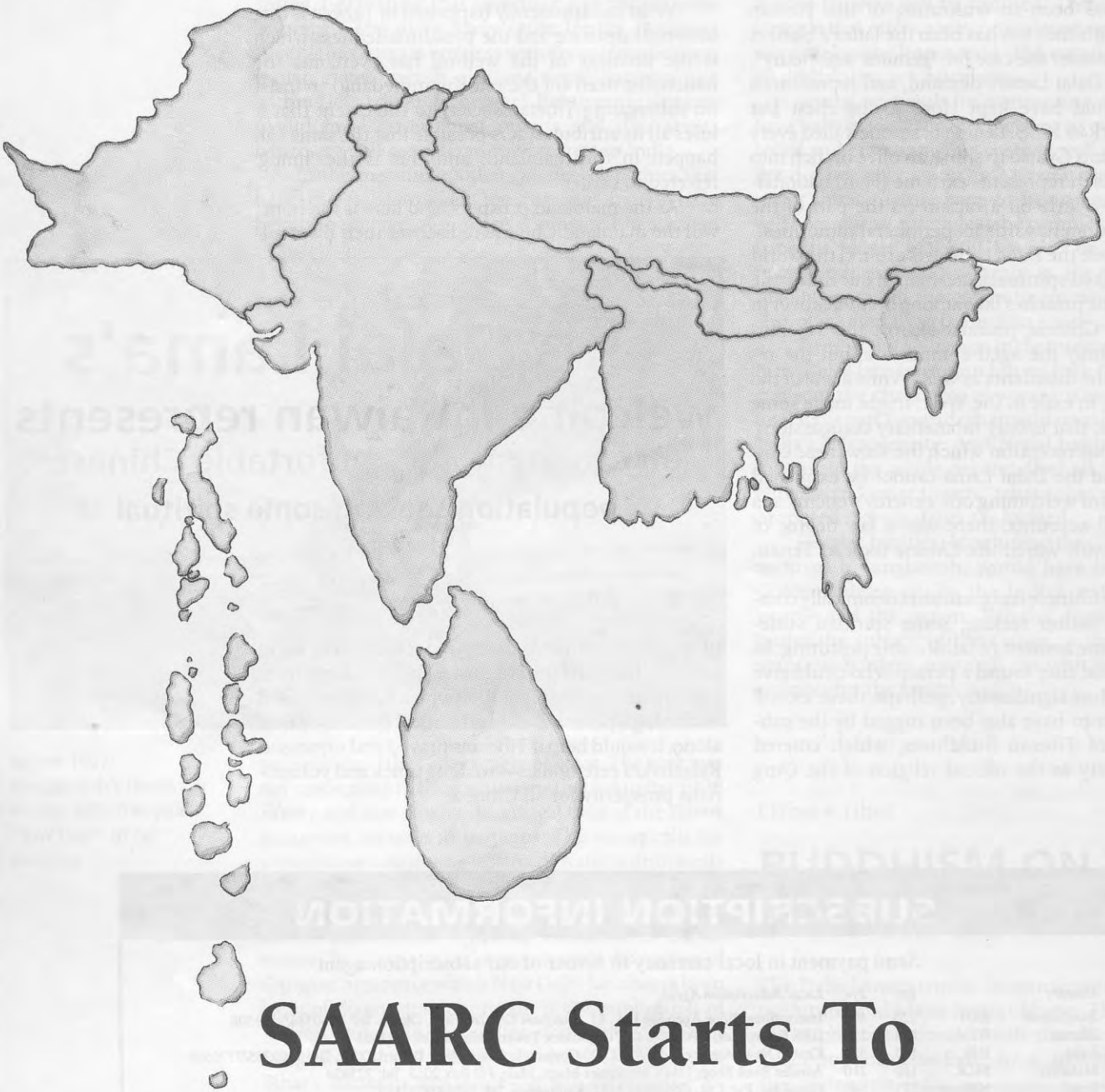

SAARC Starts To Get Serious

SAARC has had the thankless task of bringing together countries that are quite disparate in size, economic scale and geopolitical clout, and to give them a sense unity and direction. Since its birth more than a decade ago, the organisation has been compared to other regional groupings such as ASEAN and the European Community and found to be wanting. South Asians have enjoyed lampooning their own organisation for its impotence and ineffectiveness, little realising that in doing so they are merely laughing at themselves.

Not least because of the ingrained and self-serving cynicism of South Asia's educated classes, SAARC is barely the sum of its parts—the summits, the Secretariat, and meetings of bureaucrats with national agendas. And yet, there remains the possibility of making something of this organisation, to convert it into a dynamic and creative institution to promote a South Asian coming together as much.

At the same time, outside of the SAARC organisation, there is progress being achieved by something called the "SAARC process", which repre-

sents the instinctive urge of South Asian civil society to reach out across existing borders and assert historical and cultural identities. Activists have been meeting actively, and cross-South Asian meetings have grown from a trickle to a torrent. It was when businessmen began to show interest in regional cooperation a few years ago, however, that the SAARC process became 'real' in the minds of many. If *they* thought they could make money off this thing, then it must really be happening!

While individual countries will remain cautious in certain sensitive areas—such as Bangladesh in transit, Nepal on water or Pakistan on trade—there is now agreement on the need to give SAARC some teeth. This seriousness with SAARC extends to all sectors: the foreign offices of the member governments, the Secretariat, in the various national chambers of commerce and industry, and, individuals and nongovernmental groups. They all see the possibility of improving the quality of life in South Asia by thinking regionally, acting locally.

Sprucing Up the Secretariat. The SAARC Secretariat, situated a stone's throw from the royal palace in Kathmandu, is asked to play the role of an effective impresario at the centre of the regional mobilisation. Its role will be to dare recalcitrant government to place radical path-breaking work plans before the governing Council of Ministers, and to take the summits as far as the presidents, prime ministers and kings will let it go. The Secretariat must also now take on a hands-on role of facilitating (not monitoring) contact among the thousands of voluntary groups of South Asia, who represent the people more than the bureaucrat or the businessman does.

For all the hopes that are pinned on it, the Secretariat will sink or swim depending on the abilities of the secretaries general that get appointed. It is Sri Lanka's turn to choose the next top official, and after that comes Bhutan's before the cycle is complete. Meanwhile, it has to be conceded that the rotational system of this high office and the limited two-year terms are incongruous and hark back to the times when not much was expected of the organisation. Both have to change for the sake of long-term perspective and continuity.

Poor Activism, Worse Scholarship. There are obvious limits to what the SAARC organisation can achieve, but none whatsoever with the SAARC process. Having been relegated to nationalist intellectual ghettos for half a century, South Asian professionals—journalists, doctors, scholars, filmmakers, activists, librarians, teachers and hundreds of other categories—are discovering each other's world. Activities are proliferating, and there is no day when somewhere, some people are not meeting to discuss a regional subject—and this does not even include the 400 or so activities spawned annually by the official SAARC.

Unfortunately, numbers do not mean quality. While it is well-known that the majority of the inter-governmental activities organised by the Secretariat are quite dysfunctional, this problem also exists with the meetings called by NGOs. Partly, this is because South Asian meetings have become a fad and many individuals without commitment come along for the ride. There is "donor interest" in South Asian activities and these meetings come fully 'funded', but most have not been able to get beyond the hail-fellow-well-met stage. The declarations of "solidarity" are getting a little tiresome, and it is time for action, for groups must go beyond benign regionalism and challenge and goad their societies and governments so as to bring down suspicion and promote cooperation.

If the obstacles to cross-border contact—which include visa restrictions, hassles with transportation, and poor telecommunications—were to be reduced, there is no doubt that there will be more *instinctive* gathering of South Asians. It should be possible to meet even without 'funding', for example, by taking surface transport to a city in a neighbouring country. (This is now feasible between Bangladesh, India and Nepal with the Indian government's decision to allow dual entry visas for Bangladeshis visiting Nepal—journalists, activists and others are already taking the overland route to South Asian cooperation.)

Part of the reason why SAARC was not more effective in its first decade is that it was not challenged enough by academia and media. As with NGOs, there was a lack of seriousness among the majority of scholars and commentators who took up the study of South Asian regionalism. Because they saw the organisation as a non-starter, many good researchers stayed away from SAARC studies, leaving the field open for mediocrity to flourish. Now that SAARC is slowly moving to centre stage, good scholars and journalists, too, are discovering regionalism, but there will be a time lag before their work makes an impact.

It has not helped either that the scholars who have deigned to study SAARC have extremely close links with officialdom in each of their countries, which affects their critical faculties. Neither has it been all to the good that SAARC studies have been to a large extent monopolised by former bureaucrats, who as part of the "system" are hardly likely to put radical ideas into the slipstream. Dull and descriptive writing is the bane of the establishment media and scholarship, which produces voluminous literature—on refugees, development, water resources and what have you—without providing too much light. If meritocracy comes to South Asian studies, the SAARC organisation will flourish.

Great India. When academia begins to get serious on SAARC, it will find that the single challenge to regionalism in South Asia is geographical—the sheer size of India in the middle, bordering on each South Asian country, none of which borders each other. India's overwhelming presence, beyond physical expanse, its population and diversity, its economy and its geopolitical clout as a regional superpower, makes talk of regional cooperation unreal to some. The physical and demographic proportions of the country, its economy, history and political power, then, may be seen to set objective limits to the growth of SAARC as a regional organisation.

Beyond size, there is a psychological barrier

posed by the fact that the map or satellite image of South Asia is essentially a picture of India's coastline. The shores of both Pakistan and Bangladesh fail to provide distinctive features to divert from India's all-pervasive image. Then, there is the rich history of South Asia, which, after 1947, has been essentially cornered by India as its own legacy. Even the Red Fort or Taj Mahal, which Muslim Pakistan might have taken as its nationalist icons (it lacks many), happen to fall within India.

In the UN General Assembly, the one-nation, one-vote formula works because the incongruities are ironed by the large number of members. SAARC's membership, however, is divided into four tiers: diminutive Maldives (250,000) and Bhutan (650,000 or so); small Sri Lanka (18 million) and Nepal (22 million); mid-sized Pakistan (120 million) and Bangladesh (125 million); and a gigantic India, with more than 900 million people, standing alone and beyond all comparison. There is, therefore, a certain unreality behind an institution which gives "equal time" at the summits to an Indian Prime Minister and the Maldives' Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who speaks for a population one-hundredth the size of metropolitan Bombay.

Defining the limits of SAARC is an important part of "getting serious" about the organisation, and without recognising the reality of India's role and position there can be no proper analysis. In fact, its very centrality requires that India play a prominent role in fostering regionalism. But it is *how* it plays this role that will set the tone for the organisation as a whole. One can look for some parallels in the ASEAN region, where Indonesia also has an overwhelming presence. That grouping began to work and the economic boom was forthcoming after Indonesia deliberately decided to maintain a low profile. Will the Gujral Doctrine of Foreign Minister I. K. Gujral give way to the Gujral Doctrine of Prime Minister I.K. Gujral? One already sees the beginnings of a new Indian attitude, which also indicates a New Delhi more comfortable with itself.

Fortuitously, the sea-change in perception of regional cooperation in South Asia happened as India took up the chairmanship of SAARC at the New Delhi Summit of April 1995. The moment had come for this predominant South Asian, chairing the organisation for the second time, to show its fealty to regionalism, so long derided by Indian commentators as merely an attempt at ganging up by India's neighbours.

The fall of P.V. Narashimha Rao's government brought to power in New Delhi a coalition government representing the regions of India, which did not have the fierce centricism of the national parties of the Delhi Raj. The United Front's attitude was certainly more amenable to Subcontinental regionalism, and, as Foreign Minister, the dovish Mr Gujral was the ideal person to lead India into the SAARC chairmanship. There also seems to have been a fine confluence in the working relationship of SAARC's serving secretary general, Pakistan's Naeem U Hasan, and the hierarchy in South Block looking after regional affairs.

Hopefully, the change in regional perception in New Delhi is not a momentary blip, and the continuities that the Indian Foreign Service represents will mean that India's transformed attitude regarding the region will be maintained by the governments to come, whatever their makeup.

Regionalism and 'Regionalism'. India's size and diversity are not necessarily a fearsome presence for other South Asians, if one takes the long look of history. To begin with, while India might indeed be a great power at the centre, it has regions that impinge on each of its neighbours. By promoting regionalism through SAARC, therefore, India will be promoting the advancement of each of these regions. Any advantage that accrues from SAARC regionalism will also benefit each of the regions of India that borders the neighours.

The regionalism of SAARC and the 'regionalism' seen within the nation states are two separate concepts which, ironically, now seem to point in the same direction. SAARC regionalism means the coming together of different countries for the sake of peace and development. Intra-state regionalism, while an anathema to so many in the national establishments, indicates the release of native genius in the various parts of each large country, and a flowering of identity and assertion long suppressed by the nationalist strait-jacket.

The decade ahead, therefore, should see evolution at the two extremes of the nation state at the centre, the entity left behind by the colonialists. There will be South Asia-wide cooperation as a vital activity to bring separated peoples together, even while another process provides for a devolution of powers from the capitals (of all, perhaps, but the smallest states) to the regions. The mechanism will differ from country to country, but only this formula will provide a future for all South Asians.

It would be incumbent upon the "SAARC organisation" to promote inter-state cooperation. It would be the responsibility of the "SAARC process", or the outside-of-government representatives of the South Asian people, acting within their own countries and cross-pollinating across the borders, to push forward the agenda of within-state regionalism and decentralisation.

South Asia is headed into uncharted waters in the years ahead, as education, communication, trade and technology make mincemeat of old understandings and expectations. Without doubt, the SAARC organisation will be there promoting cooperation among governments; and without doubt, too, individuals and groups will be trying to make the region after their own visions of what should be.

In the uncertain times ahead, whenever the question of utility of SAARC arises, and whenever there is a need to seek direction for any cooperative South Asian activity, the test should always be in what way the mass of the people can benefit. There are too many vested interests, among politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, and even journalists and activists. And so if barriers are to be brought down, or in some cases even maintained, let this alone be the test—what is in it for the people...

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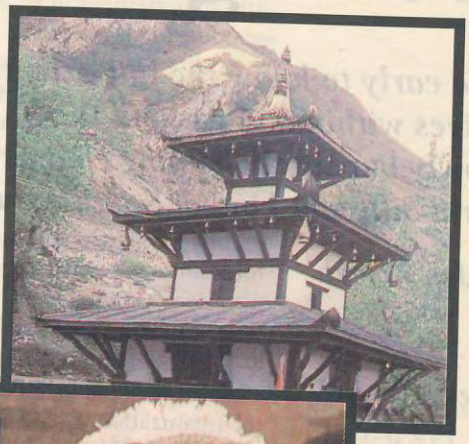

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Nothing Official About It

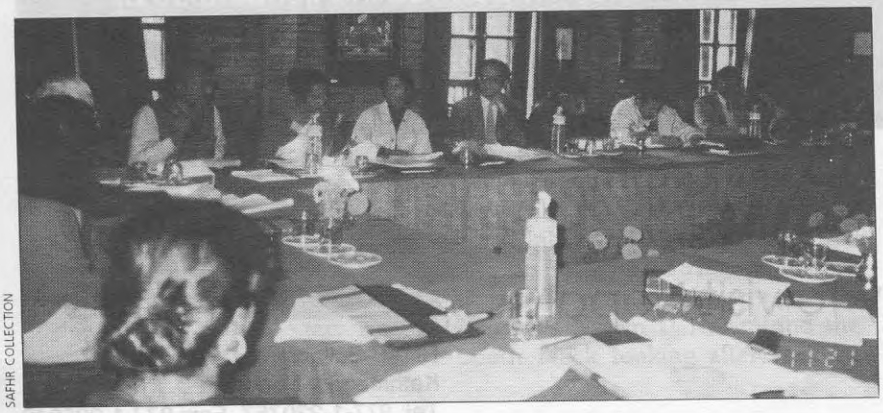
It is too early to know the full extent, but non-official initiatives within and without the SAARC organisation are slowly but surely helping change attitudes, and deliver a different kind of South Asia.

by Iftekhar Zaman

The success or failure of SAARC in advancing regional cooperation is dependent upon the inescapable fact that it is an inter-governmental organization. Even within the areas of cooperation that have been agreed upon, it will be as effective as the member-governments desire it. In other words, the scope and pace of cooperation that the governments find conducive to their perceived interests will play the decisive role. The question then arises, to what extent the individual governments are sensitive to the expectations of the people about the initiative known as SAARC. How far have signals from the "non-official" SAARC process been able to goad governments in the direction of cooperation?

The second half of the first decade of the SAARC organisation witnessed some decidedly positive developments. First, SAARC acquired a fairly elaborate institutional infrastructure, and appeared to have achieved the resilience needed to survive recurrent setbacks that are a part of South Asian reality. The organisation has also developed the *potential* of a war-preventive and peace-facilitating forum. Second, progress towards the institutionalisation of democracy in several countries also helped SAARC. Third, nearly every country has introduced bold and basic reforms for economic liberalisation, success in which may also promote interdependence. Initiatives on the economic front promise higher rates of growth, greater macro-economic stability, increased foreign direct investment, an expanding middle class, growing modernisation and fast access to the information revolution. All these indications are favorable for regionalism.

The prospects of stability, peace and cooperation, however, are far from deeply rooted, and the instabilities within and between countries continue to cloud prospects. The region is rife with endemic instability related to political, ethnic, communal, sectarian and other types of conflict. The sources of conflict are of 'structural' nature, with their roots in history, geopolitics, economics and ecology. The same historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious values that bind the nations together also keep them apart. Progress in SAARC is also hostage to divergent political and security perceptions originating in the division of the Subcontinent and its subsequent fallout.



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It is against this backdrop that the effectiveness of nonofficial initiatives for cooperation in South Asia have to be looked at. There are two main streams of non-official dialogue process that are at work in South Asia to complement the official SAARC process. The first is an informal process on the sidelines of the official events and agenda, while the second is the whole spectrum of initiatives outside it.

Common Contentious Concerns

As an institution, SAARC was born handicapped when the governments decided to limit themselves to cooperation in non-controversial areas of socioeconomic and cultural nature, and decided to keep "bilateral and contentious" out of the Association's purview. A close examination of the SAARC process will reveal, however, that while initiatives for cooperation have been facing severe challenges because of instability in inter-state relations, the Association has served as a forum where members have discussed—successfully or not—problems having implications for regional security and stability.

One notable aspect has been the increased frequency of mutual contacts at official and political levels. And there has hardly been any major SAARC event that did not witness informal consultation of member states on issues of dispute. Such issues do not appear as agenda items, but outside these the leaders and officials discuss matters of common concern practically without restriction. The trend was set in the first SAARC summit held in 1985 in Dhaka, when the member-governments decided through "informal" consultations to explore the possibility of expanding their cooperation in combating drug trafficking and abuse, and terrorism—which are not only politically complex but also quite controversial and basically of bilateral implication. Negotiations continued even though prospect for cooperation was rather remote, and in the end, two regional conventions, one on the suppression of terrorism and the other on prevention of drug abuse and trafficking, came into effect in 1988.

Similarly, the SAARC forum has been used for informal negotiations on some issues of bilateral nature. Such issues include the sharing of water resources between Bangladesh and India, the

Indo-Pakistan controversy over the nuclear issue, and the Indo-Sri Lankan problem over ethnic conflict in the latter. The recent signing of the water-sharing agreement between Dhaka and New Delhi is the culmination of a process in which a whole series of non-official dialogues within and outside the SAARC process contributed. The Indo-Pakistan agreement not to strike each other's nuclear installations is another example of successful confidence-building diplomacy using SAARC as a platform.

While these are official dialogues riding the coat-tails of formal SAARC meetings, the period since the launching of SAARC has witnessed an unprecedented rise in various types of "non-official"—often referred to as "Track Two"—initiatives. Though contacts at people's level is nothing new in South Asia, a multiple flowering of regional dialogues has been a striking feature of recent years. (Incidentally, the frequency of strictly official events have also increased a lot, facilitating greater interaction between thousands of South Asians. As early as in 1987, the number of SAARC events organised by the various technical committees under SAARC's Integrated Programme of Action was estimated to be well over two hundred annually. That number has gone up considerably since then, and there is about one meeting taking place daily today.)

According to an inventory compiled recently of on-going non-official bilateral and regional initiatives, there are more than 40 categories of interactions in progress. Numerous channels are at work. These include academia, research institutions and various other professional groups including media and social groups; issue-based organisations involved with environmental, gender, human rights, and so on; and development workers, election monitors, accountants and management experts, engineers, educators, consultants, business representatives, students groups, youth and private individuals, even political parties, trade unionists, speakers and parliamentarians. This outpouring of nonofficial activism can be viewed as an expression of what is expected of SAARC at the popular level.

Growth Industry

To be fair to the SAARC process, it may be too early to start totting up achievements. It is fair to say, however, that the non-official interactions have become a kind of growth industry, with the number of initiatives increasing by the day. This has certainly improved the scope and channels for better linkage of individuals and institutions within the region. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives have remained singular events, rather than transforming into any sustained process of networking. Few have well-defined directions, and most importantly, there is hardly any coordination of the various initiatives through an institutional mechanism. Nevertheless, the activities have served to bring into sharper focus the issues of regional cooperation from the point of view of academics, researchers, journalists, retired government officials, NGO activists and, in some cases, the business leaders who are the most frequent participants in the process.

In terms of impact on policies, it is not very dramatic. Typically, these initiatives produce a variety of papers or reports, sometimes published in the form of books, monographs, or in journals. Unfortunately, the experience has been that these publications hardly find any use at the official level. Even those that secure access to high offices very soon start to accumulate dust. Occasionally, however, there are initiatives of policy-oriented institutions which do provide useful input to the official process.

If one recalls, the imperatives for the very emergence of SAARC was articulated by a series of studies under the aegis of the Colombo-based Committee for Studies in Cooperation and Development. The working paper on the Bangladeshi proposal to launch the Association was prepared by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies. Mention may be made also of the work of the Independent Group on South Asian Cooperation, which helped include some core economic and developmental areas such as poverty alleviation and trade cooperation in the Association's agenda. The efforts of high-level officials close to the formal SAARC process and involvement of retired officials seems to have been especially helpful for initiatives to bear fruit.

Overall, the interaction between the non-official and official efforts remains far from institutionalised. But an attitudinal change appears to be taking place among officials, who are now more receptive to ideas coming from the non-official South Asian initiatives. One shortcoming of these initiatives is that they remain mostly confined to professionals, such as those in the academic and research communities. Academics, researchers, media and NGO activists may be enthusiastic in rushing in to tackle areas governments are reluctant to enter, but their ability to influence policy South Asia-wide remains fairly restricted. Similarly, very little effort has gone into roping in the younger generation of professionals—future policy-makers and opinion-shapers—who tend to be free from inhibitions and historical baggage and hence can be expected to bring fresh perspectives to old positions.

The factors which impede the process of cooperation in South Asia are many, and they will not be disappear overnight—SAARC or no SAARC. Despite continued setbacks and limitations, however, the growing interface between the official and non-official process has led to the building of regional public opinion in favour of strengthening regional cooperation. This must lead, in time, to the evolution of political institutions and processes which will work to make governments sensitive to the will of the people. Much will also depend upon the success and impact of the economic liberalisation process. Meanwhile, the expanding channels of non-official initiatives must be dovetailed into a committed network, which would work towards strengthening the civil society of South Asia.

I. Zaman is Executive Director of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo. The views expressed are his own.

The efforts of high-level officials close to the formal SAARC process and involvement of retired officials seems to have been especially helpful for initiatives to bear fruit.

South Asia Means Business

South Asian governments should lift trade barriers, get out of the way, and let markets grow smoothly.

by ***Bibek Debroy***

Despite the dangers of generalisation, it is fair to assert that most countries in the South Asian region had, until recently, followed development paradigms based on import-substituting industrialisation. Since the 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, this has been replaced by a greater degree of outward orientation with accompanying emphasis on export promotion.

Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have all been engaged in such unilateral and autonomous liberalisation attempts. These reforms involve a domestic as well as external sector component, and the two cannot really be delinked. In the external sector, most reforms have involved four distinct strands: a reduction in tariffs, an elimination of quantitative restrictions on imports, a transition to realistic and market-determined exchange rates and elimination of exchange controls so that there can be a transition to current account convertibility and a more open and liberal policy regarding foreign direct investments (FDI).

By and large, the reforms reflect an innate dissatisfaction with the GDP (gross domestic product) growth rates achieved under the earlier development model.

ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPUARACHCHI

Colombo Port: South Asian trade winds are blowing.

In many cases, the scope for further growth based on import substitution had exhausted itself. In addition, the effects of historical growth rates on welfare indicators like the percentage of population below poverty line, life expectancy, adult literacy and infant mortality had been less than satisfactory. Such dissatisfaction has existed even when reforms have been precipitated by an economic crisis.

The point to note is that the success of such outward-oriented reforms depend crucially on the continued existence of an open multilateral trading system. Reforms therefore would have been easier had South Asia opened up in the 1970s. Despite the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations and the entry into force of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in January 1995, the multilateral trading system continues to face the threat of bilateralism and protectionism as manifest in regional trading agreements. For example, such regional trading agreements are governed by Article XXIV of the erstwhile General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Under Article XXIV requirements, such regional agreements have to be notified and to date, exactly 63 such agreements have been notified to GATT/WTO. The span of these agreements covers free trade areas, customs unions, common markets and economic unions.

Advance or Retreat

How does one react to the proliferation of these regional agreements? Two lines of reasoning are possible, with the implications diametrically opposed. On the one hand, one can argue that the goal of global free trade is not directly attainable and regional free trade is a stepping stone towards that eventual goal. Viewed thus, regional agreements are desirable. On the other hand, regional agreements can reflect a dissatisfaction with the goal of global free trade and thus represent a retreat from multilateralism. Viewed thus, regional agreements are undesirable.

Had the Uruguay Round of negotiations collapsed, the second interpretation would have been more plausible. As things stand, the integration of regional trade policies within the multilateral system is not impossible and the WTO's Committee on Regional Trade Arrangements has the task of reconciling the two principles.

The 63 agreements cover the regions of Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Central America and West Asia. In addition, if one includes agreements notified under the enabling clause of Article XXIV, South-East Asia and Latin America are also covered. Thus, despite the successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round, the international trading system seems to be in danger of splitting up into a tri-polar world, with the three poles centred in Europe, North America and South-East Asia. The only geographical regions of the world that are not covered by an existing or potential major trading bloc are Africa and South Asia.

Regional agreements can have positive or benign effects on the rest of the world. Examples of positive effects are trade creation, investment creation, reduced protectionism (because of greater employment opportunities), harmonised marketing standards and decreased import costs for the rest of the world as exploitation of economies of scale brings down costs of production within the bloc. But there are also negative effects, and examples of these are trade diversion, investment diversion, enhanced protectionism (due to frictional unemployment) and mergers and acquisitions within the bloc that lead to reduced bargaining clout of individual firms in the rest of the world. The paranoia among non-members about regional agreements reflects the belief that the negative effects may more than outweigh the benefits.

Not being a member of a major trading bloc, South Asia has to accept that the inhibiting effects on market access can be fairly serious. There are four possible courses of action which are, of course, not mutually exclusive. First, one can contest the issue of bloc formation at multilateral fora like the WTO. The disciplines of Article XXIV are so mild that regional agreements have the implicit sanction of the WTO and this option is therefore not viable.

Second, one can attempt to join an existing or potential bloc. For South Asia, the obvious choices are a trading bloc that may emerge in the Asia and Pacific region centred on ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) or in the Indian and Pacific Ocean Rim, involving South Africa and Australia. But the prospects of such a large and disparate group of countries achieving any concrete economic results is not too bright.

Third, one can try to form a bloc of one's own and this is where the concept of a South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) becomes important. Apart from anything else, an entity like SAPTA enhances the collective bargaining strength of individual member countries. For example, the outcome of the textiles and garments negotiations in the Uruguay Round might conceivably have been different had SAPTA negotiated as a group. Fourth, one can negotiate bilateral agreements with existing or potential trading blocs so that market access does not constitute a problem. But even here, the countervailing force is considerably more with an entity like SAPTA. Thus, whichever way one considers the question, there is some urgency in making SAPTA take off.

Small Country, Large Gain

Historically, this urgency has been missing. SAARC has been in existence since 1985, but concrete measures on economic cooperation were non-existent before the Eighth Summit, in 1995. More accurately, the beginnings of economic cooperation can be traced to a 1991 study which analysed the existing status of intra-SAARC trade and sought to identify constraints for further trade expansion. Eventually, the agreement on SAPTA was signed in 1993 and SAPTA became operational in December 1995.

Economic analyses show that in any process of bloc formation, relatively larger gains accrue to weaker and smaller countries which in the SAPTA context means the least developed economies of Bangladesh,

The only geographical regions of the world that are not covered by an existing or potential major trading bloc are Africa and South Asia.

ANURUDDHA LOKUHAPUARACHCHI

Bhutan, the Maldives and Nepal. Conversely, relatively smaller gains accrue to stronger and larger countries. In the SAPTA context, this means India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Any process of bloc formation therefore has to be subsidised by the larger countries. The extent to which SAPTA succeeds is a function of the extent to which India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are prepared to subsidise the process. This is under the assumption that bloc formation implies more than trade liberalisation, and that required structural adjustments are also carried out. If bloc formation is restricted to the limited area of trade liberalisation, relatively larger gains often accrue to the larger countries.

Intra-SAARC trade levels have never been very high historically. As a percentage of trade turnover with the entire world, it is about 2.5 percent. But this is an aggregate figure, and intra-regional trade has been much more important for smaller countries like Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal. Many reasons have been cited for this low level of intra-regional trade. For instance, intra-regional trade flows are not determined by economic factors alone, but are a function of various social, political and historical factors. The India-Pakistan relationship is a case in point.

There are also issues such as the absence of a proper financial and institutional framework such as a bank for the countries of the region or the establishment of capital markets of regional importance. For example, the settlement of India's trade surpluses with the other countries (barring Pakistan) is a problem. This is linked with a centre-periphery or North-South perception vis-a-vis India and other SAARC countries.

In the second round of trade negotiations, the negotiators ought to switch focus to across-the-board tariff reductions, when the impact on trade flows is likely to be much more significant.

In the context of conventional trade flows, as opposed to cross-border investments, the competitive and non-complementary nature of the economies is a constraint. One can also cite the inadequate quality of goods that can be imported from within the region as compared to the quality of goods that can be imported from outside the region. This last factor is coupled with a certain amount of prejudice and lack of credit facilities in general. It is also true that concessional aid and credit often bind trade flows to donors who come from outside the region.

Uncustomary Duties

Since SAPTA became formalised in 1995, individual countries have offered SAARC countries preferential rates of customs duties. Are these likely to boost intra-SAARC trade significantly? If one scans the national schedules, one finds that Bangladesh has offered a 10 percent reduction on existing customs duties for 12 tariff lines. The Indian offer covers 106 tariff lines. Duty reductions range from 10 to 90 percent, with a range of 10 to 100 percent for the least developed economies of the region. Maldives has an offer on 17 tariff lines, with reductions of 7.5 percent. The Nepali offer covers 14 tariff lines, with reductions of 7.5 or 10 percent. On 35 tariff lines, Pakistan has reductions of 10 percent, with 15 percent for least developed economies. The Sri Lankan offer, on 31 tariff lines, involves duty reductions that range from 10 percent to 20 percent.

These reductions, achieved through the first round of trade negotiations, are not substantial enough for there to be a major impact on intra-SAARC trade. Part of the problem lies with the way tariff concessions have been negotiated, on a product-by-product

basis. Such negotiations inevitably lead to offers on items that are not traded much.

In the second round of trade negotiations, the negotiators ought to switch focus to across-the-board tariff reductions, when the impact on trade flows is likely to be much more significant. In addition, they could adopt a two-track approach to tariff reductions. That is, apart from the track adopted for reductions throughout SAARC, there can be a faster track of tariff reductions, negotiated bilaterally among the relatively more advanced countries. While the initial round of tariff reductions is significant as the driving of a wedge, the transition from SAPTA to a SAARC Free Trade Area (SAFTA) cannot take place until the tariff reductions are speeded up.

In global trade flows, non-tariff barriers (NTBs) are far more important as constraints to trade flows than tariffs. Intra-SAARC trade is no different. India-Pakistan trade flows provide innumerable examples of such NTBs. Negotiations on NTBs are more messy than those on tariffs, since NTBs are difficult to pin down, quantify or police. Therefore, the relatively more tractable business of tariff reductions and tariff eliminations needs to be completed fast, so that one can move on to the NTBs.

More importantly, trade flows are a function of cross-border investment flows. In global trade, a large chunk of trade flows consists of intra-industry trade of which a significant segment consists of intra-firm trade. The goal of increasing trade flows cannot therefore be delinked from the objective of increasing cross-border flows of investment. Joint ventures are possible in sectors such as jute, tea and textiles and garments.

The transition from conventional trade flows to investment flows has the added advantage of tapping synergies and complementarities and exploiting economies of scale, since competitive economic structures become relatively less important. Joint ventures need not be confined to manufacturing, but can extend to services sectors and even to non-tradeables. The point, however, is that such joint ventures often involve structural adjustments within the individual countries. Not a single one of the SAARC countries is presently prepared to accept such structural adjustments.

The future of SAARC lies in the standard transition from a free trade area to a customs union, and from that, to a common market and an economic union. But given the lack of political will, even the free trade area is a long way off. Not surprisingly, intra-regional investments have been far less significant than intra-regional trade.

The examples of the most successful regional blocs illustrate that they do not succeed because of what governments do. At best, governmental announcements merely provide formal sanction to what has already been taking place at ground level, because of commercial decisions. SAFTA, or a South Asian Economic Union, will not emerge because the governments decree it. The most that governments can do is to provide an enabling framework and remove constraints in the way of commercial decision-making. Most political and other constraints that exist in the region can be directly attributed to state interference in commercial decision-making.

The greatest stimulus to intra-regional economic cooperation thus lies in the reform process, which almost tautologically, involves a diminished role for the state. Therefore, the faster liberalisation proceeds in the individual countries, the better the prospects for South Asia as a whole. That is the road map to SAFTA.

The reforms would have been easier had South Asia opened up in the 1970s.

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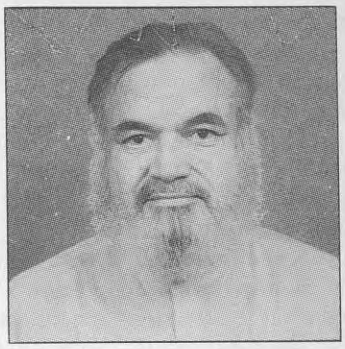

S.M. Inam

India and Pakistan together boast a market of more than a billion consumers, but their trade relations have always been overshadowed by political tension. Overt and legitimate trade between the two countries has been practically non-existent ever since a total ban was imposed on bilateral business in September 1965. But all this will change if S.M. Inam has his way.

Mr Inam has set his heart on breaking the commercial logjam in South Asia, first and foremost between the two giant economies of India and Pakistan. It is this need that led the burly Pakistani industrialist to champion the setting up of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry, of which he became the founding President back in 1994.

As his background bespeaks, this former chairman of the Pakistan Automobile and Parts Importers and Dealers Association, is a free trade-*wallah*. He says with conviction, "It is incumbent upon all the partners of the SAARC alliance to remove all hindrances in free trade among our countries." Mr Inam firmly believes that the goal of SAFTA (free rather than preferential trade) is achievable. "It requires better understanding of the issues that are hindering progress. A first step will be the lifting of visa restrictions between South Asian countries, and allowing restriction-free travel and transport of goods."

This would all seem visionary talk if Mr Inam were not also a man of action, and a social worker to boot. A former flyer and president of an aero club, he heads the Sindh Anti-Tuberculosis Association, and is an active organiser of cricket tournaments. Besides inter-regional cricket matches, he is especially keen on the opening up of Indo-Pakistani trade, which is presently practically non-existent other than for informal dealings and cross-border smuggling.

In 1995-96, the two-way trade amounted to USD 114 million, but this is a pittance compared to what is possible, says Mr Inam. Presently, the bulk of the trade between the two countries is done informally, through third parties like Singapore and the Gulf states. According to one estimate, this informal trade is as high as USD 2 billion. This trade could be far more lucrative to both sides if it were to be formalised, Mr Inam believes.

"Even after signing the Tashkent Declaration in 1966, our governments did not encourage formal trade. But the mercantile community of the two countries continuously strove for better relations, and their perseverance has now begun to pay." Mr Inam is all praise for India's recent unilateral decision to issue multiple-entry visas to Pakistani businessmen and industrialists.

Things are still moving too slow for Mr Inam, however. "Despite signing various memoranda of understanding, announcements, agreements and joint declarations, the pace is slow. The reason is the need for political posturing."

Pointing to the potential for enhanced commerce between his country and India, Mr Inam says, "Transport costs would be reduced because of the short distance. Quick deliveries would lead to smaller inventories, and less damage to goods in transit. Besides, there are the advantages of having no language problem between the two countries, and familiarity with each other's trade practices, fashions and needs."

The industrialist argues that it is past time for the South Asians to follow the example of other trading blocs like ASEAN in preparing for the challenges ahead. South Asia's businessmen and industrialists are pinning great hopes that SAPTA and later SAFTA will at long last help develop the socioeconomic backbone of the seven countries of the region, uplifting the regional economy as a whole, says Mr Inam.

"Our countries constitute an age-old civilisation which should, in these modern times, build up a sense of community for our collective benefit and for our economic survival. In this competitive world, it is time to create a modern economic community of South Asia."

-Abdul Hameed Chapra

S.M. Inam and other members of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry with then Prime Minister Man Mohan Adhikari of Nepal in 1995.

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SAARC at Crossroads

Pakistan need not fear subregionalism. It can join the effort to usher in a new era of South Asian cooperation.

by S.D. Muni

The basic premise on which SAARC was founded is clearly showing signs of validation. While shaping the SAARC initiative during the early 1980s, it was assumed that by activating cooperative cultural identities and economic interests, political conflicts and tensions in South Asia could be moderated, if not completely eliminated. Not that SAARC has got firmly entrenched into the economic and socio-cultural cooperative ventures in the manner evident in North America (NAFTA), Europe (EU), Southeast Asia (ASEAN) or Asia-Pacific (APEC). And neither have political conflicts in South Asia, such as between India and Pakistan, been resolved or reduced significantly, but there are unmistakable signs of a promise to South Asian regional affairs. SAARC stands at a critical stage of its evolution where, given the right push, it can overcome past constraints and barriers to emerge as a dynamic factor in the peace and prosperity of more than a billion South Asians.

Factors that have contributed towards this positive turn for regional cooperation in South Asia are varied and numerous. Among the important ones, the role of the more-than-a-decade-old "SAARC process" itself should be acknowledged. It has sensitised common people, policy-makers and powerful economic and cultural interests towards the opportunities available in the region for cooperation. South Asian countries now know better than they did during the 1980s about each other's assets and liabilities, and are exploring areas of mutual interests to be harnessed.

There remain information gaps, ambiguities and lingering apprehensions, but the process of dealing with them is vigorously on. Major shifts in power structures and political dynamics in South Asia since the beginning of this decade in favour of democratic forces, popular accountability and governmental transparency, much against the machinations of the hitherto entrenched interests, have generated aspirations for greater regional identity and interaction across state-erected barriers and territorial boundaries. South Asian civil societies are becoming more articulate and assertive in bringing SAARC out of the corridors of power so that popular forces can play their legitimate role in shaping its future course.

This regional effort of knowing each other and getting together got a strong push from the developments outside the region. The end of the Cold War eliminated the nearly 40-year-old pernicious spillover of the East-West divide in South Asia. More than its political fallout, the post-Cold War international economic imperatives have provided momentum to the pressures of regional cooperation in South Asia. On the one hand, the policies of economic liberalisation and the unleashing of the private sector are nudging the South Asian states to integrate the regional market and coordinate responses to international economic challenges in the area of trade investments and technology transfers. On the other, the global trend of expanding and strengthening regionalism is pressing for greater economic cohesion in South Asia, under the fear that an economically sluggish South Asia may be left marginalised in the post-Cold War world economy.

The combined positive impact on SAARC of domestic economic and political liberalisation in South Asia and the global trend of expanding regionalism is evident.

SAARC and ASEAN

Former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yu, commenting recently on India's efforts for economic liberalisation and globalisation, said that it is entering the expressway of global economy at a time when it has already become slow and congested. This also holds true for the entire South Asian region. As compared to this, ASEAN was conceived in the context of linking non-communist economies of the region with global capitalism. To preserve the so-called purity of this political and economic framework of cooperation, the region's geographical identity was even mutilated, by excluding the Indo-Chinese countries. ASEAN entered the global economic expressway when the going was fast and smooth.

In looking at ASEAN and SAARC comparatively, it has to be kept in mind that ASEAN countries were at a very preliminary level of capitalist growth themselves when they sought integration into the global capitalist economy. They had no interests of their own to protect and no terms to dictate. But in the South Asian case, particularly in the case of India and Pakistan, significant indigenous capitalist economic interests have grown over the years and they are finding it hard to adjust and harmonise themselves with the powerful economic interests at the global level. ASEAN had the added advantage over SAARC in that the member countries were smaller in size and their decision-making systems, both political and administrative, were generally more centralised and efficient. However, having involved itself in the process, it is clear that South Asia will soon be able to define and project its own forms of productive interaction with the international economic forces.

The combined positive impact on SAARC of domestic economic and political liberalisation in South Asia and the global trend of expanding regionalism is evident. A preferential trading arrangement (SAPTA)

has been agreed to and the target for raising it to the level of a Free Trade Agreement by the beginning of the next millennium has been set already. Business interests are identifying and executing areas of mutual cooperation, either individually or under the regional umbrella of similar institutional arrangements like the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In recent years, bilateral trade in the region, with the exception of trade between India and Pakistan, has grown manifold and is continuously growing. All of India's smaller neighbours are seeking increasing access to the huge Indian market for their products. The "big" is no longer awesome and ugly; instead it is becoming beautiful. India, on its part is trying to accommodate its smaller SAARC neighbours as far as possible. The trend set into motion during the previous Congress government received impetus under the United Front regime in the form of the much-talked about Gujral Doctrine which seeks to accommodate smaller neighbours' interests without expecting reciprocity. India's agreements with Nepal and Bangladesh on the question of river waters; its duty concessions to Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka; solution of the Chakma problem between India and Bangladesh; and the responsive Bangladeshi attitude towards India on the issues of internal security and stability as well as transit rights for the inaccessible Northeast region, are instances of the positive turn in the dynamics of regional relations.

Neither have Indo-Pakistan relations remained totally unaffected by these regional dynamics. There is now greater pressure within Pakistan for opening normal channels of trade and economic interaction with India, even as the core Paskistani establishment continues to harp on the Kashmir issue. A five-volume study carried out by the Pakistani Ministry of Commerce offered positive recommendations while asking India to reduce subsidies on its agricultural products to create a level playing-field for Pakistani businessmen. It also proposed that the two countries improve transport and communication links. India and Pakistan are also coordinating their approaches in the field of textile trade to meet international pressures. In spite of resistance from the core establishment, Pakistan's new and democratically more powerful Nawaz Sharif government engaged itself in political talks with India on all matters of mutual concern including trade and people-to-people exchanges. India and Pakistan are also working on the idea of cooperation on the sale of surplus Pakistani hydropower to India.

Questions on Subregionalism

Notwithstanding such positive signals, SAARC is not yet immune and insulated from the adverse impact of the India-Pakistan divide. This has been recently evident on the issue of subregional cooperation which is permitted under the Charter even if not all seven SAARC members are involved. Under this provision and motivated by the desire to speed up cooperation in geographically contiguous and socioeconomically volatile and vulnerable areas, Nepal proposed the idea of subregional cooperation among India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan in the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna subregion, at the SAARC ministerial conference held in New Delhi in December 1996. This was spontaneously endorsed by all the four countries concerned in the hope that such subregional cooperation would minimise disadvantages of asymmetry to smaller countries. The four foreign secretaries in their meeting in Kathmandu in March 1997 have constituted a Working Group of the four countries to identify and implement specific projects.

In January 1997, when Mr Gujral visited Sri Lanka, he also requested the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister to act as the coordinator for subregional cooperation among India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. He also asked Pakistan to join with India in evolving projects for subregional cooperation.

The third summit in Kathmandu, 1987: since then SAARC summits have become less perfunctory.

Pakistan, perceiving these moves as targetted at isolating it within SAARC, has reacted unfavourably and its apprehensions are not totally unjustified. The Kathmandu Working Group and its agenda on subregional cooperation has been kept out of the formal SAARC framework. This was perhaps to avoid a situation where Pakistan could object and thwart the move since the SAARC Charter requires unanimity on any action taken. This invites the question if subregional cooperation will erode SAARC and emerge as its alternative, leaving Pakistan isolated and alone?

Some of the SAARC members like Sri Lanka and Maldives are unhappy with this development as well. Here, again, it is useful to draw a comparison with ASEAN which originated and successfully executed the idea of subregional cooperation in the form of "growth triangles" (of limited areas cutting across territorial boundaries) for fast and intensive market-sector and private-sector driven growth. It is not seen as inconsistent with the wider regional agenda of ASEAN, because the growth and dynamic development of parts eventually add to the strength of the entire ASEAN.

Unfortunately in South Asia, Pakistan is not geographically contiguous with any other SAARC mem-

ber except India, with which it has been shying away from cooperating bilaterally. But then, Pakistan can join hands with other SAARC members to cooperate on specific issue areas, like with India, Sri Lanka and Maldives on tourism or with India and Nepal in air transport. India and the other countries need to explain to Pakistan that the idea of subregional cooperation has been kept out of the formal SAARC framework to keep it flexible and open-ended. The enthusiastic welcome to South Asian subregional cooperation offered by Thailand, which wants to join hands with India, Myanmar and Bangladesh in developing subregional cooperation, in fact opens new opportunities where SAARC members can forge cooperative ties with ASEAN members.

Overall, there is no doubt that, under the thrust of post-Cold War shift in domestic, regional and international affairs, SAARC is poised to make an advance. While bilateral political issues will continue to persist in the SAARC dynamics, their role in deterring regional cooperation will decline. The pace of progress, meanwhile will depend upon hard-core economic cost-benefit issues. The main political factor which seems of consequence now is that of governmental changes and political instability within SAARC countries. Everyone realises how the crisis related to the fall of the United Front government in New Delhi adversely affected the Indo-Pakistan dialogue which showed the possibility of breaking new ground.

The crisis also created anxiety in the other neighbouring capitals about the prospects of their relations with India. Similarly, the change in the government of Nepal has brought about new anxieties regarding the implementation of the Mahakali treaty, and if the political situation in Bangladesh deteriorates to the disadvantage of Hasina Wajed's Awami League government, Indo-Bangladesh understandings on Ganga waters, transit possibilities and anti-insurgency cooperation may come under a cloud.

In the long run however, forces of economic dynamism will generally acquire the autonomy required to keep the SAARC momentum uninterrupted by political and administrative breakdowns in any of the member countries. Until this happens, SAARC will neither open itself to bilateral and contentious issues, nor will it, like ASEAN, have the confidence to establish parallel fora to deal with political and security issues affecting the region.

S.D. Muni is Appadorai Professor of International Politics and Area Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

How 'Big' Is Big Brother?

In regional affairs, India must act with the magnanimity that its overpowering presence demands.

by ***Subir Bhaumik***

Small nations are generally afraid of big ones, but there are occasions when the big begin to take note of the small and even develop apprehensions about them. In the last two decades, South Asia has often experienced this when India, though perceived as the "Big Brother", has developed a scare about some of its smaller neighbours.

To enumerate a few instances, Sri Lanka was seen to be threatening when it was believed to be offering port facilities to the United States which New Delhi thought was "unacceptable to Indian interests". Bangladesh has been seen as a threat because of the "silent invasion" of large parts of Eastern India by its overflowing population, while its successive military governments were believed to be patronising a whole set of guerilla groups in Northeast India. In recent times, even Nepal has been seen as a threat as Indian policy-makers and those who inform them claim to have clear evidence of Nepal's use as a nerve-centre for Pakistani offensive intelligence activity against north India. Pakistan, of course, is in a league of its own as far as Indian perceptions go.

This is hardly the situation, then, of Big behaving big. Nor does South Asia's undeniable "Big Brother" come across as a Big Power, full of confidence and displaying the magnanimity that one expects of it.

Shabby Intervention

It has been more than a quarter century since 1971 and the aftermath of Bangladeshi independence, when the US recognised India's supremacy in the region. (*Time* magazine was the first to call India a "regional superpower".) The Indian nation-state has lost much of its elan as a "regional superpower" since. Some would argue that India was never a regional superpower—but even those who feel so would agree today that India's exercise of its overwhelming might has been carried out rather shabbily. So, when Bangladesh fails to fall in line, the Ganga is choked at Farakka and more so in its upper reaches. When Nepal does not come to terms, an economic blockade is enforced to stifle that landlocked economy. And when Sri Lanka refuses to play the surrogate, Tamil rebels are armed—at great cost to India itself, as

subsequent developments showed.

The morality factor is not terribly important here. In the words of the redoubtable A.J.P. Taylor: "Big states have always tried to dominate small states and will continue to do so." Fair enough. But on two counts, there is still a lot to be critical about Indian foreign policy in South Asia. If India wants to dominate smaller states in the Subcontinent, like the USA does on a global scale, if it believes in a South Asian Monroe doctrine of its own, then it should speak the language of power and get rid of its high moral pretensions ("nation of Gandhi", etc, etc). If the Americans armed the Afghans, they did so after saying in so many words that they would never accept the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. But Indian doublespeak is unbearable—how can you accept Chinese suzerainty over Tibet and yet help in the arming of thousands of Tibetans, all at the same time?

The era of providing regional leadership, or even global leadership, by the sheer exercise of power has perhaps come to an end. In the Gulf War it was clear that the Americans went in for the kill because the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait upset the big industrial powers as well as much of the Arab world and the use of US military might was made in a climate of global consensus. It is strange that post-colonial India, the same India which fathered consensus as a force in international relations through its advocacy of the Non-Aligned Movement as an alternative to Western-style power-politics, is beginning to underestimate the value of consensus in diplomacy and foreign relations, particularly in the regional context.

If India wants to lead the South Asian region, which it should and can, it should stop acting the bully. It should be mindful of the interests and the sensibilities of the smaller neighbours, and even of Pakistan. It should be able to generate a consensus on key issues in the economy and politics of the region, and it should be able to extract major concessions from international bodies on issues considered important by the regional countries. Delhi has to understand that almost despite themselves the small gravitate towards the Big. This is the law of gravitation and in order not to upset this natural law, the Big has to behave accordingly.

The Gujral Doctrine understands this changing fact of international relations. And the government led by Mr Gujral has its power base in the regions, not in the centre, and is therefore less likely to make an effort to flex its muscles menacingly. Indeed, it serves the rest of South Asia perfectly well to have in the seat in New Delhi a government whose power base is in the outlying regions, not in the heartland. The outlying states, after all, are the ones which border neighbouring countries—and they have as much to gain from closer interaction across the border than with New Delhi.

The states of northeastern India, and certainly West Bengal, have much more to gain by closely interacting with Bangladesh, Nepal or Bhutan. In contrast, Delhi is a distant reality. India's regions can now carry out, with Delhi's blessings, sub-regional dialogues with neighbours. When smaller neighbours deal with parts of India, and not the whole of it, the fears of the Big Brother will automatically subside. The Gujral Doctrine should legitimise the process of sub-regional dialogues in the ambit of Indian foreign policy making. After all, the greater involvement of states and regional leaders in foreign policy making will thrive on the principle of consensus, and this in the final analysis will give back India its pride of place in the region.

S. Bhaumik is BBC correspondent for eastern India.

Subregional Sneak Preview

BIKAS RAUNIAR

The foreign secretaries at the press meet: Salman Haider (closest to camera), Kumar Gyawali, Farouq Sobhan and Lhatu Wangchuk

They had gathered on 2 April to announce to the press the formation of a new grouping for regional cooperation. But their dilemma was that they did not want to appear to be undermining SAARC. It was a difficult tightrope to walk.

The opening remarks of the chairman, the Nepali Foreign Secretary, Kumar Gyawali, did not even mention that a new grouping had been formed. Sheepishly, he skirted the issue by saying they had been "talking about a growth quadrangle". There was more than a hint of contrition when he said that they had decided to adopt the principle of transparency and tell their fellow SAARC members what they were doing.

The first question confirmed the panel's fears. The Bangladeshi Foreign Secretary, Farouq Sobhan, had to give a long rationalisation of how Article Seven of SAARC Charter allowed cooperation among two or more of members on specific projects—he said the cooperation in the new grouping would also be "project specific". This raised the question of how one could have unspecific cooperation. He said that in deference to the objection from Pakistan, they had decided to pursue their plans outside of SAARC. The Indian Foreign Secretary, Salman Haider, paid a glowing tribute to SAARC and its achievements—just in case anyone had any doubts.

But that was not enough to convince sceptical journalists. "I would really request that we don't return to the same question again and again," said Mr Haider, by then quite naturally assuming the role of the chairman. When questions on the issue were raised to others, Mr Haider took it upon himself to suggests to others on the panel not to answer them. Journalists had to remind him that it was legitimate to ask question from others even if he was not prepared to discuss them himself.

Later, Mr Haider went further when, to general disbelief, he said that SAARC response to the new initiative of India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan had been "in one word, supportive." When journalists asked the Bhutanese foreign secretary, Lhatu Wangchuk, to comment, he said he had nothing else to add to what had already been said.

Watching the foreign secretaries handling the news conference, it was easy to imagine how the new regional grouping would work in practice.

– Kasra Naji

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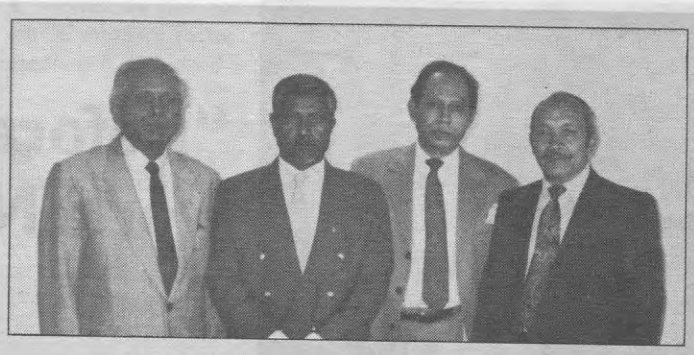


Y.K. SILWAL COLLECTION

From left, Kant Kishore Bhargava, Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, Abul Ahsan and Yadav Kant Silwal

The four past secretaries general of SAARC include Abul Ahsan from Bangladesh, followed by Kant Kishore Bhargava from India, Ibrahim Hussain Zaki from the Maldives and Yadav Kant Silwal from Nepal. They have been activated under the aegis of Coalition for Action in South Asian Cooperation, an organisation supported by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, to make recommendations on improving and updating the functions of the SAARC organisations. These recommendations are to be presented to Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who takes over as Chairman at the forthcoming SAARC summit in Male on 9 May. Himal met with this gathering of SAARC alumni when they came together in Kathmandu to discuss their recommendations. This is what they had to say:

Abul Ahsan

SAARC is now collaborating with foreign governments like Japan and with international organisations. During my time there were serious reservations on the part of certain members about SAARC having anything to do with outside funding and foreign governments. So clearly this is an opening. As for those who question the use of SAARC for bilateral relations, look at India and Pakistan, which are forced to interact at so many levels. Because of SAARC, they do meet and interact at different levels in the presence of others. As with ASEAN or the EC, regional cooperation here has improved relations among the member states. Without the frequency of SAARC meetings, India and Pakistan might have avoided each other for years.

It is also important to start worthwhile regional projects with a view to attracting private investors, who are able to put up billions of dollars into physical infrastructure. Say, if you want to connect Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and parts of India by roads or a power grid, this will immediately draw attention of private investors.

All our countries are engaged in a process of dismantling tariff barriers and introducing economic reforms as a consequence of what is going on elsewhere. When you open up, you do so not only to the outside world but also to your next-door neighbour. The possibilities which were denied for so long by artificial government fiat are now opening up. The whole process is assisted by communications technologies which are making so many rules and regulations obsolete.

Kant Kishore Bhargava

In South Asia there is this asymmetry, India not only being big, but being centrally located. And efforts to have traditional balance of power through internal arrangements or through involvement of external power, such as the United States, have been at best problematic. On the other hand, you will have cohesion in the region if you continue the patient pursuit of consensus. This is what SAARC is in the process of achieving. There is no doubt that time has been lost within SAARC as well, and we failed to make leeway in so many fronts. The accumulated cost of non-cooperation is large, and we have to see how we can retrieve the situation and have multiplier effects.

The recommendations made by the former secretaries general of SAARC call for a movement towards better political accommodation among the governments. There is sufficient movement at the conceptual as well as ground level in economic and trade cooperation. We should therefore go in for a more closely knit economic grouping and a new paradigm of economic regionalism, towards a South Asian Economic Community. The workings of the "technical committees" within the structure of SAARC have to be streamlined, and we must mobilise the power and reach of non-governmental organisations for regional cooperation.

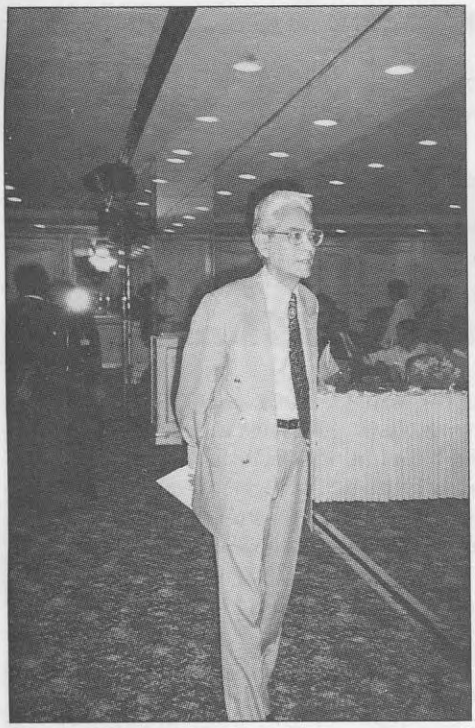
Yadav Kant Silwal

There is a South Asian civilisational commonality which is not found in other regional groupings. Overall our thinking pattern is the same. The countries of South Asia attract and repel each other like magnets. The asymmetry factor is significant: India is so predominant, and every other South Asian country borders it and not each other. India therefore has necessarily a central and careful role to play in the future of SAARC, to be active without muffling other voices. If India does not show its overbearing nature, what is wrong with that centrality? New Delhi has also realised in recent years that without regional amity, it cannot project a good picture for itself internationally.

There is consensus that SAARC has to be pushed ahead, and yet the young nations of South Asia do want safeguards to protect their perceived individuality. Pakistan might want safeguards in trade, Bangladesh on transit, and the LDCs among us will want special protection. No one wants to go the whole hog, and yet we have to go a distance for everyone's benefit. Also, remember that statehood is important to everyone.

The move towards subregional cooperation announced recently by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal is not being seen as a transparent exercise, and there is a perception that it might undermine SAARC at an important juncture. The SAARC Charter does have the provision for "action committees", but this was not used for the purpose.

Within the SAARC organisations, there are challenges. There is a need for institution building after ten years, eight summits, 18 council of ministers meetings. In the summits, the leaders sound like visionaries, but they are not able to allow SAARC to attain its potential. In the meetings of officials, there is no continuity of representation, meetings are not held on time, and the results of the hundreds of workshops and seminars are not implemented where it matters, at the grassroots. The SAARC cell in each foreign ministry is the weakest.



Alone at the top.

"Before, there was too little work. Now there is too much."

SAARC Secretary General Naeem U Hasan assumed office on 1 January 1996, and has presided over a period when the organisation seems to have, at long last, picked up some steam. He spoke to *Himal South Asia* amidst preparations for the Male summit, 9-11 May.

▲ *Is SAARC doing better as it enters its second decade?*

• Definitely, there has been an acceleration in activities. Whereas, in the past, meetings were limited to foreign ministers, now there are a lot of sectoral meetings. For example, the agriculture ministers of the region met before the food summit in Rome to chart out a common position, and the same happened for housing ministers before the habitat conference in Istanbul. This trend began with environment ministers coordinating their stance before the Rio Summit of 1992, but the process has now become institutionalised. The environment ministers have met recently again to prepare for the upcoming special session of the General Assembly on the environment.

▲ *But how is it that this new energy in SAARC that you mention is not evident to the lay public?*

• The regional countries are rapidly expanding their areas of cooperation and there is better coordination, but of course it will take a while for the public to feel this. Even what has happened, people do not know about.

▲ *What are your own priorities for the short period of two years that a Secretary General is allowed to serve?*

• I see it as my first priority to strengthen the Secretariat. It has to be made more professional, just as with the United Nations, the ASEAN and other secretariats. As the work and responsibility increases, we must enhance the numbers and quality of staff as well. As things stand, while the UN has five professional categories from P1 to P5, here we have an incongruous structure, with seven senior directors who are generalists and their personal assistants, with nothing in between. As SAPTA takes off, and as we go in for projects, we will need to meet deadlines, coordinate work, monitor progress. We will need economists, environmentalists, information specialists, and so on. For the first ten years, and perhaps necessarily, SAARC maintained too much of an inward-oriented approach. More recently, however, we have reached out and put together half a dozen agreements, for example with the Japanese, the Canadians, the European Commission, and the UN agencies.

▲ *Have you found the member states agreeable to your proposals for reform?*

• Indeed. I am glad to say that the foreign ministers accepted all the proposals I made for strengthening the Secretariat at the December meeting of the Council of Ministers, which is the body which formulates all SAARC policies. The governments have also agreed to my proposal to review the workings of four regional centres, which have to be made more action-oriented, and their rules and regulations harmonised. The Integrated Programme of Action is a key component of SAARC, and includes 12 agreed areas of cooperation, from agriculture to tourism, which are overseen by technical committees. The IPA is at the heart of our programme, and I have been asked by the Council of Ministers to carry out an independent review. The role of the technical committees needs to be redefined. Earlier, the Secretariat used to be like a letterbox, but now we are being asked to analyse things and to make recommendations within our mandate. The Secretariat has never had so much responsibility, but our resources are the same. Before, there was too little work. Now there is too much.

▲ *How do you see the important office of the Secretary General evolving during your term and after your departure in December 1997?*

• The Secretary General is also being asked to play a more central role than before. For example, it has been agreed that the Secretary General must have a say in the selection of the seven directors, at the very least in the form of consultations with the appointing governments. The Secretariat will now provide job descriptions to the governments when a vacancy opens. The Secretary General is also now authorised to put down confidential reports on his staff. The Secretary General will henceforth be present at the United Nations General Assembly, when the SAARC foreign ministers meet each other and the foreign ministers of other regional organisations. Starting in Male in May, the Secretary General will also have the opportunity to address the summit gatherings.

▲ *The SAARC summits have often been ridiculed as nothing more than a platform for heads of state and government to hear themselves pontificate.*

• I would not agree with that view. The annual summits are very useful, beyond the fact that they are constitutionally mandated. The summits are actually even more important as SAARC becomes more active, for they provide the guidance and direction for new work. The summit declarations, after all, have provided the mandate for all of SAARC's work and focus, whether it is in poverty alleviation, the girl child, or the environment. Let us not forget that the summits also play a useful role in providing opportunity for bilateral consultations. The new practice of taking a day's retreat, where the leaders meet informally and without aides, has also proved very useful. Informal sessions in the ministerial and other meetings, incidentally, have also been productive, for they are more open and allow synergy to develop.

▲ *The December 1996 meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers chaired by then Indian Foreign Minister Inder Kumar Gujral is said to have been a path-breaker. How true is this?*

• It was a crucial meeting, and the decisions taken, including on matters I have already mentioned, were forward-looking. The foreign ministers decided to lay stress in certain areas, including the need for better communications and transport between the regional countries. An expert group on telecommunications was established. They also emphasised the need for more people-to-people contact, more youth camps, more journalists travelling to each other's countries, and more popular organisations to be involved with the SAARC process. The December meeting was also productive because the delegations came fully prepared. There was agreement that there should be more coordination and contact between the government, and that there should be a 'SAARC position' on issues and events. This, I find, is in total contrast to the first ten years, when we were, as I said, very insulated.

▲ *What is your role on the sub-regional initiative announced by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal at or around the December meeting?*

• The Secretariat is not involved in the sub-regional initiative, which was apparently discussed informally between the delegations concerned.

▲ *Is the criticism levelled against the SAARC Charter, that it is ineffective because it does not allow bilateral discussed valid?*

• The prohibition on bilateral discussions is there in the SAARC Charter, and there will always be extreme hesitation to review the document. However, the criticism on that count seems to have receded as the organisation's work has proceeded in other areas.

▲ *What are your comments on the 'asymmetry factor' of SAARC, meaning India's size?*

• As far as the large size of India and its economy are concerned, that is a geographic reality and there is no changing that. But, on the other hand, that could be a basis on which we may judge SAARC, that so much progress has been achieved even under the given circumstances. With this situation of having one large country in the middle, it is commendable the level of cooperation we have achieved. No other region has so much 'lopsidedness', but despite this there is unanimity on actions that need to be taken. Any country can say "no" to any proposal on the basis of equality, and yet so much is happening.

SAARC

▲ *Is there some 'lopsidedness' in SAARC's being overwhelmingly cosy with the business community to the exclusion of other non-governmental groups?*

• I think that the business community, particularly through the SAARC Federation and industry, has taken bold steps in promoting regional cooperation with its initiatives on trade and so on. Of course, you cannot rely on the private sector alone in promoting regional cooperation. Professional bodies and popular groups have to be equally involved. In order to involve all groups in the South Asian endeavour, the Secretariat must work as a facilitator. We must evolve a structure, something like a SAARC solidarity fund, which will help monitor activities and help bring together the groups committed to working regionally.

▲ *Will it affect SAARC's independence when it starts taking money from international donors for projects?*

• There is no fear of donor dependency, because we will only get into the activities which are in the collective interest of the member states. We will choose our activities carefully and not take up a project just because there is funding support. We are also clear that SAARC projects should not be at the expense of any national projects. For example, we are planning a project on cattle disease, given its possible cross-border spread. Flight safety is another problem that can to be looked at. So, this is the stage that we are about to enter.

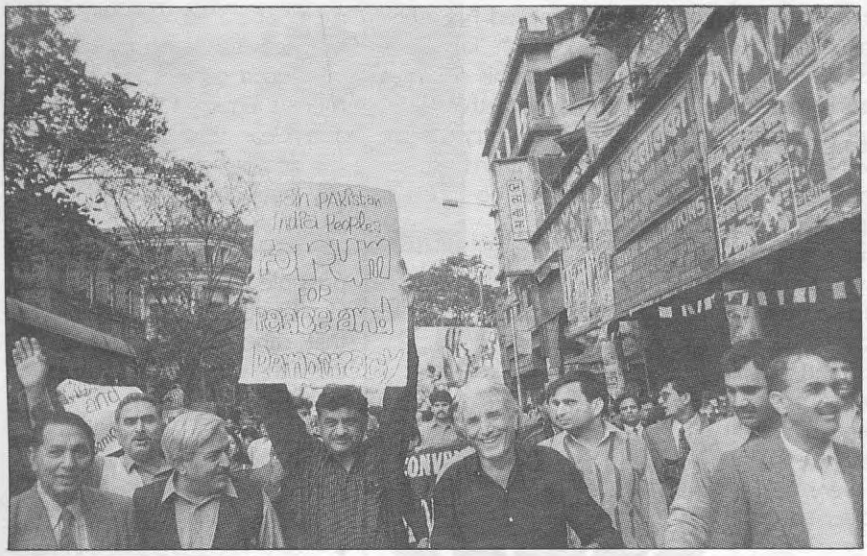
▲ *Is SAPTA all hype and no substance?*

• SAPTA is extremely important because trade and commerce are such vital areas of activity and we have such a huge mass of humanity to support in South Asia. We account for only three percent of the global trade, and it is imperative for the seven countries to try for more trade and commercial contact. With the emergence of trade blocs, there is more and more collective bargaining. We must cooperate simply to survive, and then to utilise our potential. Since it came into force in December 1995, SAPTA has been moving through the predetermined path of implementation. There were 226 items on the list, and now there were over 1500 items. The ground work and paperwork is almost over, and in April we will review the implementation aspect. Meanwhile, we are studying the transformation of SAPTA into SAFTA—South Asia as a free trade zone.

Indo-Pakistan Cross Fertilisation

The Indo-Pakistan feud keeps South Asia apart, but a criss-crossing media is rapidly bridging the subcontinental gap.

by Beena Sarwar



Procession taken out by the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy in Calcutta in December 1996.

Aliens from another planet, or at least, strangers from faraway foreign lands. Not quite. But to a large extent that is how a Pakistani visiting India feels. Yet, paradoxically, there is also an inescapable sense of familiarity. It's like coming home, but being in a strange land, where everything is what you expect it to be, but so very different The cliches come fast and furious: so near and yet so far...

When told that the Indo-Gangetic plain was the same all the way from Peshawar to Calcutta, they found that incredible.

There is the undoubted affinity between the Punjabi-, Sindhi-, Gujrati- and Urdu-speaking people across the border. But for other regions of India, Pakistanis are near-total foreigners. Witness the scene, on a Calcutta street last December when a young journalist from Lahore was stopped and asked for his autograph by a student who couldn't believe he was actually face to face with a real, living Pakistani.

"The new generation on both sides knows nothing about each other and both sides are demonising each other," wrote columnist I. Hassan, after a visit in March to his alma mater in Dehradun, the Royal Indian Military College. "Younger people who met my wife or myself were surprised that we spoke the same language, wore the same dress and were just ordinary human beings like them. Young cadets wanted to know what the land looked like across the border. When told that the Indo-Gangetic plain was the same all the way from Peshawar to Calcutta, they found that incredible."

As the rest of the world becomes a global village, the great chasm between India and Pakistan too will have to be bridged. And it is happening. On the one hand, opinion-makers and policy analysts from the two sides have been able to sit down and talk, thanks to the increasing number of intra-regional conferences and workshops, often organised or funded by international donor organisations. On the other hand, the common man gets a chance to see how the other side lives through the popular media that is gaining increasing popularity on both sides.

The most popular television channel in Pakistan is Zee. Although not state-owned, it is definitely an 'Indian' channel, and it plays to the lowest common denominator with its game shows, chat shows, sing-along programmes, and reruns of popular Hindi films and songs. In India, meanwhile, a Pakistani feels proud of all the appreciation shown for Pakistan Television tele-dramas (available both on television and in video cassettes), particularly among Hindi- and Urdu-speakers. The television screen, indeed, has managed to do what the diplomats found impossible to do for decades—permeate this most distanced of South Asian relationships.

Well-known Indian poet and writer Javed Akhtar, on a visit to Karachi this March, told university students that Pakistanis were showing greater understanding towards his country than in his last visit five years ago. He attributed this to the Indian or Indian-backed satellite channels. "Your television plays have done likewise, taught the man in the Indian street that you are not very different from us," said Mr Akhtar.

Newsprint and Email

While news and feature services have been transferring stories across the border for some time, the last

few years saw the sudden arrival of Indian columnists on the pages of Pakistani newspapers. Pakistani journalists now regularly get bylines in Indian publications. Ann Ninan, editor at Inter Press Service's South Asia office in New Delhi, says any story datelined Pakistan gets snapped up by Indian editors.

Any newspaper can pull out and slap on an agency story, but exclusive commentaries or in-depth features have their own weight and readership. The thaw in Indo-Pakistani relations, to the extent that it is real, has much to do with the publication of personalised columns by Indians and Pakistanis in each other's papers. "Why don't you write for us?" says a Karachi-based editor to a visiting Indian journalist with whom a rapport has been struck. When several journalists form part of a delegation, like in the recent Calcutta gathering of the Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy *(see Himal, Mar/Apr 1997, page 41)*, the chances of cross-border writing increases several times over.

The effort by the English language papers on each side to run columns from the other side has reaped obvious dividends. Non-hawkish reports on current events from local columnists have helped enhance the credibility of various points of view. Such cross-pollination in the press has helped override to some extent the propaganda of both sides. Yes, even on the "Kashmir issue".

"All right, so a bunch of people gets funds to sit down and talks to another bunch of people from across the border. How does that change government policy?" asks the cynic. The answer is that such meetings do not directly change government policy, but do influence the policy-makers. Good reportage and analysis from across the border also limit the extent of the politician's political posturing. Take the Kashmiri tangle, where the view is gaining ground among the vanguard intelligentsia in Islamabad and New Delhi that rather than being a territorial dispute, it is a matter involving the aspirations of the Kashmiris themselves.

Indo-Pakistan forums have been immensely useful. The two major ones held in India—in Delhi in February 1995 and in Calcutta in December 1996—led to a series of articles in *Dawn* by prominent columnists like M.H. Askari and M.B. Naqvi. The agenda laid down by such writers, urging dialogue between the two governments, inevitably became part of public discourse, which made it easier for (or forced) Pakistani politicians to drop some of their posturing.

The forums have also taken advantage of the new information transfer technology represented by electronic mail. "Thank God for email," said a journalist participating at an Indo-Pak forum held in Lahore in November 1995. Indian and Pakistani journalists had just decided to keep in touch and exchange articles, and they knew that without the new technology of electronic mail this would be ok.

Given the exorbitant costs and hassles of faxing, email has indeed arrived as a godsend for regional communicators. Increasingly, human rights groups, women's right activists and development workers and others, too, are taking the lead of the journalists. The volume of electronic exchange of information over the Indo-Pak frontier is rising rapidly, bypassing all the obstacles placed by officialdom, the post, and poor phone lines between the two countries (email is routed through international channels). This can only add to the confidence-building that has already been achieved by television and print media.

Useful Seminaring

The sudden increase in cross-border seminars and workshops organised by those outside government have provided unprecedented opportunity for Indians and Pakistanis to travel across. One such workshop ran for nine days at the Neemrana Fort Palace in Rajasthan last October, organised by the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College, London. Among the participants was a young, Lahore-based journalist, Mazhar Zaidi, who, visiting India for the first time, saw first-hand how personal contact could clear the air. By the time the Kashmir issue came up for discussion on the last day of the workshop, he reported, the participants had already managed to "tear apart the imposed wall of hostility and antagonism which has been created between the people of the two countries."

Mr Zaidi, however, was already a 'dove'. What about the 'hawks'? Among the Pakistanis at Neemrana was Saad S. Khan, a student from Islamabad and a self-confessed "cut-throat, anti-India hardliner". Said Mr Khan, "Till the last day, in my heart of hearts, I wished at least one Hindu would misbehave with me, to substantiate my deeply ingrained beliefs about the 'Hindu mentality'. But nobody obliged." In an article titled "Confessions from the Land of the Enemy", Mr Khan reported on his myth-shattering experience in an India where he only received warmth and camaraderie.

While wandering around old Delhi, says Mr Zaidi, he was bombarded with questions about Lahore by old people who were once of that city. "Is Lakshmi Chowk still called by the same name?" Yes, it is. So is Ganga Ram Hospital, Gulab Devi Hospital, Mozang Chungi, Lakshmi Mansions on Regal Chowk and Model Town.

Wrote Mr Zaidi, "You can't understand why, if you are not in your country, everything still looks the same. Standing near Jamia Masjid in Old Delhi, you can feel the ambience of Lahore's Mochi Darwaza. Or the similarity between South Extension, where you'll find the yuppie crowd eating out at trendy restaurants—it's just like Liberty Market in Lahore, or Jinnah Super in Islamabad."

More than a culture shock, he says, it's like coming "face to face with a mirror image of the same culture". It is this face on the mirror that media exchanges between India and Pakistan, whether it is satellite channels beaming down unasked, email and the Internet, or terrestrial journalists visiting each other's country, are helping the people of each country recognise as one's own.

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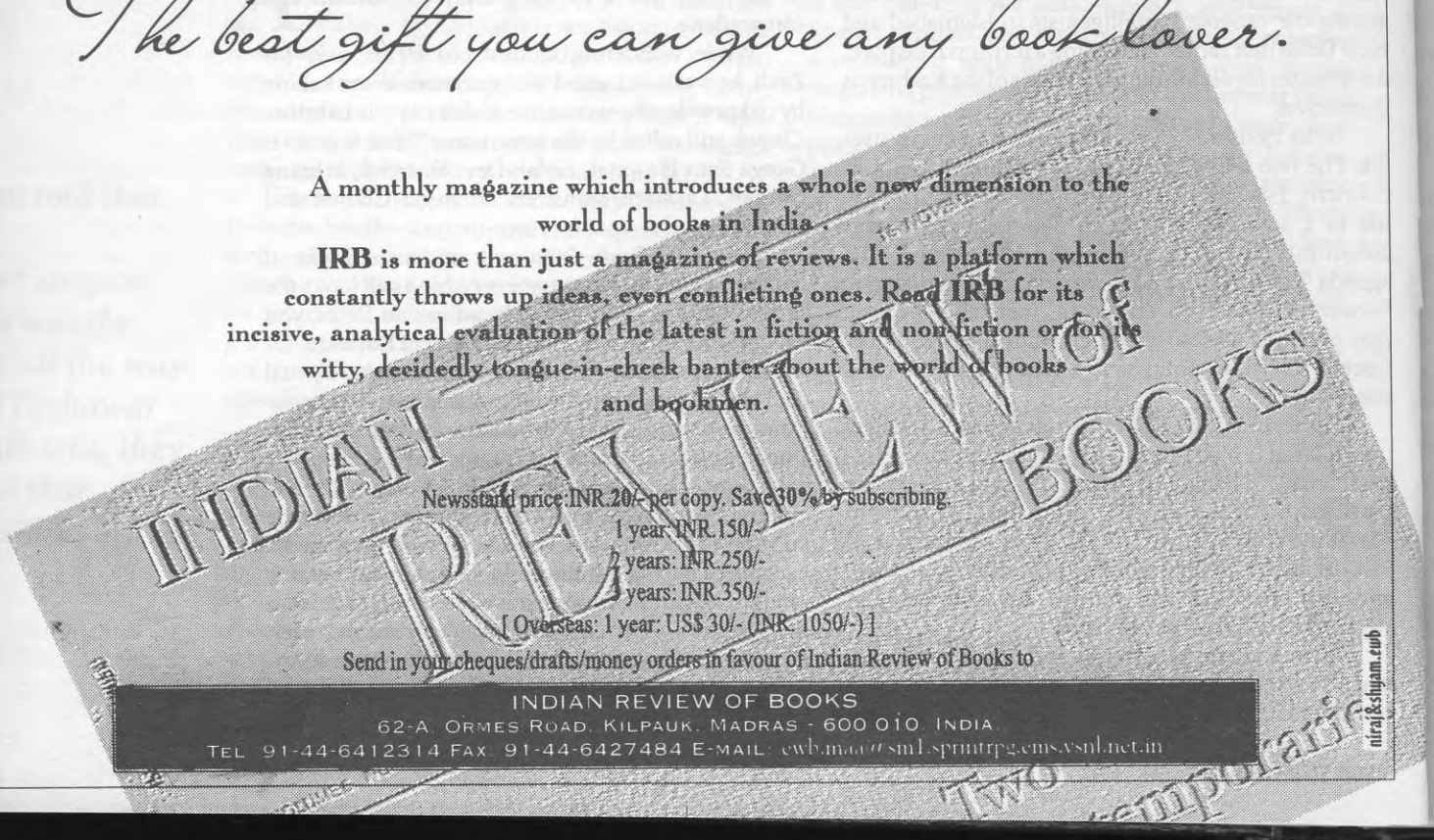

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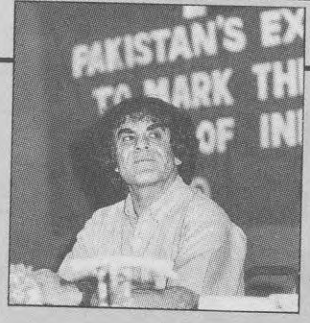
From Karakoram to Everest



THERE ARE many ways to celebrate a jubilee year and one of them is to go climb Everest. A group of Pakistani mountaineers are on the mountain at this very moment, seeking to celebrate 50 years of their nation's statehood by climbing the Mother Goddess of the Earth.

It is fitting that these fine climbers from the Karakoram, many of them Balti who have earned a reputation as worthy climbers (see Mar/Apr Himal, page 68), should go climbing in a region that has been the preserve of that other famous climbing race, the Sherpas. For, while the Sherpas have climbed extensively in the Karakoram as support for Western and other expeditions, their counterparts from Baltistan and Hunza have never made it to the Central Himalaya.

It is unfortunate that there will be no Sherpa climbing with the Pakistan team, but there will be Tibetans accompanying them as they tackle the mountain from its standard North Face route.

This is not only the first Pakistani expedition to Everest, but also the first ever outside Pakistan. The ten-member team is led by Nazir Sabir, the well-known Pakistani climber (and politician). Mr Sabir, 43, himself has climbed all the four 8000-metre peaks in the Karakoram: K2, Gasherbrum I and II and Broad Peak. Another member of the team, Rajab Shah, 45, has climbed K2, Gasherbrum I, Broad Peak and Nanga Parbat, the one Pakistani eight-thousander that lies in the Himalayan chain. (It is just one of those ironies that no Pakistani has yet summitted all five 8000ers in the country till now.)

At a press conference in Kathmandu before the team headed off to Lhasa, Mr Sabir said, "Many of our climbers live at the same height as the Sherpas themselves. The living conditions are the same." He hoped to attain the summit some time in the end of May, and was confident of getting everyone off the mountain safely. "Climbing is a dangerous sport and we all know the dangers, but I have a good team of able climbers," he said.

The idea of a golden jubilee expedition has been in preparation since 1994 by the Alpine Club of Pakistan, and a sponsor was found easily enough in the form of the Hubco Power Company, the multinational that built the largest thermal power generation plant in Pakistan. The China-Tibet Mountaineering Association (CTMA), the body that regulates mountain climbing in Tibet, then came with an exchange offer. CTMA would send a team to Nanga Parbat while the Pakistanis tried Qomolongma. Both countries would host each other's team up to the respective base camps.

Besides India and Nepal, this Pakistani expedition is the only other expedition from a South Asian country to Everest so far. This year, the Malaysians are climbing from the Nepal side. Just goes to show that expeditions are mounted only by countries which have reached a certain level of affluence.

The Pakistani team with President Farooq Leghari and Nazir Sabir *(above)*.

Cheap Is Beautiful

GIVEN BELOW are some brilliant ideas from India that have the potential to transform many a villager's life. The only problem is that they have been produced by the "small press" rather than the "regional" or "mainstream" media, and hence the information has spread to only a few people, reports *EEG Features*. This is only a sampling of the unusual, but low cost and effective, innovations that no one seems to know about.

- Farmers are predicting the coming of the monsoons by studying the foliage of the *mahua* and the *pipal* trees.

- A scientist from Bangalore has discovered the simplest of pregnancy tests for cattle. All that is needed is the cow's urine and a few grains of wheat seed.

- Farmers from Kerala have made a mousetrap using old saw-blades and umbrella sticks.

- Another Keralite innovation is the idea of building a whole house—floor, roof, doors, windows and furniture—from a coconut tree.

- A Rajasthani villager has found a way to plant a tree using just one litre of water. Following his method, after the initial watering, nature takes care of the tree for the rest of its life. (We would like to know more about this one.)

- An ingenious method to improve seed germination: feed the seed to cattle and later collected them from the dung. This from Sri Lanka.

- Junagadh resident Amritbhai Agrawat's invention is a four-wheeled bullock cart. This animal-friendly vehicle has a gear-driven shaft, can carry 2000 kilograms, has hand brakes, a facility to pour fertilisers (which has calibration control to regulate the fertiliser dosage) and can be drawn by a lone bull.

- "Premjibhai" quit his Bombay lifestyle to become an "incredible tree planting machine". His method is simple. He has a van that sprays coated seeds wherever he goes. So far he has planted or distributed 45 billion seeds and he began only in 1987.

Princess Bhutto (and we do not mean Benazir)

PUBLIC SCRUTINY, never far from the Nehrus/Gandhis, has passed onto the new generation in India with Priyanka Gandhi's every move being monitored by the press. Now, she has a counterpart across the border in Pakistan, where another political "princess" is getting ready to take her own place under the sun. She is Fatima Bhutto, the 15-year-old daughter of Murtaza Bhutto—son of Zulfikar and brother of Benazir—who was gunned down in a Karachi street last year.

If there is any political family in South Asia that can match the Nehrus/Gandhis in terms of national aura, it is the Bhuttos. The two families have much in common, in dynastic succession as in their share of tragedies. And although much of the sheen has worn off the Bhuttos and although the Gandhis are progressively losing relevance in Indian politics, their scions have begun to make news no matter what they do.

Both Priyanka Gandhi and Fatima Bhutto are the granddaughters of prime ministers. Ms Gandhi had a father and a great-grandfather as prime minister as well, while Ms Bhutto had an aunt for one and a great-grandfather as the *diwan* of a princely state. The former lost her father and grandmother to assassins and the latter's father and grandfather suffered equally violent deaths.

Ms Gandhi is now ensconced in marital life and though there are those in the Congress (I) who are waiting for her to become active in politics, she has given no indication either way. For the ten years younger Fatima Bhutto, however, life is just beginning. "I have an interest in politics....Whether I would join it or not I can't say right now. You'll have to wait," she told the daily *The Nation*.

But that is at best a diplomatic answer and her taking up politics is not ruled out. In fact, the newspaper interview, which was overseen by Ms Bhutto's highly political step-mother, Ghinva, can be construed to be a statement of sorts towards Ms Bhutto taking her first step towards taking up politics. That, however, is a long time away. For the moment, Ms Bhutto has yet to decide whether she wants to go to university in Harvard or Oxford.

About her father, Ms Bhutto said, "I was very close to him. He was like my best friend, even if I looked I couldn't have found a better parent or a better friend or a teacher." Murtaza Bhutto divorced her mother when she was still a child. However, she is very attached to her Lebanon-born step-mother. (It was through Fatima that Ghinva met Murtaza. Ghinva used to teach Arabic to Fatima when they all lived in exile in Damascus.)

About her relations with her aunt, Benazir? "How can you have a nice happy relationship with someone who arrests your father and doesn't help him or his family?" is the forthright answer.

Personal feelings apart, however, she has followed her aunt's footsteps: father killed and his "mission" taken up by the daughter. She campaigned in Sind during the last two general elections and her experience already shows in the way she describes the problems faced by people in Larkana, her family's ancestral town. "They have, in Larkana at least, fountains as if to mock the people because they don't have water in their homes but they have got these lush beautiful fountains springing all over the place."

Ms Bhutto is quite taken by her grandfather, and at the moment is researching Machiavelli, who was Zulfikar Bhutto's favourite author. She spends a lot of time browsing through the famed Bhutto library. "There's nothing you can't find in there," she said. Her reading is almost entirely devoted to non-fiction and, in that, mostly biographies. That, if nothing else, is indication enough of her affinity for her family's destiny—politics.

Gum Tree Activism

WE DO not hear of the Great Eucalyptus Debate anymore, even though back in the 1970s this stately Australian import provided the grooming for a whole generation of Indian environmentalists. As Janet White reports in *EEG Features*, eucalyptus faded from view as ecologists have moved "on to more lucrative issues". The floodgates of environmental activism as well as pontification burst with the host of other subjects that came up, from limestone quarries to vehicular pollution, prawn fisheries and river sludge.

But the problem with eucalyptus, if it was real in the first place, is still with us. Indeed, Ms White reports that eucalyptus are as bad as ever for South Asia's ecology, and if South Asians are not worried, the Californians certainly are. This is because, in addition to all the other problems of eucalyptus, it has suddenly shown itself to be prone to certain kinds of pests. Three of these pest varieties have caught up with the Californian trees, and the state is engaged in a campaign to cut trees and grind their trunks and limbs—the only way to get rid of the diseases.

In California, they are going about eliminating the diseased Eucalyptus methodically, spending USD 1500 to 2000 *per tree*. Now that it is clear that these Eucalyptus are not only unwelcome but also malignant, what will the responsible authorities do in the Subcontinent. More likely than not, the attitude will be, "If they are diseased, then they will die. What me worry?"

Freedom To Defame

NEVER SPEAK your mind on a subject as sensitive as Kashmir. This is what Ravi Nair, who runs an effective outfit known as the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre out of a New Delhi basement, found out in what has become a case of bizarre interpretation of press freedom *by* the Press Council.

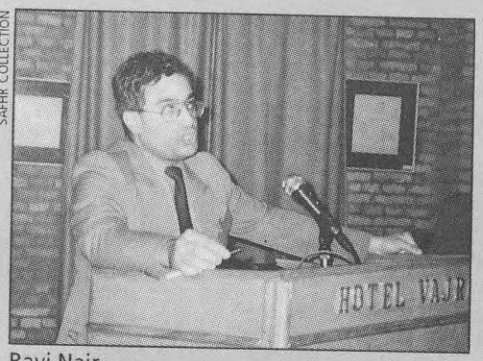
It all began back in 4 November 1993, when the Dhirubhai Ambani-owned *The Observer* published a report quoting "authoritative sources" and said Pakistan intelligence agents in New Delhi "made use" of Mr Nair to prepare "a detailed document" of human rights violations in Indian Kashmir. The news report went on to say "(Indian) Government agencies suspect Mr Nair may have been paid a fee for the preparation of the report".

The reporter apparently wrote the column without talking to Mr Nair, who wrote to the newspaper denying the charges and demanding an apology. *The Observer* ignored the request, following which Mr Nair filed a complaint with the Press Council charging that the paper's motives were to defame him. That was when the affair took its absurd turn.

The newspaper's manager, rather than its editor, replied to the Press Council saying that it was willing to make "a suitable retraction as desired by the complainant in case the complainant is able to obtain and furnish to the Press Council a declaration or a clean chit from the Home Ministry (Intelligence Bureau), Cabinet Secretariat (Research and Analysis Wing) and Ministry of External Affairs. If the statement made in the report is incorrect then these agencies of the government which alone are in the possession of relevant facts and information, would be able to give a clearance to the complainant."

In effect, Mr Nair was to get a "clean chit" from the very agencies which, according to the report, had accused him of being on Pakistan's payroll. If that was not ludicrous enough, the way the Press Council acted certainly was.

Mr Nair's case was up for final adjudication on 9 April 1996. Five days before this date the Press Council received a request from Mr Nair's office asking that the hearing be postponed for any day after April 15



SAFHR COLLECTION

Ravi Nair

when Mr Nair, who was attending meetings of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, would be back in Delhi.

The Press Council ignored the request for a five-day postponement by Mr Nair and went ahead with a hearing on 9 April 1996. Wrote C.R. Irani, editor of the daily *The Statesman*, "It is incomprehensible to me that the Press Council, under a retired judge of the Supreme Court, should pay such scant attention to the principles of natural justice....They heard the counsel for the newspaper and accepted at face value (the correspondent's) reliance on official sources."

No less incomprehensible is how the inquiry committee of the Press Council "felt that the impugned report was based on information received by the respondent-newspaper from authentic sources and, therefore, there was no substance in the complaint. The committee decided to recommend to the council to dismiss the complaint."

Mr Nair has called the ruling "wrong in law, devoid of reason and shows a non-application of mind." Its implications on Mr Nair apart, the decisions has raised a serious question of 'legal' defamation. "If this stand is accepted as valid in law, it would be open to these government agencies (IB, RAW, MEA), and their political masters as well, to plant stories in the media levelling charges of treason, espionage, subversion or what have you against politicians, journalists or just anyone they wish to harm," wrote an indignant A.G. Noorani, the noted jurist.

Mr Nair, in the meantime, is not taking things lying down. While he has approached the World Association of Press Councils regarding the matter, he is also planning to move the courts. It seems likely to be a long haul but Mr Nair is prepared for it.

Visiting Places

THE MALDIVES has chosen 1997 as the Visit Maldives Year, and Nepal has gone for 1998 as the Visit Nepal Year. Maldives, a country of 250,000 hosts, today hosts 350,000 Western tourists a year. Nepal, with 21 million of its own, and also relying on tourism for a large portion of its revenues, hosts a little less, and the tourist numbers are declining.

The VMY '97 is a well-funded and efficient effort, managed by the Tourism Minister Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, former Secretary General of SAARC. It comes complete with super-glossy brochures displaying emerald vistas and white sands. The year's slogan is "Sustainable Development Through Tourism".

VNY '98, on the other hand, is managed by a government bureaucracy trying hard to be tourist-sensitive. There is not really the money, creativity or flexibility available to develop full "product diversification". And plans are already horribly askew with the inability of the national flag-carrier, Royal Nepal, to lease a wide-bodied jet even after a year's trying. Nevertheless, entrepreneur Karna Shakya believes that Visit Nepal '98 will leave a positive legacy, most importantly telling the world that there is much more to Nepal than what the tourists have discovered so far.

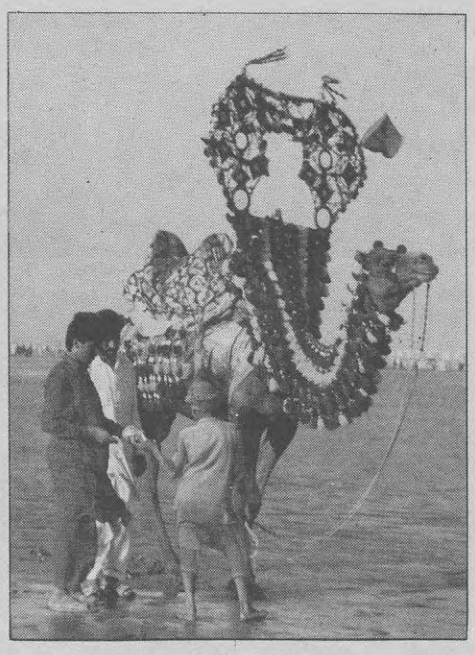
1997 VISIT MALDIVES YEAR

visit nepal '98

The strategy of both countries is to increase the volume of tourism and profit margins by going for a high-end clientele. The Maldives can plan on the basis of small size, political stability, and sun-loving Europeans. Nepal's plans are hobbled by industry inertia and political uncertainty—Tourism Minister Chakra Prasad Bastola, who launched VNY '98, departed with the change of government in March.

On the other hand, the Maldives' plans have a limit set by the beaches, corals and multicoloured fish. Not much product diversification there, whereas Nepal is a country of immense variety and untapped possibilities. It can continue to fascinate long after the holidayer is bored of staring at the see.

Holy Day Not Holiday



Sunday fare: Caparisoned camel on Karachi beach

"IT WAS so nice that after many years we spent our Shab-e-Juma (Thursday night) without wasting our time watching movies, for we had to go to work the next morning. It was for the first time in so many years that we went to offer our Juma (Friday) prayers in such high spirits; otherwise we used to yawn at prayers, having slept late the night before, watching movies."

Thus wrote Karachi citizen Firdous Husain in a letter to the daily *The News*, thanking the Prime Minister for making Friday in Pakistan a working half-day, starting 28 February 1997.

Although Nawaz Sharif's decision to change the weekly holiday to Sunday from Friday was based on business and economic interests rather than a desire to curb late-night movie watching on Thursdays, it has been widely hailed. Objections had been expected from the clerics, but Mian Nawaz Sharif took the wind out of their sails by stating that the decision would actually "restore the sanctity" of Fridays.

Said the Prime Minister, in his first address to the nation after taking office, "Instead of going to offer prayers on Friday, people would treat it as a holiday, a day of rest and recreation, a day to hold wedding functions. Making it a working day until noon will encourage people to offer Friday prayers." The prayers are offered around 1.00 pm.

The mild protests against the Prime Minister's action is nothing compared to the uproar which followed his predecessor Benazir Bhutto's tentative support for a decision by the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry's to observe Sunday as the weekly holiday. The religious groups forced the government to withdraw its support, after which the business community succumbed and overturned their decision. As one trader then put it, "We can keep the markets open (on Friday), but unless the government keeps the banks open, how can we do any dealing?"

Friday as holiday was instituted by Gen Zia-ul Haq as part of his plans to consolidate his own position by appeasing the religious parties. No one missed the irony that it was the late dictator's protege, Mr Sharif, who is now pushing through the rollback, buoyed by his massive mandate at the recent hustings: he has the support of over 180 members in a house of 209.

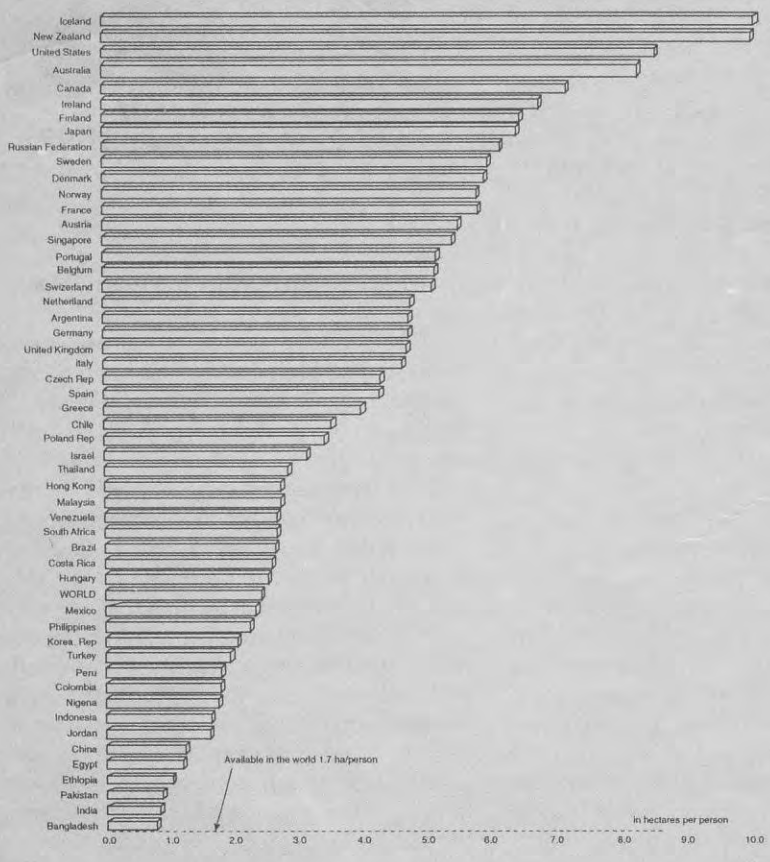
Some comments from ordinary people on the change:

"The week seems longer now" –Arif, a young businessman.

"It feels good to be in synch with the rest of the world" –a doctor in Karachi.

"I still keep thinking of Thursday as the weekend, and Saturday as the beginning of the week" –Uzma, a housewife in Lahore.

Welcome to the world, Pakistan.



How Big Is Your Ecological Footprint?

HOW MUCH 'nature' do countries use, how much 'nature' do they have? was the question foremost on the mind of Mathis Wackernagel at the Center for Sustainability Studies in Mexico. And so he developed a statistical formula to measure the "ecological footprint of nations", which shows to what extent their consumption can be supported by local ecological capacity.

In a report presented at the Rio+5 sustainability conference in Rio de Janeiro in mid-March, Mr Wackernagel showed the three major countries of South Asia come at the bottom of the list of 52 largest countries—which means that they are the most 'sustainable' of the lot.

The arrow in the chart points to 1.7 hectares per capita, the amount of biologically productive space available worldwide. Only people from nine countries use less, including the populations of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (and, obviously, the other South Asians, who did not figure in the study.)

Mr Mathis also provides calculation spreadsheets for each country showing his data and methodology, which includes analysing the consumption of over 20 main biotic resources, and the energy balance of traded goods. The researcher can be contacted by email at mathiswa@edg.net.mx .

Caught In The Act

THE ARMED Forces (Special Powers) Act of India, which is in operation in six states of the country's Northeast, has come under severe scrutiny of a watchdog body made up of lawyers, journalists and activists.

In April 1996, a fact-finding group visited Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura and Arunachal, where the Act is in force, as well as Meghalaya, which was included because of the "disturbing" level of military presence there. The resulting 56,000-word report released recently in New Delhi constitutes a lengthy indictment of the Act.

The group claimed that the Act had "disrupted normal civilian life, legitimised arbitrary killings of citizens by the security forces, led to illegal detention and custodial violence, denied the citizens their legitimate right to justice from the courts, undermined the authority of the civilian administration, and exploited inter-community (both tribal and non-tribal) rivalries through a policy of divide and rule."

According to the investigators, rather than seek political solutions to the problems that beset the Northeast, the central government had resorted to extensive militarisation and repressive legislation. It was therefore distanced from the population, with the security forces treating everyone as a militant or a secessionist. Such was the level of suspicion, that even the members of the mission were sometimes regarded as "stooges" of militant groups.

About the inter-ethnic conflicts in the region, the report says there has been increasing insularity and chauvinism among some movements, often resulting in fratricidal killings. The militant groups which have taken up arms must bear the responsibility for their actions and the impact of their armed struggle on civilian populations, especially on communities other than their own, states the mission. It urges the militant groups to seek peaceful means to achieve their demands, while insisting that the government recognise the grievances being articulated by all kinds of groups in the Northeast. "As long as the government deals with the issues as law and order problems to be suppressed by military solutions, it will only cause the escalation of armed resistance," says the report.

The fact-finding mission included members of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Baroda), Saheli (Delhi), Indian Peoples' Human Rights Tribunal (Bombay), Vimochana (Bangalore), and the Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights (Imphal).

The RCSS workshop alumni and teachers.

Catch 'Em Young

IN THE PLETHORA of regional meetings taking place in South Asian cities these days, one misses the voice of young professionals. Such occasions mostly bring together a buddy-duddy network of veterans contribute. Which is why a gathering that took place in the first half of March in Kandy was invigorating.

The residential workshop brought together 36 young professionals from the seven South Asian countries and 29 experts who came to take classes. The meeting was organised by the Colombo-based Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) and its primary achievement was the creation of a network among the young generation of South Asian scholars.

Entitled "Sources of Conflict in South Asia: Ethnicity, Refugees, Environment", the workshop provided a forum to examine how non-military issues evolve into conflict. Thus, the conference took in the whole gamut of South Asian conflicts, from Sri Lanka's "Tamil problem" to the situation in India's Northeast and from communal riots in India to environmental damage wrought by big dams throughout the region.

RCSS's director Iftekhar Zaman says he hopes to convert the event into a process whereby more and more young professionals will be involved in future.

TRAVELLERS AND NEO-ORIENTALISM

THE TWAIN STILL DON'T MEET

by Sigrun Eide Odegaard

LONELY PLANET TRAVEL SURVIVAL KIT: INDIA

I asked him where he was going. He shook his head; his hair danced. "Just"—he raised his eyes and said with drama—"travelling."—Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar*, 1975

This is an article that discusses what I call the "traveller culture" in India and Nepal. It is basically a reflection upon some paradoxes in this transnational culture of Westerners travelling with the Lonely Planet guidebook in their backpacks. A guidebook which has a crucial role as a trendsetter in this traveller culture. In order to avoid talking about a traveller culture in abstract essentialised terms, one has to embed the concept in social activities, and that I have tried to do.

There is a gap between travellers' actions and the norms and representations they themselves think they communicate and represent. These individuals do not look upon themselves as 'tourists', but as 'travellers'. A general view of tourists among travellers, is that tourists travel only for short time and in organised groups. They thus only have access to "front stage". Travellers, on the other hand, have access to "backstage", as Ulf Hannerz points out in *Global Culture—Nationalism, Globalisation and Modernity*.

A well-established subjective identification as travellers differentiates them from "ordinary tourists". Since they want to travel "backstage", travellers seek authentic otherness. This drive for authenticity instead of the reproduced (understood as produced for tourists) make travellers seek destinations off the beaten track, where there are no tourists. Lonely Planet gives a lot of information about "untouched areas" (as the opposite of "tourist ghettoes"), where one rarely will see large groups of travellers together and "where the local people remain friendly".

Travellers are individuals, and their individuality is often one of the reasons for travelling the way they do, contrary to "tourists". This does not prevent travellers from conforming to certain unwritten rules and values. As a traveller, you also start behaving like a traveller, dress like a traveller and go to the same places as other travellers. This indicates that there is a kind of standardisation and conformed fashion among travellers within this particular travellers' universe, and this is what I mean by traveller culture.

Travellers with a Lonely Planet

Basically India is what you make of it and what you want it to be.–*Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit: India*

Next to the shared values already indicated, travellers in India and Nepal carry in their backpacks the Lonely Planet as a travel survival kit. It gives travellers detailed information about places to visit, low-budget places to stay, and where a traveller will meet other travellers. This book is best described as the travellers' bible and as it has become the guide to Nepal and India, it also adds to the conformisation and standardisation of travellers' values.

On the way to one of the roof-top restaurants in the Paharganj area in old Delhi, one passes many restaurants mentioned in Lonely Planet. In these restaurants, some travellers read their Lonely Planet and plan their next

train journey, while others discuss where to go and in which hotel it is best to stay after getting there. Some have just arrived, which can be seen by the quality of their trekking boots and the latest edition of Lonely Planet they are thumbing. Next to the newly arrived, there are those who never left.

"India is not a place you simply and clinically 'see'; it's a total experience, an assault on the senses, a place you'll never forget," the guide points out in its introduction; the traveller in India will never be quite the same person after the "total experience" of the country. There are those who refuse to use this guide book, in their hope of getting even closer backstage. But, with or without Lonely Planet, travellers tend to end up in or around the same places.

Travellers are transnational and many "do" Asian countries "on a shoestring". Although there are many common features among travellers as a whole, the visited countries, as well as travellers' presumptions about the countries (in this case India and Nepal), influence the "total experience" they acquire. In their search for spirituality and non-materialism, many travellers have a tendency to romanticise what they see and experience. They end up not seeing the countries as they exist. Despite their norms and good intentions, travellers are representatives of the well-established Western tradition of Orientalism.

Orientalism and Nostalgia

India as the Spiritual Centre

East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.
–Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West"

In a world where the discourse on the East has been dominated by Orientalism and romanticism, travellers have been brought up to perceive India and Nepal as non-materialist, spiritualist paradises. "There is possibly no other country where religion is so inextricably intertwined with every aspect of life," Lonely Planet says about India. Together with the religious and spiritual aspects, maharajas' palaces, elephants, fakirs, and the mysticism of the East, are emphasised by those selling India and Nepal in the international market, as well as by the travellers themselves when they go home. The essentialism I refer to is more pronounced in the travellers' narratives given upon return, but is also present while travelling.

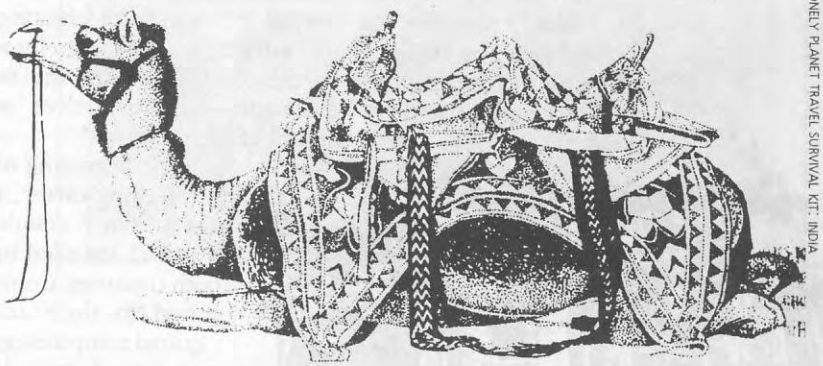
There are many different reasons for choosing Nepal and India. The search for a Shangrila is still very present among many of them. In addition to such a spiritual search, there is also the urge for finding something radically different. Whatever the different motivations, they are often related to the longstanding Western tradition of Orientalism, understood as the Western essentialised knowledge about the exotic Other.

Among the long-time travellers I met and travelled with, there were not many of the "postmodern" kind who are not concerned about the authenticity in the culture they visit. Dominant were those that regretted the destruction they have wrought on other ways of life, and the idea that Western cultural imperialism has "Westernised" every place. Many travellers list the places they just must visit before they are "destroyed", and many experience disappointment in finding destinations already "destroyed" or "Westernised". About Goa, the lost hippy paradise of India, Lonely Planet reports plaintively: "There's also a large contingent of Western package-tour visitors who arrive by direct charter flight and stay in the beach resort complexes that have sprung up in main centres. Even the Indians from outside Goa have begun to come here in ever-increasing numbers."

The famous Sri Rajneesh Ashram in Poona and export gurus invited abroad, led to notions about India as a spiritual Shangrila. India became "a living museum of religious humanism, yogic health practices and new age phenomena" (Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*). Rishikesh, in the northern Uttar Pradesh, is termed the "yoga capital of the world", and is on the itinerary of many travellers.

Whether you are interested in yoga and meditation or not, for many they have become compulsory if you want to consume authenticity in India. Lonely Planet therefore provides information on Rishikesh, although it adds, "Studying Hinduism has, naturally, become somewhat commercialised at Rishikesh". The traveller is cautioned about unauthentic Hinduism, while in the next breath recommending one of the ashrams as a relaxed place where "you don't have to attend the yoga class (6 am) or the evening lectures".

This indicates a well-known and accepted fact that most travellers are not that deeply interested in "studying aspects of Hinduism". Why go to an ashram, then? A Norwegian girl I met said she went to a Rishikesh ashram



LONELY PLANET TRAVEL SURVIVAL KIT: INDIA

because everyone else she met went there. It hadn't been so nice, she told me, even though it was cheap and food (although awful) was included. It was boring at night, and she and her friends had to climb over the fence to get in and out of the ashram after the evening curfew. What was important to this Norwegian was to do what everybody else does while travelling in India; authenticity of the spiritual experience was not important.

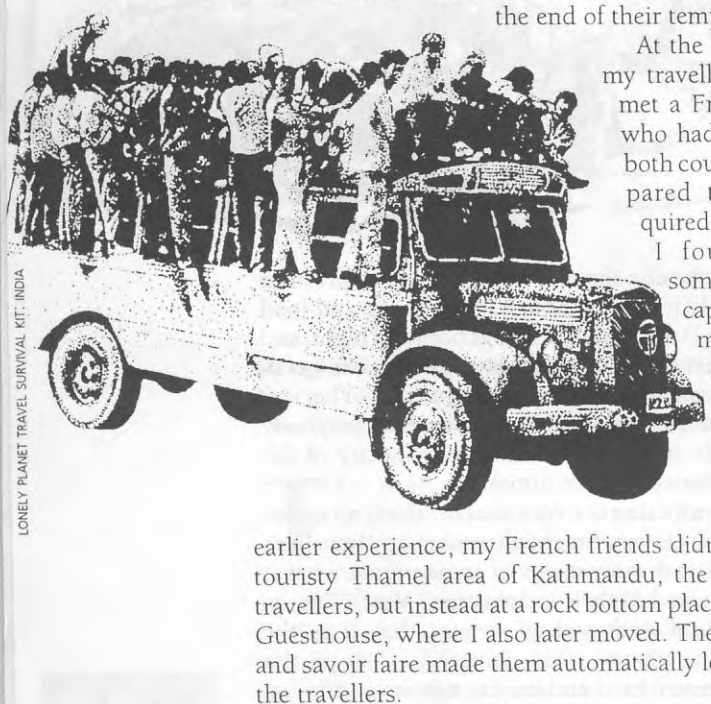
Eastern spirituality is a Western construct, an essentialism that today is very much inherent in any traveller's mind. Does their dreamy image of India mirror what is there, or is it a land of their imagination? Veena Das, in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, argues that it is the Brahmanical imagination that managed to shape the European representation and master narrative of India. This master narrative and essentialism nevertheless proved useful for the Western-educated Indian elite, who, in the struggle for independence, had to base an indigenous nationalism on values different from those of the colonial power. The Gandhian emphasis on *ahimsa* (non-violence and vegetarianism) clearly shows the transformation of Orientalism into a way of self-representation.

This Western mythologisation of an eternal spiritual paradise is not limited to India/Nepal only. Tibet has been a very useful place for the West as a source of adventure and mysticism. In fact, the West has reduced Tibet to its own picture of Tibet, and forced upon it its longing for spiritual life and escape from the material world. There is, therefore, no need for the real Tibet, writes Tsering Shakya in *Samtiden*, because Tibet is reborn in Western fantasy and psychedelic experiences, as the Shangrila. This again, he suggests, may be the reason for the Western world's lack of interest or engagement in what is happening in Tibet today. Similarly, is there a need for the real India in a traveller's vision?

Where Competence Counts

Many travellers feel great frustration after coming to India and Nepal, when it finally dawns upon them that the spiritual lands of their imagination do not exist. "It's not an easy country to handle, and more than a few visitors are only too happy to finally get on an aircraft and fly away," Lonely Planet points out, adding, "and the most experienced travellers find themselves at the end of their tempers at some point in India. Yet, it's all worth it." The guide states that it is legitimate to dislike India at certain points of your travel, although, "Love it or hate it, you can never ignore India".

India poses a big challenge to the traveller, a place for the bravest of the brave, where skill and competence are crucial values for his survival in a jungle of cheating Indians. The guide is full of advice on where to go for a "little respite from the hardships of life on the Indian road" when travellers—it assumes—find themselves "at the end of their tempers".



LONELY PLANET TRAVEL SURVIVAL KIT: INDIA

At the beginning of my travelling career, I met a French couple who had travelled in both countries. Compared to their acquired competence, I found myself somewhat handicapped with my more theoretically based competence derived from studying anthropology. Due to their earlier experience, my French friends didn't stay in the touristy Thamel area of Kathmandu, the mecca of all travellers, but instead at a rock bottom place called Peace Guesthouse, where I also later moved. Their experience and savoir faire made them automatically leaders among the travellers.

"Competence with regard to alien cultures itself entails a sense of mastery," Mr Hannerz writes in his book. This has a "narcissistic streak in that the self is constructed in the space where cultures mirror each other". For travellers in India, the crucial thing is to have the skill and competence to handle India. There are many stories about travellers who fail, and Lonely Planet is also full of examples. The reason why people fail, though, is not their own responsibility. Most often, it is blamed on the natives who don't understand, or rather, are stupid. One of the first things I learnt from my French friends was that Indians are "stupid". This seems to be a general view of Indians among many travellers.

What people tell each other in the recommended restaurants and cafes, is how to avoid being cheated by Indians. The picture of the Indian as the Other that one has to watch out for is as present among travellers as the essentialism mentioned earlier. Lonely Planet is extraordinarily explicit in its information on how much things would cost, so as to prevent the traveller from being ripped off. Travellers are socialised into the idea that cheating is inherent in the local culture. There is always the warning against cheats, as with this information about camel safaris in Rajasthan illustrates:

> However much you decide to spend, make sure you know exactly what is being provided and make sure it's there before you leave Jaisalmer. You should also make sure you know where they're going to take you. Try to talk to other travellers for feedback on who is currently offering good, reliable and honest service.

This paranoia sometimes makes travellers behave strangely. They are obsessed with the idea of not paying more than the local price, which is a result of their obsession with competence and skill. The constant vigilance against being ripped off by the locals is what gives the travellers in India that fatigued, suffering India look. There is always bargaining and the first question asked is, "How much?". A reluctance to pay more than the local price, and preferably less, makes one wonder if travelling like "free passengers on the global track" is the main purpose.

"They grew filthier and more fatigued-looking as I moved down the cars," wrote Paul Theroux in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. He noticed that in the third class compartment English was the only language spoken, because there were only hippies travelling third class. Whether it was the money saved or the idea that travelling third class was more authentic is hard to say. But as no locals travelled third class, if they could avoid it, the authenticity of the experience was lost.

Third class exists no more, so all travellers these days travel in second class. It is very rare to hear about someone travelling first class, though. That is tantamount to admitting that you could not cope with the masses. Travelling second class on today's Indian trains is the same as travelling "backstage". As Lonely Planet points out, "It's India for real on the trains."

Traveller is Traveller and Native is Native

It was then that I learnt, perhaps for the first time, how thoroughly the notion of travel has become corrupted by the notion of power –Claude Levi-Strauss

Are travellers really willing to immerse themselves in other cultures? Lonely Planet, the guide book and bible, is written by travellers for travellers. The information and values communicated throughout the guide reveals paradoxes and contradictions when

it comes to this "immersing into a culture".

Take the example of food. There seems to be a great aversion against local food and thus no immersing into the dietary habits, even though many travellers emphasise that they love Indian food back home. Food is a potential topic of complaint whenever travellers go on treks, safaris or rafting trips, and the guidebook is quite explicit in its dietary guidance. For example: "The minimum price for a basic safari is Rs 150 per person per day. For this you can expect a breakfast of porridge, tea and toast, and lunch and dinner of rice, dhal and chapatis—pretty unexciting stuff. For Rs 250 you should also get fruit, mineral water and some relief from the rice-dhal-chapati tedium."

Natives in Nepal and India do not necessarily make a difference between tourist tourists and travellers. They make a difference between tourists with money and tourists without. Also, to the locals there are good tourists and bad tourists. It is possible that tourists coming for shorter periods often may be more polite and easygoing than travellers, and thus more popular among the locals.

Contrary to their illusions of being innocent wanderers, travellers in India and Nepal may sometimes articulate their "bad" attitudes they themselves ascribe to tourists. This is often the case with the traveller's reluctance to accord natives' point of view any relevance at all. One tendency, as already pointed out, is a romanticism of natives' values, often a result of an imperialist nostalgia and a radical culturalist attitude. Another tendency is more imperialist than nostalgic: the opinion that the local culture is crazy, stupid (or what not), rather than only different.

Despite all the good intentions in using cultural relativity to come to terms with the natives, the travellers tend to treat Nepal and India, as The Other Societies, on his own terms rather than theirs. Travellers tend to dress as filthily as they like, as this, too, is part of the travellers' identity. Rarely would they dress in the same way back home. The neocolonial attitude seems to be, "This is only India/Nepal anyway".

Indians and Nepalis do appreciate it when they come across someone wearing clean clothes, and they wonder why so many travellers insist on looking so undignified. Travellers, for their part, still expect to be treated with respect. Behaving according to norms and values of the travellers' universe, they don't care if this is offensive to the natives.

Transnationalism and the New Tribe

Travellers go to the same places, eat at the same kind of restaurants, and mostly remain within the communitas while on the road. The Lonely Planet strengthens this traveller communitas. In that way, they are part of a third culture, even though this may be contrary to most travellers' intentions, and the way they represent themselves. This communitas is in many ways closed and does not encourage engagement with the Other, the locals.

As the travellers proceed from place to place, natives have no chance to contest their self-representations. The natives' point of view is not considered important. Low-budget travelling and the fatigue experienced by longterm travelling in countries which, according to Lonely Planet are "an assault on the senses", may also be a factor that undermines these cosmopolitans' role as bridgeheads in a global culture.

Travellers want to look upon themselves as different from tourists. But this idea is an illusion. △

S.E. Odegaard is associated with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo.

PATAN MUSEUM

KESHAV NARAYAN CHOWK
PATAN DARBAR

NEPAL

THE MUSEUM BEHIND THE GOLDEN DOOR

The Patan Museum displays the traditional sacred art of Nepal in a magnificent setting, the 18th century palace of Keshav Narayan Chowk at Patan Darbar, a World Heritage Site.

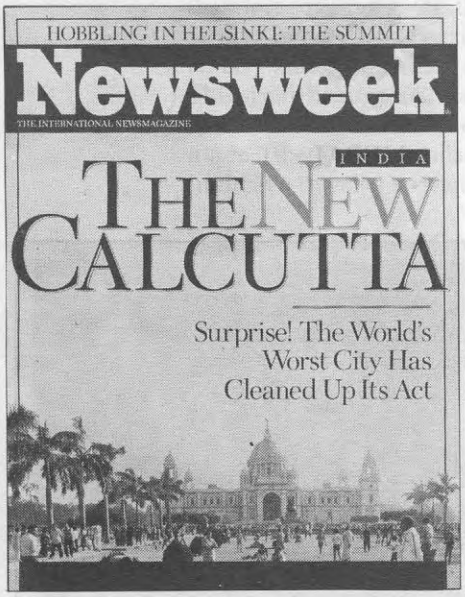
This historic palace, once home to Malla kings, has been restored and converted to its new purpose through the joint efforts of His Majesty's Government of Nepal and the Government of Austria.

Museum facilities include a spacious courtyard for cultural events, guest studios for foreign scholars and artists and, adjoining the palace gardens,

THE PATAN MUSEUM CAFE

Scheduled to open by the end of May 1997

"The New Calcutta", proclaimed the 31 March *Newsweek* on its cover, adding that "The World's Worst City Has Cleaned Up Its Act". However, the editors failed to provide any proof by way of picture inside.



The article by Sudip Mazumdar in the Pacific edition, all of one full page in terms of text (divided over three pages) seems to have made the cover only as a token gesture to South Asian readers. The original *American* edition, meanwhile, probably featured on the cover the more fully reported article "Is God Listening?". When will the editor sahibs over at 57th Street begin to see the light and stop throwing morsels at us?

Who's to evaluate the reasons for the paradox between high human development indexes and **suicide rates**, as reported by Bharat Dogra in his never-say-die feature service, *News From Fields and Slums*? The suicide rate for Kerala is 25 per 100,000 as against the all-India rate of 9.9. Over the waters, 46 Sri Lankans out of every 100,000 population kill themselves. Given such statistics, will someone make a case against development? Stay poor, uneducated... and alive!

If you have heard of Robin Raphel, you are not likely to hear of **Ric Inderfurth**. He has been nominated by Bill Clinton to head the State Department's South Asia Bureau. If he wants fame (no fortune on this assignment) he will have to insult some South Block highup, which is what Ms Raphel did and look at the press she got in India.

Here is my submission for the **best South Asian writing in a newspaper** for March: Siddharth Varadarajan in an article entitled, "Music Died in the Shadow of the Taj" in *TOI*, on the reception accorded to American composer Yanni when he commandeered the Taj Mahal. Yanni's music is an advertiser's ultimate antidote to thought. A potent weapon with which to induce mental sloth and passivity in the listener....In that nether region of mental drift, of mindlessness masquerading as meditation, the senses are benumbed and ready to be worked over by commercial sponsors. This, then, is the secret of Yanni's fame and fortune. His music is one extended jingle, protean and subliminal, for the vacuous values and globalised commodities of the marketplace in the New Age.

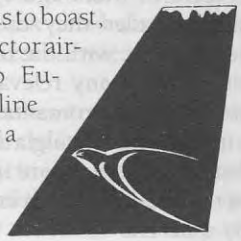
Anil Agarwal, and his Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, who I have written about more than once in this column, did a hat trick over March and April. He invited three heavy-weights (Sonia Gandhi, K.R. Narayanan, Atal Bihari Vajpayee) to launch three books, all of them with grim titles: *Dying Wisdom*, on water harvesting; *Slow Murder*, on vehicular pollution; and *Homicide by Pesticide*.

Here is the **Chhetria Quiz of the Century**: what does it mean when a headline in the *Independent* of Dhaka states: "**Ctg** needs

Infrastructure"? Find the answer, written most cleverly in reverse Urdu-style, at the bottom of this column.

Has the cinematised Oscar-winning *The English Patient* done South Asia an injustice? And is Michael Ondaatje an accomplice in all this? The central character in the book is the Sikh sapper, Kip (played by Naveen Andrews), who is lover of the nurse Hana. Not only was Kip's part marginalised in the screenplay, with Ondaatje's apparent acquiescence, but Mr Andrew's name does not even make it on the billboards. It is thought, and said, that Kip received short shrift because a relationship between **White Girl and Brown Man with Long Hair** would not make for box office success, and the Sri Lankan author seemed to have readily agreed.

There is one airline in Nepal which **does not fly**, but does advertise. And where other airlines put in their slogans, this one has this to boast, "The only private sector airline designated to Europe". Give the airline credit, however, for a good design to go on the tail of their airplane, when it arrives.



I liked what **H.Y. Sharada Prasad** had to say in an article entitled "A requiem for great hopes of an ageing nation," in speaking up for the achievements of Indian democracy. Penned the venerable adviser to the powerful and the dead of India, in *The Asian Age* of 8 April, "... No country has more outspoken commentators and cartoonists and angrier authors. Free speech may not mean a full stomach. But free speech means that despite all the outward despondency, deep down we have faith in ourselves and the confidence that we have the capacity to throw out the scoundrels." Hear! Hear!

An **International Conference on Creativity and Innovation at Grassroots** (ICCIG 1997) was held in Ahmedabad in early January, hosting 400 delegates from 40 countries. It had a wonderful symbol, The Goddess of Creativity, presiding over the deliberations. Wrote Sudhirendar Sharma, editor of *Undhyoo*, the Conference newspa-

per, "The goddess of creativity has picked up from where Archimedes left. He neither got the pole nor the place to stand. But given the fulcrum of R&D, this goddess will move the world. But who will give her the space to stand?"

Casino Times, the publication which serves the **pleasure palaces of Kathmandu**, has this to say in a recent editorial on the Indian clientele who come to try the one-armed-bandits:'The speculative spirit, ever present in the Asian blood, found no outlet at home—due to lack of casinos in India. Thus, Nepal gained tremendously by the inflow of tourists. 'The Indian' traveller spends much more money in the (Kathmandu) valley than his European counterpart. 'The Indian' loves to shop, eat, drink and of course to play. He has money to spend and he does. It is this 'Indian' that we are trying to bring to our clients—the advertisers."

The Economist ran a report on the **Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)**, which studied the average scores of 13-year-olds in 41 countries. Singapore tops the list in both Maths and Science, and South Africa is at the bottom on both counts. The countries of South Asia are nowhere to be found. It might be that the TIMSS tabulators forgot about a fifth of humanity, but more likely they thought it was not even worth it. Such is the well-publicised gradation of Subcontinental education. So what was Bill Gates doing here in March?

Did you watch how the cameras followed **a certain lady** at the Non-Aligned Movement's conference on 7-8 April? Granted, she was Chairperson of the conference, but the papparazzi homed in on Maria Emma Mejia Velez, Foreign Minister of Colombia, mainly because she was, ummm, photogenic. And, granted, given a choice of the goateed Gujral and the somnolent Deve Gowda, who would *you* chose?

There is a strict ban on **advertising alcohol** in Pakistan. And so when an overzealous *News* editor saw the word "root beer" on a Garfield cartoon, she blacked it out for fear of protests by the fundamentals. Root beer is an unhealthy-tasting aerated concoction favoured by American young 'uns, whose alcohol content is limited to its name.

I think it was Bishop Desmond Tutu who once said: "When the whites first came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. Now, we have the Bible and they have the land." An interesting cartoon in the South Asia special of *Global Issues*, a supplement to Australian Geography and selected Teacher Association journals, provides quite a similar perspective to the British arrival in the Subcontinent.

Talking of the same journal, the editors of *Himal South Asia* had a pleasant surprise to find their magazine listed under **Resources for South Asia**. But wait, what is that spelling again?

Himil
by
Himil Incorp.

The answer is the Bangladeshi port city of Bogattihc.

- Chhetria Patrakar

The roof of the world.

Mt Everest . 8848 m . 29 may 1953

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ABIR ABDULLAH/DRIK

Mr Ershad talking to BBC TV after his release from jail.

A President Who Set Precedents

by Talat Kamal

Ever since he hit the headlines, Hussain Mohammad Ershad has been setting one precedent after another. Never before in the short history of Bangladesh had a leader taken over without bloodshed, never had a leader been forcibly removed from office, or jailed for misdeeds, never had a leader won parliamentary seats from jail (not just once but twice), and never had a leader come out of jail as strong a contender for political office. Finally, never before had a leader been so open about his love life.

In the end, the 69-year-old former president of Bangladesh and chairman of the Jatiya Party may have committed political suicide by admitting his long-time relationship with Zinat Musharraf Hossain, wife of Musharraf Hossain, former industry secretary and now an MP of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). His wife of more than 35 years, Begum Raushaun Ershad, walked out on him, while three of his senior party leaders with the support of the Begum herself have appeared in the press asking the party chairman to relinquish his position.

Meteoric Military Career

Mr Ershad began as a lieutenant colonel in the Liberation War, was detained in a Pakistani war camp, and it was only in 1973 that he returned to independent Bangladesh. After that his rise to the top was of meteoric.

In 1974, he was made colonel and sent to a military academy in India and promoted to brigadier while he still there. He came back to Bangladesh in 1975 after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and was promoted again to Major General by Ziaur Rahman, who had himself just been appointed army chief by the then President Khondokar Mustaque Ahmed. Mr Ershad became the deputy chief of army the very next year. And in 1978, when General Zia quit the army and was elected president, it was Mr Ershad who took up the post of army chief with his new rank of lieutenant general.

In May 1981, after President Zia was assassinated by another group of army officers, Vice-President Abdus Sattar became acting president and was later elected president. It was from Sattar that Ershad took over power through a bloodless coup on March 24, 1982. He retired from the army and made himself president in 1983 but retained the title of Chief Martial Law Administrator.

Ershad is now facing, among others, a case on charges of usurpation of power when he took control in March 1982 and

declared Martial Law. He has refused to admit that he forcibly took power from the then government: "Sattar handed over power to me. The whole world knows that." He said that Martial Law had come to an end and that he had his actions ratified through the seventh amendment to the constitution. He also claims that the BNP was responsible for prolonging his military rule by refusing to participate in the first elections in 1984 after first agreeing to do so.

The statement for Mr Ershad's resignation on "moral grounds" last month came after he had granted an interview with a local Bengali daily where he admitted his relationship with Zinat. Zinat Musharraf Hossain is a Jatiya Party MP and presidium member. After the elections last June, the parliament had to elect 30 members for seats reserved for women as per the constitution. The Jatiya Party was allotted three of those seats. Mr Ershad nominated Zinat. Party members say that the other two nominated MPs were also friends of Zinat. Mr Ershad's wife Raushaun is currently also a Jatiya Party MP, but she was elected from her home district of Kishoregonj directly.

Some Jatiya Party members said it would "no link with the woman scandal". So, Mr Ershad stated that he had severed ties with Zinat and that she has been "relieved" of her Jatiya Party presidium membership. But this would not pacify party members who considered it "nothing but a bluff" and are standing their ground for his resignation.

Since his jailing in December 1990 after a popular uprising, Mr Ershad's Jatiya Party has fragmented into several rival groups. This fact was clearly evident when Mr Ershad was in Rangpur in February of this year to celebrate Eid. On his arrival at Saidpur airport, the rival groups of his party raised slogans against each other to the point that those at the gathering soon came to blows.

As of January 9, 1997, six years and 25 days after his government was toppled Mr Ershad was free to take the reins of his party once again. His release got mixed reactions. Jatiya Party leader Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury hailed it as a "victory of rule of law ensured by the present government". Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Begum Khaleda Zia, wife of late President Ziaur Rahman, said the release was the result of a tacit understanding between the Jatiya Party and the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the daughter of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

It should be noted that during the 1986 elections, Mr Ershad had won by a landslide, the BNP had boycotted what it considered an election under an illegal government. The Awami League, however, did participate because of what many believed to be a secret understanding between Sheikh Hasina and Mr Ershad. Upon his release from jail the allegations of Jatitya's "entente" with the Awami League have resurfaced.

Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP ruled from 1991 to 1996, when she won the general elections held under the caretaker government of acting-president Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed in February 1991, formed after Ershad had stepped down. The uprising against Mr Ershad had been initiated by the Three Alliances, led by the BNP, the Awami League and the Jamaat-E-Islami. Mr Ershad claims that his arrest was a direct violation of the agreement he had before stepping down with the leaders of the Three Alliances and acting-president of the caretaker government. He said the caretaker government had agreed "not to victimise any of our leaders and that the Jatiya Party would be allowed to contest the parliamentary elections with equal opportunity enjoyed by other political parties".

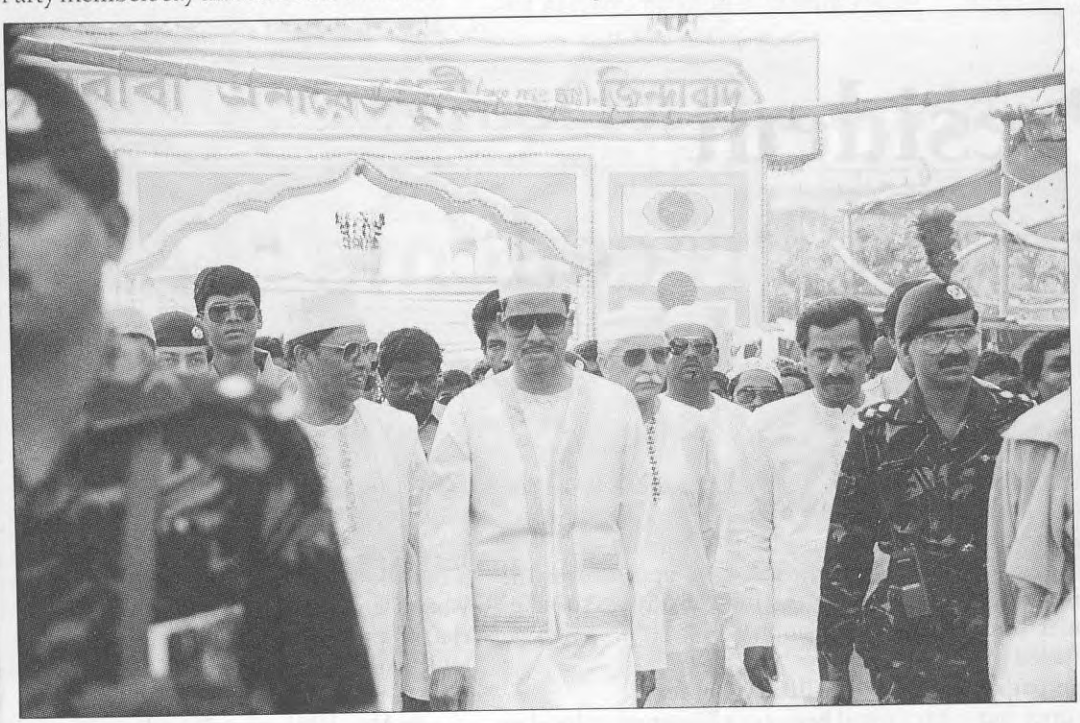
Tacit Understanding

What Mr Ershad does not mention, is that in return he had agreed not to dabble in politics. He ignored this and in an interview with the BBC declared that he would contest elections and return to power. That off-hand remark angered students who demanded that Mr Ershad be arrested and threatened that they would surround the cantonment where he was living if he wasn't.

This outcry was subsequently supported by the large political parties. Justice Shahabuddin in his efforts to ensure that the atmosphere for the upcoming elections would be peaceful, the primary task of his interim caretaker government, had Mr Ershad put behind bars. He was allowed to contest elections, and an enquiry commission set up. Mr Ershad ran in the elections from his home province of Rangpur for five seats and won from all five of the constituencies.

Upon being freed Mr Ershad said his release proved that the cases filed against him were politically motivated to destroy him. "I am freed because the present government did not influence the judiciary which the previous government did. The release was possible as the judiciary could function independently," he added. He also denied ever having any agreements with the ruling Awami League.

But the appointment of Jatiya Party



SHAHIDUL ALAM/DRIK

Secretary General Anwar Hossain Monju as Communications Minister in the Awami League cabinet, described as a "government of consensus," has bolstered the argument that there was indeed a tacit understanding between the two parties.

Currently, in addition to Mr Ershad's resignation, three top presidium members have also demanded that the Jatiya Secretary General resign from the cabinet. They feel it is farcical that a party secretary general be in government while the rest of the party is in the opposition.

Mr Ershad says that the government of consensus is not a permanent settlement, and that the Jatiya Party decision to support the Awami League in the formation of the government will be proof of his party's political sagacity in the long run. "Although the present government is of consensus, it is essentially an Awami League government. The Jatiya Party is playing a constructive role as an opposition party," he added. Mr Ershad plays no heed to allegations of a partnership with the Awami League.

But he admits that there is more "political symmetry" between his party and the BNP than with the Awami League. Both the JP and the BNP, he said, profess "Bangladeshi" nationalism as opposed to the Awami League's "Bengali" nationalism. He has said that he would continue to support the Awami League for the next five years, although it was too early still to evaluate the Awami League government, but also that he would not rule out the possibility of developing good relations with the BNP because "there is no last word in politics."

Low Key

Mr Ershad has also been low key on the sensitive water sharing treaty between Bangladesh and India—the most far-reaching agreement made by the Awami League government to date. He says he will reserve comments until the dry season when it can be ascertained how much water will actually flow into Bangladesh.

Mr Ershad has also been reticent on the recent expiration of a 25-year treaty with India, and the possibility of a peace agreement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. His only advice to the Awami League government regarding the peace agreement is that the army be kept in the negotiations, "as the army is the symbol of our independence and sovereignty".

However, the three Jatiya Party presidium members say that Mr Ershad does not represent the party any more and they want the Party to play the role of opposition on issues like the transit with India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the SAARC sub-regional grouping and the Indo-Bangladesh water treaty. They said Mr Ershad has been contradicting the party line and they gripe that he is whimsical and is not running the party democratically.

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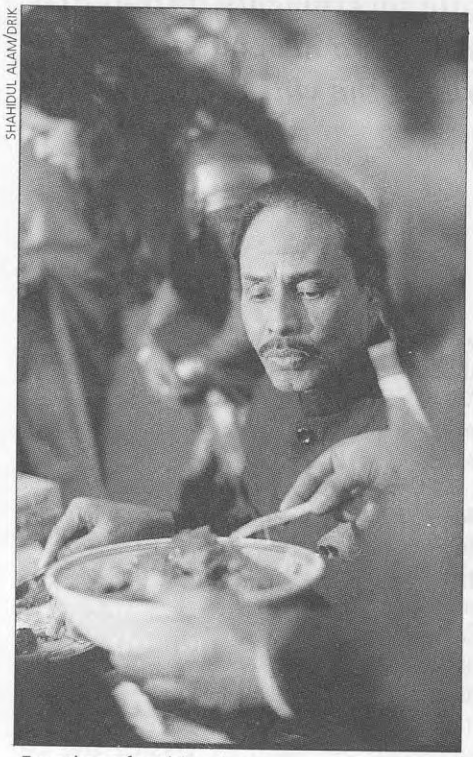


Feasting after his release.

Mr Ershad has of late turned his focus on an even more personal agenda, claiming pension and benefits both as a former Army Chief and a ex-president which he says entitle him to a monthly pension which is half of the salary drawn on the last day of office. The benefits include a personal assistant and an attendant, medical facilities admissible to a minister and government transport free of charge for attending official functions. If granted, the former president is also entitled to a telephone at his residence and an exemption of the bill to as much as the government desires, free lodging at any government circuit house and a diplomatic passport.

In his first political meet after his release from jail in January Mr Ershad called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to hold a corruptioin trial against the BNP regime. Mr Ershad is especially bitter against the BNP because it did not provide him with pen, paper and books when he was in jail. Mr Ershad, who has always seen himself as a poet, said BNP "should remember that a poet and his poems cannot be killed."

BNP's deputy leader in the parliament Prof. Badruddoza Chowdhury in a meeting has called Mr Ershad "Frakenstein's monster that will ultimately destroy its master, the Awami League". Sources speculate that the Jatiya-Awami pact was not exactly an agreement but an anticipation that the Jatiya Party would keep the BNP distracted. And although Mr Ershad has been in the papers accusing the Zia government of numerous misdeeds, the Begum has shown political restraint by not reciprocating in kind.

Mr Ershad says his party is "the only nationalist force in the country". He calls the BNP pseudo-nationalists. "Their foundation is only to oppose the Awami League and India," he said of the BNP, "... our foundation is the legacy of 1947 and 1971."

Jatiya Party stalwarts accuse Mr Ershad of destroying the party's image. "Under the circumstances, we feel that it our duty to save the party and uphold the party banner of nationalism, democracy, Islamic values and economic freedom," they say.

Mr Ershad for his part has vowed not to go back to jail. "I am confident, I will get bail in all the cases. I have suffered a lot without having any fault," he added. The message he gives to his party men is that they must forget all the differences inside the organisation and prepare to achieve a landslide victory in the next elections.

Meanwhile what of the women behind the great man? Raushaun Ershad has returned after Ershad's promise that he will break ties with Zinat, although friction is still evident. Zinat for her part has left her husband's house for places unknown, and MP Musharraf Hossain has reportedly divorced his wife. Dhaka is rife with rumour that the pro-Zinat faction of the Jatiya Party is planning a surprise of its own with the return of another "Ershad woman", Mary Badruddin from New York soon. With his inner-party feuds, complications arising from the politically-ambitious women in his life and political foes with long-term grudges, Mr Ershad may find it difficult to set one last precedent—become the leader of Bangladesh twice.

T. Kamal is a freelance journalist based in Dhaka.

The Public and the *Patwari*

While all of India is talking of corruption and chargesheets at the highest echelons of national and state governments, an initiative gathers steam in a corner of Rajasthan to demand and secure transparency of development works at the village level.

by ***Bunker Roy***

The root of all corruption in the villages is the freedom with which village officials can falsify bills, vouchers, daily wage registers and attendance books. Because the system is so corrupt, because there is no accountability and no fear of being caught and suspended, every year millions of rupees of funds earmarked for building schools, dispensaries, houses, drinking water schemes, planting saplings in forest land and construction of dams, anicuts and community centres go into the pockets of *gram sevaks* (village workers), *patwaris* (village clerks) and village level officials in league with touts and politicians. This is the situation in all the South Asian regions, without exception, where governments have taken the responsibility to deliver development schemes to the poor in villages.

Good governance has now become a global issue and a matter of concern for those giving development aid. The topmost priority is to minimise corruption. When he toured South Asia recently, the World Bank President himself minced no words in declaring that aid projects would be stopped if there was enough evidence to prove funds have been wasted or cases of corruption have been proved. A decade ago, such public statements would have been unthinkable.

For all the glib talk of the right to information in India, however, today no villager can walk up to a government official and demand details of expenditure regarding how much the government has spent in his own village. This is because, simply put, he has no rights. He cannot ask for bills, vouchers and 'muster rolls' because no government order exists to allow him to do so. Without the villager empowered to monitor grassroots projects, therefore, millions of dollars of support from institutions like the World Bank, UNDP and others disappear every year on the way to South Asia's rural societies.

When the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi informed the nation that only 16 paise of every rupee was actually reaching the poor, he was understating the case. He also might have known that he was powerless to stop this leakage. Whatever the policy, however strong a political leader's commitment, corruption will remain rampant as is the case today, as long as the people at the grassroots are taken for granted and expected to be silent partners in development, and as long as government functionaries at the village level are not accountable or answerable to the villagers they serve.

Jan Sunwayi

The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghathan (MKSS) is a mass-based organisation working in one of the most backward areas of Rajasthan, Bhim Tehsil, which incorporates outlying areas of the districts of Pali, Ajmer and Rajsamand. In 1990, this group decided to take up the matter of rural-level transparency and accountability.

It took all of four years for the MKSS to get copies of bills and vouchers and muster rolls of development projects from the government. After all was collected, it was decided to share this information with Bhim Tehsil's public at a *jan sunwayi*, or public hearing, the first of its kind in the history of Rajasthan. Because this was a hearing and not an open court, everyone was invited—bureaucrat, politician, contractor, farmer and landless labourer—so that everyone was free to take the platform to make his point.

The jan sunwayi was very effective, for as individual bills, vouchers and names were read out, the brazenness of it all became apparent. Confronted with the surprise and anger among the suddenly-aware villagers, the corrupt officials and politicians had no recourse but to remove themselves from the scene. The MKSS organised more such hearings, and hundreds of the very poorest from miles around came to

Banner at the Beawar dharna.

listen and share their experiences. As the hearings progressed, the public heard the names of dead people supposed to be drawing wages, non-existent bags of cement being claimed, bills for furniture, stone and lime that never reached the village. It all came out in the open, and also became very personal.

Held between December 1994 to April 1995, these jan sunwayis concluded with two unanimous demands. One, every village literate or illiterate had the right to demand details of expenditure, and on payment, to make photocopies of all bills and vouchers and muster rolls relating to any development work in his village. Two, that in all proven cases of corruption, embezzlement and misappropriation in these public hearings, the property and assets of the officials be seized and auctioned and the money recovered be spent in the wronged village. There would be no departmental enquiries, no cases in court and no suspensions—just force the government official through public pressure to return the amount he had embezzled to the same village. This has been done by the MKSS in Rajasthan, and it can be done elsewhere.

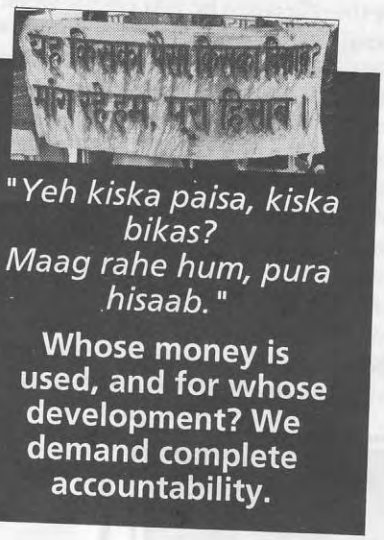
The reaction of the State Government was, of course, typical. It claimed that the MKSS was agitating over a non-issue, for there was no order preventing citizens from requesting and receiving information. But then a union of *gram sevaks* played neatly into the MKSS' hands and embarrassed the government by declaring a strike in January 1995. The strike was called to announce that they would not give details of expenditure to anyone.

On 5 April 1995, the Chief Minister made a historic announcement on the floor of the State Assembly—the first ever of its kind made since Independence by any government. Without mentioning the MKSS, the Chief Minister declared that every citizen has a right to information on development expenditure. Upon paying the cost of photocopies, the citizen could have access to all documents on all works from 1990-95.

Shock waves reverberated down the lines of bureaucracy and public officialdom, and despite the Chief Minister's announcement, for a full year no government order was issued. It is clear that there was a threat from elected politicians and corrupt officials to bring all works to a halt if such an order was issued. The government continued to stonewall in the face of repeated requests, and after a year of waiting the MKSS announced an indefinite strike in the form of a *dharna* (sit-in). This time, it made only one demand, that the Chief Minister honour the commitment he made on the floor of the House.

On the 6 April 1996, the government issued a hurried notice that they were processing the order, which had not been delayed due to pressure from any quarter. They sent word that the strike should be lifted. For its part, the MKSS demanded to see the order first.

When the order did arrive and was read, it fell far short of what the Chief Minister had committed himself to: for there was no mention of the right of inspection or arrangements for photocopying of documents. This did not make sense in a state where the literacy rate is as low as it is, and



"Yeh kiska paisa, kiska bikas?
Maag rahe hum, pura hisaab."

Whose money is used, and for whose development? We demand complete accountability.

the MKSS declared they would continue the strike.

The strike lasted for 40 days and nights, and with every passing day the MKSS members received warmth, affection and support from the common man and woman of Beawar town in Ajmer District, where the dharna was being held. Wheat came from farmers, women selling vegetables on the streets donated onions, potatoes, brinjals by the kilos. Pamphlets were printed free, tents and places to stay the night were donated and the whole town was mesmerised by the gutsy peasants fighting the government for a cause.

The Chief Minister was embarrassed by the strikers, for they exposed his government's inefficiency and indecision. Meanwhile, with every passing day, more members of the public came to understand the importance of viewing documents pertaining to development works, and the significance of the photocopy machine. The value of public hearings as a means of sharing information and of pressuring government to part with closely-held "secrets" also came to be acknowledged.

The venue of the strike was then shifted to the state capital of Jaipur. In a makeshift structure which was deliberately put up close by the State Secretariat, through song and street plays and puppet shows civil servants were entertained on the broken assurances of the Chief Minister. There was nothing the police and the state intelligence apparatus could do as the villagers held court to an appreciative audience.

The local press and the television networks gave the strikers prominence, and their courage and sincerity was so transparent that finally the state government gave in, but with bad grace. It constituted a committee to look into the matter and asked for a report within two months. In good faith, the MKSS called off the strike although there were journalists who warned them that the committee-formation was just a ploy. The government would never concede to allowing documents to be photocopied, the journalists said, and warned the MKSS to be ready for a long battle. The war was far from over.

Secret Transparency

Two months later, the committee submitted a report strongly recommending that there were practical ways of honouring the Chief Minister's assurances of photocopying documents. On a case which had everything to do with transparency, the government declared the report secret! Even the members of the committee were not allowed to take a copy with them for fear of its being leaked to the press.

The government said it planned to place the report on the floor of the House when the State Assembly next met, but it was clear that the intention was to bury it, and it is still to be brought before the house.

While the report remains in the government's sole possession, the MKSS seems to have opened the floodgate of demands for public accountability and transparency in development projects. Prominent invitees to the Beawar dharna, which included social activist Swami Agnivesh and senior journalists Kuldip Nayar, Ajit Bhattacharjee and Prabhat Joshi, have taken up the campaign at the national level. The Press Council of India is presently drafting a Bill called the Right to Information Act with the help of activist groups to be presented to Parliament soon.

The Press Institute of Jaipur has started a regular newsletter called *Transparency* to keep those interested up-to-date with new developments on the right to information crusade. The UNDP and World Bank have expressed an interest in learning more from the MKSS about its experimentations with accountability. Meanwhile, the National

Academy of Administration, which trains bureaucrats in Mussoorie (Uttar Pradesh), has put the issues related to right to information and transparency in development administration in its training programme.

The right to information campaign has spread, and groups in other states of India have taken the cue from the Rajasthani peasants. In Bilaspur in Madhya Pradesh, a young commissioner named Harsh Mander, one of those who had arrived in Beawar to lend support to the dharna, held open hearings on the public distribution system. While this initiative was much resented by the junior officials, the response of the public has been phenomenal. Politicians and Ministers have tried to scuttle the hearings, which have exposed the misdeeds of the officials, but their only success was in getting a change of venue.

Recently, small groups in the Uttar Pradesh hills invited MKSS members to participate in their jan sunwayis. Similarly, several groups in South Indian want MKSS to share its experience on how to organise hearings in their areas.

The Powerful Poor

How have the people benefitted? Certainly not monetarily, for no new schemes or projects have resulted from their activism. But the dignity and self-respect that the poor have acquired in the MKSS area has to be seen to be believed. It takes courage to stand up in front of hundreds to accuse a local official thought to be invincible and beyond the pale of the law. The self confidence that has come from such an experience means more than getting a loan sanctioned or have someone give you a drinking water scheme or schoolhouse or dispensary. The same village officials who used to look down on them as clueless peasants now treat them with respect. The poor in this corner of Rajasthan have gained some invisible power, which is deterrent enough for the officials to be very careful when they handle public money. Who knows when their name might come up in a jan sunwayi. The fear of public humiliation is very real.

As far as the government is concerned, its attitude is marked by indifference bordering on hostility. No one wants to be held publicly accountable and be answerable to a rural community they have always considered inferior, backward, primitive and illiterate. It is unthinkable and mortifying to have to answer questions in front of so many people and be shouted at. The government has collectively decided not to allow the right to information campaign from growing into a movement in Rajasthan. In this, they are hopelessly out of date and out of touch. For this campaign has every indication of ending up a movement, with or without governmental obstruction.

Protection of the right to information at the village level is one of the most important means to promote genuine development. Public hearings, it is clear, are a critically important means to ensure transparency, and they have to be institutionalised throughout the country and the larger South Asian region. This has to be done even though it is certain that the bureaucrat is going to fight such initiatives every inch of the way.

But then, as always, it is small battles that are going to win this war. If a small drop in an obscure town in Bhim in the middle of the desert can spread ripples all over the country swimming in a sea of corruption then there is still hope.

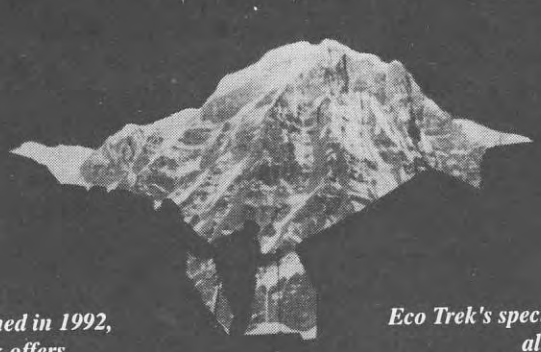
Traveller there is no path
Paths are made by walking.

B. Roy is a social activist based in Tilonia, Rajasthan.

"move off the beaten path"

ECO TREK, NEPAL

Choose your adventure ...
Discover the Himalaya!



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Microcredit Under The Microscope

Wanted: microlenders who empower the poor rather than maintain them on the treadmill of debt.

by Kavaljit Singh, Nan Dawkins-Scully and Daphne Wysham

Suddenly, it appears, everyone is jumping on the microcredit bandwagon. The Microcredit Summit, organised in early February in Washington DC was only the latest and most high-profile activity *(see accompanying article)*. The reasons for this trend are as varied as the players.

Microcredit has the support of many women's advocates who view expansion of microcredit as a potential bellweather for women's empowerment. Multilateral development banks, in an era of budget cuts and disbursement reductions, are embracing microcredit as an opportunity for them to move away from the capital-intensive "development as charity" model to the potentially more profitable "development as business". But perhaps most significantly, the financial community has woken up to the fact that there is a great deal of money to be made in microlending, where interest rates can range from 20 to 100 percent.

Microcredit is often portrayed as a "win-win" option, wherein investors profit handsomely while the poor gain access to resources that allow them to help themselves. The reality, however, is not always so rosy.

In India, a number of self-help groups (SHGs) were created in the 1980s to provide credit facilities to the poor, especially women, in both urban and rural areas. These SHGs stumbled upon a surprising finding: by targeting women, repayment rates came in well over 95 percent, higher than most traditional banks. Impressed by those repayment rates, institutions like National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) began increasing their lending to SHGs in India. However, the lending rates of SHGs to borrowers were not cheap. For example, SIDBI lent to NGOs at 9 percent; NGOs were allowed to onlend to SHGs at rates up to 15 percent; and SHGs, in turn, were allowed to charge up to 30 percent to individual borrowers. Although such high-interest credit is touted as a vehicle for poverty alleviation wherein the poor use the funds to undertake commercial ventures, studies have found that the loans are largely used by poor people to meet their daily consumption needs.

Nevertheless, similar microcredit operations are now being established elsewhere in India, with liberal grants from international donor agencies like the Ford Foundation, UNDP and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). This seed money, in turn, will attract additional capital from the corporate sector and financial institutions. Loans are to be provided to borrowers through a network of subsidiary lending institutions. In order to assure investors a good rate of economic return, these corporate entities will lend at market rates. Critics charge that such microcredit, rather than resulting in poverty alleviation, will simply keep the poor on the treadmill of debt or bypass them altogether in favour of those who can afford credit at market rates.

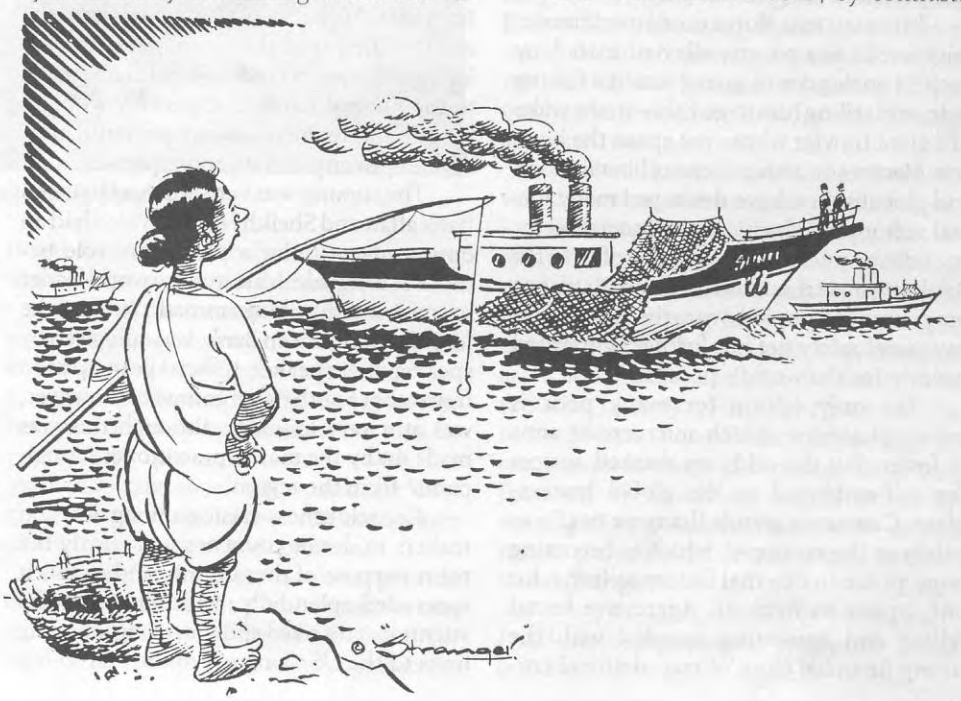
Assist the Poorest

The World Bank last year launched its own microlending arm, the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), with the goal of "systematically increasing resources in microfinance". The Bank's President James Wolfensohn announced the programme at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, claiming CGAP would improve access to microcredit for "the globe's poorest citizens, particularly women".

In order to evaluate whether CGAP and other microlending programmes will actually achieve the goals they set for themselves, it is important to distinguish between the two types of microlenders: those whose primary goal is to empower the poor and those whose primary goal is profit. The field is already crowded with microlenders of the latter variety whose exorbitant interest rates keep the poor trapped in a downward spiral of debt. What is desperately needed are more microlenders committed to the empowerment of the poor.

The laudable successes of microcredit programmes like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad was not won overnight, nor was it derived from a simple process of making small loans to the poor. Microlenders like SEWA combine low-interest microloans with labour advocacy on behalf of women employed in the informal sector for provision of health care, training and other services, thereby raising the wages, educational levels, and standard of living for the women it serves. Access to credit is only a small part of the picture of SEWA's success.

The World Bank's CGAP, by contrast,



appears to be narrowly focused on microlending as an end in itself. And the means to that end, critics charge, may do more damage to "empowerment lenders" like SEWA and Grameen than good. A recent report produced by the Washington DC-based Institute for Policy Studies, found that 46 percent of CGAP's expenditures in its first year of operation was spent on policy reforms which may benefit lenders but end up hurting poor borrowers, particularly women. For example, CGAP views microlending as unviable in the presence of usury laws—laws which provide ceilings on interest rates. Thus, its first order of business at a USD 500,000 conference in Mali was to get government officials to repeal their nations' usury laws.

CGAP also calls on countries to completely privatise their microlending institutions, removing all subsidies for banks which service the poor. Such reforms would force banks such as the Grameen, which relied on subsidies for 17 years before becoming financially viable, to shut down or charge much higher interest rates to reach self-sufficiency in a shorter time-span. CGAP also advocates stronger debt collection laws—specifically collateral laws—which will result in a safer environment for bankers but which could exclude the poorest, and poor women in particular, from access to small loans.

CGAP is arguably a small programme—whose total budget approximates one-tenth of one percent of overall World Bank lending. Yet, if past performance is any guide, this small programme could prove to wield significant clout in defining the parameters and practices for microlenders.

In the current global economic climate, microcredit as a poverty alleviation tool, by itself, is analogous to giving a man a fishing pole, and telling him to go fish—in the wake of a giant trawler whose net spans the horizon. Macroeconomic policies of liberalisation and globalisation have destroyed many formal sector jobs; drastic cuts in social sector spending under the rubric of World Bank-imposed structural adjustment programmes coupled with the absence of any social safety net has further aggravated poverty for the world's poorest.

The only option for many poor is self-employment, which microcredit aims to foster. But the odds are stacked against the self-employed in the global marketplace. Consumer trends fluctuate nearly as wildly as the economy, which is becoming more prone to external factors as India, for one, opens its markets. Aggressive brand selling and marketing coupled with the strong financial clout of transnational corporations places the poor, especially poor women, at a particularly unfair advantage in the global marketplace.

Against this background, microcredit can, at best, lead to micro-solutions. This is not to say that microcredit cannot play a valuable role in poverty alleviation. But any developmental strategy will require far more than the "band-aid" of microcredit on the gaping wound of poverty and unemployment. As microlenders chasing the growing ranks of the poor multiply, a proper regulatory and supervisory framework under which these entities should function must be developed in order to ensure that intermediaries, corporate bodies and others involved in microcredit come under close public scrutiny. Otherwise, these new entities may simply lend legitimacy and greater financial clout to an exploitative form of organised money-lending.

K. Singh is the coordinator of the Public Interest Research Group, Delhi. N. Dawkins-Scully and D. Wysham are colleagues at the Women's Power Project, Institute for Policy Studies, Washington DC.

Microcredit Evangelism

A microcredit summit in the United States had a monochromatic view of poverty and ways to alleviate it.

by ***Prabhu Ghate***

The Microcredit Summit held in Washington DC on 2-4 February was the first privately organised development summit. It succeeded in attracting a herd of presidents and prime ministers, queens and first ladies. Because they were there because they wanted to be, their participation may have done more for the cause than an official global summit.

Hillary Clinton was the biggest draw. But perhaps by his presence while the hostage crisis continued over in Peru, it was President Fujimori of Peru who lent the most credibility to the summit and its Declaration that microcredit—small loans made to the poorest families, especially women, for self-employment—was a powerful antidote to poverty and its consequences.

The summit was very much a Grameen Bank affair and Sheikh Hasina Wajed had an opportunity to play a prominent role because of Bangladesh's status as a world leader in microcredit. Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank, was eulogised by speaker after speaker. Official participation from other South Asian countries, however, was at a very low key, although this was made up by the many "practitioner participants" from the region.

Consciousness-raising among decision makers in donor countries was clearly the main purpose of the summit, and in this it succeeded splendidly, with all the media attention it received and the strong lobbying links to the US Congress of the convening organisation, Results Educational Foundation, and Ms Clinton's involvement. The latter gave a long slide show of visits to Grameen and SEWA, and explained how the Clintons had known Mr Yunus since their Arkansas days, when they set up a Grameen-type community banking operation. Citicorp, Chase Manhattan and American Express were among the conference sponsors, strengthening the message of the summit that the "poor are bankable".

However, the price that had to be paid for this broad-based and high-profile consciousness raising strategy was a certain over-simplification of the message and occasional degeneration into hype. The summit Plan of Action document was itself guilty in this respect. Although the preamble recognised that microcredit is just part of a broad antipoverty strategy, the Plan of Action went on to say it is the "greatest single intervention known" for reducing the gap between the rich and poor. Too many "feel-good" speakers and every UN agency head had to be given a platform in four long plenary sessions, leaving time for only two technical sessions. In each of these sessions, participants were forced to choose between 15 panel discussions being held simultaneously.

One issue had already been settled by the drafting committee, which had refused to budge from the use of the term "microcredit" rather than "microfinance". The latter term seeks to give equal impor-

tance to encouraging savings by the poor along with extending them credit. While the summit documents placed considerable emphasis on the ability of even very poor borrowers to save, the declaration of support signed by all participants states its goal in terms of reaching 100 million of the world's poorest families by 2005 with "credit for employment and other financial and business services". Thus, savings is subsumed under "other financial" services.

The issue is more than a semantic one. The basic difference between micro-enterprise programmes can be characterised as those which extend credit as an advance against savings, which come later out of the income generated by the activity financed, and those programmes which insist on "no credit without prior savings". Grameen represents the former approach, and the self-help group movement, first popularised by the German aid agency, GTZ, the latter. Under it, groups have to establish a track record of regular savings and lending to each other before they become entitled to

Microcredit assistance to a Pakistani woman: Is she really benefitting?

outside funding. It is no coincidence perhaps that the Germans, along with other important bilateral donors, stayed away from the summit.

The Grameen Bank approach is being replicated in a number of countries, including India and Nepal in South Asia. In Nepal, there are now two NGOs and four government-sponsored regional rural banks modeled on Grameen in the tarai plains. The high population density, relatively well-developed road network and availability of market outlets in the tarai makes it a suitable area for Grameen-type lending (where borrowers are formed into groups clustered into centres so that the field-worker can reach a large number of workers and cover her costs).

The Grameen model has only recently started to be replicated by a few NGOs in India, which is surprising, given similar population densities and levels of poverty as in Bangladesh in large parts of the country. The Grameen Trust has for long had a training programme for foreign replicators, so if knowledge of Grameen Bank lending technology has been slow in coming to India it may be because Indian NGOs are as affected as other parts of society by traditional attitudes of "we know it all". Indeed, it is remarkable how little sharing of experience there is between the microfinance sectors in the various countries of South Asia. Interestingly, it was government through the NABARD and the Reserve Bank of India that was largely responsible for popularising the second (now dominant) model in India, which seeks to link the banks to self-help savings and credit groups, a programme being assisted by the Rome-based International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and now the World Bank.

Back at the summit, the two other issues that engaged practitioners but not the keynote speakers were the "minimalist" approach to microenterprise development represented not only by Grameen but also by many other prominent NGOs (with the marked exception of SEWA), and the dangers inherent in the microcredit evangelism much in evidence at the conference.

Credit "minimalism" seeks to provide only or mainly credit to microenterprises, seeing it as their most crucial need, whereas more "holistic" approaches attempt to assist with some or most of the other requirements such as market development and information, technology and product upgradation, technical and business skills training, assistance in procuring raw materials, and so on. The organisation SEWA, for instance, focuses on two vital non-credit ingredients—organising its members along trade lines so as to develop leadership skills and putting pressure on the system to remove distortions and biases in the regulatory and policy environment. Second, it provides its members with social security services such as medical and life insurance without which credit intended for productive purposes unavoidably get diverted to consumption emergencies. (See to previous story)

The dangers of a single-factor view held by microfinance evangelists of poverty as the simple lack of liquidity were strongly brought out in an exciting panel discussion jointly organised by Oxfam, ActionAid and other British NGOs. (The UK aid agency, ODA, was one of the bilateral donors that stayed away from the conference.) The panel was not listed officially, and was the equivalent of the "counter summit" that official summits often attract. Speakers pointed out that recent research suggests that microcredit brings far more benefit to people just below the poverty line than to those far below it. Moreover, "the jury is still out on whether poor women in Bangladesh have in general been empowered by women-only loans".

Panelists stressed there was a danger that enthusiasm for this new panacea in development would divert resources away from existing anti-poverty budgets, particularly for primary health and education. Rather than focus on micro-finance as a stand alone anti-poverty formula, the summit should have focused on learning how it can be integrated into broader anti-poverty strategies.

As Ben Rogaly, one of the panelists, stated, "Several of the members of the Steering Committee...stand to gain in the reflected glory from the perpetuation of their models. The problem is that in switching focus from strengths in innovation to strengths in public relations, organisations can lose sight of the impact of their work in reducing poverty... Part of the problem lies in the presentation of information. Experiences such as those of Grameen Bank and Bancosol in Bolivia are hailed (often by outsiders) as solutions rather than as dynamic processes of learning and institutional change."

P. Ghate is an economist and writer based in Delhi.

1997.

Too Little, Too Limited, Too Late

The demands of the Chittagong Hill Tract activists is nothing more than politics as usual. The kind of change that would do them good, however, would change the face of all Bangladesh.

by ***Imtiaz Ahmed***

One cannot really be sure as to what would have happened if the demand for political autonomy in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) had been taken up in the 1960s, at the time of the Bengalis' struggle for "autonomy" within the state of Pakistan. What is certain, however, is that the construction of independent Bangladesh saw the almost simultaneous birth of the Hill people's "nationalist aspirations" in the state of Bangladesh. Therein lies the paradox.

But that was in the past. The demand for "political autonomy" in the CHT is now too little, too limited, too late. This is said neither to win the heart of a chauvinistic member of the so-called "sub-national" minority community, nor (as the case may be) to evoke the wrath of an equally chauvinistic representatives of the majority community. Rather, it springs from a conviction that the time has come to bury old struggles and begin new ones, rethought and reorganised to face the challenges posed by our ever-changing times.

Too Little

The demand for political autonomy is inadequate as it cultivates a demand that is primarily "political" in the narrowest sense of the term. A close reading of the Five-Point Demand of the PCJSS (Parbatya Chattogram Jono Sanghati Samity, the main political party of the Hill people) will show that the demand for political autonomy in the CHT is not only *territorial* in nature but is also informed by a precise *governmentality*.

While the demand for autonomy is justified and hardly needs to be deliberated upon, what is less easy to understand is the implied suggestion that such an autonomy will by itself end Bengali domination and weed out the grievances of the Hill people. The current subjugation of the Hill people did not come about just from the flooding of the CHT by the Bengalis. The domination, although "Bengali" in its composition, is also secular and comprehensive—political as well as social, cultural and intellectual. Merely limiting Bengalis territorially will not guarantee an end to domination (Bengali, or any other) in the CHT.

By targeting the government, the demand reflects a mentality that considers the "government" to be the deliverer of all things. This is what is meant by 'governmentality', and in a way it asks the government to give what is really not in its possession. That "modern state" is not simply a political society, it represents a complex combination of both *political* and *civil* societies. The demand for political autonomy is restricted to political society and fails to consider the fact that much of the delivering power, particularly for sustaining the core objectives of the autonomy, lies with the civil society.

If the intention is to disempower the (Bengali) state and secure political autonomy, it is critical that the (Bengali) civil society be disempowered as well. Anything less than that will not only polarise the situation and make the conflict more violent but will also make the demand for political autonomy more difficult to achieve.

Too Limited

To take the argument to its logical conclusion, there is no reason why the struggle for "political autonomy" should be restricted to the CHT only and not extended to other regions of Bangladesh. Of course, it can be argued that the CHT question has a "national" dimension. But is it not true that it is *domination* that gave birth to the Hill people's "nationalist aspirations" and not the other way round? And domination, although different in form and content, cannot be said to be limited to the CHT alone. In fact, the majority of the people living outside Dhaka

Chakmas returning home from India following a package offer by Bangladesh to them earlier this year.

suffers from a Dhaka-centred domination. Would it, therefore, not be more sensible and tactical as well to take these people into confidence and make the demand for autonomy a demand of the majority of Bangladeshis?

There are several reasons why this change of focus is important, but let us take up only two. The first one is related to the question of representation. There is a feeling that if some (presumably the present three) parliamentary seats from the region are reserved for the Hill people, they will be empowered. The Five-Point Demand makes this point. The question that immediately comes to mind is what these three Hill members will do amidst 327 Bengali members in the Sangsad. Even if they are regularly elected (which they have been), the Hill members are bound to be out-voted.

There is a need to look at the issue from a qualitatively different standpoint, for which the question of representation is crucial. Consider the present situation. Representation of the kind where one member of parliament represents 150,000-200,000 citizens makes a mockery of democracy. Because the MP can hardly truly "represent" his/her constituents, both end up becoming dependent upon "intermediaries" (ranging from corrupt officials to hired *mastans*/goons).

In order to empower the people (including people of peripheral regions), Parliament needs to be decentralised. One way to do this is to have several parliaments, at least one at each divisional level. There may be a common structure (i.e., a federal parliament) joining all these regional parliaments, but its powers would be severely curtailed compared to the latter. Such legislative bodies, apart from making MPs more transparent and thereby more accountable, would mellow the cause of regional, local and ethnic dissenters.

The second reason why the autonomy demand should be broadened to include others is implicit in the above argument. Insofar as the demand for political autonomy is limited to the CHT, it reproduces and reinforces a dichotomous relationship between the Hill people and the Bengalis, which increases the power of the chauvinistic (often, self-seeking) forces on both sides. In fact, the nationalist (conservative) forces among Bengalis find it easy to rationalise the domination of the CHT, including the violent use of the military, by harping on the dichotomy.

To put it differently, once the demand for political autonomy encompasses other regions (or divisions) of Bangladesh, it will become difficult for the nationalist (conservative) forces to amass support among the general (Bengali) population against the Hill people. It will also lead to a situation where more and more Bengalis would begin to see the merit of the Hill people's demand and join in the common cause of freeing people from all forms of domination.

Too Late

As a critic of 'nation', 'nationalism' and 'nationhood', whether "Bengali" or of any other type, I find "Jumma nationalism" of the CHT very uncreative. It merely, and sadly, reproduces the politics of old times. In fact, like Bengali nationalism, it is bound to reproduce a new kind of hegemony, of the numerically more over the numerically few.

The proposed "Regional Council" is a good indicator of this. With the majority of the seats (practically 38 out of 48) shared by the Chakma, Marma and Tripura, such a Council is structured to reproduce the domination of these over the smaller communities of the Murung, Bom, Lusai, Pangkho, Khumi, Khiang, and Chak. What is the point of replicating something against which one is waging a war? There is no creativity in merely replacing one 'nationalism' with another.

More critical, however, is the PCJSS' demand to put a ban on the purchase of land in the CHT by outsiders, presumably Bengalis. The reasons behind the demand are understandable, but what good will it do? As has been pointed before, "domination" is more than the physical presence of individuals, and in an era of global capitalism buying and selling of land are dictated not by Councils or Parliaments but by the sheer power of capital.

Not surprisingly, Bangladesh's land, including real estate property, is increasingly owned by the "Americans", "Canadians" and "Australians". Of course, we call them "Bangladeshi-Americans", "Bangladeshi-Canadians" and "Bangladeshi-Australians", but they are the Bangladeshis whose living consists of transferring their land-based profits from Bangladesh and investing them in Montreal, New York, Sydney, Dallas, places where they believe they and their children have a better future.

Economically, it makes more sense to move one's assets out of Bangladesh and the only way to turn this transfer around is by radically restructuring the country's political economy and ensuring development worthy of attracting all kinds of pennies. Until that is done, the "foreignisation" of Bangladeshi land and capital will continue. The "land question" in the CHT must, therefore, also be reinvented, lest it be made to slip back into the doldrums of history.

The final point to be made has to do with the strategy of some of the activists to introduce the role of a third party, that is, India, into the CHT issue. It goes without saying that successive Bangladeshi regimes have only themselves to blame for creating enough grounds for India to be involved in. But, if strategic thought has any validity, a third party will always have its own agenda, often very different from either of the contending forces.

This is very true with respect to the role of India, which was well demonstrated in the 1993 round of negotiations on the return of the refugees between Bangladesh, India and the representatives of the Hill people. As is now known, the Hill people were "forced" into negotiation, prompted as it was by the decline of political support inside host state of Tripura, where the interests of "Bangalee Hindus" and "local Tripuras" succeeded in limiting Chakma influence even among the Tripuran Communists. As a result, the condition of the Hill refugees turned overnight from bad to worse, as one report indicated: "The Indian government gave verbal assurance that the refugees would not be repatriated by force or against their will. But the government did exert *'non-violent pressure'*..."

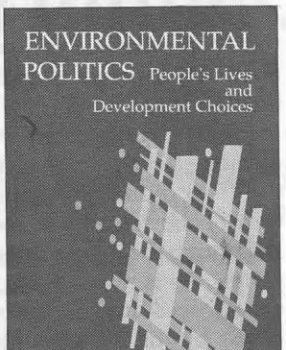
In the light of this experience or, for that matter, Velupillai Prabhakaran's experience with Rajiv Gandhi and the Indian government, one can never say when this third party will withdraw its support and join hands with the Bangladesh government in enforcing a solution preferable to the latter. As a rising modernist power, with strong foundations in nationalist and centralised doctrines, the Indian state can ill-afford to advocate the Hill people's demand for political autonomy for long. Odd as it may sound, only a quick distancing from India can save the autonomy campaign from having an ominous outcome.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The agenda is clear. The emancipation of the Hill people, like the emancipation of the majority of Bangladeshis, can only come about by transforming the whole state of Bangladesh; the two are intrinsically related. Modern statehood must give way to a post-nationalist mode of living. Anything less than that is sheer illusion, readily consumed by those who shamelessly prefer old wine in new bottles.

I. Ahmed is editor of Theoretical Perspectives, *Bangladesh, and currently Visiting Associate Professor of International Relations at the Yokohama City University.*

The Green Shift



Environmental Politics People's Lives and Developmental Choices

by Sumi Krishna
Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1996
INR 350

reviewed by **Jayanta Bandyopadhyay**

Writings on the theorisation of the relationship between environment and development, realistic or spiritualistic, have a long record. The book under review is a good addition to that list. It is based on Sumi Krishna's close exposure to several field situations that represent various dimensions of this complex relationship in India. Credit should go to her for not underestimating the complexity of that relationship, and thus, for remaining restrained in prescribing instant national level solutions, as is quite common among the so called "alternative-*wallas*".

The strength of the book lies in the attention to analysis, and not to mere prescription. It does, however, fall victim to the weakness that the text is rather inward-looking and pays scant attention to the external linkages that influence the processes of economic transformation and environmental consciousness in India.

The prelude in Ms Krishna's book, which is aptly described as "the human factor in environment" provides the scenario in which her analysis is set. The series of stories here provides the backdrop, albeit partial, of the emergence of stress in the environment-development relationship in India. The various responses to environmental issues are categorised in three compartments, which are described as popular, managerial and progressive. This is a refreshing departure from the general practice of clubbing environmentalists, of all types and in all situations, as one bundle of well-meaning knowalls busy in pointing out what has gone wrong in the world. The functional relationship of environment and development today, or more precisely of natural processes and economic processes, are of course too dynamic and complex for such a sweeping classification.

The analysis and categorisation presented by the author can, however, only be taken as a starting point for further clarification and not as the last word. But it is important to give some attention to the categorisation in order to make the best use of its potential.

Fuzzy Boundaries

The first category of environmentalists has been identified as "popular" who are seen to be linked directly with Gandhian philosophy and tactics. The second category is identified as "managerial", relating it to the formal institutions of governance and research for environmental decision-making. The third category is identified as "progressive", giving it a close identity with Marxist viewpoints. The author declares, and rightly so, that "despite the differences among them, the ideological boundaries between the approaches remain fuzzy".

The chapter dealing with the "limitations of management" provides important examples showing that when crucial steps are taken, they are mostly guided by individual priorities and motives of the decision-makers. The example of decisions related to the negative externalities of limestone quarrying in the Himalayan foothills of Dehradun has been described. From the available literature, one cannot disagree with the author that the stoppage of limestone quarrying in Dehradun was made possible more due to the presence of "influential resident environmentalists" than by any commitment to ecological stability in the fragile foothills.

The absence of any reference in the chapter on institutions to the great number of Indian universities and institutions that are supposed to generate scientific knowledge to help human development in the country is disappointing. The scientific community of India, excepting a few individuals, has retained an unfortunate and calculated silence on critical environmental issues. As a result, the country is faced with a great number of critical situations in which independent assessment of environmental impact is needed, but a very ill-developed independent knowledge base exists within the huge scientific institution.

Whether it is in the case of decisions on dams, or impact of power generation plants, or the relation of mineral extraction and the environment, etc, critical policy decisions on environment have mostly been taken by ministers and administrators, often keeping political advantages or image building in

mind. In those cases where some sort of consultative process with selected scientists have taken place, the deliberations have often been kept away from the public eye with the help of the Official Secrets Act.

In the next four chapters the author ably addresses several key problems of environmentalism in India. The most interesting one is the selling of 'tradition' in environmental activism. In criticising the negative environmental impact of the urban-industrial life-style, many environmentalists in India tend to glorify 'tradition'. The hardworking women of Garhwal or the Gonds of Bastar or any other community with low-energy subsistence lifestyle are the ones who are praised. If where they live is any indication of how these environmentalists that belong to the "city dweller's nostalgia" school develop these ideas, New Delhi should be a rainforest-covered village with a sustainable "hunting-and-gathering" lifestyle. This above dichotomy, as the author points out, should not blind us to the difficulties of these externally glorified living conditions and the environmental degradation associated also with them.

Just Jargon

The part of the book that is of greater significance for decision-making in India, is the second section, which deals with issues of population as well as technology. Addressing the issue of intensive agriculture, and in contradiction to the gross simplification propagated by Western eco-fundamentalists (and their Indian counterparts), the author throws important light on the gains and losses from the green revolution.

The problem with Sumi Krishna's book, however, arrives a little later when the author declares that "most Indian environmentalists—regardless of whether they subscribe to the popular, managerial or progressive approaches—endorse the concept of sustainable development as the only path forward". What is true is that since the publication of the Brundtland Report in the 1980s, the very concept of "sustainable development" has remained a mere jargon and, presently, is on its way out of fashion. It is difficult to accept that most Indian environmentalists view this equivocal term as the ultimate goal.

Of course, one cannot expect all the issues of environment and development to be handled in a single publication. But, at the same time, it is difficult to refrain from identifying the one important gap in the book if its title is to be justified. The term "development choices" has been included in the title, which implies that people can and have the option of exercising choices over the economic pattern of their lives.

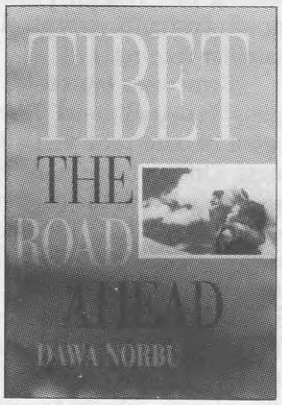
Since the book was published in 1996, which saw the continuing process of widespread liberalisation of the Indian economy, it should be natural to expect the author to examine the external linkages of both the Indian economy and of the environmentalists. When the economy of any country has developed close links with the world economic system, the question of development choice becomes a difficult one. The environmental risks associated with quick growth in GNP, supported by the transfer of production facilities from the industrialised countries to the countries in the South, needs to be addressed in a serious way.

Similarly, the links of Indian environmentalists with international donors and NGOs constitute another important segment of environmental politics. It is important to keep in mind that major donors and NGOs in the industrialised countries provide substantial financial support to environmentalists in the countries of the South. It would be naive to consider such assistance as representing unadulterated philanthropy. In a period when international negotiations are often providing binding guidelines for changing national environmental laws, a look into the role of the Indian environmentalists who participate in almost all the international meetings on environment with financial support from industrialised countries should have found some place in a book on environmental politics.

These gaps in addressing external issues in environmental politics make this otherwise refreshing publication appear inward looking.

J. Bandyopadhyay is an Indian scientist and ecologist based in Geneva.

Orthodox Shangrila vs. Perverse Realism



Tibet: The Road Ahead

by Dawa Norbu
Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, 1997
INR 395, pp 378, ISBN 81 7223 238 1

reviewed by **Sanjeev Prakash**

Contemporary books about pre-1950 Tibet tend to present one or the other of two broad representations. According to the first, Tibetan lamas were subsumed in Buddhist holiness, ordinary peasants were poor but unwaveringly earnest and morally unimpeachable, and the formal institutions of state did not exist because they were unnecessary. This might be dubbed the "orthodox Shangrila school".

According to the other representation, the monks indulged in all sorts of obscure tantric rites and exploited the peasantry, most commoners eked out a life of bare subsistence, and the existing institutions of state were undermined by continual and rampant intrigue. This, "the perverse-realist school", has an extreme variant found in Chinese official literature which says that the dominant characteristics of Tibet's religious orthodoxy were cruelty and venality, and that human sacrifice and barbaric practices of torture were frequently resorted to in order to maintain an unjust theocratic regime.

Each of these constructions of Tibet serves a political ideology. Indeed, each of them is connected with a specific view of the kind of future Tibetans want for their country, its politics, its society and economy, as well as a characteristic set of prescriptions to achieve those goals. Sadly, informed descriptions of how ordinary Tibetans view the complex issues behind such simplistic and exaggerated positions have been comparatively rare.

1997.

Part of the problem has been that among the older generation of Tibetans in exile, it is primarily the aristocracy and the priesthood that possessed the expressive skills and intellectual sophistication to write of Tibet for the outside world. Like any generalisation, however, this one too may be faulted. For it is also true that, particularly in recent times, there have been the excellent works by Jamyang Norbu and others of the Amnye Machin Institute in Dharamshala, the journalism and critical essays of Tsering Wangyal in the *Tibetan Review*, which he edits, and the academic writings of Tsering Sakya from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, among others. But, for the most part, these have been exceptions rather than the rule.

Dawa Norbu, professor of Central Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, belongs to this select group of Tibetan writers who search beyond popular stereotypes and shopworn cliches for an authentic and representative voice. His new book, couched in the form of an autobiography, must rank as one of the most compelling human documents from a Tibetan perspective to have emerged in recent times. More than any other book this reviewer has read over the past few years it shows us why we must be careful about accepting simplistic representations of Tibet—both the old, pre-1950 regime, and after the hardening of Chinese rule in 1959 and subsequent diaspora that sent Mr Norbu and most of his family into the uncertainties of political exile.

Perhaps the most laudable virtue of Mr Norbu's book is his ability to describe events in plain and forthright terms. So, instead of attempting to describe how all Tibetans might have felt about things, he records the characteristic reactions of those close to him, his family and their neighbours:

When I tried to explain to Mother that the Chinese claimed sovereignty over Tibet, she snapped with her practical common sense and simplicity: "And you believe the Chinese? They tell lies with greater conviction than we honest people do when we speak the truth." Then I asked her what difference it would have made to the ordinary Tibetans whether Tibet was ruled by the aristocrats and lamas, or by the Chinese. She answered: "Tibetan rulers were bad, but the Chinese are worse. Think back to when you were a little boy. When I pinched your bottom hard when you were naughty, you cried a little and stopped; but when others, especially outsiders, hit you a little, you cried aloud and wept as if your parents were dead."

Tibetan Society, or Revolutionary Maoism

The first part of the book dwells on life at subsistence, its hardships, but also its relative independence; of the simple events in a peasant's calendar—marriages, religious propitiations, sexual escapades. After the events of 1950, the gradual Chinese efforts to undermine the reciprocal ties and entitlements of subsistence society and their efforts to introduce a sense of competition among the Tibetan peasantry under the guise of revolutionary Maoism make sad but familiar reading.

Somewhat curiously, Mr Norbu suggests that traditional Tibetans lacked the spirit of enterprise and a sense of forgiveness. One wonders how the former can be reconciled with the customary view of the enterprising Buddhist traders who dominate the trans-Himalayan trading routes, or how the latter is compatible with the (presumably) traditional Buddhist virtues of loving-kindness and mercy. Are we to presume that, in its preoccupation with Buddhism the religion, Tibetan society was inattentive to its underlying principles?

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Mr Norbu's book is his unfailing ear for the common person's voice, his eye for subtle detail, and his ability to report the emotional colour of a particular moment. Of his neighbour Acho Dawa returning from Eastern Tibet in 1952 bearing news of the Chinese invasion, he recounts:

Usually he would send a verbal message or letter, through a fellow-soldier or a trader bound for Sakya, well in advance....But this time his return was a complete surprise to his family as well as to his neighbours....He told us: "The sun of bliss will set from the land of snows. Our dreaded enemies are already knocking at the frontiers of Kham. They are the foes of our faith, and have destroyed the monks and monasteries in China and Mongolia. They are bloodthirsty monsters; they eat human beings and any animals they can lay their hands on. They are devils incarnate."

Such naive, but vehement, demonisation of the enemy may be forgivable in illiterate peasants, but one realises with some unease that they are echoed, on the other side and in more organised fashion, in Chinese official accounts of pre-1950 Tibet.

Tibet: The Road Ahead should appeal to all who find themselves dissatisfied with the motivated romanticisation and vague generalisations of conventional accounts of the past, present and future of Tibet. This book is both a deeply moving personal story and the testament of a complex people who, though quite adept at political intrigue, have themselves become subject to the intrigues and uncertainties of the modern world.

S. Prakash is a Delhi-based researcher and writer specialising in Tibet and the Himalaya.

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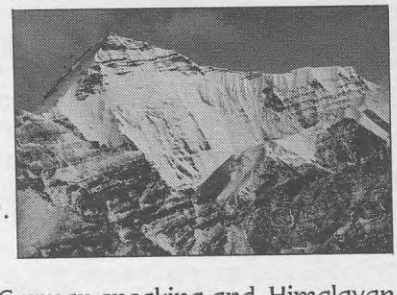

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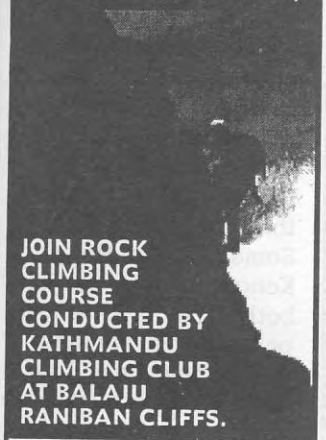

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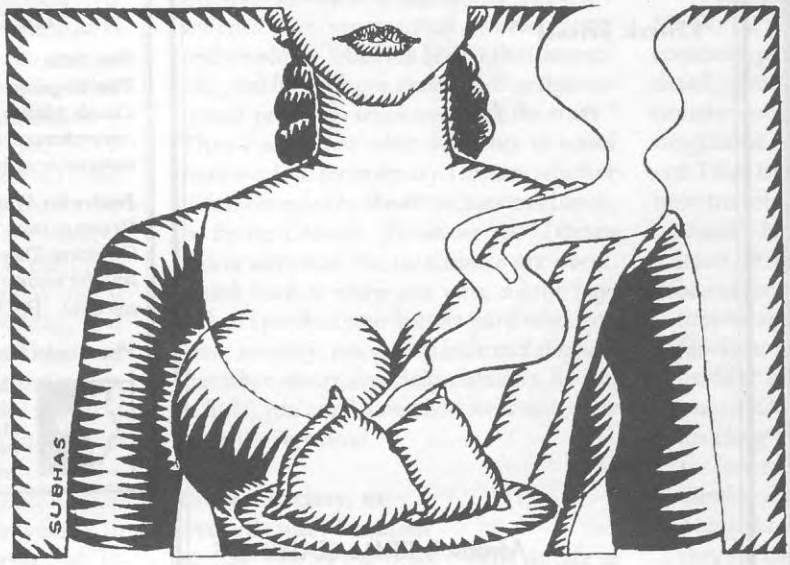

Back in my Upper Barun hideout after a sabbatical in the plains, I have come to the conclusion that human beings have outlived their usefulness—except in two vital matters: eating and mating.

Just look at the past month: 39 computer buffs decide to rendezvous with Hale-Bopp by pressing the escape button, Sita Ram Kesri exhibits the political flair of a dung beetle and the Japanese are hatching virtual chicks from computer eggs. My place is here: away from satellite television and modems connecting me to home pages that remind me that your species has squandered the favour that the creator bestowed upon you.

You may be at the pinnacle of the planetary pecking order, but that does not necessarily mean you are a better species than a sea horse. In fact, a sea horse is neurologically more adapted to its surroundings, it is less destructive to its ecosystem and shows more of a gender balance in reproductive duties: the mother lays her eggs in her mate's pouch and the father gives birth!

Members of the human species in essence are still preoccupied with the same two things that all living things are preoccupied with: sex and food. In that order for most of you lecherous males out there. You have not progressed from amoebas, which are only interested in two things: binary fission (when it gets the urge it simply tears itself down the middle to make two of itself) and phagocytosis (encircling a passing morsel of pepperoni pizza with its hungry pseudopods, and wolfing it down).

Thermophilic bacteria that live on the mouths of sulphur vents of undersea volcanos and Bill Clinton have two things in mind: keeping tummies full and sowing wild oats. In fact, if they do discover that the sludge below the ice sheet on the Jupiter moon, Europa, has life you can be sure the Jovian gametes will be mucking around in it, and taking time off from their zygote producing duties to graze on Europan plankton.

So there you have it: not only have humans not advanced they have actually stagnated as far as these things go. Primitive organisms are much more efficient fornicators and masticators. Even so, just about everything humans do in their daily lives still concerns eating and mating. Just take a look at *The Times of India* weekend section: the contents are either about how to prepare a vegetarian samosa without using ghee, or advice to girls about how to find a partner. The venerable paper can't be faulted for just following the primordial instincts of all lifeforms since cyano-bacteria first started flirting in the Earth's primordial chowder.

In fact, if you really come to think of it almost anything the modern homo erectus does is ultimately about confection or conception. Work? That's just the modern version of going off to forage for berries, and while there darting behind the bookshelf for a bonk. Politics? That's all about power which boils down to money, which is either about Paula Jones or about *jambon poche en pate l'ancienne* followed by *brochettes te saumon au foie de canard frais* and washed down with a bottle of a young Bordeaux claret, or both.

As any carnal carnivore will tell you, food and sex can be mixed. Some species like the praying mantis take it to the extreme, I have to admit, by making pre-prandial love and eating their mates. (Miss Mantis: Which position would you want to be eaten in, dear?) In effect, the mantis is efficiently mixing the business of survival with the pleasures of copulation. Humans haven't taken their cue yet, but they are getting there. Some diners in Hong Kong think they can have both if they drink a tiger penis soup every night.

Or the movies: *Like Water for Chocolate* is the only feature film where diners get multiple orgasms from eating. The recent Taiwanese film *Eat Man Drink Woman* also celebrated the nexus, as did the Japanese production, *Tampopo*, about a woman's erotic search for a perfect meal. The directors of these films have instinctively and separately exposed the inner hunger gnawing at human souls, and found that they can make big bucks exploring it.

To be sure, sages through the ages have long taught us that there is more than just procreation and filling our bellies to existence. Some have bravely chosen not to go forth and multiply, preferring to channel their energies to more important matters like choosing Mother Teresa's successor. There is a perennial yearning for transcendence in every human being and they have cleansed their souls through fasting and abstinence. But not all agree. The Rajneeshes of the world—they prefer the Epicurean path to nirvana.

In the subcontinent, humans don't seem to be following their instincts as well as might be expected. There are no problems on the procreation front. No doubt, in performance you have exceeded our quota. But it is on the feeding side that there are some glaring deficiencies: it's an all play and no food situation. It is only when these two activities go hand in hand that there can be true sustainable development for you humans.

As for me, I better return to my cave where my sex-starved spouse hungrily waits. And tell him I have a headache.

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