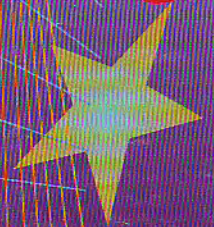


HIMAL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

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Vol 11 No 4 April 1998

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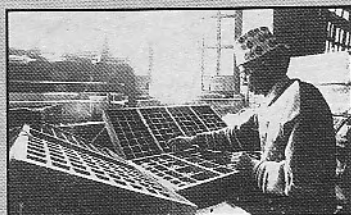
Cover art by Venantius J. Pinto includes a letter each from Devanagiri, Oriya, Malayalam, Bengali, Gurmukhi, Kannada, Telugu, Gujarati, Tibetan, Assamese, Urdu, Tamil, Sinhala, Modi (running hand Marathi), Brahmi, and an Indus glyph. It also shows the ancestors of the letter 'अ' up to the current Devanagiri.

Cover

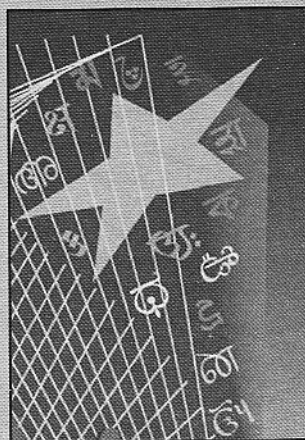
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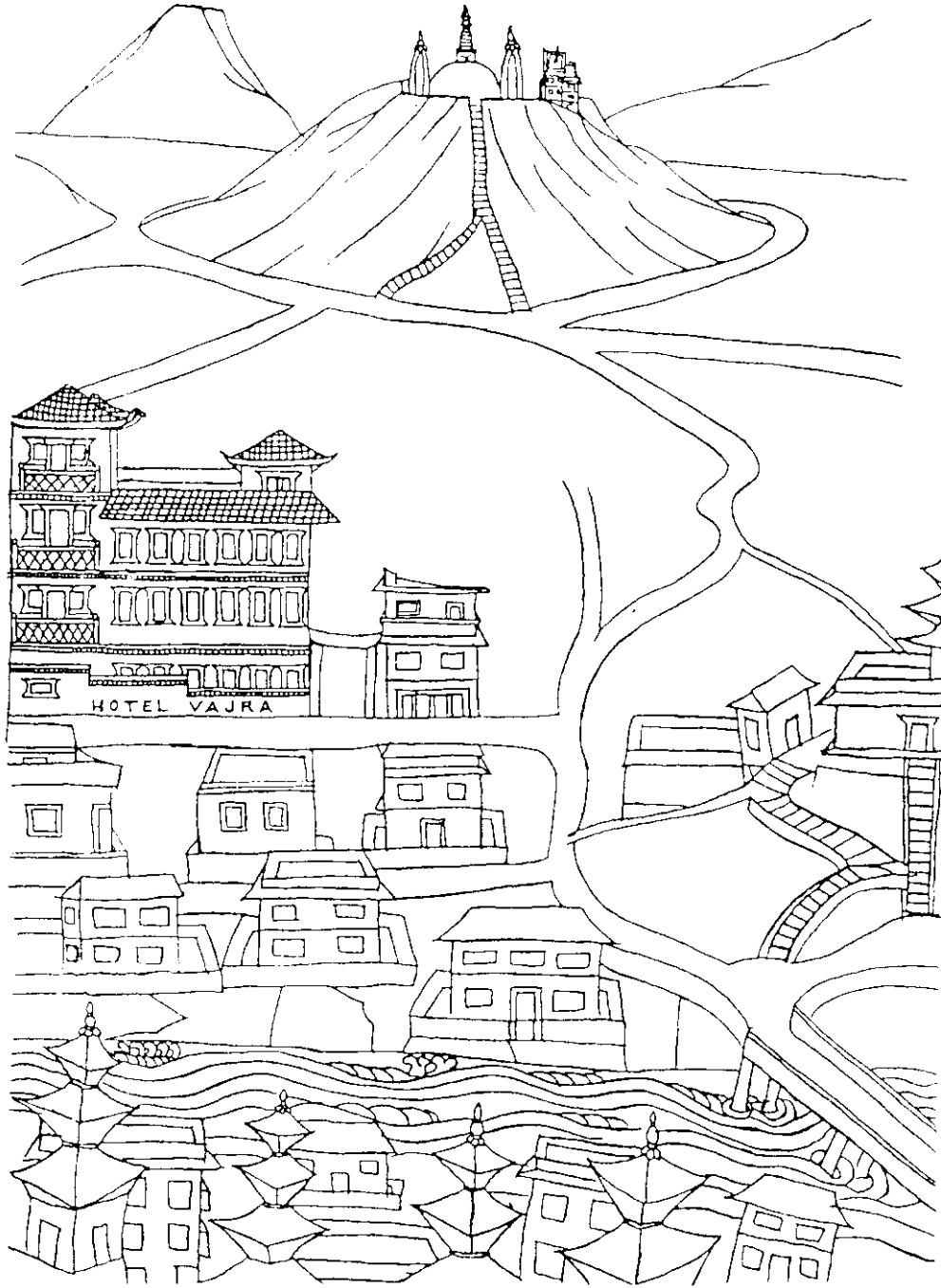
Readers are invited to comment, criticise or add to information and opinions appearing in Himal. Letters should be brief, to the point, and may be edited. Letters that are unsigned and/or without addresses will not be entertained. Include daytime telephone number, if possible.

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See page 31 for subscription information



Vajra (literally--flash of lightning), 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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Getting it wrong

This is in reference to the commentary "I, Me, Myself" in your February 1998 issue about the best talent in the Indian civil services exams preferring the revenue to the administrative and foreign services.

Presuming that by "best talent" you refer to people who rank the highest in the exams, I must inform you that the first 40 or 50 candidates in the civil services exams almost without exception prefer to join the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) or the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and have been doing so at least for the last ten years.

I know of only one person out of an intake of about 600 candidates between the years 1991 to 1997 who preferred to join the revenue services rather than the IAS or the IFS.

Anupam Ray
Indian Foreign Service
Bonn

For uniform pensions

I am a retired US soldier living in South Carolina, USA. If I understand correctly, the British government pays all working soldiers the same pay, but upon retirement, pays the Gurkha retirees less (July/August 1997). They defend this policy by saying it costs less to live in Nepal than in other countries.

At the age of 44, I thought I had heard it all. What difference does it make where a soldier lives after retiring from military service? A pension, regardless of where you live after retirement, is paid for years of faithful service. Should I draw less of a military pension because I live in South Carolina than a fellow retiree living in New York? I think not!

J. Enlow
US Army (retired)

Not amused

I was rather disappointed to read some of the articles in your February '98 issue. All I could see was the ridiculing of Pakistan and its history, from how its name was conceived in a bus ride to how its leader drank alcohol and ate ham. What is the objective of bringing

out these sour parts of Pakistani history other than to please and appeal to just one class of readers.

These articles remind me of a booklet I read 20 years ago in Pakistan titled "Jab Indira Jawan Thee" (When Indira Was Young). I was amused to read it at that time but now think it was inappropriate. I am sure some of your readers will be amused by these "newer versions of history", but then you will not be pleasing a large majority of potential readers. So if you must print such material please don't say the magazine represents the whole of South Asia.

Masood Ahmad
<mahmad@southernco.com>

Jinnah maligned

Although you claim to represent South Asia, it looks like most of your articles regarding Pakistan are gathered from people who are most probably majoring in Pseudo-Journalism, or from some disillusioned people who have failed to see the Light of Pakistan and its torch bearer Jinnah in a troubled and dark South Asia.

Regarding your articles on Jinnah, the impression I got is that you have made the best possible

effort to malign Jinnah and, along with him, Pakistan. The consequence of such coverage can only be the loss of quite a few of your Pakistani readers (the second largest community of the region you claim to represent). I agree that Jinnah was no angel but the way you have portrayed him is also not justified.

I suggest that the magazine revise its editorial policy vis-a-vis Pakistan and Jinnah.

Syed Imran Mustafa
Houghton, Michigan

We would only ask the previous two correspondents to read the issue on Jinnah again to find out whether the Quaid was in fact maligned. Editors.

Mullahs' hostage

I found the articles in the February 1998 Pakistan Special issue extremely relevant to today's circumstances. Whatever is happening in Pakistan today, is the bitter fruits of our past labour.

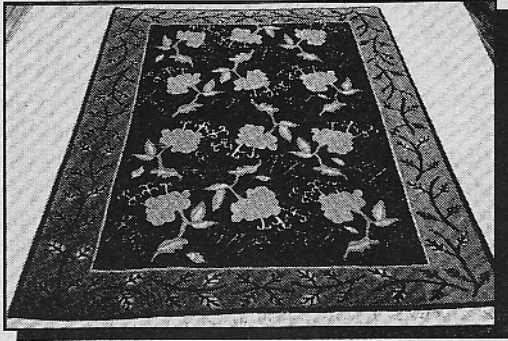
I would have the history of Pakistan divided into two periods, one being the first 25 years (1947-1973), and the second, the next 25 (1973-1997). I am not prejudiced against any form of government, but I have to say that

KRISHNA'S CORNER



Carpet and Wool Development Board

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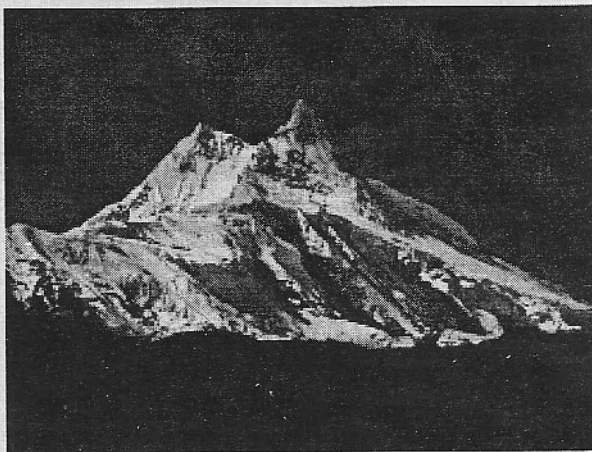


In the context of open and liberalized economic policy pursued by the nation for the attainment of sustainable development, quality and productivity enhancement in the Carpet Industry sector, His Majesty's Government of Nepal has formed Carpet and Wool Development Board (CWDB), a semi-governmental and service oriented organization under the Development Act, 2013. It represents the commitment of the carpet business community who seeks to establish a one window system to deal with policy issues of HMG/N, carpet productivity, export development and promotional programmes.

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Mystery !

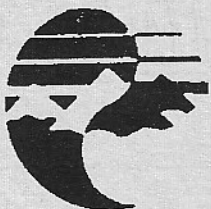
Well, after all, what is this "Mystery" ?

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the first quarter century was on the whole a promising one, with some development in infrastructure, science, education, health, banking, etc. This was the era when we had the Holy Quran, and Allah's guidance was enough for us.

But, in 1973, the year we got a new constitution (to have all kinds of fun with), the mullahs hijacked my lovely country. With the new constitution, I have seen that the nation blindly follows the mullahs, resulting in perversions in every walk of life. Today, Pakistan has been pushed onto a track from where there seems to be no U-turn. Alas.

Muhammad Aslam Nasir
New Jersey

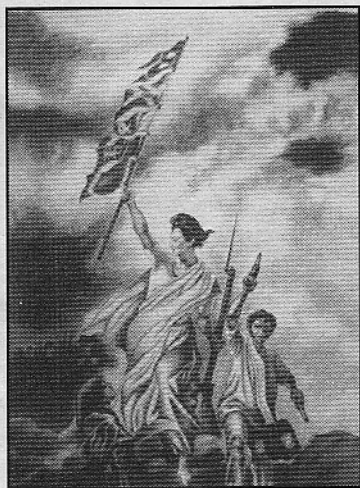
Indigenous demons

It is disturbing to note that you have this depiction of a militant sari-clad lady with a gun-toting child on your Website.

South Asia has no demons other than those of its own creation and no wars to fight other than those against corruption and illiteracy.

Khawar Mehdi
Minneapolis

The image is of course a play on the famous painting by Delacroix, which represents "Liberty Leading the People". Like all art, this one by Nepali artist Subhas Rai too has to be interpreted. The picture need not be seen as one advocating militarism, and can be understood as a plea to bring genuine freedom to the peoples of the various countries of South Asia. This is how it could be seen. Editors.



Target: cognitive elite

I appreciate HIMAL's "joint South Asian effort" to present issues of vital importance which, I think, will eventually serve to achieve understanding and peace in the region. South Asian civil society has been retarded due to conflicting state

roles. HIMAL could be one institution that transcends the often corrupt role of states to bridge the gap between the peoples of the region.

The South Asian world is going through an enormous change, a disruptive change indeed, but there is hope. We are heirs to two great civilisations, the Indian and the Persian, as well as to two great religious traditions, Islam and Hinduism. The past always lives and guides the future. We can either choose to learn from it or ignore it. The latter will cost human productivity dearly.

HIMAL's contribution could be in bringing to consciousness the crucial debates of our time, if not to the general public at least to the ruling elite. These debates should revolve around aspects of society crucial to the understanding of a region. Politics, economy, society, religion all are intermeshed and cannot be separated as some Western social scientists would like

to. We need to analyse our own situation with creative imagination and thorough analyses specific to our regional imperatives, instead of copying readymade paradigms from overseas which still control the consciousness of so many South Asians.

As literacy improves in South Asia, I see a wider circulation for a serious effort like yours; for now, we must focus on those who read and have the power to change things, i.e. the cognitive elite of our society. If revolutionary changes fail to come from below, as in most societies, there should be intelligent reforms from above.

Ejaz Akram
Catholic University of America
Washington DC

Reasonably yours

In his review of *Into Thin Air* (January 1998), Ed Douglas writes: "...local efforts have done reasonably well in reducing the impact of the consequent increase in garbage... The mountain's South Col...is still something of a blight, but only to mountaineers who go there."

Is it "reasonably" expected nowadays, to undertake a great adventure like climbing the highest mountain in the world, only to find it a rubbish dump, littered with other people's discards, including corpses and oxygen bottles?

And then, what of people who, like myself, have grown up with Everest in our minds as the epitome of mystic purity, even something to guide one's meditations. If one's health does not permit one to be a mountaineer and "conquer" Chomolungma, can one "reasonably" say it does not matter if the place is a garbage dump?

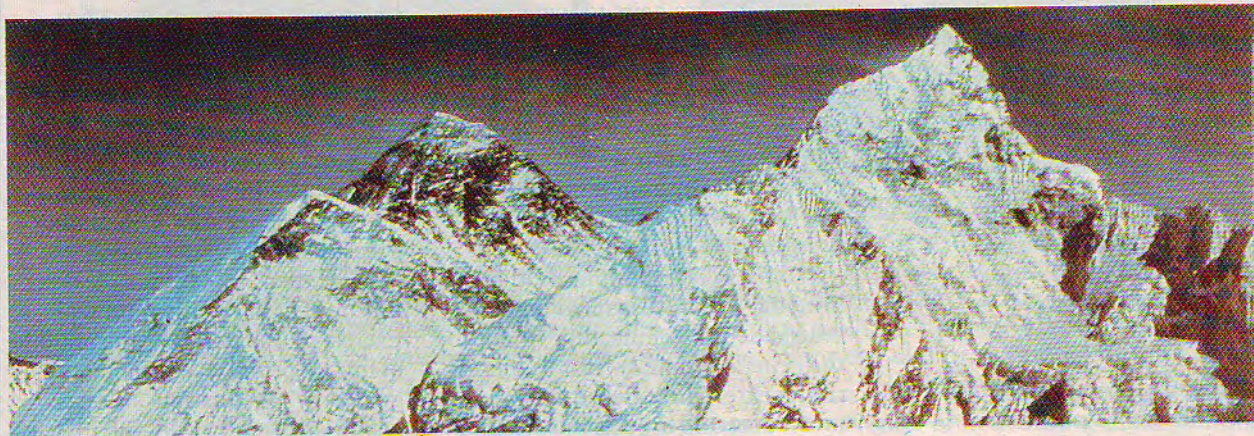
C. Davidson
Rio Rico, Arizona

Coy contentions

HIMAL's March 1998 issue continues the debate on large dams with four provocative pieces that raise issues needing further debate. However, the two coyly "pro-high dam" articles by Jayanta Bandyopadhyay and Ramaswamy R. Iyer ignore issues that need to be brought out.

While conceding many of the points raised by anti-high dam activists, Bandyopadhyay argues that the demand for water and energy in the plains is so acute that high dams in the Himalaya should still not be ruled out. He fails to acknowledge two major issues that undercut his argument. The first is the issue of sedimentation. When you dam a river, a Himalayan river in particular, you not only create a reservoir of water but also that of sediment which has been moving down the slopes for ages. This mass movement is a hydro-geological process akin to a giant conveyor belt, which will continue even if the entire range from Kashmir to Nagaland were nothing but a

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canopy of trees. Dams can pass water through their turbines and spillways; the sediment, however, is there to stay.

Dam-building interests have always greatly underplayed the impact of sediment, as recent studies show, to make their pet projects look attractive. This one fact alone makes the economics of high dams highly questionable.

The second issue that Bandyopadhyay fails to consider is that of nature's greatest gift to the Ganga plains - groundwater reservoirs that already store two to three times more water than all the proposed artificial reservoirs in the Himalaya. This alternative storage comes without any of the risks associated with high dams such as vociferous "oustees", rapacious external bankers, technological failure of long gestation, complex engineering works and reservoir-induced seismicity.

The common argument by high dam lobbyists that exploiting groundwater calls for cheap energy which only high dams can provide,

has been undercut by the experience in India and Nepal. The market, in the form of cheap diesel pumps, is already exploiting this potential, even in the command area of large surface irrigation projects such as on the Kosi and the Gandak. It is these pumps, and not so much the highly wasteful surface irrigation canals, which are contributing to India's current success in food self-sufficiency. Pumps and electricity, freely supplied by the government, go unused by farmers who pay for private diesel pumps because *sarkari* surface and groundwater schemes run by the bureaucracy are extremely unreliable. Farmers do not like to pay for water; what they prefer to pay for is reliability, which the market or farmers' cooperatives are better at delivering than the rent-seeking bureaucracies in our midst.

Iyer, on the other hand, seems to be undergoing a paradigm shift, which is remarkable and highly praiseworthy given his background as India's top water bureaucrat. It is unfortunate, however, that the

Three-Country Ganga Brahmaputra project with which he is associated has been unable to effect any degree of similar shift in thinking of the three governments of Nepal, India and Bangladesh as far as water management in South Asia is concerned.

His almost knee-jerk reaction to my describing (in an article in the July-August 1995 *Himal*) the Three-Country study as a victory for "Big Brother" shows the heavy emotional toll a paradigm shift extracts. There is little justification in his jumping to the conclusion that anyone using that term is "anti-Indian". When it comes to water management, Big Brother is not just Indian, for we have Nepali Big Brothers quixotically pushing for possibly the world's highest dams in the seismic western Himalaya (Pancheswar on the Mahakali and Karnali on the Chisapani) as well as Bangladeshi Big Brothers hell-bent on realising a construction bonanza in the form of the Ganga Barrage.

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multi-generation enterprises, while beneficial to the upper middle class of these countries which also includes bureaucrats, consultants and suppliers, would do little for the farmer or the local entrepreneur in the foreseeable decades. To the water-logged Bihari peasants in the Gandak or the Kosi command area (which these massive canal systems supposedly serve), Delhi bureaucrats are as much Big Brothers as are Kathmandu bureaucrats to the farmers of Nawal Parasi district in the Nepal terai. This commonality of perception on power and its "political economic" role in defining priorities, a perception that transcends national boundaries, is what "environmentalism", correctly construed, is all about.

Iyer asks three questions of environmentalists. The first is whether high dams would be benign if the issues of equity and environment were addressed. The second is whether alternative means can meet the projected future demands for water and energy, the implication being that environmentalism notwithstanding, we have to build high dams. And the third is whether we can do away with the technology of high dams without addressing other big issues of technological hubris that is the hallmark of modern civilisation.

The basic flaw in this line of argument is its hypothetical base cloaked as "science" when the issue he raises is of political economy and differing perceptions of values. Every technology, big or small, has a social carrier. While village-level schemes would have farmers as carriers, for high dams the carrier is the nexus of an increasingly alienated bureaucracy and suppliers of the construction industry, whether merchants or bankers. Demand forecasts, mechanistically extrapolated by this set of social

carriers, function as the basis for their shopping list, and has little relevance to reality if one looks at the sum total of past forecasts made. Alternative economists and high-tech scientists working in renewable energy have already challenged these projections quite effectively.

The issue here is not of big or small, but the passing on of unbearable risks to the unsuspecting, the poor and the future generations. And environmental activism is about organising these groups to fight the inevitable hidden consequences of these risks. Asking whether modern technology would be benign if all the issues raised by activists were answered is a bit like asking, "If an elephant laid eggs,



would you like to have elephant egg omelettes?" The wide chasm of political economy between construction carnivores and environmental vegetarians renders his question as irrelevant. However, the basic question in this debate which will not go away is not about birds and butterflies, but about the ends to which public funds and the labour of public officials will be put to, which good activists want addressed at the outset.

Iyer also strangely ignores the censoring by managers of the Three-Country Study of an excellent article on the macro-economics of high dams by Prem Jung Thapa (which was subsequently published in *Water Nepal* vol 5/no 1). Iyer admits that the Study was "about

intercountry cooperation and not about alternative path to development", but fails to draw from it the obvious corollary - that when you take that approach, you fall into the trap of pushing the dominant paradigm's bandwagon where censoring and filtering out alternative ideas become a legitimate pastime. In such an intellectual milieu, what is the point of saying "divergent views on large projects and on environmental issues were indeed heard" if the net result is to ignore, or worse, censor such views?

Isn't the anger that comes across in anti-high dam writing then not only justified but also a necessary outcome? Isn't a passionate conviction in the soundness of one's ideas a required precondition in order to break through these hardened paradigm filters in the corridors of South Asian power? If intellectual space is not given to alternative ideas in such a well-funded multi-country exercise, how and where is one to try and give answers to the questions Iyer raises?

Maybe the first priority of our times should be to create an intellectual arena where contending views are given equal opportunity. Himal has succeeded in doing that but its pages are too limited to conduct the in-depth review that is necessary. For Iyer to find answers to his questions, this debate must circulate inside the walls of South Asian universities to challenge the minds of upcoming generation of thinkers and professionals, and in the process shake these temples of learning from the intellectual lethargy that has been their unfortunate affliction so far.

Dipak Gyawali
Lalitpur, Nepal

Rooting for Sardar Sarovar

It seems that your issue on "large dams" has not taken enough care to

present "pro-dam views". It is well known that agitations against large dams are directed by an anti-growth lobby of Western countries. In India, it has been joined, among others, by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which has led the fight against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) on the Narmada.

Let me present some information on the Narmada project so that some of the misconceptions may be clarified and the prejudiced opposition to the project brought to light. While the Supreme Court of India is still considering the applications of the Madhya Pradesh government and the Narmada Bachao Andolan against raising the height of the SSP to 110 metres from the present 81.3 m, a churning for a new approach and new appreciation of the SSP has begun.

Bharatiya Janata Party-led governments have come to power both in Gujarat and at the Centre, which has given hope to those who want a taller dam on the Narmada. Gujarat's Chief Minister Keshuhai Patel hinted as much, and the BJP supremo L.K. Advani, now Home Minister, had declared time and again during the election campaign that the Narmada project would be given "national status". This was taken to mean that all obstacles would be removed in building the SSP to its originally proposed height.

It has been recognised that SSP, with a dam height of 110 metres, could easily cover dry lands of Kutch and Rajasthan. Also, this would allow a 250 MW power plant to come up at the project site. It is not clear whether the opponents of the SSP would like to demolish the 81.3 metre dam and leave high and dry all the irrigation channels which already fan out to the far corners of Saurashtra and Kutch in Gujarat.

Incidentally, Gujarat has found a new indirect ally - the Madhya Pradesh-based Environment Protection Group (EPG), headed by Sharad Jain, former president of the Narmada Valley Development Authority in MP. In a survey of the implications of the increased height of the SSP, the EPG has succeeded in

revealing the truth about the rehabilitation issue. The unreliable information available earlier to the villagers came filtered through the protestors and the MP government's gloomy attitude towards the whole scheme.

The EPG survey has pointed out that residences and farms of only 16 villages will be affected by the increased height of the SSP; the villages (only houses) to be affected by advancing waters will be 95; and 14 villages will remain completely unaffected. The survey found that 22 percent of the affected families would choose to go to Gujarat for rehabilitation; of the rest, 62 percent would like to remain in MP, while 15 percent (mostly well-to-do farmers) do not want to move.

The EPG claims that there is a lot of misinformation circulating among the affected villages, and that whenever there was a flow of correct information about the benefits of rehabilitation schemes, there was hardly any protest from the villagers.

Rehabilitation is not an event, as too many critics assume, but a process. The SSP evidence suggests that, some exceptions apart, the bulk of project-affected persons are already better off than in their

original homes. There is no warrant for pessimism, and the protesters' fears that rehabilitation is impossible is unfounded.

On 4 March 1997, following the Supreme Court's award staying construction of the SSP, Sanat Mehta, the then MP from Gujarat and former chairman of the SSP Nigam, raised some basic issues relating to the project during the zero hour in the Lok Sabha. To his own surprise and happiness, he found warm support for his "pro-height" contention from such leaders as the then Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, Sharad Pawar, Chandrashekhar, Sharad Yadav, Somnath Chatterji and other stalwarts.

As a top official of the SSP put it: "The Narmada Bachao Andolan defends a tribal lifestyle that is in any case increasingly unsustainable. Those agitators sitting in developed countries simply cannot imagine what benefits such a dam could mean to those living in and around the forests since centuries. It could perhaps mean a resurgent new literate and modern class of people who would not tolerate any economic hegemony of non-tribals or some super power."

*Batuk Vora
Ahmedabad*

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HOPE IN THE LAND OF THE PURE

THERE IS NEVER a dull moment in the Pakistan polity, with what the erudite call "fissiparous tendencies" erupting all over all the time. This was as true during the month of March as in any other. The Karachi cauldron boiled over once again as the Mohajir factions of Altaf and Haqiqi went after each other even as the former threatened to withdraw from its alliance with the Pakistan Muslim League (Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party) in governing Sindh.

If Sindh was unstable, the Punjab-dominated national government was seeing other provinces generate pressures with renewed urgency. Once again, the debate between provincialism and centralism began to pick up steam, with the proponents of the "Pakistan Ideology" calling for strict adherence to a tight-knit nation-state ruled from Islamabad.

lition. The trigger was the Prime Minister's sudden amnesia regarding a promise made to rename the North West Frontier Province "Pakthunkhwa". This is an important matter for the Pakhthuns (Pathans), who make up the majority in the province, and who want the name change since the Sindhis have Sindh, the Punjabis Punjab and the Balochs Balochistan.

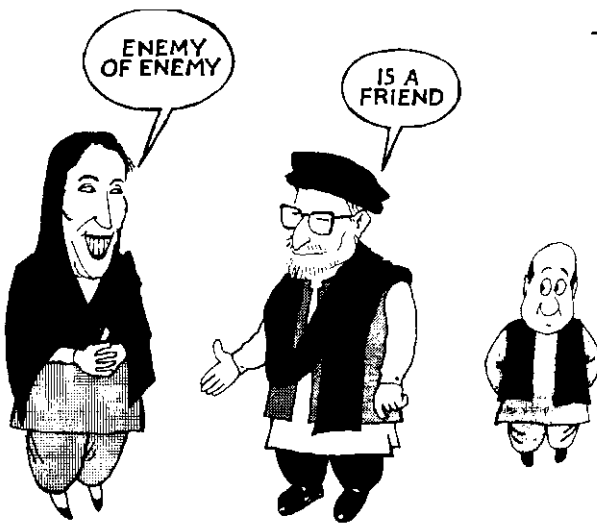
Balochistan, meanwhile, was unsettled. The use of its abundant resources for the greater national good - particularly for the benefit of Punjab province and the city of Karachi - has always rankled and the Balochs are growling. While there was that small (or not so small) matter of dropping the 'u' from "Baluchistan" and replacing it with an 'o', even more significant was the tussle with Islamabad regarding the withholding of funds for the province.

The national and provincial party alignments and structures seem hardly capable of tackling the many challenges facing the country, other than providing band-aid treatment. For all his much-vaunted success in centralising power so as to be able to do the things required to steer Pakistan along a proper course, the Prime Minister's Muslim League is no longer as strong as it was just a few weeks ago in the National Assembly.

The government's power presently rests on the disarray of the opposition. Benazir Bhutto is far out in the cold, her credibility ripped apart by the unfolding corruption scandal with her husband as the prime accused. In mid-March, Benazir did get together with other anti-PML parties and factions to launch the Pakistan Awami Ittehad (PAI), but this is no more than an opportunistic alliance to fight the PML. "Everybody having pro-Pakistan thinking must support the PAI movement," said a PAI spokesman, but no one was taking the pronouncement seriously.

Meanwhile, also over the course of March, Pakistan held its first census in 18 years, counting people and households. Holding a census is a necessary exercise for all kinds of obvious reasons. You cannot run a country without knowing how many there are and what the demographic characteristics are. But here, a census holds out the possibility of further destabilising a country that lives on the edge. One official of the statistics division said, "It [the census] is likely to create more problems than it will solve," and he may well be right.

The Ahmadiyas, persecuted by the state this past decade for espousing "un-Islamic" tenets, decided to make a major policy shift when they announced that they would not



Parties which were till a few weeks ago regarded as in the mainstream suddenly became "anti-national" in the minds of some.

Nawaz Sharif's national alliance in Islamabad was weakened when the Awami National Party of the NWFP, a partner of nine years' standing, decided to opt out of the coa-

register as Muslims during the census. There is actually a retrogressive line in the census form itself which denounces the Ahmadiyahs, and which has to be acknowledged by all who describe themselves as Muslim.

But, for a country that is getting ever-more mired in the whirlpool of regional, sectarian, and linguistic suspicion, the census exercise may yet yield a positive outcome. As a columnist wrote in *The Dawn* of Karachi, one just has to make the best of a poor situation. The outcome of the census may be disruptive and may lead to new upheavals in the political arena, he wrote, "but it will not be a bad thing if the census can bring our inherent animosities into the open and intensify our conflicts to a level where some resolution may be possible." So there is hope.

INDIA

ATAL'S ODDITY

IF INDIA WAS looking towards the general elections to clear some of the uncertainties that cloud the political horizon, it could not have been more haffled. The single largest party that derided the shaky coalition of 13 regional parties which preceded it as a "khichdi government" is now in power with the strangest of coalition partners and a truly fractured mandate.

While the United Front government had a common minimum programme, a reasonable claim to representing regional interests and a commitment to the basic tenets of the Indian Constitution, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government is on a different turf altogether. It does not believe in the pluralistic cultural and national ethos enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The BJP has never fought shy of proclaiming its commitment to "Hindutva" though it has now toned down its shrill accents in deference to some of its allies. To confound confusion, it has been joined by some of the very United Front constituents which had vowed to fight its coming to power because of its declared pro-Hindu biases.

Following the general elections, the BJP loudly thumped its chest and said the people had given it a clear mandate to rule. But it won only 178 of the 539 seats declared. Though it increased its share at the hustings, the BJP still has only a fourth of the total votes in the country. Despite working hard at wooing Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

and the Muslim population before the elections, the BJP did not win a significant following among them. The BJP and its allies got 56 percent of upper caste votes and 42 percent of votes from "Other Backward Castes". But the SC/ST vote was only 25 percent, with the Muslim vote even lower at 7 percent. The SC/STs account for more than 22 percent of the country's population, while Muslims make up 12 percent.

As for the allies - they include the imperious J. Jayalalitha and her followers, the fire-brand erstwhile Congresswoman Mamta Bannerjee and her loyalists, the maverick trade unionist George Fernandes' Samta Party, Punjab's Akali Dal, Ram Krishna Hegde's Lok Shakti, Navin Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal, the discredited Congress leader Sukh Ram's Himachal Vikas Congress, the Shiv Sena of Maharashtra, Suhrmaniam Swamy's Janata Party, and some prominent independents like Maneka Gandhi and Buta Singh. This coalition is made up of a virtual army of prima donnas that the BJP appears ill-equipped to manage.

Already, the partners have begun to extract their pounds of flesh. Jayalalitha has key ministries in her bag, including Law, with her protege who picked up that portfolio faithfully proclaiming that the dozens of corruption cases against his leader are politically motivated. The others, including some independents, have important ministries vastly disproportionate to their strength in the house. The Telugu Desam Party, one of the architects of the earlier United Front government, tilted towards the BJP, and got itself a Speaker in the

The new coalition is made up of a virtual army of prima donnas that the BJP appears ill-equipped to manage.

House in the bargain. From the Kashmir Valley, Farooq Abdullah of the National Conference broke away from the U.F. deciding to support the BJP.

The National Agenda for Governance brought out by the new ruling alliance reads like a patchwork of platitudes rather than a plan of action. This may be the wages of man-

aging an unwieldy 18-party set up, but there was no reason why a common, minimum, non-controversial programme could not have been framed.

Say some, the BJP is learning to be accommodating, to carry along its allies under a wide umbrella of support. The hawkish Hindutva agenda is a thing of the past, they say. But then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, endlessly touted as the most acceptable face of the party, could not get his candidate sworn in as Finance Minister. The Sangh Parivar, or to be more specific, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh muscled in at the last moment, and Prime Ministerial protestations were of no avail. It surely will not be long before the Parivar imposes its agenda on key areas of governance.

Already the BJP Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, who also happens to be the party's only successful Muslim candidate, has announced his intention to introduce a new international channel of Doordarshan "to counter anti-Hindu propaganda by the foreign media". He says, in blinkered arrogance, "The Channel will not term Hindus as terrorists or fundamentalists, unlike the BBC or the CNN." Naqvi also says he wants private satellite channels to 'uplink' their programmes from India (this is not allowed so far) so that the government can control what they show. One can only wish well for the rest of South Asia as it watches these across-the-border shows.

It is anybody's guess how long this set-up will last and what is to follow. The Congress has yet to revitalise itself, Sonia Gandhi notwithstanding, and the United Front appears depleted and defeated. The political scene is even more confused than before, and the ideological underpinnings blurred. Isn't this where we first came in?

SRI LANKA

ABSURD SURVIVAL

A WAR THAT has been too long in the waging gets whittled down to cold statistics about the dead. Over 50,000 killed in 15 years: that's the Tamil-Sinhala figures.

Tragic as it is, the dead, we should remind ourselves, can take care of themselves.

It's the survivors, some two million of them, about whom the world should be

shocked into paying attention. These survivors, most of them Tamil and Muslim civilians of the Northern Province of Vanni, are living out a ghastly nightmare, diseased and starved, helplessly caught between the Tiger and the Soldier.

Reports from the Vanni districts - Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar - make tragic reading, bearing all the pain of a massive humanitarian disaster. In Vanni, if anything can go wrong, it has, already. If the army has destroyed homes, hospitals, churches, temples and schools, the Tigers have killed thousands of civilians.

And of those left behind, it's a desperate struggle for survival. Cut off from their normal livelihoods, each basic need becomes a luxury that cannot be afforded. Life in Vanni has all the trappings of an absurd drama in its pathetic dimensions. Here, then, is a hurler survival kit for the suffering civilian:

Put up with woefully inadequate dry rations in the time-honoured sour-grapes principle.

Shopping lists are waste of paper.

If you're young, even just into your teens, fight to feed yourselves, either join the Army or the Tigers.

Don't fish in banned waters (Northeast coast), stick to the piece of land you don't have.

Learn to live with daily inflation (the height of inflation: a Sri Lankan paying, actually paying, 35 rupees for a kilo of coconuts).

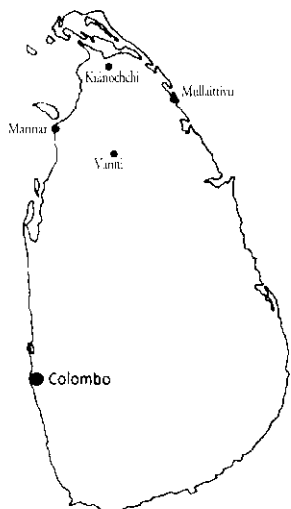
Essential drugs are perennially scarce, buy Paracetamol tablets on credit.

If you're a patient, patience of course should be an important virtue. You may wait for hours, yet not manage a glimpse of the doctor. As all hospitals are ridiculously understaffed, life is in your hands, not the doctor's.

Don't panic when you hear about all those thousands of cases of malaria. Seek solace from the malaria veterans - a normal sight in Vanni - who have caught the disease 7-9 times. But don't ever buy the expired medicine that the government doles out. Since the government also has restricted the availability of sugar-coated quinine tablets for malaria, it's better to die without it.

And if you don't have malaria, but typhoid, tuberculosis, diarrhoea, scabies, rabies, etc., not to worry, many are in the same boat.

Do understand the challenge faced by your doctor, who, because of lack of minor facilities such as blood tests, relies on the deadly



trial-and-error method.

'No kerosene' is a blessing in disguise in these hard times. At least it should deter those bent on self-immolation.

As for shelter, mother nature's Emerald Island lap is the best.

No schools? Enjoy the vacation!

War is a lesson in economising. No excess baggage; the old and the disabled are liabilities, leave them alone.

Ultimately, the best survivor is the one who goes mad. The many lonely women on Vanni's roads, wandering blissfully, belong to this exclusive tribe.

That's the kind of gallows caricature that the Colombo government's "War for Peace" throws up. It's also the spin off of the economic hlockade - an euphemism for state-sponsored starvation - that has been in place in the Vanni districts since 1990. The humanitarian agencies have difficulty providing relief, as the government wants to play the sole distributor for fear of supplies falling into rebel hands. NGOs have been forbidden from supplying food and drugs; other than the government, only the Red Cross is allowed to distribute medicine. But even for that they have to wait for days to get the military's permission.

Now that's the lot of Vanni's civilians - the endless wait - for food, for shelter, for clothes, for medicines - and this awful war to be done with.

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THERE IS AN unfolding technological tragedy in the Subcontinent which has its source in our inability to use new information technology because of the language barrier. This retards social and economic growth drastically, but there seems little concern in each of the South Asian countries and provinces.

The English-speaking upper crust of South Asia are mostly computer-literate, and this gives them (us, reading this magazine) the false sense that the machines are in use all over, in business, publishing, administration, education, household use, and so on. In fact, only a tiny fraction of computer-aided number crunching and data retrieval is a reality in South Asia. You have to know English to be able to sit before a computer, which immediately takes computers out of the reach of more than 95 percent of South Asians.

Until computers can be brought down from the rarefied elevations of English-speaking South Asia and into the 'vernacular' bylanes, they will continue to remain hightech toys. The price of hardware is falling and costs are no longer the barrier they once were. The real obstacle is language.

This issue of *Himal* focuses its cover on the matter of 'localisation', making computers more accessible to South Asians in their own languages. Many South Asians who are able to afford and use computers cannot do so because they do not understand English and its "qwerty" keyboards. As far as Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Oriya, Sindhi, Tamil or Urdu are concerned, they may as well not exist in the world of informatics.

Yes, it is possible to type in these South Asian languages and, up to an extent, do layout and design and bring out newspapers and books through desktop publishing. But this is just a fraction of what the computer is capable of. Computer applications beyond typing and layout are out of reach of most South Asians who do not have English. This is unfair.

It is important that the "transition economies" of South Asia be able to adopt and adapt all technologies from around the world to serve the needs of our own economies and societies. In Europe, North America and East Asia (the "West"), the use of computers as communicators has become integral to the way enterprises, and even households, work and acquire their effectiveness and competitive advantage. Information and records can be archived and used for future planning. Data processing in the computer promises, in every sphere of life, enormous advantages by ensuring accuracy, speed and flexibility. Regular administrative and clerical activities are automated.

Once, it was easy to say "but we cannot afford this technology". Large numbers of people will indeed remain outside the digital curtain because of cost and

illiteracy, but millions of South Asians - small businessmen, grassroots activists, bureaucrats and administrators at district level, and school teachers, accountants, overseers and reporters all over - are today ready to use computers. Their jobs require it. But they, too, remain outside because they lack English.

To involve the population at large in the use of information technology, information technology must work in the language of the ordinary users of that technology. In the immediate case, it is much easier to move the technology to work in the language of the local population than for the population to acquire the appropriate level of competence in English.

It is not sufficient, therefore, just to involve the English-speaking classes where computers are concerned. Neither can you simply transplant solutions from the West and expect them to succeed; considerable amount of local adaptation of both the methods of the transition economy and the methods embedded in the information technology must take place to bring them together. This process of adaptation can be viewed as a process of appropriation, transforming the technology from an alien artefact to one belonging to the local culture, empowering the local culture through its presence. This cannot be done in a language foreign to the culture, but requires that everything to do with the culture becomes expressed in its language and symbols.

This movement to make the technology work in the local languages, or 'localisation', is relatively easy to achieve, and affordable. However, localisation in South Asia so very often does not happen. In this issue, *Himal* looks at the problem from two angles. Kenneth Keniston studies it from a broad cultural and political perspective, and raises serious questions about the national and commercial interests involved. Patrick Hall surveys the technology and the languages of South Asia, and ends up raising similar questions. Rimi K. Chatterjee from Calcutta looks at the challenge faced in the digitisation of one language, Bangla, and from Bombay, Harsh Kumar reports that small businesses across the Subcontinent are ready for the computer. Is the future of information technology and how it is used in South Asia to be determined by the interests outside South Asia, or is it time that South Asians took control of this technology by insisting on its availability and use in the languages of the region?

Readers are familiar with the C:\>, or the "c-prompt", which greets the computer-user upon turning on the machine. There are many levels of course in which computers can be localised, but perhaps total success will have been achieved when we are able to introduce the Devanagari सा:\> or the Arabic सा:\> in place of the Anglo-Saxon symbol.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY of

SOFTWARE

Politics, economics and culture determine what South Asians see on their computer screens.

by *Kenneth Keniston*

Of South Asia's 1.3 billion citizens, 96 percent are currently excluded from using the computer, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. This is due to the near-total absence of software in the languages that the majority of them speak. Restated in the jargon of the computer scientist, there has been virtually no "software localisation" to any of the major languages of the Subcontinent.

The exclusion of a full one sixth of the world's population from what enthusiasts term "The Information Age" raises questions about politics, culture and software that are important not only to South Asia, but to the rest of the world as well. Despite internal conflict, this region has maintained a vibrant multilinguistic, multicultural society in an era of world fragmentation, and it remains committed to economic growth and to freedom and social justice. It thus has a rare, perhaps unique, opportunity to affect the directions in which the Information Age will move.

Whether or not software is localised at all, and if so, whether it is adapted to the cultures to which it is localised, are issues influenced by political and cultural factors. Future social and cultural impacts of software and of other aspects of the electronic age in South Asia are in no sense technologically determined, but depend largely on what South

Asians and Americans decide to do, and specifically on the capacity to work together to set standards for localisation to non-English languages that are global without being imperialistic.

Rule by the digirati

I begin with a bad dream - a dream that is part science fiction, part nightmare, but also part sociological projection.

In the not-too-distant future, the entire world will effectively be controlled by a small group of individuals identifiable by four distinct characteristics: they are all computer literate; they all have an Internet address and/or Website; they all possess a cellular telephone (probably with direct satellite links); and they all understand - and speak and write - English as their first, second, or third language.

This new ruling class - we can call them the *digirati* - will be concentrated in the nations of the so-called North, but its members will also be found in Bangalore, Bombay, Dhaka, Delhi, Karachi, Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Singapore, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur or Johannesburg. They jet from continent to continent; they communicate instantaneously in English over the Internet, World Wide Web, or whatever follows. They have instantaneous access to unbelievably comprehensive networks of information; they make financial



transactions in Hong Kong, Sydney, London, Lima, Singapore and Calcutta; they exchange scientific information, weather reports, business news and personal gossip at the click of a mouse.

In addition to their economic and political powers, the masters of the new "telectronic" media will be the authors, inventors, agents, actors and controllers of a cosmopolitan, globalised, consumerist, lowest-common-denominator world culture. This new culture - if it can be called a true culture - will be inspired and perhaps dominated by Disney, Sony, Murdoch, MTV (suitably adapted to conditions in Delhi or Buenos Aires), McDonald's, CNN, Mitsubishi, Nike, Philips, Levi's, Nestle, Microsoft, Intel and corporations as yet to be conceived. Faced with the power of this new electronic culture, the traditional non-English-speaking and non-electronic cultures will stagger and perhaps be overwhelmed.

The fully 99 percent of the world's population that is not computer literate, not fluent in English, and without Internet-Websites and cellular phones, will be gently ruled by this new global telectronic ruling class, the digirati. This 99 percent will include the 95 percent of the people of the world who do not speak fluent English, all the world's illiterate and innumerate, as well as the underclasses of

Northern Europe and North America and the vast majority of peasants, farmers, and workers in the so-called South.

The 'rule' of the new telectronic class will be gentle, persuasive, and only rarely violent or coercive; it will be leveraged by the economic and cultural forces of 'liberalised' economies. There will be minimal physical force used, but relentless pandering to consumer desires, a youth culture that spreads to grandparents, satellite TV in every village, World Cup football witnessed by billions, universal blue jeans, T-shirts and sports shoes, locally-adapted rock, and (at the "high culture" level) the Three Tenors at the Baths of Caracalla.

But reactions against this dominant, cosmopolitan, global electronic culture will take ugly forms. Cultural, economic and political nationalisms of a fundamentalist kind will thrive because of the neglect of local traditions, practices, values, and linguistic identities and their submergence into a single global electronic culture.

These new fundamentalisms will build on imagined, recreated, and fantasised pasts. They will hearken back to ancient empires, lost languages, and imagined (though fictitious) eras of racial, ethnic, and/or cultural power and purity. They will be xenophobic and intolerant, anti-modern, hostile to politi-

High flyer: the prototypical computer user according to Microsoft. Image used in the software company's ad in Indian magazines.

cal and cultural freedoms, and antagonistic to foreigners, immigrants, neighbouring nations, and minorities within their own borders. Ethnic, cultural and political purity will be their goal; the exclusion of the ethnically, culturally or religiously impure will be their rule.

If that is a pretty dark picture of the future, it is not because this writer believes that it is an inevitable consequence of the information revolution. On the contrary, there is a chance, through actions that could be begun now, to avoid the negative cultural and political consequences of a particular kind of information age.

Culturing software

What does this have to do with software localisation? Localisation, after all, is that highly technical process by which computer programmes written in one language by members of one culture are translated into another language for use by members of another culture.

Currently, the major packaged software firms, almost all of which are located in the United States, prepare for localisation by setting apart the irreducible source code of major programming languages, operating systems and applications from the linguistically and culturally specific elements which need to be changed for special local markets.

This process is called the "internationalisation" of the programme code. The list of elements that need to be set apart so as to be 'localised' is long: not just obvious text translations, but character sets, scrolling patterns, page geometries, dictionaries, search engines, colours, numbers, box sizes, names, dates, and icons. (As one observer has noted, there is no gesture of the human hand that is not obscene in some culture.)

The complex technical features of software localisation are well understood and often written about by specialists. But two other aspects of localisation, both of which have significant cultural and political implications for the Subcontinent, are sometimes mentioned but seldom studied: first, whether or not localised versions of major programmes exist at all; and second, the embedded cultural con-

tent of even technically well-localised programmes.

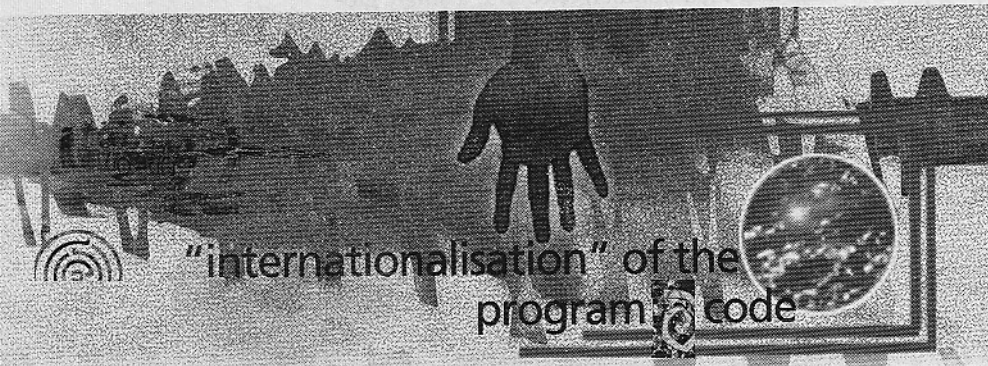
Occurrence of localisation

Let's start with the first aspect, whether localised versions of English-language software already exist. At present, about 80 per cent of the world market in packaged software is produced by American firms, and the percentage grows each year. With few exceptions, localisation, therefore, means whether or not software written originally for an English-speaking audience by American programmers is or can be adapted to other languages and cultures (often with the help of colleagues abroad). What factors determine whether these English-language programming languages, operating systems, and applications are made available to non-English speakers - that is, are localised?

Consider some curious facts. The Windows NT platform is currently localised, we learn, not only for major European languages with large computer-user populations - e.g., French, Spanish, German, Norwegian - but "enabled" (a lesser step than localisation) for Catalan, Rhaeto-Roman, Bahasa and Icelandic. Or, in the case of the Apple Macintosh operating system, localisation is available not only for the major European languages, but also for the language of the tiny Faeroe Islands (pop 38,000) in the North Atlantic south of Iceland, for Kazakh, for Uzbek, and so on.

But with the exception of English, none of the major languages of South Asia, including Hindi (spoken by almost as many people as English or Spanish), is included in either list. The population of the Faeroe Islands has a Macintosh localisation and the inhabitants of Norway have a localised version of Windows NT, but the populations of Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Maharashtra have neither. Unless they speak English fluently, the peoples of South Asia have no access to these major computer operating systems.

How do we explain these omissions? The most common explanation is economic. A software company's decision to localise software - a costly undertaking - most obviously is a response to its perception of the potential market demand. Where a large population uses computers, and - an important qualification - where piracy rates are low enough that software producers can sell their products rather than have them stolen, companies are more likely to in-



Which languages should have priority for localisation?

Neglect of Local Traditions

vest in localisation. For this reason, we have French, Spanish, German, Finnish and Swedish versions of major programmes by international software firms like IBM, Microsoft, Digital, Oracle, SAP, etc.

In India, the absence of a significant domestic market for localised software means that dynamic Indian software firms, now primarily dedicated to overseas collaborations and the sale of software services, lack any economic incentive to produce software in languages other than English. In any event, the need is limited because, it is said, India possesses the second or third largest English-speaking population in the world. After 50 years of Independence, English remains the *lingua franca* for communication between Indian states; and members of Indian elites, whatever their mother tongues, generally have a superb command of English. Therefore, there ostensibly is no market and no need for localisation.

This economic explanation is quite plausible. In a region where the annual income (parity purchasing power) of the average individual is less than half the cost of a well-equipped computer, where almost half the population is illiterate, where almost a third of the population lives at or below the official level of subsistence, and where the cost of an Internet connection may exceed the cost of food for a month, computers - and therefore localisation to native languages - are today beyond the means of any but a minority.

Demand anticipation

But do economic factors alone really explain the existence of localised programmes for Iceland, for the Faeroe Islands, and for the Norwegians? Why have large commitments to localisation been made by American software

firms in China, where piracy rates are said to exceed 90 percent, when there are deep differences between the political philosophies of the People's Republic and the United States, and when doing business in the PRC is generally unprofitable and often involves, it is said, very large hidden costs?

One reason has to do with the long-term planning cycle of software firms, overseas as well as in South Asia. American firms, among them Microsoft, place long-term bets on future markets, bets which may not pay off for a decade or more. Along with the capacity for quick adaptation, then, leadership in the software industry also requires the ability to look far ahead. American software companies' investment in R&D in China is a case in point; it is a way of establishing a foothold in a potentially vast market in the distant future, even though current or near-term profit may be low.

With regard to India, even if the corporate, business, and personal demand for local-language software is limited today, it takes little imagination to foresee a day when it might be large, indeed vast. India already is said to have the largest middle class in the world. National growth rates overall may appear modest because of the moderate growth of the huge agricultural sector, but industrial growth rates in recent years, especially in the southern states of India, have been in double digits.

And it does not, as they say, take a rocket scientist to predict that if these rates of growth continue, more and more firms, businesses, and individuals - banks, warehouses, merchants, shippers, shopkeepers, libraries, post-offices, bus lines, private and eventually public schools and parents - will little by little constitute a growing, and ultimately a large market for software in Indian languages. Moreover, piracy rates in India have been dropping due to a concerted effort to bring India's rates closer to the European/North American rates of 20-40 percent.

Thus, from the point of view of software manufacturers in India and overseas, it would seem a reasonable economic gamble to anticipate the emergence of a substantial demand - that is a profitable market - for software in the major Indian languages. Indeed, not to anticipate this day would seem economically irrational.



Problem with virtue

Why then is localisation to Indian languages not yet happening? An exclusively economic perspective does not provide answers; politics and culture also have to be taken into account. Consider the role of culture and politics in localisation to Chinese.

The technical problems of localising from English to Chinese are formidable. Chinese is an ideographic written language with tens of thousands of ideographs (only 7000 of which currently exist in Unicode, the international standard), no phonetic alphabet, and no single agreed-upon way of using the Roman ('qwerty') keyboard to enter ideographs. Moreover, written Chinese is linked to complex tonal spoken languages which vary dramatically (and often unintelligibly) from region to region. These problems are staggering. Yet, localised Chinese versions of many major programmes already exist.

Why? The reasons are partly cultural and partly political. The Chinese written language is everywhere the same, even though spoken dialects often are mutually unintelligible. Moreover, the present Chinese government is authoritarian and highly centralised. So it is possible to negotiate with a single ministry in Beijing and make, at least on paper, binding agreements about standards of localisation for all the 1.3 billion citizens of the China.

A centralised political authority and uniform localisation standards make it reasonable to place a long-term bet on the eventual development of a profitable Chinese market. In India, the situation is obviously more complex. India is a democratic, federal nation with an admirable tradition of multilingualistic and multicultural practices. No ministry, no individual, no party can presume to speak for, or set standards for, all of India. There is no majority language: 18 languages are officially recognised, and many more are spoken. The prevailing policy espouses liberalism and tolerance with regard to the use of local languages.

But this virtue creates a problem. As the director of internationalisation of a large American software firm put it: "We would like to do some localising in India, but we don't

know how. Which Indian languages?"

On the face of it, this can be easily taken care of: start with Hindi because Hindi has the highest use and most-nearly national status. Depending on how its boundaries are defined, Hindi is spoken by about 400 million Indians, whether as a first or a second language. It is among the five most widely spoken languages in the world.

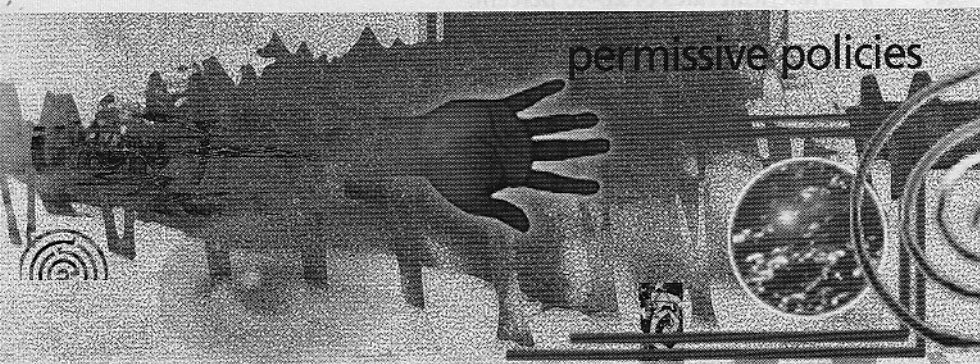
But there seem to be difficult issues with Hindi. Whose Hindi is to be chosen as the standard language? Jawaharlal Nehru once complained that he could not read the Indian Constitution in the variant of Hindi in which it was written. Studies of the linguistic patterns of Northern India indicate wide regional variations in spoken Hindi-Hindustani, particularly between the Persianised Urdu and Sanskritised Hindi.

In addition, the introduction of localised software raises the complex issue of the politics of language in India. At one level, the multilingualism of India as a nation, the acceptance of 18 official languages, the coexistence of many linguistic groups in all major Indian cities, and the fact that many Indians speak one or more languages in addition to their mother tongues - these facts of multilingual tolerance and pluralism first strike the eye of the foreign observer. However, localisation to only one Indian language (e.g., Hindi), or indeed only to two or three, could well arouse the quiescent passions that are now kept latent by the prevailing policy of linguistic pluralism.

But from the point of view of a software firm, localising into all the official languages of India may seem an inordinately complex, expensive, and difficult task. No matter where and by whom decisions about languages for localisation are made - whether by an all-Indian body, by a multinational corporation, or ideally by a consortium of Indians and multinationals - the possibility of stirring up ardent linguistic nationalism needs to be taken into account.

Technetronic hegemony

Writers of manuals for software internationalisation invariably pay lip service to cultural factors in software (e.g., they note that the meaning of the colour red differs from one culture to another). But they almost never examine thoroughly enough the built-in or embedded views about the nature of reality, the nature of users, and the social world contained in software and hardware. To deal with this sub-



ject adequately is beyond this writer's ability, so the comments here will only be suggestive and programmatic.

For those who are engaged in advanced scientific work, who live in the so-called modern world, or who are actual or potential members of the digirati, the telectronic ruling class - for us, a whole set of assumptions about time, human nature, and society may have come to seem 'natural'. These root assumptions are in essence the rational, analytic, reductive, scientific assumptions that were incorporated in Europe about 500 years ago, into what we now define as 'modern' views of time, matter, nature, and human nature. Today, they constitute the ideological bedrock on which science and technology - including electrical engineering and computer science - are built. But we need to emphasise the fact that they bring to software (and indeed to the hardware on which it runs) an inescapable commitment to a world view that was unknown throughout most of world history, and one that remains alien to much of the world's population today.

Studies have tried to distinguish between the highly valued 'individualism' in North America and a more 'collective' orientation towards life, achievement, and social relations in other parts of the world. Thus, it was not surprising, on a recent trip to Argentina, to hear a rural Argentine primary school teacher complain that the well-translated, well-localised American educational software used in her school presupposed, as she put it, "solitary individuals sitting at a keyboard solving problems as rapidly as possible". The translations into Spanish were excellent, she said, but somehow these values were "not Argentine". Indeed, she wondered whether if one took this US educational software, expertly localised to Spanish, as a model of life, would it not transform young Argentine children into "little North Americans".

It is doubtful that children can be transformed into "little North-Americans" by a single educational computer programme. Nonetheless, the teacher's perception is crucial. Software can certainly help solve problems, but equally it can convey a set of implicit and culturally-specific assumptions about the world. Could the hegemony of American-packaged software be one small aspect of a larger pattern in which 'American' - or more precisely, global technetronic - culture spreads across the world at the expense of local diversity?

One other set of absolutely critical but implicit assumptions about those who use software is that they are "numerate" (i.e. they will



have a reasonable command of basic arithmetic, if not of advanced mathematics), that they will be literate (that they will be able to read instructions on the screen and use a keyboard in whatever language the keyboard is designed for), that they will be accurate (that they will not misspell addresses or computer commands), and finally, that they will be capable of working in a microworld where all choices are binary (yes/no, up/down, delete/retain, go back/go forward). These assumptions presuppose the presence of a certain kind of person on one end of the computer. But what if he or she cannot use numbers? What if she or he cannot read the instructions on the screen? What if he or she cannot write, or cannot type? What percent of the world's population today satisfies all these elementary requirements of computer use, when half of the people in the world have never made a telephone call?

Software localisation, while it is importantly a matter of technology transfer and economics, is also a practice with decisive cultural and political parameters. The content of localised software is determined not only by the language chosen for localisation, but by deep, underlying, usually implicit and unacknowledged (because it is thought to be 'natural') assumptions inherent in the software itself. And software carries with it a view of the world, of people, of reality, of time, and of the capabilities of users, which may or may not be compatible with any given (South Asian) cultural and social context.

Whether, how, when, for whom

Some commentators argue that the electronic-communications revolution, far from improving the condition of the Southern nations and of the poor in the Northern nations, will inevitably enlarge the gaps that exist. Some claim that this is an inevitable consequence of any new technology that is accessible only to an elite.

But it can always be argued that the consequences of the new telectronics will not be determined by the technologies as such, but rather by the ways we use them, by the contexts within which we choose to deploy them, by the wisdom and values that guide our actions in using them.

To return to the issue of localisation to South Asian languages: whether, how, or when

this is accomplished, and for whom, are obviously crucial factors in determining whether the information age widens the gaps that already exist in the Subcontinent - and everywhere else - between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. If English is to remain the only easily available language for computer use, and if we make the reasonable assumption that access to computers (and to computer-based electronic communications) is empowering, then 95 percent of the people who do not speak good enough English for computer use will automatically be disempowered. Existing gaps will grow.

Whether this happens is above all a matter that knowledgeable South Asians in each of their countries and localities need to determine in collaboration with international software companies. On the one hand, there is, of course, the possibility of consolidating the existing privileges of a gifted, educated, cosmopolitan, English-speaking elite. But if this happens, it is likely that fundamentalist reactions against the growing power of the globalised English-language electronic culture and an English-speaking elite will mount, and that these reactions might overturn, as they have done elsewhere, traditions of multicultural tolerance, democracy, diversity and human rights.

Happy possibility

There is, however, another possibility - a happy dream, if you will. It is a dream of South Asian and international cooperation to make computers accessible to the vast majority of South Asia's people who are not fluent in English. It is a dream of localisation to South Asian languages.

In 1997, there was an unprecedented meeting of representatives of the large software firms in the United States to discuss developing common standards for software internationalisation. Although these firms compete tooth and nail for American and international markets, they are nonetheless trying to develop, over time, uniform standards for internationalising new programmes. Developing common internationalisation standards will be a complex, technical and difficult job.

These standards will require each company to change existing procedures. But they will also make it far easier for localisers in, let us say, Mysore, Colombo, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Lahore to develop local versions of the English-language software and applications written by these companies. As the work proceeds, we could even move towards a day when all major new software programmes have, as it were, a common "plug-and-play" localisation interface. If that day arrives, the cost of localisation from English to other languages, including Indian languages, will decrease (and the probability of doing so will increase).

As the World Wide Web grows in importance, as bandwidth increases, as traffic multiplies, as problems of encryption become more complex, as commercial uses expand, as use of the Web for telephony and digital video burgeons, the development of new worldwide standards becomes necessary. A consortium subscribed to by dozens of companies worldwide was recently created at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It aims to establish common standards to ensure that the worldwide digital communication networks and technologies developed by distinct firms in different nations will, in the decades ahead, be compatible with each other and indeed, compatible with all major languages. In this process, each participant has had to relinquish sovereignty, to modify existing procedures, to disclose corporate secrets, and in some cases to abandon technologies in which they had deeply invested. The important points, however, are that working groups have been established, standards hotly debated, and progress made.

The leaders of many Indian software firms also have expressed parallel uncertainty about how or whether to proceed with non-English Indian languages. This is the confusion of software producers. On the side of desired social goals, however, I also have been struck by the almost universal hope of Indians to move towards a time when village stores, shops, banks, post offices, warehouses, schools, and eventually homes can be interconnected on Internet and the World Wide

Web; when Indians and South Asians of all cultures can have access to computers in their own languages, and when the potentialities of digital technologies and multimedia for recording, storing, deepening, and accessing the riches of Indian cultures can help strengthen,



rather than vitiate, the variety of this nation.

But realising such a future will require an unusual degree of cooperation and visionary leadership from South Asians in both the private and public sectors. They will need both vision and determination in order to develop (surely in collaboration with international software firms) common standards for localisation to their individual languages. Enormous creativity is already going into plans for developing standards for the languages of India. At the National Centre for Software Technology, CDAC, Konkan Railways, NASSCOM, the Bhaba Centre for Atomic Research, and elsewhere, a variety of ingenious methods for entering Indian languages and scripts into computers has been developed and continues to be developed. Moreover, major international firms have announced plans to develop versions of their current operating systems in Indian languages.

The imaginativeness and diversity of all these efforts hold a promise for the future, but also a difficult challenge. The stage now seems to be set for a final act in which the key players come together to produce a grand finale - coherent and agreed-upon standards for localisation. Such standards could provide the "plug-ins" that will enable South Asian languages to dovetail with the work of the American consortium in developing common standards for localisation. Without such coordination between foreign and local developers of standards for internationalisation, the outcome is likely to be a Tower of Babel.

The alternative to Babel is that there will evolve a consortia of South Asians and multinationals to develop standards for localisation to the major regional languages, perhaps be-



ginning with Hindi (in the case of India, but surely including other languages, especially those from the south). These consortia could bring major participants in the public software sector together with major firms in the Indian private software sector, as well as with representatives of foreign software firms. Their goal would be to establish mutually agreed-upon standards for such matters as keyboard entry, scripting and fonts, standardisation of languages, and the uniform translation of critical computer terms. Accomplishing this will not be simple, either technically or (in a broad sense) politically: too many creative people have devoted too many hundreds of hours to differing solutions, not all of which can prevail.

The stakes are high. For unless South Asians come together to develop common standards for localisation, there are only two alternatives. One is that such standards will never develop, and real localisation will not be implemented. The other is that if localisation to South Asian languages is accomplished, it will be defined by default in Redmond, Washington, rather than in Delhi, Karachi, and Dhaka, and the results could too easily be inappropriate for the region. ▽

K. Keniston is a professor of psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has over the years developed a special interest in software localisation in South Asia.

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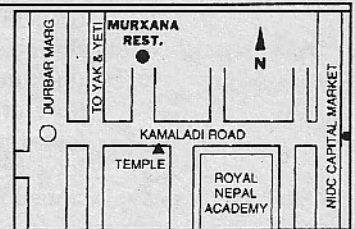
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Think Regionally, Act Locally

The first step in making computers work for South Asia is to make the computers print out the letters of the local language. It's not as easy as it looks.

by Patrick Hall

Writing systems and languages

All the writing systems of South Asia and South East Asia, except those of Pakistan, are traceable back to the ancient Brahmi phonetic writing system of the 4th century BC. But over the centuries, the letters of different systems took different shapes as the languages diverged along their respective evolutionary paths.

Around the first century AD the scripts of the South Indian Dravidian languages diverged from those of the North Indian and Sinhala Indo-Aryan languages. Later, around the 6th century, the Tibeto-Burmese and Austro-Asiatic languages of Southeast Asia also adopted Brahmic writing systems, later branching off into the particular systems of Burmese, Thai, and so on. It was also around this time that Tibetan and other languages of the Himalaya adopted a Brahmic writing system. Today, the letters of the different systems look very different, but each letter has continued to carry its unique phonetic value.

In order for computers to print in any of these languages all that needs to be done is to identify the alphabet, and then fix things so

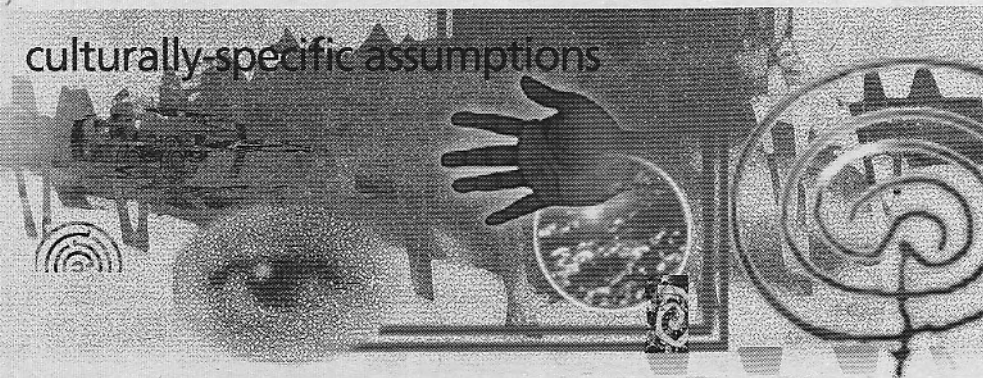
that you can print that alphabet. In the old days of impact printers this meant creating metal type for the new alphabet. Today we have laser printers and ink-jet printers, and the type is described in software, but the idea is the same: replace the Roman type with the type of the new alphabet. Type faces (called fonts) are designed for the new alphabet, and installed in your computer.

This sounds simple, but it is not. Even deciding what the letters of the alphabet are can be a problem. The act of computerisation forces us to consider what is in the alphabet, and what is not, and there are many issues to confront. For instance, in the Devanagari script, are vowels and consonants with the modifiers *chandrabindu* (◌̣) and *anuswar* (◌̣) themselves letters, or do these modifiers have some lesser status as diacritics? Such matters have to be decided with the help of language experts; it cannot be left to technologists alone.

Technological limitations

Then there is the technology of the computer which limits the number of printable characters. Current personal computers allow 224 printable characters. (The computer allows one byte per character, allowing a total of 256 codes of which some 32 are used by the computer for its own purposes). Of these 224, some 30 to 40 are needed for punctuation and mathematical

culturally-specific assumptions



Which languages should have priority for localisation?

Neglect of Local Traditions

symbols, leaving perhaps 180 for alphabet characters. That seems like plenty, until one starts looking at what needs to be printed. Also, it needs to be considered that an ideal of the print industry has always been to be able to reproduce in print something as good as a calligrapher's writing.

Take the example of Devanagari, the writing system used for Nepali, Hindi and some other North Indian languages. When printing was being introduced in the early 19th century in Bombay, it was found that Devanagari required 1800 different type elements for one print size. There are three reasons for this. First, the writing is cursive and adjacent letters usually join with ligatures properly positioned in a range of printable characters for seamless joints. Secondly, since Devanagari uses many diacritics, extra forms of the letters with the diacritics are required. Thirdly, the letters are sometimes stacked on top of each other or otherwise combined in what are called conjuncts (क्व, क्ख). Separate type elements are needed for each of these conjuncts. Today, many less than the 1800 originally proposed characters are used, but still 44 consonants and 11 vowels require many hundreds of distinct printable characters. Since computers allow a mere 180, compromises have to be made.

Similarly, the cursive Arabic writing system used for Urdu, with some 28 to 35 letters in up to four different forms and many diacritics, requires more than a hundred characters for basic quality printing, and many times that to vary the width and to stack the letters as is found in quality calligraphy.

Compromises will have to be made in Devanagari and other writing systems of South Asia, just as they were made in European languages and the Roman scripts. European languages when written by hand are cursive, but this cursiveness has not been replicated in print. Alternative forms of letters () and awkward composite letters (Æ, œ) and diacritics (, , ^) have disappeared or are disappearing. Some might argue that this has simplified the Roman alphabet to great benefit, while others feel that much of the beauty of writing has been removed.

Compromises and chaos

For Devanagari and similar alphabets, the usual compromise is to drop a lot of the conjuncts and the full variety of characters needed for quality printing. And then, to produce a font, the remaining characters are each given a unique internal code number between 33 and 255 to form a code table, and the shapes designed using a computer software

package like Fontographer. After installing this new font in the usual software, such as a word processor, one can select it and begin to type in the selected writing system.

Creators of the font will have determined which keys need to be pressed for typing. They will probably have chosen one of two keyboard layouts - *typewriter* (following a well-known typewriter layout like Remington) or *phonetic* (placing characters on Roman keys of similar sound).

This exercise, of squeezing Devanagari into a code table of limited size and aligning characters with keys containing implied internal coding, has been done by many people

- *ASCII - American Standard Code for Information Interchange, a convention for representing the Roman alphabet in the computer*
- *Bit - the smallest unit of computer storage (the atom of computer storage, if you will)*
- *Brahmi - the prototypical writing system of India developed around the 4th century BC, from which all writing systems of the region have evolved*
- *Byte - the unit of computer storage consisting of eight bits which can hold 256 different items*
- *Code table - the set of internal codes and the characters that represent a particular writing system*
- *Devanagari - one of the Brahmi writing systems used for Hindi, Nepali and some other languages of northern South Asia*
- *Diacritic - a mark added to a printed character which alters the way it should be pronounced*
- *Glyph - a printable shape used to compose characters of a writing system*
- *Internal code - a byte or set of bytes used to represent a character of a writing system within the computer*
- *ISCII - Indian Script Code for Information Interchange, an Indian equivalent of ASCII for the writing systems of India, though more abstract and technically demanding than ASCII*
- *Key-mapping - software that determines the internal code that is created for a given key press on a keyboard*
- *Phoneme - an elementary sound of the spoken language*
- *Rendering system - software that, given an internal code in the context of other internal codes, determines how the coded character should appear in print or on a display*
- *Unicode - a coding system for the computer aimed at including all the languages of the world*

and organisations in South Asia, and each has compromised in different ways to end up with different sets of characters and different internal codes. The result is chaos. A choice of writing styles is desirable, but what has happened is a total incompatibility of fonts - text prepared using one font cannot be replaced with another font unless the character repertoires and internal codes are identical.

Taking the example of Devanagari fonts developed for Nepali in Kathmandu, (डमरू) in the Anusha font becomes (डम□) when the font is changed to Barood, because the internal code for (डम) in the Anusha is the internal code for (डम) in Barood, while the next internal code for (रू) has no meaning in Barood and hence the box to indicate this. It is not the same with Roman fonts, for in changing from the Berkeley Medium font used in this article to Helvetica Regular, the text remains readable. Easy convertability of texts is the major advance in standardisation and is essential for South Asian fonts today.

International Standards

There is compatibility among the Roman fonts for the simple reason that the character sets and internal codes underlying the fonts have been standardised, a process that emerged way back in the 1950s with what is known as ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange). The ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) equivalent of ASCII is ISO 646, which includes some simple devices for national variants, and since then standards for character encodings have included methods for handling non-Roman scripts as well, whereby national bodies register their scripts with ISO. The multi-script standard that is now rapidly becoming established, however, is Unicode.

Unicode began in the American company Xerox in the late 1970s to solve the problem of ideographic scripts such as Chinese and Japanese with their tens of thousands of characters. Each distinct character in each writing system was provided with its own unique code, which required thousands of codes. This was achieved by using two bytes instead of the usual one, which allowed 65,536 (256 times 256) distinct codes. Unicode has been

adopted by ISO as standard ISO 10646, and since it now uses four bytes, the four thousand million codes possible is clearly enough for all eventualities.

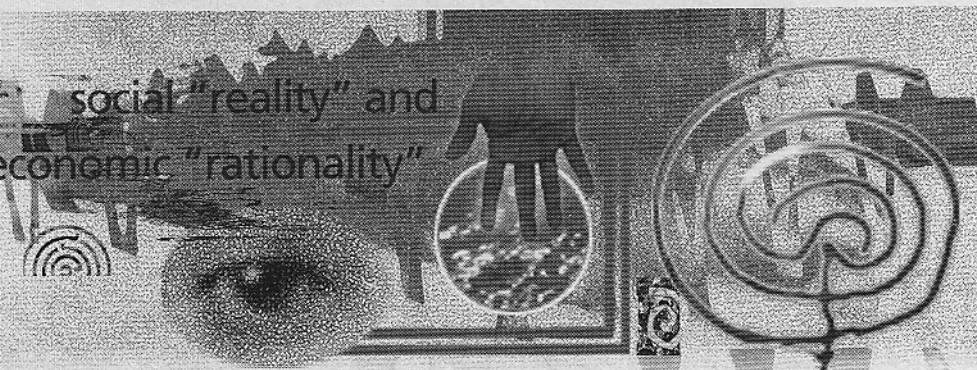
But there are some critically important issues in the way Unicode is managed. Unicode is not regulated by ISO but by the independent Unicode Consortium in California. This is very much a US organisation, with very limited European and East Asian affiliates. Unicode already contains character sets and encodings for many writing systems, including the Roman or Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic systems of West Asia, many of the systems of South Asia and South East Asia, as well as the ideographic systems of China, Japan and Korea. These have mostly been derived from national standards but not necessarily with the participation and approval of the national agencies concerned. Unicode has been adopted for the next generation of most major computer platforms, but it is not clear whose interests Unicode serves.

While current systems are based in the ASCII tradition of character encoding using one byte per character, the future clearly lies with Unicode and its multi-byte representations. Which means that South Asia must simply accept what Unicode and computer suppliers give them, or else it must actively engage with Unicode and make it serve the interests of the people of South Asia.

It might be expected that there have been standard encodings for single byte fonts in the ASCII tradition in South Asia, and that efforts are being directed towards the multi-byte Unicode standard. (Languages like Urdu and Pushtu using the Arabic writing system have long been served by ASMO 449, a single byte standard which grew out of an Arab League initiative.) But the fact is that almost nothing has been done to standardise single byte fonts for the Brahmi scripts of South Asia. Whatever is being done is of very recent origin: in India, the BharatBhasha initiative, started in December 1997, aims at establishing a *de facto* standard for all Indian languages; and in Nepal, a standardisation committee is in the final stages of drawing up a national single byte standard.

Advancing the technology

To understand what has happened with South Asian computer fonts, a little knowledge of how font systems work is necessary. Computers work internally using only numbers, and bit patterns correspond to these numbers. When you press a key on



world fragmentation

Which languages should have priority for localisation?

Neglect of Local Traditions

GRAPHICS BY VENANTIUS J. PINTO

your keyboard, an internal code is sent along the cable to the computer where it is stored, and then sent to your display where the internal code number is used to select the actual character to be displayed. When you ask your computer to print, the sequence of stored internal codes is sent to the printer, which uses the internal codes to select in turn each character to be printed.

So far, we have seen a direct correspondence between the key you press, the code that is generated for transmission to and storage in the computer, and the character that is printed. We need to recognise that this direct correspondence need not be so, and that we could have three independent components - the entry system including keyboard layouts, the internal codes, and the rendering system which includes the fonts. Here is what happens using a simple example from Devanagari.

In the diagram below, on the left is the sequence of keys to press, but the actual keys to press depends upon which keyboard layout is being used. These then generate internal codes using key-mapping software: some changes, even some reordering, may take place. When this internal code sequence comes to be printed or displayed, it is rendered using the chosen font to determine the style.

The critical feature is the rendering system, which effectively gives you your own calligrapher.

tem. This is what was done in the 1970s for the Arabic writing systems and in the 1980s for the Brahmic writing systems.

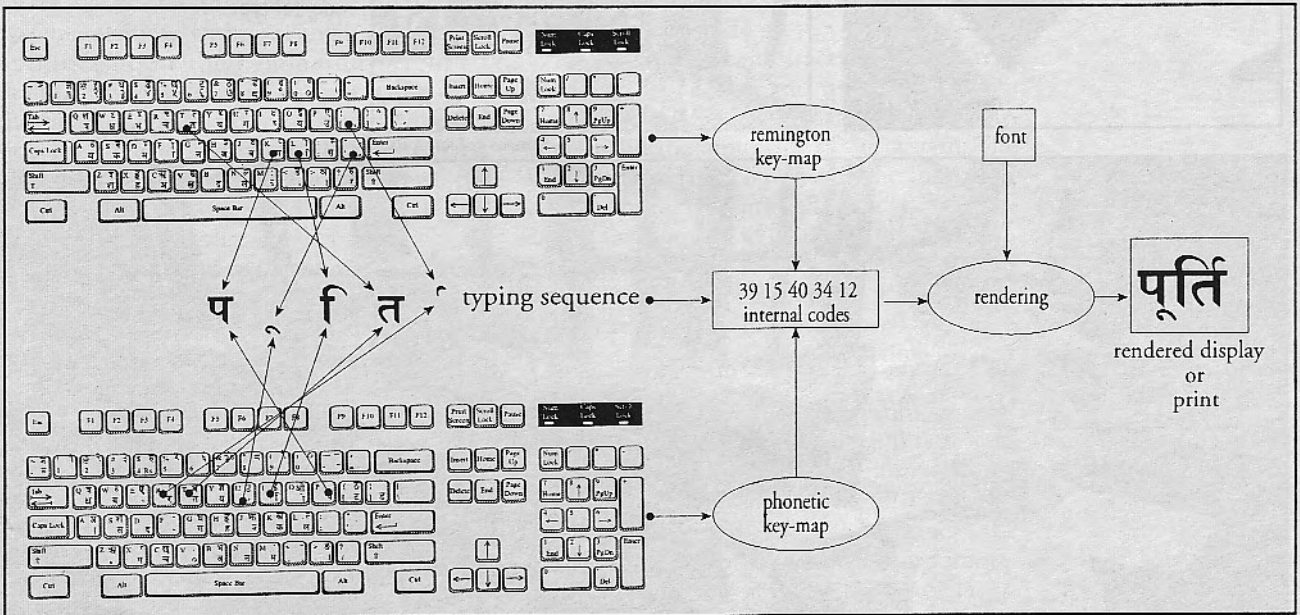
Advanced encodings for Arabic and Brahmic

In Arabic itself there are 28 letters, several of which can appear in up to four forms: as shown below for the Arabic letter *heh*, depending on how they fit into the cursive flow of the writing.



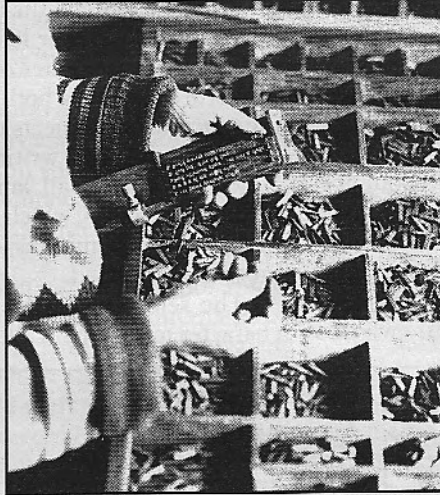
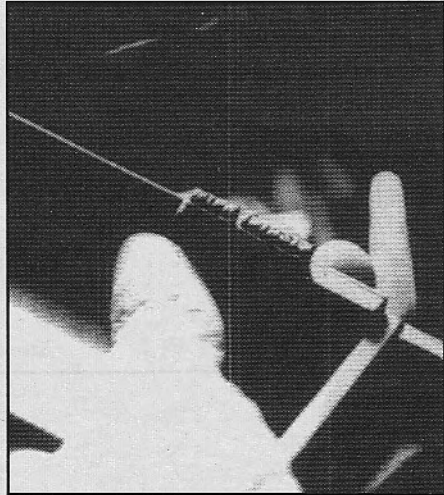
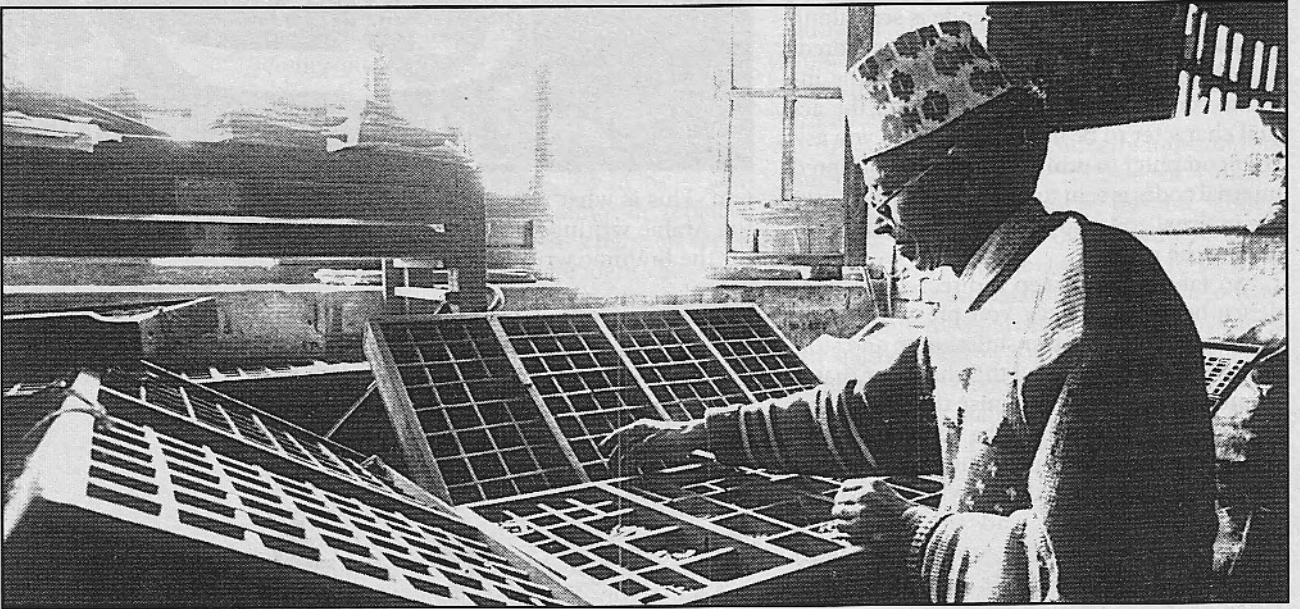
From left to right, the isolated form stands unconnected to other letters, the final form connects to some letter on its right, the medial form connects to both left and right, while the initial form connects to the left. In extensions of the Arabic writing system given by Unicode to cover all languages like Urdu, Pushtu and Sindhi, which use the Arabic writing system, the number of letters has been more than doubled.

The selection of the actual form of the character to be used (called a "glyph") is cor-



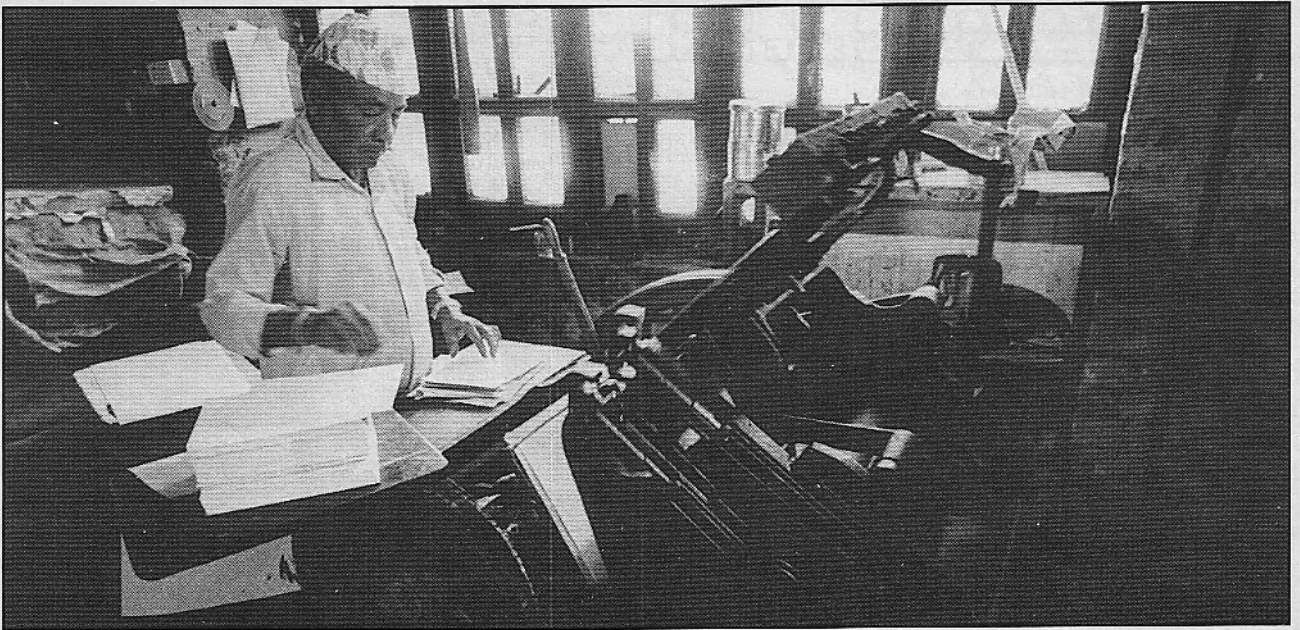
ligrapher. Tell the calligrapher what you want written, and the calligrapher will render it with all the finesse of the calligraphic art. The internal codes can then be designed to focus on the essential features of the writing system.

rectly left to the rendering system, since this can be precisely determined by context. But rendering systems of even this simplicity are not provided by current standard operating systems, and thus the rendering has to be



Long before computers, but after hand-written calligraphy there was "cold type". Individual lead pieces with letter faces were brought together by hand to create the printed word. More than a century ago, many of South Asia's languages adapted to cold type. Many have yet to graduate to the next technological step-up: the digital type.

PICTURES BY ARTHUR PAZO



built into the specialist applications built for Arabic.

The way Unicode has encoded the Arabic writing system and its extensions still leaves some problems. The principle of one internal code per letter is right, but the situation with some characters, shown in the table below, needs urgent review.

The *hamza* (ء) is represented in six forms, each of which has its own encoding, whereas one code should have been enough. Similarly, the two characters - *taa marboota* (ة) and *alif maksoora* (ى) - are encoded without any clear argument as to why they have been included and are not just context-dependent forms of *taa* (ت) and *alif* (ا) respectively. These aspects of the Arabic writing system, and the way in which the extensions have been handled, clearly need the further analysis of professional linguists.

In India during the 1980s an encoding for the Brahmic writing systems was produced. This was developed through research grants from the Indian Department of Electronics initially at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and then at C-DAC (Centre for Development of Advanced Computing) in Pune. It led to the 1991 Indian Standard IS 13194, the Indian Script Code for Information Interchange (ISCII). A 1988 version of the standard was used as the basis for the Unicode encodings of the writing systems of India.

ISCII is an advanced encoding in two ways. Firstly, ISCII aims to encode all the writing systems of India within a single code table, building upon their common origin in Brahmi. The letters of the alphabets that have the same phonetic value or sound (derived from the same original Brahmi letter) are given the same internal code, so that changing fonts between writing systems yields a crude but useful transliteration.

Secondly, ISCII aims to represent the letters and not the particular written forms or glyphs of the letters, just as had been done previously for Arabic. This means that in particular the conjuncts of the writing systems do not need to be given internal codes, since these can be generated by the rendering system which will recognise when a sequence of consonants should be joined, and how they should be joined as a horizontal conjunct or as a stacked conjunct or perhaps as some special different character. The figure illustrates: the pairs on the left are stored, while the conjunct character or glyph on the right is generated and printed or displayed as needed.

च + व = च्व

ध + द = द्ध

The rendering requirement for Brahmic writing systems is more sophisticated than that needed for Arabic, and is well beyond the technologies available in current operating systems. This has meant that special software has had to be produced, and C-DAC has developed a rendering system that is relatively simple.

But the drawback of this level of sophistication for both the Arabic and Brahmic writing systems is that the rendering system required is packaged and sold with other software like a word processor, thus making both ASMO 449 and ISCII (and their Unicode derivatives) expensive. In India C-DAC has a monopoly, buttressed by the state requirement that all government information be supplied in ISCII. Of course, others could enter the market, but the entry cost is very high.

Problems and benefits

ISCII has recently been reviewed and has been the subject of much criticism, but the official report on this review has not yet been made public. Some of the criticism stems from the requirement of advanced rendering to use ISCII, but there is also substantive linguistic criticism of some features of ISCII. While due recognition must be given to the very significant contributions of ISCII and C-DAC to the development of encoding systems and standards for Indian writing systems, it is time that these defects were corrected. The standardisation process which is underway in Nepal is trying to do so.

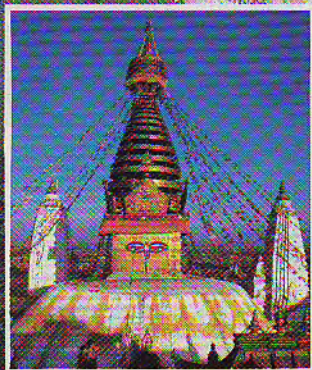
Taking this more abstract approach of representing the letters and not their written forms in the internal codes can have enormous benefits for the input side of the system. The keyboard need only have key positions for the letters, not their forms, reducing very significantly the number of distinct keys required. This in turn reduces the number of 'shift presses' required. Both of these lead to a very significant increase in typing speed and accuracy, and a reduction in learning time for new typists.

The next generation of operating systems must give computer users the ability to render fonts with the flexibility required for the writing systems of South Asia. If this change comes about, it will take place through the adoption of Unicode and the incorporation of the key mapping and font rendering facilities needed by Unicode. Further sophistication may come with the development of the TrueTypeOpen font system by Microsoft and Adobe; this will allow arbitrary reorganisation of characters during rendering to give quality results.

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Unicode has already been adopted into current Unix systems. Microsoft appears to have adopted Unicode for Windows 98 and related systems, and will implement whatever Unicode mandates, though Microsoft is saying little publicly. Apple's intentions are even less clear, but they have implemented ISCII in their Indian Language Kit. It is still possible, however, that Unicode may fail to represent the writings systems of South Asia adequately, and that the platform providers may fail to provide the technology necessary to render the scripts properly.

The way forward

There is some state of confusion in South Asia, with much happening, but with little co-ordination. Standards are necessary for computers to work in the languages of South Asia. The extant standards in Unicode are not adequate and need the expert attention of linguists from the nations concerned to remove linguistic misunderstandings. More scripts need to be added. This cannot be left to well-intentioned but inappropriately qualified groups in the US, and must involve the participation and leadership of linguistic and technical experts in South Asia.

Furthermore, the commercial interests of organisations like C-DAC in India, and major

concerns like Microsoft, cannot be left to determine whether or not the peoples of South Asia get access to computing in their own languages and conventions, nor what form South Asian languages should take.

What is needed is a regional conference under the auspices of an organisation like SAARC to resolve these matters at the linguistic, technical and political levels. C-DAC is organising such a conference in the first week of September 1998 in Pune, a welcome and timely initiative. This writer most sincerely hopes that one aim of this conference will be to resolve the very basic issues covered in this article. A resolution of the issues must be arrived at respecting the interests of all the countries of South Asia (which have languages and scripts that are shared across borders) and drawing upon expertise from across the region; it would be most unfortunate if India dominated this meeting. Which is why it is important that the organisers of the conference formally constitute the meeting within a regional framework and seek neutral chairpersons for the strategically crucial sessions. Δ

P. Hall is Professor of Computer Science at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, and a visiting professor at Kathmandu University, Nepal.

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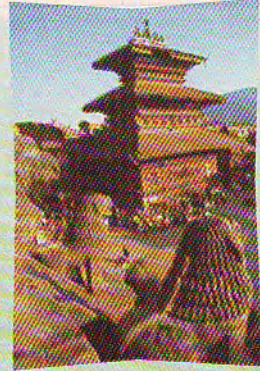
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Cold type, digital type and Bangla font

by Rimi B. Chatterjee

A substantial amount of water has flowed down the Hooghly since the days when Sir William Carey and Panchanan Karmakar developed the first Bengali font. A burst of creativity at the beginning of the 19th century led to great advancements in Bangla printing. The letterpress font (in lead type) in its basic form as we have it today ingeniously solved many of the problems associated with Bangla orthography - the fact that the unit of Bangla writing is the syllable rather than the letter, for example.

The momentum was lost over the course of time, however, and Bangla in this century has failed either to develop new, usable fonts for the modern age, or make a successful transition to the virtual space of digital text. Nor has it made a big impact on the informal republic of the Internet, though Bengali cultural sites abound. (Bangla does not read well in Roman letters and for some reason South Asian scripts take ages to download.)

Not like roshogollas

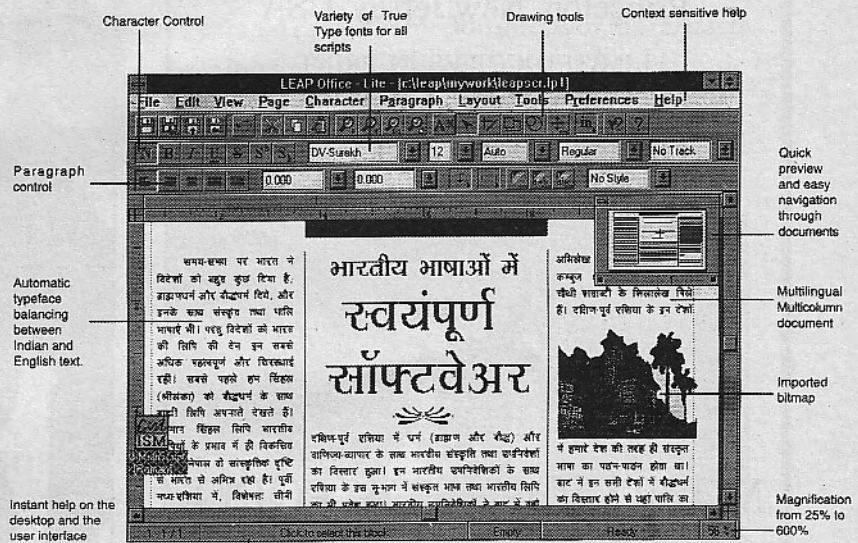
Yet, judging by the rash of computer tutorial homes and training centres coming up all over the *mofussil*, one would think West Bengal was churning out software professionals like *roshogollas*. The reality, however, is less sweet. Most of these centres own substandard machines running obsolete software, the trainers themselves may not be more advanced than last semester's 'graduates', and all this for fees that are generally exorbitant. Even in the city of Calcutta, where one would expect competition and publicity to impose some quality control, the situation is not much better.

There are other problems as well associated with the teaching of software skills in the Subcontinent. As software packages get more sophisticated and rely less on the user's familiarity with hardware, they become more and more 'help-driven', that is, they come with self-explanatory text included in the package, which can be accessed while running an application. While this trend is progressive in the sense that fewer instructions and procedures have to be memorised to use a package successfully, the design structure does assume a fairly sophisticated knowledge of English

on the part of the user.

Programming languages are still very "logic"-based, and can be learnt with a modicum of English knowledge, but for those who wish to learn, say, desktop publishing techniques, the process of learning to use the package demands good English skills even if the ultimate purpose is to typeset text in an Indian language. There lies the difficulty. However, on the credit side, most popular packages are becoming increasingly icon-driven, so once one learns how to use a package, perhaps by a live tutorial in one's own language, actually using it becomes fairly straightforward.

This necessarily restricts unmediated Bangla desktop publishing use to those who already know English. One notable exception, though, is the Ananda Bazar Patrika group of publications which has designed, and uses its own system for Bangla desktop publishing, right down to having its own font. Workers are taught to use the system on the job. But as the group comprises of over 12 English and Bengali titles under one roof, it is big enough to support such a project without needing an outside market to pay for its development. For most users, the options are limited to what is available in the market.



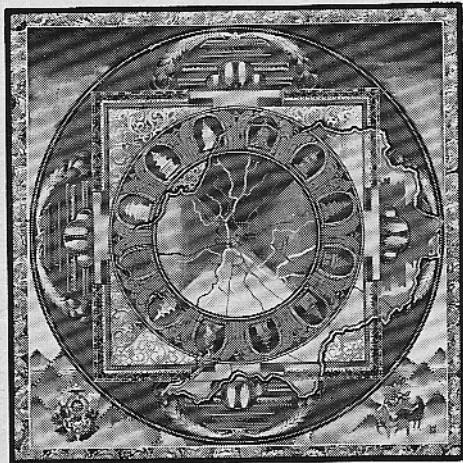
Even this word processor for Indian languages designed by C-DAC in Pune requires an English guiding hand.

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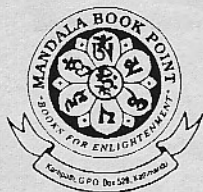
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Thin stocks, fat hopes

The market, it must be admitted, is not well stocked. The most well-known Indian language text manipulation package available appears to be the GIST system, developed by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), based in Pune. This provides for word processing in a number of major Indian languages, even though the help files and literature are still in English.

C-DAC recently released a package called LEAP, developed with a group called Men at Work. Both these packages use the INSCRIPT keyboard layout, whereby one uses the caps lock key to toggle between English and Indian scripts, while the letter sounds are typed in phonetic order. The package automatically merges consonants and vowels, thus solving the 'matra' problem. The full package includes on-line spell-check in all the languages, and the printed result looks passable if a little spindly.

In theory, there is no reason why a fully Bangla-ised version of, say, the Word 7 screen I am looking at right now should not be developed. Very little of what I see requires more than character recognition in English, al-

though if I want, say, to know how to create a table of contents in a master document, I will have to navigate my way through a lot of complicated help cards. Again, there is nothing in these to prevent them from being translated into Bangla, but the question then arises about the profitability of such a venture.

If the largest potential market for Bangla language software is the present constituency of computer-training centres, one cannot expect a high retail price to help sales. Small businesses, whether into desktop publishing or not, might benefit tremendously from such software, but the turnover of such businesses in cash-strapped Bengal is too low for the software giants to take note.

So, is there a market waiting for a Bengali Steve Jobs to crack open? One can only wait and watch. Meanwhile, we hope that the software revolution does not pass us by while the clink of metal type continues to fill rural Bengal's bamboo groves. △

R. Chatterjee is a Calcutta-based freelance writer who recently worked on the Indian publishing history with respect to Macmillan and Oxford University Press.



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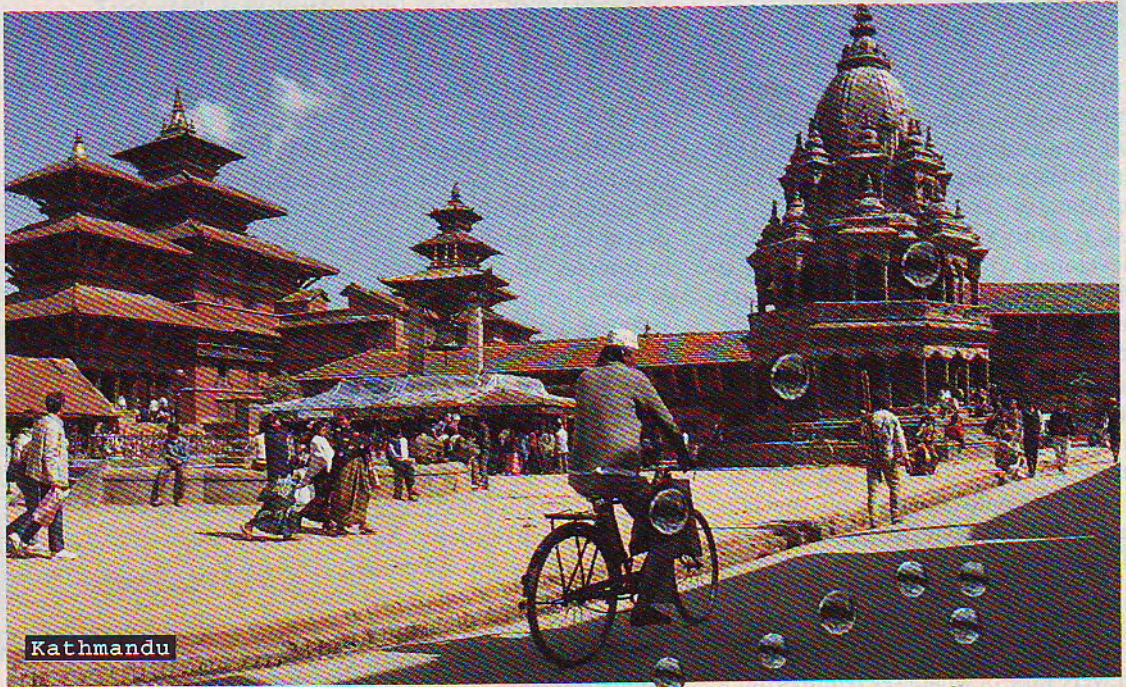


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Local language vs purchasing power

Is there a demand for software in local languages? Is it required?
Will it sell? Who will do it?

by Harsh Kumar

There is a story which is repeated in many textbooks on Marketing Management. Two salesmen arrive in a country and find that the population does not use footwear. One of them reports back to headquarters: "There is no demand for footwear in this country, as people here do not use any footwear." The other wires a different message: "There is tremendous demand for footwear in this country, as people here do not use any footwear."

Needless to say, it was the second salesman who got a pay raise and an accelerated promotion.

The naysayers who say that there is no demand for local language software in South Asia should take this story to heart, for here there obviously is such a demand. Whoever can access and provide the services in terms of hardware and software, can rake in the profit. There have been a number of studies to indicate that the return on investments in information technology (IT) is very high. Till now, it has been the small English-savvy group of South Asians who have been able to reap

the benefits of IT, while the larger population which does not have English has been excluded. This is hardly just, and does not tally with the much-vaunted goals of achieving equality and social justice.

It is a fact, of course, that presently there is very little software available in the Subcontinent's local languages. Much of what is there is limited to word processing applications; some of the other localised software costs more money, or even means additional hardware. Sometimes, using computers in South Asian languages even require spending an extra INR 8000-10,000. In other words, there is at times a hidden penalty to be paid for working in a local language. No wonder, then, that most people prefer to stick to English on their screens, with the result that computing in local languages has not picked up.

At present, computerisation efforts and their benefits have remained limited to only the English-using category - some five per cent of the population. Computerisation has not touched the larger masses.

It is often said that it is the lack of purchasing power of the larger masses that keeps computers restricted to the English-speaking classes. This argument is not entirely valid. Let us consider a section of the larger Indian mass, for example. If you look at the work of small-time shopkeepers in any town - Bomhay, Badaun, Gaya, Trichi or Bhavnagar - you will find that there is no reason to doubt their purchasing power or to believe that they will not be able to benefit from computerisation.

This population of shopkeepers can definitely use computers to business advantage, provided there is software in their language to adopt and implement successfully. Presently, these proprietors of small businesses have to learn English to use computers or hire an employee who knows English. This creates a problem because they would then have to share their closely guarded business secrets with this person. They would embrace computerisation if there was software in a language they can use.

India's computer and software companies have to think in terms of a new approach to deal with this large potential market, one which has purchasing power but no English. The size of this small-shopkeeper market is large: it makes up about 40-50 percent of shops in big cities and 10 to 20 percent of shops in the smaller towns. This amounts to about 15 to 20 times the size of the existing market of Indian computer companies. It's had economics for the industry to ignore this market until it learns English, for that day will take too long in coming.

A study of returns on investment shows that the computerisation of these small shops (mainly for inventory management and accounting) will pay for itself in six to eight months. In other words, there is plenty of scope to sell such localised software.

Who will do it?

The development of local software can best be taken up by specialists who know both computers as well as the relevant South Asian local language(s). In India, for example, there is a large pool of such programmers for whom English is a second or third language. They will be able to prepare software with what is called local language "front-ends". (In a front-end software, the application is in the local language, but the underlying programme remains in English. In the second step of software localisation, even the underlying programmes would be in a South Asian language.)

This group of programmers who are interested in localising software into their lan-

guages has to be supported by the local bodies in the private and public sector. For example, at the national or provincial level, market bodies as well as the various *sahitya* academies could provide the forum to promote localisation. The market representatives and language bodies would work together to define specifications, government support, subsidies, as well as to promote the product that emerges.

It is not that the big computer companies do not have a role to play in the localisation process. They will definitely have to chalk out a new strategy for their role in the individual countries of South Asia as the market changes and indigenisation proceeds. At that time, they will also adapt and fight for their market share, but it is true that for the moment, these big companies are very comfortable handling large accounts. They are not geared to meet the demands of the small-time computer users, for they are thinly spread across large areas. Their big accounts typically have about 50-100 computers in three or four sites in a city like Bomhay.

Once there is software available in local languages, the future market for computers is going to be radically different, and much larger. In the new market, say, of the size of a small town like Vashi in Maharashtra, there will be about 400 computers in a stretch of less than a kilometre. This concentration will be economically viable for any software or hardware vendor. Such large number of computers in such a small area will be far easier to maintain than maintaining the present large accounts. The full market potential will then be realised when we see that there will be hundreds of such dense clusters of computer users in the Bombay area - Dadar, Parel and Crafford market. Now, if we multiply the number of similar markets in small towns all over India, we will be able to fathom the size of this market.

Big companies, if they want to remain big, will have to learn to deal with this new market, where there would be a large number of customers with small holdings. The next wave of computerisation, to speak only of India, will belong to the company that can cater to and capture this large market.

H. Kumar, who works for the Konkan Railway in Bombay, is the developer of Susha, a 'freeware' font which makes it possible to work with 'front-end' software in Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and Gurmukhi. Susha can be obtained from H. Kumar by writing to <krcl@giasbm01.vsnl.net.in> or <kumar_harsh@hotmail.com>.

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Inside Rao

WHAT DO YOU do when you are out of power, by now four times removed from the prime ministership of India and twice removed from the presidency of the Congress party? And also a possible jail term in the offing?

It could be India's answer to *Primary Colours*. Former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao has decided to come out with his fictionalised biography, *The Insider*. It promises to be an exciting ringside view of a turbulent political era through the eyes of someone who has been an important part of it all.

The book earlier generated interest when a magazine published excerpts detailing the protagonist's love life. This time around, another magazine has published more varied excerpts along with an interview with the erudite Rao in which he says, "My role in the book is that of a political activist. I thought I had something to



SUBHAS RAI

say as an insider."

Never has an Indian prime minister (sitting or retired) brought out a book on his life while still alive. And now the news is that it is slated for release by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at a grand function in the capital in April. In doing this, he will be returning a favour to his friend, Rao, who, as prime minister, had released Vajpayee's own book of poems. "The book of the season" is what

the publisher, Penguin India's David Davidar, has called Rao's memoirs. But, the question is, will it sell? The most recent runaway Penguin hit was not a literary or political potthoiler, but a hook of cut and dried journalistic reports from the rural interiors of India. P. Sainath's *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* has gone into four reprints of 10,000 copies each.

Will Rao the 'insider' best Sainath the 'outsider'?

Monster cake

EVEN AS NEW Delhi's political cauldron was brimming over with potent concoctions of the khadi clad, the Indian Culinary Forum (ICF) was getting ready to whip itself into a frenzy. The Forum, defying all known geometry of the cake (always a circle or a square, never a long, long rectangle), was readying to bake an entry into the Guinness Book of records with the world's "largest" of the kind.

The cake was to have been an enormous 82.5-tonne, 3-km-long gastronomic monstrosity on Rajpath, stretching out from the Presidential Palace on 15 March. However, the inauguration of the new Parliament and rising day temperatures stopped the ICF from enjoying, as it were, a cakewalk on the Rajpath. They were refused official go-ahead for the proposed date.

But that has only made the organisers more obsessed. Now they say the venue will be shifted as "we can't take the risk of displaying the cake in the open in the month of April."

So from Presidential outdoors, the 'cake' - if we can call it that instead of the snake it would resemble - will now be 'constructed' in the comfort of an air-conditioned auditorium. Twenty-five of the city's best hotels are part of this mid-spring madness. Their puerile goal is to outweigh the 58.8-tonne cake baked by Alabama chefs in the United States.

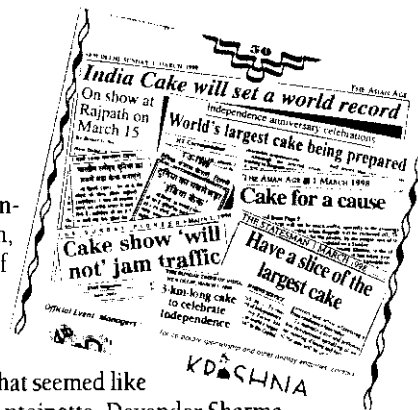
The madness, allegedly, has a method too. The organisers say the proceeds will go to charity and the event is in celebration

of India's 50 years of Independence. If that were not enough, Manjit Singh Gill, president of the ICF, adds, "We want to prove to the world the capability of Indian chefs."

But don't fall for that. In what seemed like a sharp indictment of Marie Antoinette, Devender Sharma of the Forum for Biotechnology and Food Security, shot off letters of protest to the press, the President and the Prime Minister. "When millions of people are below the poverty line and do not even get two meals a day, how can one organise such an event?" asked Sharma.

Point taken, but not everyone would lose sleep over moral correctness. The press in New Delhi was concerned more about the commuting hell in the making from this all-time first when a cake stops traffic. The absurdity only multiplies: apparently stunned by the sudden realisation that one of the key ingredients of the cake is the egg, animal rights activists R.P. Jain and Laxmi Mody spoke up in defence of the thousands (presumably unfertilised) of eggs that would be destroyed to produce the culinary megalomania.

This is what people do when the politics of a country goes out of whack. They go cuckoo and start baking lengthy cakes.





SUBHAS RAI

Governor Prabhakaran

FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS from an interview with Minister and leader of Ceylon Workers Congress, S Thondaman, carried by the *Sunday Leader* of Colombo on 22 March, 1998. Ceylon Workers Congress is a party which represents "upcountry Tamils".

Q: You recently said that the north and east must be given to the LTTE for a period of five years and LTTE leader Prabhakaran be made the governor. What is the basis of your thinking?

A: ...Now there is a war between the LTTE and the government. The government cannot divide the country and give half of it to the LTTE, so there must be some method to find peace. When I did not have a vote, former president J.R. Jayawardene invited me into his cabinet. Now, does this mean that the cabinet was given to me? No. This is what is not understood by our people. He invited me with a good heart and I accepted it. This gave me a sense of responsibility. Likewise, if the government can make Prabhakaran the governor for a specific period, then he would act more responsibly. It should be declared that Prabhakaran is the governor of the north-east province and will wield all the powers of a president of this country.

Q: In your view, what should be the next step after handing over the north and east to the LTTE?

A: What happened to Hong Kong after the agreement between the UK government and the Chinese government ended? Did not they come to a settlement? Was not Hong Kong handed back to China? So let something of that sort also happen here. After some time, let Prabhakaran as agreed upon by an agreement, give back the north and east to the government. There must be a give-and-take policy in this regard. Once Prabhakaran ends his period of office, the north and east would automatically come under the purview of the government in power.

Q: President Chandrika Kumaratunga, too, in an interview with a foreign magazine said she had considered giving the north and east to Prabhakaran for ten years. But when she came under criticism she said she was only joking. Now, how serious are you?

A: I am very serious about what I say. But with regard to the president saying it was only a joke, I would say this is why the minorities are suspicious of any Sinhalese government. But as far as I am concerned, I am very serious in saying this. Today not only are the people of the north and east suffering, but the entire country is suffering.

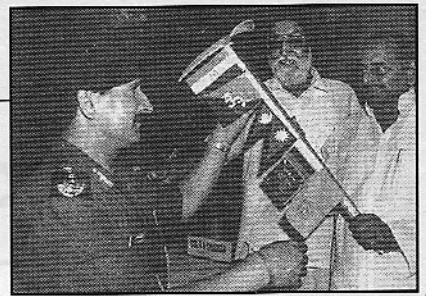
Q: Is it fair to give the north and east to the LTTE when they are not considered by all Tamil political parties as

the sole representative of Tamils?

A: Maybe, maybe not. But today the government is preparing to negotiate because of them and not because of other Tamil parties. Now my question is what did the other Tamil parties do and what can they do? Even a democratic party like the TULF participated in the Vaddukodai resolution and after that they too kept away from this problem. All Tamil parties have done nothing to solve the problem.

Q: Do you mean to say that the LTTE could do something better than other parties?

A: They have already done much more than other political parties. Since the passing of the Vaddukodai resolution, tell me which Tamil party took an effective step towards solving the problem as the LTTE did? The only party which has made the government negotiate on the Tamil issue is the LTTE and not other parties. As far as I am concerned it is not my job to judge whether the LTTE is the sole representative of the Tamils or not. All I want is peace.



Columbus climbers

THERE IS A 1956 book, *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* by W.E. Bowman, not very well known generally, but which most mountaineers would be familiar with. It is a spoof of mountain climbing in the grand old tradition of sahibs laying siege, with the help of an army of porters, to the mountain (in this case the highest of them all, Rum Doodle, standing at a majestic height of 40,000 1/2 feet).

The book is a hilarious account of how a disparate group of would-be mountaineers fumble about in a fictional "Yogistan" trying to conquer Rum Doodle. Finally, in a grand climax the leader leads his team up to the summit, which 'gives' pretty easily, only to realise that they are not on Rum Doodle, but on North Doodle, 5000 feet lower. "We had climbed the wrong mountain," the leader reports.

Cut to real life and the autumn of 1997. A "SAARC" team of mountaineers was brought together on yet another commemoration of India's 50 years of freedom to go and climb a mountain in the Indian Himalaya. The peak chosen was the previously unclimbed 6794-metre Gya, situated at the trijunction of Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh and Tibet. The ex-

pedition did not get off to a good start since the route decided upon was from the north which meant going by way of Ladakh (in Indian Kashmir), and the Pakistanis would not climb there. That initial hitch notwithstanding, a large group was assembled, consisting of mountaineers from Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India (it is not clear which other countries were included since the team leader has not put out a report), Sherpas and local porters.

The team went up to Himachal armed with a huge enlargement of the mountain face they were to climb, as well as much fancy equipment such as satellite phones and a global positioning system (GPS) so that they would know where they were.

The assemblage of climbers itself was by no means unimpressive. The team counted in it several Everest summiteers and climbing instructors and was led by Col H.S. Chauhan, principal at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. As an Indian climber put it, "They could have climbed anything, let alone Gya."

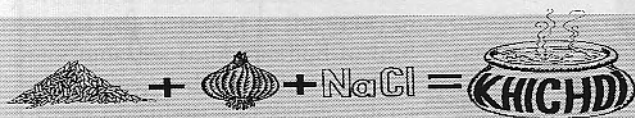
And that's what they seem to have done. After tackling two very difficult sections, the summit was reached. Photos were taken, GPS observations made and the world informed by satellite phone about the "first ascent of Gya".

Back in Delhi, preparations were

on to celebrate the conquest when a horrible discovery was made. They had climbed the wrong mountain. What was thought to be Gya was not in fact Gya.

The slides showed the real Gya further behind the peak that had been conquered. A postmortem revealed that the team had read the map wrongly and established base camp a valley too soon. Meanwhile, someone had forgotten to bring along the picture of the mountain. "The nadir of Indian mountaineering intelligence," said the above-mentioned mountaineer, forgetting for a moment that this was a South Asian team, albeit on an Indian mountain.

Back in Delhi, after the initial embarrassment was done with, it was decided to look for a face-saving measure, more so because this was a much-hoopa'd effort at regional camaraderie, whose success had been much trumpeted. And so they went ahead and decided to call the peak Gya Sumpa/6480 m (meaning the 3rd peak of Gya), hoping that no one (including politicians) would notice. Till the time of going to press, they certainly hadn't.



WHEN IT BECAME known several months ago that Bangladesh's rice crop of last autumn had fallen below par, the government lost no time in importing 3.5 million metric tons to prevent a price rise. A hundred and twenty million Bangladeshis eat rice as a staple, and any government which knows its poll arithmetic knows there is only one way to deal with rice price. Unfortunately for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, there was more inflation in the offing.

Riots broke out in February when onions suddenly became very pricey. They were selling for the not unusual 15 to 18 taka per kg, when soon they were up at 50 taka. The blame was laid on low onion stocks due variously to last year's excessive rainfall, this winter's cold wave, and smuggling out to India, which too had a poor onion harvest this year. (In normal times, Bangladesh meets its surplus demand by importing Indian onions.)

The onions were important enough for Sheikh Hasina to call an emergency cabinet meeting. Traders were allowed to import the bulbs on an emergency basis, and the import tax was lowered from 37.5 percent to 7.5 percent for the period 3 March to 15 April.

Before the onion injury had healed, the Prime Minister was rubbed with a salt crisis. On the face of it, this was a 'manufactured' crisis, thriving on rumours of scarcity even though there was adequate supply. One Dhaka wholesaler, Sharif Uddin, said he was selling 300 25-kg bags a day whereas his normal was no more than 80.

Commerce and Industries Minister Tofael Ahmed claimed that there was no scarcity of salt in the market and attributed the scare to "a conspiracy of certain quarters against the government". Even so, the government put out a handout claiming that the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) has taken steps to import huge quantities of salt, and that a shipload was already at the port.

However, something good seemed to have come out of the grain-and-condiments crisis, after all. After boycotting the Parliament for six months, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party of Begum Khaleda Zia, decided to use an appropriate fig leaf to head back up the steps of the Sangsad Bhawan. On 8 March, the BNP announced that it was coming back "in the greater interest of the country as the prices of essentials are running high without checks".

This is how rice, onions and salt become the essential ingredients of a Bangladeshi political khichdi.

-Talat Kamal

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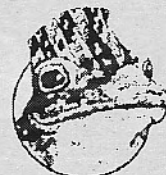
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Pakistan, the land of pure (and ergo, peace), they said. Not so, Chhetria Patrakar reconfirmed during a recent trip, which is why the larger portion of this *Mediafile* is devoted to that troubled land. The information has been gleaned from a pulse-taking of the fine English newspapers of that country.

To begin with, I had to learn all kinds of new terminology with no thesaurus to help me. Such as No-Go areas, which the newspapers scream from the headlines without bothering to explain. Some investigation revealed that these are areas controlled by either of the two rival fratricidal Mohajir groups of Karachi, and which the other side may not enter for fear of elimination. "Karachi becoming another Beirut", proclaimed one headline in *The Dawn*.

Here is another term that you have to know if you want to know the Pakistani pulse: PAI. The Pakistani Awami Ittehad is exactly what they call a motley crew. It is a group of politicians out in the cold, most importantly Madame BB, who have banded together to fight Mian Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League. Said the PAI President at a press briefing, "We will try to form a government comprising of honest representatives of the people and which could come up with the solution of problems faced by the country." Blah blah, at least be original.

This is one good headline, especially if you consult last month's editorial in *Himal* on President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar. Now that he has been

made head of state, how will this arch-social conservative adjust to speaking up for girl child education and even take up the occasional secular position? As he prepared to open an international meet organised by the Pakistan Psychiatric Research Centre, *The Nation* announced: "Tarar to open international symposium on schizophrenia".

The Indian Army is busy with an advertising campaign that emphasises

A Family called Pakistan



Whether assisting in census, improving infrastructure or other nation building activities, the civilian and the soldier work hand in hand.

Whenever faced with natural calamities and major disasters, the Pakistan Army and the civilian brethren work together to provide succour and relief. This is only natural. After all, the Pakistan Army and the civilian population both belong to the same family called Pakistan.



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the machohood of khaki. Across the border, the Pakistan Army seems to have an entirely different advertising focus, with emphasis on "A Family called Pakistan" in which "civilian and soldier work hand in hand". The Pakistan Army, the public is reminded, is assisting in implementing the census, improving infrastructure, organising rescue work during natural calamities and major disasters, etc. Not a word about war or machismo.

Trouble with terms is brewing in the province of the "Baluch", another semantic indication of a deep-rooted political problem of the tussle between provincialism and federalism. It goes back to the British tongue's inability to pronounce 'Baloch', which

made them say 'Baluch', which is what gave us Baluchistan. The Brown Sahibs who helped draft the Pakistani Constitution stuck with Baluchistan. Now, the provincial government demands that the name should be written 'Balochistan'. Give it to them, I say, but Mian Nawaz Sharif once again thinks otherwise.

There are seminars and workshops happening all over South Asia all the time, but only in Pakistan is there this peculiarity of coverage. The torsos of as many important personages as have taken the podium are photographed; they are then squeezed into vertical slivers and fitted into the frame. An establishing shot of the gathering is provided on the side. Here I provide a sample from the 22 March issue of *The Nation* on "Sh Rashid, Ejazul Haq and others speaking at a seminar held in memory of late Hameed Nizami at Rawalpindi Press Club." The

same thing happens when upscale weddings are held in hotel reception rooms, and the Pakistani English press revels in reporting diplomatic parties, lovingly repeating the names of diplomats, corporate high flyers and culture barons. Nothing like it elsewhere, not in Comilla, Colombo, Coimbatore or Cothmandu.

Now, to sidle over to the non-Pakistanis of the Subcontinent. Lalita Pawar was the bad woman in many a Hindi movie - more than 800. Short and dark, a fixture epitomising feminine evil in films right through to the 1980s. The actress died practically unmourned in early March. She passed away in her sleep, aged 82, in her apartment in Pune, and was not





discovered until two days later. Lalita Pawar was, in reality, short, dark, self-effacing, soft spoken, and someone who deserved at least upon her death a fraction of the media coverage that vacuous starlets get for stubbing a toe or running a light. What made Lalita Pawar a particularly evil-looking character was her pinched-up left eye, which was the result of a burst vein, itself the result of a violent slap from an angry director decades ago. Goodbye, evil lady (not vamp, that's a different category) of the silver screen!

As a regionalist, Chhetria Patrakar is thrilled to learn of the fraternal ties developing between the Bangla and



Indian Navies, with short Rear Admiral Mohammad Nurul Islam dropping by to say hello to tall Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat in New Delhi, hundreds of miles from the nearest shoreline, wharf or jetty. Apparently, Bangladesh has sought India's help in building a base for "indigenous warship construction". I cannot but applaud this war-like preparation between two fraternal nations. But do I seem to remember a certain little matter of a binational contest over a couple of silt-laden islands off the Sunderbans? Oh, well, nothing says navies cannot cooperate even when waters are contested.

The news story that was used by practically every newspaper in South Asia which had access to the AFP wires,

said "Nepalese cow killer gets 12-year jail term." Two years ago, Somlal Tamang is said to have taken the life of a bovine individual and now an appellate court has confirmed upon appeal a lower court decision to enforce the maximum penalty. This life term is most incongruous, and brings up for question the notion of human rights in Nepal. What's happening up in those mountains? When cows, men (and women) are thus made equal, even Maneka Gandhi cannot take heart.

The Kathmandu Post reports that Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev attended a tourism fair in Berlin, apparently the first time Nepal's royalty had gone anywhere to promote an industry. Which is all very well, but I am just a bit confused (and hence undeserving of any plaque of appreciation from any quarter) when the paper reports that, "During the visit, Crown Prince distributed plague to about three hundred tourism entrepreneurs and media persons at a programme organized by Visit Nepal Year '98."

Although no one has actually congratulated him on the matter, which is most unfortunate, you will by now know from the hate mail received that this columnist has emerged as the foremost (and only) Inspector of Sub-continental Photojournalism. Here's an AFP picture captioned "Congress (I) leader Sonia Gandhi holds her head during the swearing-in ceremony of Atal Behari Vajpayee." Hey, don't let your biases show, man! Look closely, she is only scratching her right forehead with the nails on her third



and index finger. It is allowed, and she could have been shooing away flies, mites, mosquitoes, cantankerous former party presidents, and the like.

"India's bureaucracy among the worst in Asia," said an AP story and the papers in neighbouring countries printed the item with glee. But how can I believe the finding when the chief analyst who came up with this gem goes with a name like Bob Broadfoot. Moreover, how dare he shake my faith in the Indian Administrative Service, which has had India going all these years? I also note that the report by the Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy studied only 12 countries, none of which include India's neighbours. So no need to feel too superior, comrades. You're probably much worse off with your bureaucracy. Do they even have it there?

An otherwise decidedly Urdu newspaper insists on giving the title of its "Showbiz" section in English. I wonder why.

- Chhetria Patrakar





BIKAS RAUNIA

Hindutva & the un-Hindu

by Dilip D'Souza

Hindutva advocates writing in the Indian media are always striking an oddly two-faced pose. On the one hand, they are eager to impress upon their readers that Hindutva is the "ethos" of the "mainstream", or the "majority" of Indians. On the other, there's a constant moaning about how Hindutva has been and remains completely marginalised in India.

The loudest moans, of course, are reserved for the sad state of the In-

dian press, which is apparently "controlled" by an overwhelming flood of "pseudo-secularists" and "Marxists", and so on. Yet these writers (which include stalwarts like M.V. Kamath, Arun Shourie, Varsha Bhosle, Swapan Dasgupta, Arvind Kulkarni, A.R. Kanangi, Sudheendra Kulkarni, R.K. Karanjia, Olga Tellis, Jay Dubashi, Sanjay Raut, Bal Thackeray and Nilkanth Khadilkar) overlook their own numbers.

This strange dichotomy - brave claims to being the mainstream set against whimpers about "pinkos" - does not seem strange to these friends of the Sangh Parivar. Rather, a peculiar logic persuades them that in their dreamland, you can be in the mainstream and yet be one against the swarm.

It's not true that the press is overrun by Marxists; nor is it true that it is bristling with Hindutva heroes.

What is true is that while most Indians are 'defined' as Hindus, Hindutva is not the ethos most of them subscribe to. Therein lie some lessons for the propagators of Hindutva.

Dalitbahujans

Back in British times, nearly 83 percent of Indians were classified as Hindus. That, however, does not mean that all those defined as Hindus are actually Hindus. This is where Kancha Ilaiah starts from in his book *Why I Am Not A Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Samya, Calcutta, 1996).

By most reckonings, Ilaiah, a teacher of political science at Osmania University in Hyderabad (Deccan), is a Hindu. Indeed, the Sangh Parivar includes persons like him when it speaks of "the majority" ethos that it has appropriated for itself. But as Ilaiah points out in innumerable ways in this slim volume, he is emphatically Not A Hindu.

Instead, he is a *Dalitbahujan*, broadly meaning the backward and lower castes in the country - the "people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority". To Ilaiah, Dalitbahujans are utterly distinct from Hindus. Their very culture, their religion, has nothing to do with Hinduism. In fact, writes Ilaiah, "the opposite of Hindu culture is actually Dalitbahujan culture."

Just why does he see Dalitbahujans as distinct from Hindus? And what does that mean for the pretensions of Hindutva? The answers reach the fundamental reality of India: caste. Nothing in this country - not religion, not wealth, not power, not language - defines you quite as profoundly as caste. In a very real sense, caste has no bars: it cuts across every other demarcation, as is glaringly evident in the matrimonial columns of the Sunday papers, where Sanadhya Brahmins, Agraharis and Chamars are all equally intent on finding mates from among their own kind. Nadar Christians too, cannot escape their label.

What does it matter that we have cellular phones and Channel V? In too many corners of the country, some things never change. And the most

important one is: you never lose your caste identity.

Ilaiah celebrates that identity: particularly, his Dalitbahujan identity. He fills his book with rosy - too rosy, perhaps - accounts of Dalitbahujan life: their gods, their rituals, their customs, the status of their women. Ilaiah's descriptions make the book a near-anthropological study, and, in every case, Ilaiah shows how far removed Dalitbahujan existence is from what the "mainstream" defines as "Hinduism".

Mandal and Ram

Ilaiah argues that the Hindutva movement appeared merely as a reaction against the backward class reservation movement. "Suddenly since about 1990," he says, "the word 'Hindutva' has begun to echo in our ears... as if everyone in India who is not a Muslim, a Christian or a Sikh is a Hindu." He goes on: "This totally baffles me... [T]he very sight of this saffron-tilak culture is a harrassment to us."

Some history and a little arithmetic may help here. In 1980, the Mandal Commission reported its ef-

forts to identify the so-called "Other Backward Classes" (OBC). Actual caste was only one criterion in the Commission's scheme to identify such OBCs. There were ten others, such as a school dropout rate measure, how far drinking water sources are, and so on. When these criteria were applied, says the report, "most of the well-known socially and educationally backward castes were identified as backward."

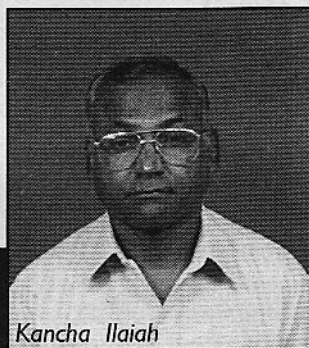
The report's vital point was that the OBCs it identified form 52 percent of India's Hindu population. And since the great majority of Indians are defined as Hindus, about 52 percent of all Indians are OBCs. Add to that the nearly 23 percent already identified as Scheduled Castes and Tribes and you have three of every four Indians in the lower castes, Ilaiah's "exploited and suppressed majority".

This is where Hindutva's very thesis of speaking for India's "mainstream" falls on its face. How can less than 25 percent of India form its "mainstream"? That explains why, in response to V.P. Singh's 1989 promise to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendations of reservations for OBCs, the Sangh Parivar diverted the caste struggle and made it into a religious one.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid and the subsequent murderous violence were outcomes of this deliberate strategy of diversion. "The more aggressive form of Hindutva [is represented]," Ilaiah writes, "in the anti-Mandal ideologies, the Ayodhya-based Rama slogan... All these are part of the anti-Dalitbahujan package."

Certainly, as a reviewer pointed out, the answer to Hindutva cannot lie in the unprincipled politics of Kanshi Ram and his Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh - people who claim to voice Dalit aspirations. But in that context, this book and the arguments it contains can be used as a basis for dialogue and understanding, rather than just a source of friction between Dalits and Hindutva ideologues. ▽

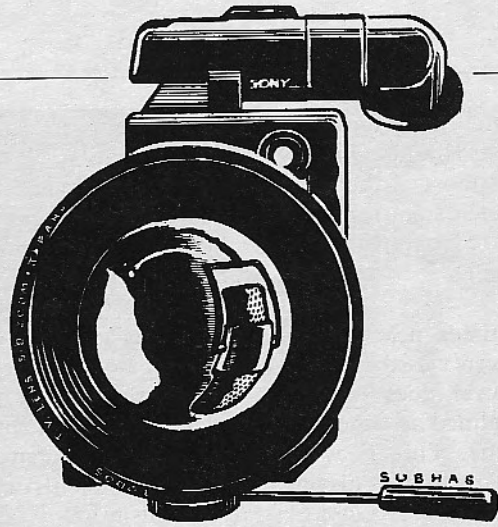
D. D'Souza is a computer scientist and writer who lives in Bombay.



Kancha Ilaiah

"The very sight of this saffron-tilak culture is a harrassment to us."

Television for conflict resolution



Afdhel Aziz proposes a television programme which may help relieve the ethnic tension in Sri Lanka.

The apathy among many Sri Lankans towards the country's ethnic conflict is obvious. Jaded by years of strife and false hopes, the public now finds the fighting an abstraction far removed from the rigours and chores of daily life. It is a subject for discussion by armchair generals, the intellectual debate having shifted to the rarefied climes of academia and power politics. The conflict has lost its relevance for the average man not directly involved in it. It is only when a tragedy strikes - such as a bomb blast at the heart of the metropolis - that he is temporarily drawn out of his shell of apathy to consider the war that has been raging in the north and east.

Rather than join in the apathy, one must look for ways in which the public can once more be engaged with the ongoing tragedy. Television, in particular, can be used to do this effectively, for it is the most potent medium because of the power of the visual image. Unlike print and radio, television requires little imagination on the part of the viewer. A lively television programme can make real the numbing aftermath of a bomb blast or the panic of a newly bereaved mother or orphan. It has the power to draw the man and woman on the street into the core of the issue.

People's show

Any media programme that hopes to address the subject of resolving the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka has to focus on ignorance and intolerance.

And while healthy dissent must be encouraged, the forum of debate should not be allowed to be turned into a party's political broadcast or used for retelling of old arguments. Neither should it turn into a platform for demagogues out to use the television power for self-aggrandisement. The programme should instead concentrate on involving the people in every aspect - from conceptualisation to all areas of production and broadcast. For, if a show is not of and by the people, how can it claim to speak to the people and for the people?

A revolutionary format for a television programme dealing with the ethnic conflict would be a live call-in show with an independent moderator. The moderator would have to be unbiased but not unemotional, neutral but not detached. It should be someone who feels strongly enough about the subject to exhibit personal feelings, but professional enough not to let his personal views obscure those of the callers. S/he would have to be fluent in both Sinhala and Tamil so that the programme could easily shift from one language to the other. Simultaneous translations would have to be provided. Such a format, which would allow interactive participation, has the chance of engaging the people's attention and helping revive a sense of tolerance in the audience.

If it is to have a sense of immediacy and grabbing power, the call-in show would have to be carried out live. At one go, this would eliminate the problems of government censor-

ship and also free the programme from the chains of sponsorship - big business does not like controversy. Ideally, the broadcast should be sponsored by civil society organisations which have no vested interest in the outcome of the war.

As the programme gains a viewership, the avenues of communication between the media and the viewers could be broadened by using the range of interactive options available: everything from mail and toll-free phonedlines, to more sophisticated media like email and a website featuring transcripts with links to resources and information on the subjects discussed on the show. The last two would also help draw the Sri Lankan expatriate community worldwide into the body of the show.

More importantly, however, the soundtrack from the programme could be broadcast on shortwave radio so as to reach the rural areas where access to television is limited. Alternatively, the format of a village meeting can be used, not unlike those used so successfully in the 1996 presidential campaign in the United States - using the virtues of video-conferencing and tele-conferencing to link communities in various parts of the country to one main centre. Today, the technology is there, in South Asia as in North America.

Seven-second delay

The relative anonymity of call-in shows allows for free expression.

While there is always the danger of racists or bigots calling in, this can be tackled with alert screening mechanisms. One simple method is to ask callers for a phone number and an address, which is then verified before they go on air. There are other methods too, such as the commonly used seven-second delay, which allows obscene callers to be automatically cut off before their words are broadcast.

Another format for a television show that may help redress the intolerance among communities is a simple multi-language educational show aimed at young Sri Lankans. Presenting them with ethnic role models who act in harmony with each

other provides positive examples of how cultures can get along in peace. Care must be taken not to use stereotypes, since that would only intensify the problem. Rather, the programme should seek to present information about the various cultural traditions and backgrounds in an open and entertaining way.

A key aspect of this show would be its multi-lingual format. For example, a piece on Sinhalese Buddhist rituals could be done in Tamil, while an exploration of the life of a Tamil schoolgirl in the eastern province could be done in Sinhala. This would avoid the ghettoisation of cultures, and help both sides recognise similarities and celebrate differences. An

essential feature of this show would have to be a Sinhala-Tamil language segment where simple words and phrases are translated.

Communication between the two communities is divided by the barrier of language - if that barrier is gradually lowered, it could be the first step towards mutual understanding and tolerance. Television, as a medium which uses both the visual image and the sound wave, is ideally suited to make a difference. If only we make the decision to use it. ▽

A. Aziz is a freelance journalist from Colombo, presently at the London School of Economics.

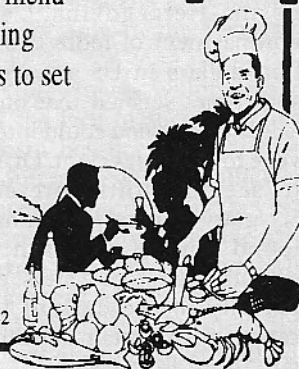
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Annan's South Asian boys

Caught between Baghdad and Washington, Secretary-General Kofi Annan leans on subcontinental shoulders.

by Farhan Haq

In recent years, the relationship between the United States and the United Nations has soured so much - the replacement of former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali at Washington's urging, disputes over Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the non-payment of more than one billion dollars in US arrears - that it sometimes seemed that only a *deus ex machina* could intervene to set things right. Or, so it seemed until present Secretary-General Kofi Annan found a novel approach to smooth the rough waters, especially in the current US campaign to contain any military threat from Iraq.

After clinching an agreement in direct negotiations with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in late February which would allow UN weapons inspections of even the most private Iraqi installations - and thereby avoiding a near-certain US attack - Annan was quickly faced with the dilemma of how to ensure that the White House would accept his deal.

Baghdad had backed down, allowing in principle the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons monitors to perform their work even in Iraqi presidential palaces, but an implicit part of the deal was that neutral UN

diplomats would ensure that such intangibles as Iraq's national dignity and sovereignty would not be violated.

Well, it seems, there is no one more neutral than the South Asians. In short order, Annan named Jayantha Dhanapala, Sri Lanka's former ambassador to the US and the newly-named Under-Secretary-General for Disar-

Non-white tokens

As both Shah and Dhanapala travelled to Baghdad in the first week of March, it remained unclear exactly what they would do if, for instance, the embattled US President Bill Clinton decided to send the 35,000-odd US troops in the Persian Gulf to fight rather than, in effect, be perceived - as one prominent Republican Senator put it - as making Kofi Annan the US Secretary of State.

Dhanapala, a US favourite from the days in 1995 when he chaired talks on the renewal of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, is to defer to the authority of UNSCOM inspectors when going into Iraqi sites and serve mainly as a pipeline for complaints if Iraq feels the weapons teams are being too intrusive.

Shah's position is even murkier. He said his role is only "to provide improved lines of communication between the government of Iraq and UN headquarters." Considering that Iraq now has UN officials who oversee

everything from its weapons programmes to oil sales and the distribution of humanitarian aid, additional communications lines seem redundant.

If the two diplomats' precise tasks



Dhanapala and (opposite) Shah.

moment, to head a team of diplomats who would accompany UNSCOM on any sensitive inspections; and then Annan named India's former UN ambassador, Prakash Shah, as his special representative to Iraq.

UN/DAI PHOTO BY EVAN SCHNEIDER

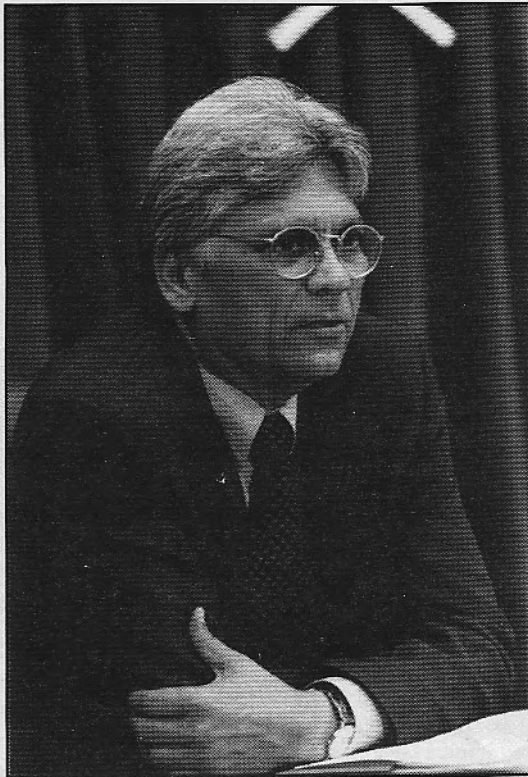
are undetermined, their symbolic significance is anything but that. As one South Asian diplomat commented cheerfully but cynically after Shah's appointment was announced, "He's a qualified diplomat, he's well-versed on disarmament and he's not white." That last qualification could go a long way in easing Iraq's suspicions that the UN is doing the work of the United States (and to a lesser extent, of Britain) in laying the groundwork for a new US attack.

Annan clearly had already irked Washington by forestalling an attack with his eleventh-hour diplomacy. Even before the secretary-general left for Baghdad, US Ambassador Bill Richardson loudly doubted that he could accomplish anything by going, and gritted his teeth when discussing any diplomatic alternative to US air strikes. Washington would not be pleased by the appointment of Shah to act as an intermediary if future tiffs between Iraq and the US threaten to escalate into military conflict. It was Shah, after all, who led India's unsuccessful effort in 1996 to garner Third World votes in the General Assembly against the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Shah's appointment as someone authorised to handle disarmament affairs also puts an envoy in Baghdad who has in recent years challenged several US-encouraged efforts to bring nuclear disarmament to South Asia. Perhaps more significantly, the CTBT tussle had pitted Shah against the treaty's most prominent backer at the UN, Australian Ambassador Richard Butler - who, as the blustering, truculent executive chairman of UNSCOM, has been loudly (if somewhat unfairly) castigated by Baghdad as Washington's man.

UN vs US

The appointment of the two South Asian envoys is also a sign of a differ-



UN/PHOTO BY EVAN SCHNEIDER

ent, related trend: the clear distaste within the UN for the way Washington has tried to bully the world body in recent years, from dumping Boutros Boutros-Ghali when he became a political liability for Clinton before the 1996 US elections (in which Republican candidate Bob Dole repeatedly earned cheers for mocking the Egyptian diplomat's name) to its most criticised failing, the nonpayment of dues for the UN's running - which now amount to some USD 1.3 billion in regular and peacekeeping costs. At the same time, the US Congress is pushing for a reduction in the UN assessment of dues, by which Washington is currently required to foot the bill for a quarter of the roughly billion-dollar UN budget every year; Clinton is seeking a lowering of the assessment to a little over 20 percent.

The problem is that Washington is finding it hard to sell the idea that its UN dues are too high when countries from Canada to Fiji have been paying up their (admittedly lower) shares faithfully. The annual cost of keeping current US dues, Pakistani Ambassador to the UN Ahmad Kamal contends, amounts to the price of one token on the New York City subway

per US citizen. In contrast, he adds, for every dollar in American dues that goes into the UN, the US takes out between five and seven dollars in salaries for American personnel at the UN, procurement contracts for US companies - and, not least, the money the UN headquarters staff spends in New York City. For Washington, says Ambassador Kamal, "the UN is a goose that lays golden eggs."

The American public seems to agree. Several polls show that more than 60 percent of US respondents approve of the UN's work, while a clear majority favoured a diplomatic solution in Iraq to a military strike. But Congress is a separate creature entirely, with some Republicans (such as Representative Helen Chenoweth of Idaho) backed by the sort of angry Americans who believe the UN sends black helicopters prowling over their mainland and plans to take over public parks. (One recent episode of the popular conspiracy-minded TV show, *The X Files*, featured a villain who spoke in front of a UN logo, saying, she "answers only to the Secretary General".)

The White House's willingness to retreat in the face of such paranoid parochialism has been a particular bone of contention with UN officials, who frequently wonder why they are treated as members of a sinister government run by aliens - particularly when, as a recent study sponsored by the Ford Foundation revealed, the vast majority of upper-level staff appointments continue to go to North Americans and Europeans.

Taming Washington

Ironically, with the Iraq stand-off, the UN has reversed the normal pattern of US-dictated solutions and put in place a negotiated settlement much more even-handed than what the Clinton administration wanted - thanks in no small part to someone whose very job at the UN owes a lot to Washington's use of its clout. Kofi Annan would not be Secretary-General today if the then US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright (now the Secretary of State) had not decided that the Ghanaian career UN staffer would be the right man to replace the increasingly

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independent Boutros Boutros-Ghali at the end of 1996.

Although Boutros-Ghali won the approval of most UN member states - including 14 of the 15 nations on the Security Council - it was the sole opposition of the United States which doomed him. African countries, unwilling to lose the top spot at the UN, eventually swung their support behind Washington's preference for Annan. Mild-mannered, educated at Minnesota's Macalester College and known for his administrative expertise, Annan seemed the ideal choice to implement the stringent cutbacks that the White House wanted the UN to undergo before it could persuade Congress to repay the arrears. Annan followed through on the reforms - although not as radically as Clinton or Congress may have wished - but has proved during 15 months in office to be anything but a pushover.

Shortly after taking office, the Ghanaian Secretary General said that his post "also has a political and diplomatic role, and above all a moral voice which should be heard periodically when necessary." In the first few months, when he weighed in against the massacres in the Democratic Republic of Congo or Algeria, Annan raised that voice without drawing objections from Washington. But when Iraq prompted a worsening standoff with UNSCOM last November and Clinton ordered the intensified deployment of US troops in the region, Annan also started speaking out more vocally for a negotiated settlement - something Albright and Richardson only grudgingly accepted after erstwhile allies from Russia and France to Egypt and Saudi Arabia opposed the military effort.

More importantly, in recent weeks, while Clinton insists that Washington now has the right to strike Iraq unilaterally if the current arms agreement is not obeyed, Annan has cautioned that "if it became necessary to use force, some sort of consultation with [Security] Council members will be required." The message to the US has been clear: Follow UN procedures if you intend to use UN rulings as a fig leaf for action. That, in turn, is a different message from the one Washington heard when US troops secured UN authorisation for the 1991 Gulf War, or when it cited UN dictates to justify its no-fly zones in the north and south of Iraq.

Whether the United Nations is becoming more assertive is one thing: it remains strapped for cash, and may well have to meet a variety of Congress-imposed benchmarks before it receives the money it is owed. But for now, the recent pattern of a United Nations dominated by the world's "indispensable nation", as Albright so arrogantly and frequently puts it, has been slightly altered - as seen by the prominence of two South Asian diplomats in the world's most heated hot spot. △

F. Haq is UN correspondent for Inter Press Service.

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V O I

Revenge bombs, are they the future of India? ask Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad in the March 1988 issue of Communalism Combat (Bombay), after the series of bomb blasts in Coimbatore.

...the ugly incidents in Coimbatore are an extremely ominous sequel to what happened in Bombay less than five years ago. In January 1993, Hindu mobs whose minds were set on fire by the Shiv Sena and Sangh Parivar conducted a pre-meditated pogrom against Muslims. This was only possible because many policemen openly behaved in a partisan manner and the "secular" Congress government in Maharashtra stood as a mute spectator. Less than two months later, a small group of Muslims determined to 'avenge' the killings and even the score, blasted bombs that killed a large number of innocent civilians.

Thanks to an alert and impartial press at that time, what happened in Bombay in 1993 is only too well known. Unfortunately, not many Indians are aware that in late November last year, Coimbatore's Muslims were subjected to a harrowing experience and police bias similar to what their co-religionists had undergone in faraway Bombay not so long ago. The time gap that separated the pogrom by Hindutva mobs and the Muslim bombs in Bombay was about 60 days. In the case of Coimbatore, 75 days separate the riots which started on November 30 and the bomb blasts on February 14th. In both cases the state was ruled by a party/parties ostensibly committed to a secular polity; in both cases the police played a shockingly partisan role. Is there a pattern here?

We reject the resort to violence as the solution to any problem and we condemn the killing of innocents, irrespective of who the murderers are and the gravity of their grievances, real or imagined. Precisely for that reason, perhaps, we can clearly read the writing on the wall. We would like to believe that our fear that India could be entering a vicious cycle - state indulgence emboldens mob

violence followed by a retaliatory bomb planned by a few inflamed minds - is misplaced. But the fact that highly experienced and widely respected police officers share our apprehension, only compounds our concern...

Ittefaq Nama, a recent column in The Friday Times of Lahore written by 'NS', most likely the paper's editor Najam Sethi. (Lalas refer to people across the border, "bum" is Pakistan's bomb programme, and Hira Mandi is Lahore's red-light district.)

God bless President Clint Eastwood and may God lift that owl's daughter wooman, Santa Monica. All woomans of bad character have got together and done President Clint Eastwood's mother-sister. Just imagine! They are accusing him of doing *badmashi* in Oral Office. Fateh Pakistan has sent letter to President Clint:

"My dearest your majesty President of America. People are saying bad things about you doing bad things in Oral Office. You are father of mature daughter. Keep doors of Oral Office open at all times. Talking persons face black. *Bolnay valay ka moonh kala*. Begum Hillaria Sahiba is zenith (*zcanat*) of your House which is White. Even if mens will be mens, they should not be so in Oral Office.

"I am amazed at your ambassador. Hasn't he told you about Hira Mandi in bloved Lhore? You should come in Hira Mandi. Then all secrets will remain. Begum Hillaria will also never know. Buoys will be buoys.

"You want me to do hello-hi with Lalas who have been enemas of Pakistan since 1947. You want me to do holiday of our Fauj and Faujis. You want me to forget Kashmir. You want me to close our *bum*. You want me to trade with Lalas. I am prepared to do what you say to save my *raj*. I stay, your plan stays. I go, your plan goes.

C

E

S

"Can you not do what I want to save your presidency? If I can do hello-hi with Lalas, you can do hello-hi with Baby, Khushboo and Sharmeeli of Hira Mandi. If I can do holiday of our Fauj and Faujis, you can do holiday of army of beautiful young interns at White House. If I can forget Kashmir, you can forget Oral Office. If I can close our *bum*, you can close yours. If I can trade with Lalas, you can trade with Khushboo and Sharmeeli (heh, heh, heh). You should be prepared to do what I say to save your presidency. You stay, I stay. You go, I go. Hain ji?

"I am writing all this because I am your lover."

O goray-goray!

O baankay chhoray!

Kabhi meri galli aaya karo.

Indian English debate, as presented by Aparna and Vinay Dharwadker in *India at 50: Bliss of Hope & Burden of Reality* (Sterling, 1997).

Surveying *Indian Writer of English Verse* in 1933, Latika Basu had concluded that "As long as the vernaculars in India are ... alive it should be the aim of Indians to develop them, for writing in a foreign tongue can serve no useful purpose," and that "English is not alive in India... That is why Anglo-Indian verse is of such poor quality." More than 25 years later, the Indian English poet, P. Lal, who established the Writers Workshop in Calcutta in 1958, attributed a very different cultural power to English in India: "The real writer in English not only thinks, but makes love in English. English is at the tips of his senses. In fact, Lal went further to suggest provocatively that "Only in English can the real Indian poetry be written; any other poetry is likely to Bengali-slanted or Gujarati-biased, and so on. Only Indian writings in English can hope to attain the 'Indian' flavour, which is a cosmopolitan flavour."

A pea-sized universe. From an editorial in *The Hindu* on Stephen Hawking's theory that the universe began from nothing bigger than the size of a pea.

There should be nothing surprising about Dr Stephen Hawking's present theory that the entire universe was no bigger than a pea before the Big Bang took it over 12 billion years ago to push it into an endless expansion. (Incidentally, his poaching into the realm of currency and finance for picking up "open inflation" for so christening it could suggest an unintended likeness between the monetary bloating of economies and the spatial spread of a still mysterious universe.) The question which continues to baffle the dense among the humans - and one could be sure that there are millions of them - is, however, about nothing having existed except the pea-sized universe before the Big Bang. Even the *nothing* as it is popularly understood needs space to exist. If, according to Dr Hawking and also the other scientists who have more or less the same perceptions, everything came out in the primordial explosion in a succession of less than nanoseconds after the Big Bang, imagination will have to be stretched almost to its breaking point to know what was happening to that pea-sized universe from which not only Space but Time as well were born with vast expanses still remaining filled with the rich nothing to give the galaxies a huge living room. Obviously the space housing all the galaxies had packed itself into Hawking's pea-sized universe which was ready to burst with the Big Bang. But how does all that answer the question what existed - if ever it could have - before the tiniest universe when there would have been no space even for nothing? It should have been another kind of "nothingness" which could do without Space and Time. It has been left to those from the disciplines like poetry, philosophy and religion to explore this other state in ways ranging from the arcane to the sublime.

Patience, patience & patience

Europeans eyeing the Indian market appreciate the potential, are exasperated by the rigmarole, but appreciate the law.

by Rakesh Mathur

Unlike other countries, where positioning of your business tends to be much smoother, doing business in India requires "patience, patience and patience", said Roger Mabey, Executive Director of Bovis International Ltd. Bovis is one of the oldest multinational players in India, and Mabey is spearheading the company's globalisation strategy. Speaking from experience, he says, "There is a great need of diplomacy when dealing with India. One can hurt feelings of Indians, which may result in a loss of face. For this, we require flexibility and commitment. In India, we need to network as well. We have to be aware of the local politics. It is also important to have a [Indian] link in the UK. During last autumn, we had more meetings with our Indian associates in London than we had in India."

Mabey was speaking at a seminar organised by *The Economist* in London recently, in which European executives got to speak of their hopes and expectations while doing business in India. It was an exclusive affair (obviously, with a registration fee of nearly GBP 600) attended by industrialists, investors, academics and Indophiles. There were several high-powered investors such as Daimler-Benz Transportation, Ciba Chemicals, Imperial Tobacco Group and Royal Mail International and the speakers were apparently selected for their experience in

dealing with India.

(*The Economist* is organising its Tenth Roundtable with the new government in New Delhi, in May 1998. For those who are interested, the registration fee for this one is USD 2500.)

Mabey had good news about India too. "We have no debts in India, we get paid in 60 days. I cannot say that for many other countries. India is the only country where we have been making profit from the day we set foot on its territory. In most other countries, it is in the second year of our business when we are able to break even."

Elephantine tiger

Dominic McCafferty (picture), a trade promoter representing the British Government's Department of Trade and Industry, emphasised the need for businessmen to understand the Indian economy's slow but steady pace. "India has the third largest pool of labour in the world. It may not be a fast tiger but a huge elephant that is going forward. It is difficult to stop him in his stride." Added McCafferty, "But one has to stick to one's policies. English is used by people but one has to be careful that the Indian partner understands what you mean."

India holds more attraction than

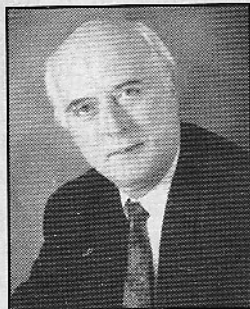


Elizabeth Regina supports business with India: the queen with British trade delegation.

any other country for Rhinhold Heus, Managing Director of the ANZ Investment Bank. "Things are slower but they can change overnight. Kentucky Fried Chicken had their licence revoked but they appealed successfully against it in the Supreme Court. This is something which one cannot imagine happening in China. In India, it is not about 'know how' but 'know who'."

The comparison between the business environments in China and India came up repeatedly during the seminar. Unlike China, India does not depend on exports, which is why it was felt the latter would be shielded from the economic crisis in East and Southeast Asia. At the same time, had the rupee been convertible, India too could have been carried away by the wave. At the risk of over-generalisation, some participants suggested that Indian businesses were a lot more "conscious" and "prudent" in their investments than the counterparts to the east.

The meeting also recognised that much had changed in the financial sector since the pre-1991 regulation era. While India uses only a small amount of foreign lending, dividends are now tax-free, rendering the capital market active; the convertibility of the rupee will be



done in three phases and the Reserve Bank of India is devolving many of its powers.

Law and policy

Arun Singh, a partner in the London-based Mason Solicitors, said that foreign investors would also do well to comprehend the changes that had overtaken the legal system. For example, he said, non-resident Indians (NRIs) can now have 100 percent equity propriety.

Said Singh, "Recent and future changes in the legal system in India are some of the most advanced in the world. For example, dispute resolutions and injunctions are more prompt than before. It is the final trial which takes a longer time in India."

Singh also discussed the culture of business: "India does not take any foreign product with open arms. One has to do proper market research. Any transaction in foreign exchange should have approval. In fact, the situation in India is similar to what existed in the mid-70s in Britain when no British citizen was allowed to take more than GBP 50 out of the country.

"There is a different business environment which needs to be identified. Concepts about punctuality, hierarchies have different connotations there. One cannot afford to be arrogant. One has to check every application for misappropriation and it is important to register a trade name."

Back to Lord Clive

The seminar also heard John Bray, Principal Research Consultant of Control Risks Group, analysing the Indian attitude towards Westerners. Bray believes that Indians have enormous admiration for Westerners despite the perception that some of them are corrupt and untrustworthy, and tend to hide the real agenda. "India's attitude towards the West is not always balanced. There is an undeserved suspicion which may be a legacy from Lord Clive's. The word 'loot' has come into the English vocabulary thanks to the work done by Lord Clive."

Bray also handed out some nuggets on Hindi business-speak. "West-erners need to learn some practical

Hindi words too: *sifarish* means 'relationship favours', *hawala* means 'unofficial economy'. This financial system works very fast and very efficiently. *Chaipani* is 'a small payment', which is given to bureaucrats for 'lubrication'. *Rishwat* encompasses every social attitude towards corruption. Many Indians still have a handout mentality and they are used to having subsidy."

However, observed Bray, "in spite of cynicism, things really work; they have a legal system which works and foreigners do win cases. Elections are held properly and one can expect proper justice in the Indian system."

Shifting focus to the whole of the region, Bray said: "India has not enjoyed the best relations with its immediate neighbours over the years, yet now there is more focus on cooperation between neighbouring states, as is illustrated by the purchase of Bhutan's hydro-electric power by India. Similarly, the American company Unocal is hatching ambitious plans to build a transnational natural pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and hopefully onto as far as Delhi, although as long as there is still dissent in Kashmir, this may prove to be impracticable."

All this apart, there's a human side to investment and development, as noted by Julian Parr, Regional Manager of The Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum. Parr was concerned about the ways in which multinational companies are operating in developing countries. He feels that the process of development not only requires market-oriented policies, but also greater economic participation, social cohesion, human development, environmental sustainability and accountability.

While all this may be true, one aspect of European exports was never discussed at the seminar (and neither has it been in so many others) - the export of arms to the Third World, including South Asia. There was absolute silence when the matter was raised during the luncheon. At that point, everyone concentrated on the food.

R. Mathur is a freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker in London.

HIMAL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

Himal has a list of aims, modestly stated, which has to contend with paranoid politicians, hidebound bureaucrats and millions of miles of barbed wire. It has on its side the virtues of readability and the absence of dogma.

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The Sunday Times Plus, Colombo

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Javed Jabbar, Karachi

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Abominably yours,



Think about it don't even. There is no way you will convince me to write a sequel to Billy Goat.

Instead, I turn this month to the Intern Explorer and how the Computer can be used to propel our Subcontinent to full Continent-hood by the year 2015. (Whyfor are we getting called "subcontinent", and responsive was who for this nomenclature? Our big land subcontinent not good enough for them, hah? We are sub-human they think?)

Have you noticed how computer names have started resembling car names? In fact when the Aptiva first came out, I thought it was a new Honda hatchback. And when Compaq unveiled its Presario line, I was sure it was a fourwheel drive to rival the Mitsubishi Pajero. Finally, when they named the latest notebooks Armada, I was convinced that Compaq and General Motors share the same Madison Avenue publicity firm.

If the names sound like cars, the ads and commercials for cars and computer accessories are also becoming indistinguishable. They both stress speed ("New Sportster Flash, at 56 Kbps, It's Twice As Fast As the Nearest Rival - Sorry Officer, I Didn't Realise My Notebook Was Going This Fast), or horsepower (Power your Millennium II, with 16MB of Rugged WRAM). It is impossible to tell apart an ad for Hyundai's Kimchi sedan from the ad for a Hyundai CRT. They both stress roominess (Hyundai DeLuxe Monitor, All the Extra Space You Need), or speed (Go 12x Faster on the Information Superhighway with Net Accelerator).

Even the terminology comes from the macho world of motoring. You can get a "zip drive" as in "Let me just zip down to the Watergate Apartments and zip up." To spellcheck you just press "auto correct", if you want your computer to go into top gear you press the "turbo" button, web browsers have search "engines", and if you are not careful about the speed limit your computers can "crash". And for those who love public transport, the Mitsubishi Apricot is sure to have a "universal serial bus".

And that's the other thing: why did computers start being named

after various fruits? What's wrong with vegetables? Macintosh would have made a lot of impact on child nutrition worldwide if instead of naming their early models Apples and Bananas, they had called them Broccoli and Zucchini. If ever there was a *deshi* design on a new range of localised PCs, I'd name mine a *Sarsaon ka Saag* (mustard spinach for you South South Asians) and this would be for the computer what the Ambassador is for cars. Ruggedly handsome, matter-of-factly slow, and a computer that can be maintained from Kanyakumari to Kashmir.

The *Sarsaon ka Saag* would be a politically correct PC. It would have a motherboard that would make your grandmother proud. It would be culturally sensitive and would offer the Vernacular Operating System (VOS) and thoroughly localised fonts.

For the VOS, the place to start would be to translate Westernised computer terminology to languages indigenous to the Subcontinent. And in this age of religious revivalism, the *Sarsaon ka Saag's* marketing slogan would stress the planned obsolescence of its internal memory: "Aya RAM, Gaya RAM". (Random Access Memory, you *buddhoo!*) And the mouse will regain its lost respectability as the vehicle for Ganesh and be referred to as the *Chuha*.

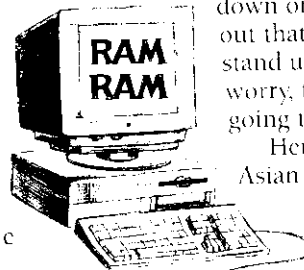
While Bill Gates obviously loves his joystick, there must be another name we can give for the one that Chandrababu Naidu wields - how about "lathi"? And when India's most-wired Chief Minister asks for the "Menu Bar" the waiter is most likely to bring him the bar menu unless we translate these basic commands. To prevent such mishaps, the menu box on VOS could be called a "*thali*". And when Mushahid Hussain, Pakistan's info-savvy information minister, wants to rearrange his internal peripherals he may need to press the "*khatam*" command.

Localisation of computer technology must start with the translation of emoticons like :-), which have now become a vital icon for intergalactic communication and a universal symbol that means "I just called your mother names, but don't worry I have a nice smiling emoticon here to prevent you from hitting me in my nose."

Without emoticons, Western Civilisation as we know it would grind to a halt because we would not have access to the innermost emotions of the person we are chatting with in the hightech and impersonal world of computers. Western emoticons have one major drawback, as far as I am concerned:

why are the little men all lying down on their sides? :-). Cut out that dumb smile and stand up! :-). No, no, don't worry, that asteroid is not going to hit the Earth.

Here are some South Asian emoticons that should immediately be incorporated into all interoffice memos of the SAARC Secretariat as a form of email shorthand, and propagated elsewhere through the SAARC Chamber of Commerce. Unfortunately, because of the Eurocentric software we all have, they have all had to lie down.



SUBHAS RAI

- +(:-) Hare Krishna devotee
- :-*D Arundhati Roy
- (:8-) Mahatma Gandhi
- (:-)= Dalai Lama
- [:-) Nawaz Sharif
- \$:--\$ Benazir Bhutto
- @<:-]:0 Khushwant Singh on top of an Ambassador
- @|:-0 Manmohan Singh chewing paan
- <:-0 Sita Ram Kesri surprised by Sonia while chewing paan
- &@:\$B:-(Railway coolie
- W The Titanic
- *O XF-11 about to hit the Earth



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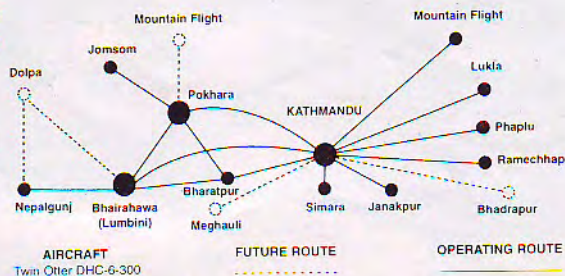
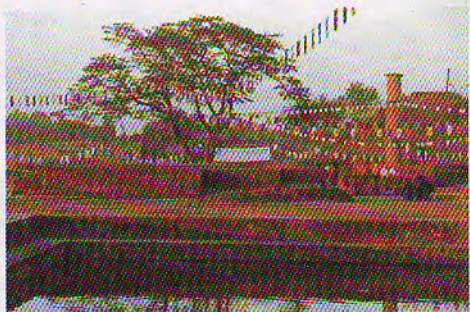
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