HIMĀL

THE SOUTH ASIAN MAGAZINE

COUNTDOWN

Insurgency of an Elite

Amitav Ghosh

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INSIDE

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Layout
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Marketing Offices

Ajoy Biswas Dhaka
Tel: +880-2-812 954, 911 5044 (fax)
office@drik.net

Media Sales Representative Karachi
Trans Indus Media (Pvt) Ltd
2nd Floor, Haroon House
Ziauddin Ahmed Road
Karachi 74200
Tel: +92-21-567 0081, 567 0085 (fax)
tim@xiber.com

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COUNTDOWN

by **Amitav Ghosh**

I came to be haunted by an image of two desperately poor protagonists, balancing upon a barren mountaintop, each with a pickaxe stuck in the other's neck, each propping the other up, waiting to bleed to death.

"Anything is possible, because our policies are irrational. Our decision-making is ad hoc. We are surrounded by disinformation. We have a historical enmity and the emotionalism of jihad against each other. And we are fatalistic nations who believe that whatever happens – a famine, a drought, an accident – it is the will of God."

The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the Subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind are, in the end, their own people.

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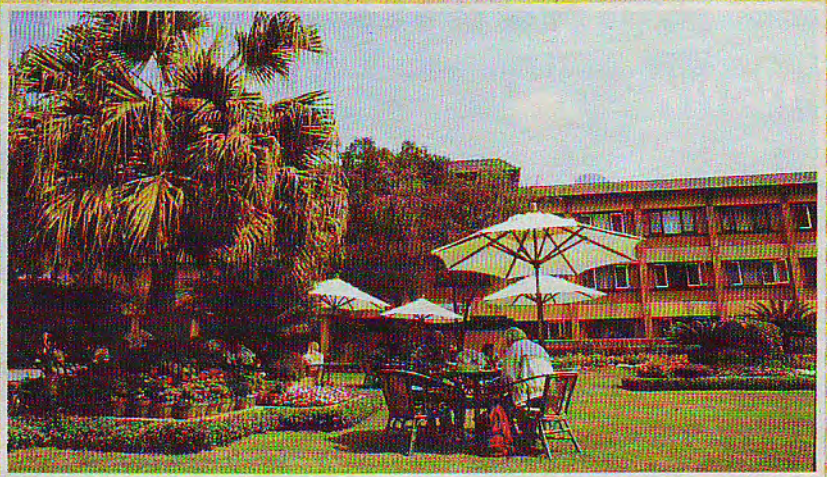

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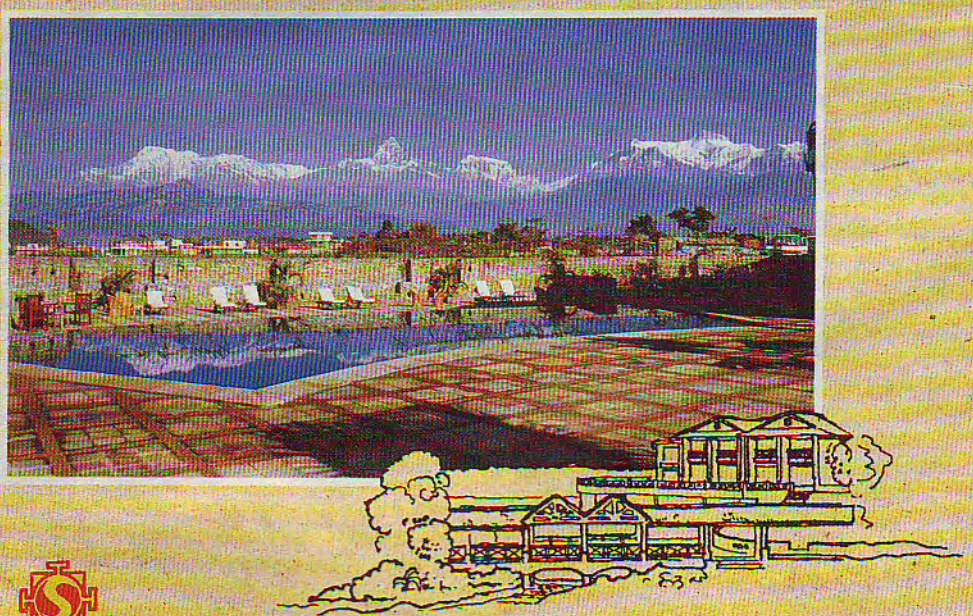

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Akhtar Hameed Khan

"Sufism and the art of urban healing" (August 1998) is a tribute to sufism and Buddhism which moulded the thoughts and actions of Akhtar Hameed Khan. Khan is an example of an ICS officer trained in the colonial era going for selfless service of humanity. He has correctly diagnosed Pakistan's two great problems: sectarianism and feudalism. This is applicable to India also, but may be not to that extent. In India, feudalism has largely died out but the feudal mindset is still there. If the people of the Subcontinent could be educated to think rationally and act rationally, they would be able to overcome the appalling poverty and march towards a life of harmony, peace and progress. More and more people like Khan should come forward for this noble cause – a cause as dear to the holy *Qur'an* as it is to the *Vedas* and the *Bible*.

S.P. Gupta, IAS (retd)
Lucknow

● It was with interest that I read the interview of Akhtar Hameed Khan in your August issue. I first met Khan at Michigan State University in 1958. My earliest memory of him is that of a tall, thin man wearing a long tunic (best described as a Bengali *kurta*) and a pair of trousers in Aligarh style made of home-spun and home-woven cotton. He was 43 then, and already legends had been woven around him.

In the interview referred to here Khan is reported to have regretted leaving Patna. I never knew he was a 'Bihari'. From my long association with him, I knew his father was a deputy superintendent of police and the family came from Meerut in Uttar Pradesh. He joined the ICS and was posted to Bengal, his first posting being in Comilla as assistant magistrate (probationer). Later he served two stations, Patuakhali and Netrokona, both in Bengal, before resigning from the service in 1943/44.

During the next half decade or so he wandered around in different places of India and tried odd trades such as working as locksmith and a cobbler, and also served a stint as a primary school teacher. But he never severed his ICS link. It was through this link that he reappeared in Comilla as the principal of Comilla Victoria College. After leaving the college he served a period as probably the first director of the Village AID (agricultural industrial development)

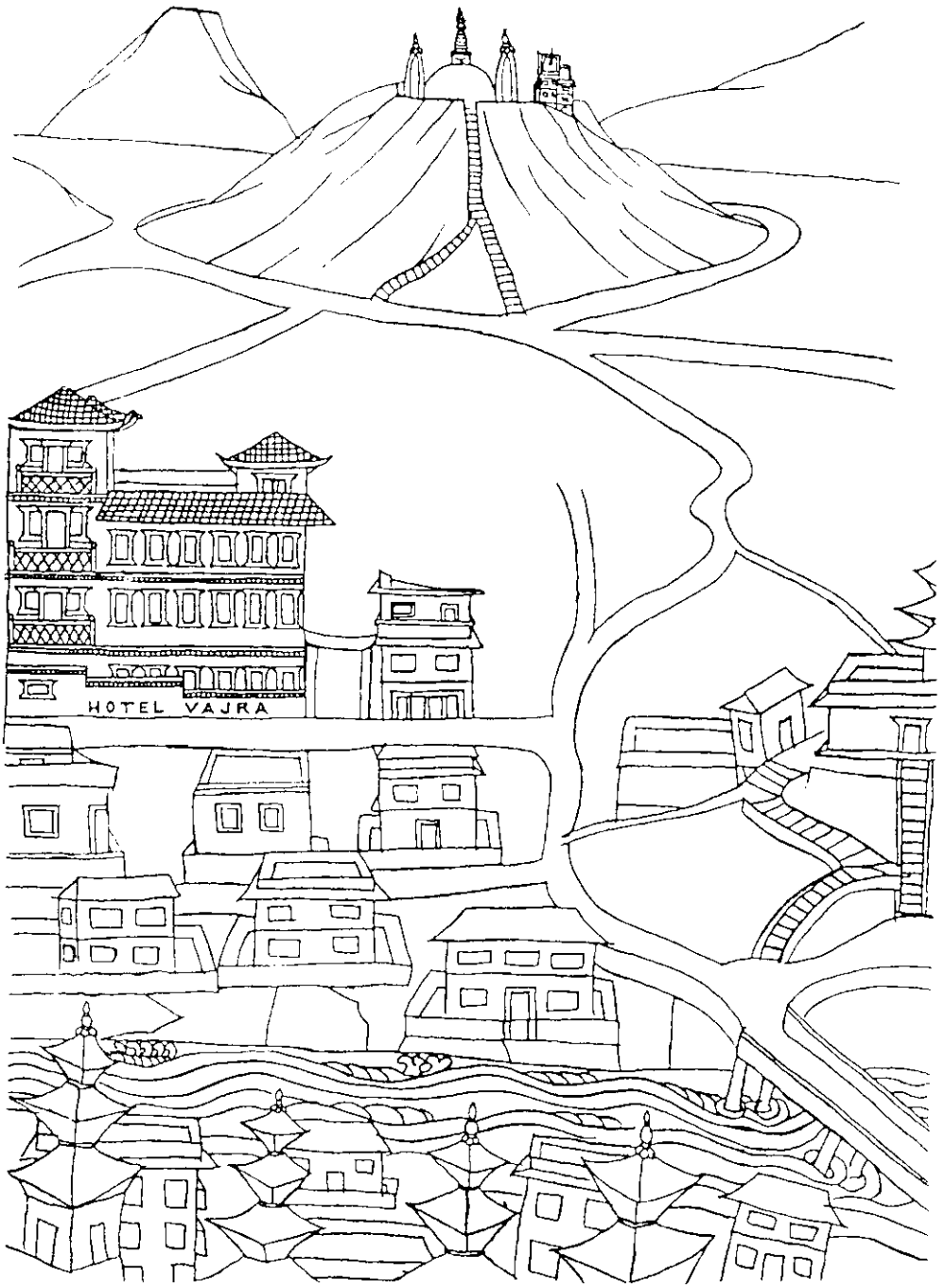
programme.

When I met him, he was the first director of the Village AID Academy for East Pakistan, for which Comilla was chosen at the initiative of Khan himself. The meeting at Michigan had been organised by the Ford Foundation to provide intellectual leisure to faculty members recruited in Pakistan and globally to develop a vision of rural development under the auspices of the public sector in East and West Pakistan.

Together with Khan was one Raja Mohammad Afzal Khan, director of the proposed Academy in West Pakistan.

Turning to what he said in the interview, I agree Comilla was not Khan's idea at all. The approach was developed on the method of knowledge development through group study and action research. What Khan has derogatorily dismissed as an "American idea" was actually the American intellectual heritage that sought development through knowledge and freedom of choice. Comilla, as was reported in its heyday, was an approach to human resource development with applications of principles of social science. It was the work of a group of devoted social scientists and applied technologists.

In Comilla, Khan played two important roles. First, through his links in the bureaucracy (in the best years of Comilla the chief secretary of East Pakistan was his ICS batch mate), he ensured a very high visibility – he received both the Magsaysay and the Sitara-e-Pakistan awards in 1963 – even as he succeeded in maintaining non-interference from the politico-bureaucracy in the development of the project strategy and



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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implementation.

Second, he was responsible for the decline of the Comilla project. Khan had little regard for cognitive or scientific research-based development. So instead of strengthening the professional faculty of Comilla Academy, Khan turned to subordinate civil servants and extension bureaucrats to provide leadership for the development of scientific agriculture and modern economic organisation in the country, in which they failed.

It is most fascinating that in the interview Khan disowned both the Comilla approach and its failure. But his legends have grown and now, at 82, he reflects on his life and admits the one regret of his life – leaving Patna, where he probably apprenticed as a locksmith.

A. Majeed Khan
President, Independent University
Dhaka

Baltistan

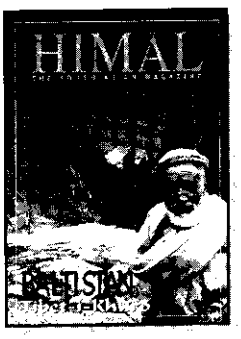
We belong to the Social Uplift Programme for the Northern Areas (SUPNA), a social welfare organisation based in Skardu, Baltistan. Commonly known as Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan's Northern Areas, this region shares borders with Afghanistan, China and India (Himal, May 1998). Its population is about 2.2 million and it covers a total area of about 27,000 sq miles.

Till the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent, the Northern Areas was ruled by the Dogras of Kashmir. After the formation of India and Pakistan, we liberated ourselves from the Dogras and formed our own government. With unanimous consent and after 21 days of self-rule, we announced a self-annexation with Pakistan.

In return for our decision to join Pakistan, we were enforced with the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), the worst kind of human abuse committed by the Pakistani government at that time.

In 1949, following a tripartite agreement among Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris, in which we were not even represented, a plebiscite was proposed. Against our will and consent, we were forcibly and illegally termed as "disputed" and our status was attached to the Kashmir issue, something we have always opposed. All of this was done only to gain a Muslim majority in the proposed plebiscite. That was 50 years ago; the plebiscite has not taken place, and we remain "disputed".

We have suffered due to this disputed status because: a) we do not have democratic rights or a democratic system; b) we cannot vote in the parliamentary elections of any country, including Pakistan's; c) we cannot take judicial matters to the proper higher courts. As a result, we face the worst violations of human and democratic rights.



Our case has been sent to the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, which, in its letter dated 14 August 1997 (no. G/SO 215/1 PAKI 917) has acknowledged the submission of our case to the Commission on Human Rights and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

In July/August 1998, the Indian and Pakistani forces resorted to armed conflict with the use of heavy artillery. The continuous bombardment in the area caused about 9000 people to migrate, of whom approximately 6000 are still living with no shelter as refugees in the lower plains. They are surviving by selling their personal belongings, including their cattle. Rather than try to address this humanitarian problem, the government of Pakistan has been using force to send the refugees back to the highly dangerous Olding area. Meanwhile, the refugees continue to live in the worst possible conditions, and face starvation and disease. Further calamity is bound to occur as winter approaches.

Malika Baltistani
Rashid Sami
Karachi
Email: sami786@cybernet.pk

Clarification

On page 45 of the September issue of Himal, in my article "Lessons from Ladakh", the impression is given that Sonam Dawa has decided to resign from his position with the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh, and wants to return to his previous job. The published text even suggests that the source of this 'fact' is Mr Dawa himself.

I would like to stress that the original text submitted to the editors clearly stated that "Sonam Dawa himself, moreover, makes no secret of the fact that he would much rather not be an Executive Councillor, and THERE IS SPECULATION that he may seize the first opportunity to return to his previous position as Director of the Ladakh Ecological Development Group." In the printed version of the article, this crucial "there is speculation" has been omitted, fundamentally altering the meaning of the sentence. I would like to place on the record that nothing said to me by Mr Dawa, on or off the record, warrants this change, and neither did my original text. Since the edited text was not shown to me prior to publication, I was unable to prevent this unfortunate error, and I apologise to Mr Dawa for any inconvenience that may have ensued.

It is regrettable that adequate editorial care was not given by Himal to the processing of my contribution, especially given the sensitive nature of some of the material included in the piece. Accuracy in reporting words and meanings is not only crucial in relationships between writers and their sources, but also between authors and their editors.

Martijn van Beek

We apologise for the editorial oversight. Editors.

Sylvan Levi (1863-1935)

Throes of a vertigo

Sylvan Lévi (1863-1935), the French indologist visited Kathmandu Valley – then capital of a truly forbidden kingdom – at turn of century, seeking long-lost Buddhist texts that may have been preserved in mountain isolation. He wrote a three-volume report and memoir, Le Népal: Etude historique d'un royaume hindou *(1905-1908), based on his trip. The unpublished manuscript of the work's flamboyant English translation will be published by Himal Books in 1999. We print here an excerpt from Levi's work, where he discusses the Subcontinent's lack of history in general, and then highlights the 'countries' of Ceylon, Cashmere and Nepal and how they differ from 'India'.*

INDIA, IN HER whole, is a world without history: she created herself, gods, doctrines, laws, sciences, arts, but she has not divulged the secret of their formation or of their metamorphosis. One must be well initiated in Indian ways to know at the expense of what patient toil, the learned men of Europe have established far distant connecting links in the obscurity of an almost impenetrable past; what strange combinations of heteroclitic date have enabled to edify a tottering chronology, even now thoroughly incomplete.

History

Civilised nations have preoccupied themselves in general, by conveying a durable remembrance to posterity; organised in community, they have directly extended to the group the instinctive sentiments of the individual. They have desired to decipher the mystery of their origin and to survive in the future. The priests, the poets, the erudites have offered themselves to this very powerful need. The Chinese have their annals, as the Greek have Herodote and the Jews their Bible. India has nothing.

The exception is so singular that it has, at the very outset, caused surprise and given rise to interpretations. One has especially alleged as a decisive argument, the transcendental indifference of the Hindu feeling penetrated by universal vanity, the Hindu surveys with superb disdain the illusive course of phenomena; to better humble the human smallness, his legends and his cosmogonies drown the years and the centuries into incommensurable periods that involve the imagination in the throes of a vertigo.

The sentiment is exact; but in India as elsewhere, the highest doctrines have had to adapt themselves to the incurable failings of humanity. The commemorative inscriptions and panegyrics carved out of stone that are strewn over India, prove that from an early date, kings and other distinguished individuals have safeguarded themselves against being forgotten. The long and pompous genealogies that frequently serve as a preliminary to royal deeds even show that the chanceries were setting up in their archives an official history of the dynasty. But the political administration of India condemned these crude materials as they were most likely to disappear and with fatal results. If contented peoples had no history, then anarchy also had none, and India had exhausted herself in perpetual anarchy. Foreign invasions and internal rivalry have never ceased to overthrow the order of things.

Levi and family pose in Nepali attire.

Sometimes, at long intervals, a genius would rise and knead in his strong hands the amorphous mass of kingdoms and principalities, and make of India an empire, but the work perished with the workman; the empire gets dislocated and self-made soldiery proceeds in the work of her dismemberment into states of lesser importance. Too large to adapt herself to a monarchy, India is wanting in natural divisions that would assure her of a stable partition; hegemony wanders haphazardly over the stretch of this vast territory and travels from the Indus to the Ganges, from the Ganges to the Deccan. Capitals spring up, shine with effulgence and go out; marts, warehouses and sea-ports of the day before, are deserted, empty and forgotten on the morrow.

From time to time a surge passes over this upheaval and gradually breaks all in its fall. Alexander enters the Punjab and the distant Ganges shakes off the yoke of its powerful rulers; the English land on the coast and the Mogal empire is shaken. India which is imagined as ordinarily absorbed in her marvellous dream and separated from the rest of the world, is in reality a vulgar prey on which rushed the cupidity of the fascinated universe. The Vedic Aryans, the Persians under Darius, then the Greeks and Scythians, and the Huns, and the Arabs, and the Afghans, and the Turks, and the Mogals, and the

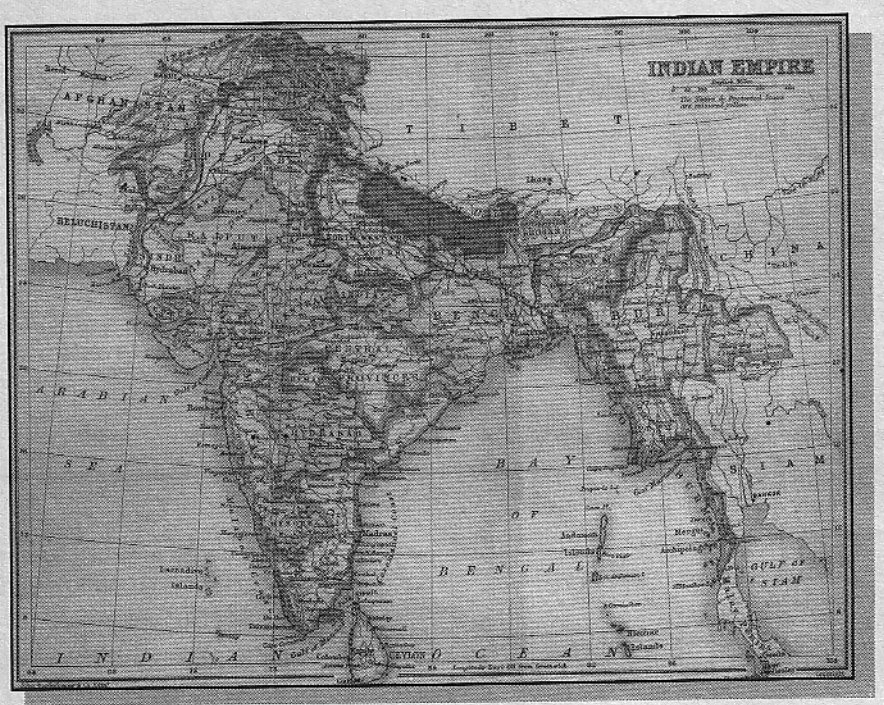
Europeans unchained in emulation; Portuguese, Dutch, French, English; the history of India is almost totally blended with the history of her conquerors.

Buddhism

If India, by the abuse of her instability, was condemned to be deprived of a political history, she could at least have acquired a religious one. Buddhism nearly gave her that one. Born from a vigorous personality which a mythical disguise could not effectively mask, propagated by a succession of patriarchs, regulated by councils, patronised by illustrious sovereigns, the Church of Buddha reminds herself of the stages of her growing greatness; having appeared and having been published in the course of time, she did not hope for a stunning eternity. She fixed her duration to a definite period and eager to lead men to salvation, she measured with sadness, centuries travelled over, and centuries still open before her.

The Buddhist priests, solitary in their convents, contemplated, without doubt, the storms of the world, alike deceiving mirages of universal nothingness; however, as members of a community and answerable for its interest, they carefully kept the register of donations and of privileges granted by the favour of kings. The church had her annals; the convent had her diary. But a sweeping tempest swept away Buddhism, the monasteries and the monks together with their literature and traditions. Left alone and face to face with invading Islam, opposed to the fanaticism of the conqueror, the resources of his indiscernible suppleness; he disdained history which contradicted his ideals and gainsaid his beliefs, he created himself heroes to suit his taste and sheltered with them in the past of legends.

Three countries only have cherished the memory of their real past; due South, Ceylon, surrounded by the sea, due North, Cashmere, and Nepal in the mountains. All three have a common character in contrast with India: nature has traced them a well-defined horizon, that the eye can compass without being able to overcome. Separated from India, they can never mingle with her, and pursue their destinies by themselves, surrounded by a fatal circle.



The Subcontinent at the time of Levi's visit.

Ceylon

Ceylon, ancient and always flourishing metropolis of Buddhism, grew proud of a continuous chronicle which covers over 2000 years; from the time that the son of Emperor Asoka came to erect the first monastery, about 250 before the Christian era, his monks have not ceased to range methodically in didactic poetry, the annals of the Singhalese Church. Their exactitude submitted to the control of Greeks and Chinese has succeeded brilliantly in the double test. But Ceylon is a little world set apart; her politics, which sometimes express the truth, separates, even today, Ceylon from the Empire, Anglo-Indian, to reconnect her immediately to the British crown. The peninsula belongs to Rama, the hero of the Brahmins; but the island, subdued by his weapons for a short time, nevertheless remains to his antagonist, the demon Ravana. The maritime routes of the East that open out like a fan around her, have poured in all the races of the world, Arabs, Persians, Malay and African negroes and white men from Europe and yellow men from China. India stretches towards her almost to touching point, but what an India! Dark India, Dravidian India, where Brahminism has always had to divide the empire with the indigenous religions, with Buddhism, with Islam, with the Christians under Saint Thomas, with the Jesuits under Madouré. Ceylon is an annexation of India, she is not a province, less even a reduced image.

Cashmere

Cashmere, which is inland, acts like a pendant to the great island. The mountains surround her but do not imprison her. Passable defiles connect her with Tibet at Kashgar, at the valleys of Pamir; accessible passes slope down to the Punjab, towards this historical threshold of India, where all the invaders have had to pitch their first battle. Ceylon is advanced sentinel at the crossways of the Indian ocean, Cashmere penetrates like an angle under the pressure of India, to the very heart of Asia. But, welded to India, she shares her destinies; conquered, like her, by the Turks of Kaniska, and the Hunds of Mihira Kula, she pursues like her, a period of splendour and of might between the VIth and the Xth

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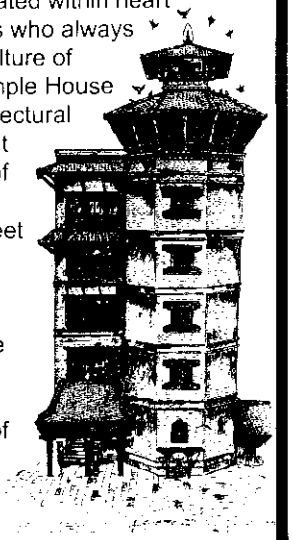

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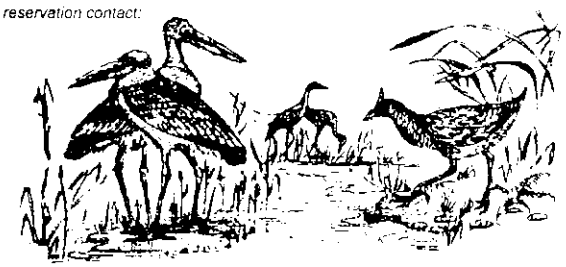

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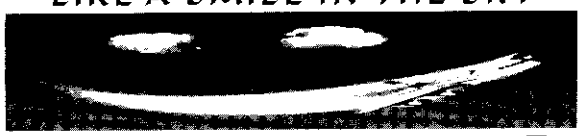

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SUMMER SCHEDULE EFFECTIVE FROM 24TH SEPTEMBER 1998

FLIGHTNO	*DAY*	*FROM*	*TO*	*DEP*	*ARR*
OS4444	Thursday	KTM	VIENNA	1200	1900
OS4446	Saturday	KTM	VIENNA	1200	1900

WINTER SCHEDULE EFFECTIVE FROM 28TH OCTOBER 1998/1999

FLIGHTNO	*DAY*	*FROM*	*TO*	*DEP*	*ARR*
OS4444	Thursday	KTM	VIENNA	1300	1900
OS4446	Saturday	KTM	VIENNA	1300	1900

century, then, exhausted by her struggles against the harbarians of the West, she succumbs to the efforts of Islam. A chronicle composed in the XIth century, alone reminds one today, of the glories of the past; but it has sufficed to make these immortal. The Sanskrit literature that the kings of Cashmere had protected and often even studied has worthily repaid their good offices; the *Raja-tarangini* of the poet Kalahana has saved their names and exploits from oblivion. Others have wished later on, to take up the threads again, and pursue the work of Kalahana; but the interest of the subject had vanished. Cashmere has escaped the Hindu genius and was no more but an obscure annexation of Mohameddan India.

Nepal

Nepal had a history, alike Cashmere and Ceylon, her history is a very modest one. Entrenched between her glaciers and her impenetrable forests, isolated like an undefined dominion between Hindustan and Tibet, she has never known the refined civilisation of Cashmerean courts, or the opulent activity of the great Buddhistic island. Her annals do not remind one either of *Mahavamsa pali*, or of the Sanskrit *Raja-tarangini*; their very shape betray their contrast; they consist in dynastic lists (Vamsavalis) combined with the lists of endowments and royal donations; the compilers who have gathered and founded them have not attempted to raise them above to the dignity of a literary work. The usual language sufficed them, they had chosen to speak in the half-Tibetian of the Newars or the Aryan dialect of Hinduised Nepalese. Their narratives, poor and usually meagre, dwell, with complaisance, only on miracles and prodigies. It only swells into details at the mythical period and at the modern period. The strength of recent souvenirs only is able to withstand the dazzling brilliancy of a legendary past. Heroes and gods cradled by popular belief move from century to century, always truer and more real, proportionate, as each generation gives it, its soul and its faith. One sees them, one feels them everywhere present; man is the blind instrument of their wills and caprices.

The revolution of 1768 which gave Nepal to the Ghurkhas is only, to the chroniclers, but the sequel of a treaty first arranged in heaven. History propagated in this way is reduced to a pious epic, mounted on an apparatus of suspicious chronology. Science, happily has at its disposal other ways to control and complete the tradition. The epigraphy already substantial and which dates back from the Vth century; the ancient manuscripts, numerous in Nepal where the climate has better preserved them than in India; the literature of local origin; the narrations of pilgrims and of Chinese envoys, the informations taken from history and from the Indian literature, in short the enquiries gathered by European travellers, since the XVIIth century. All these documents of various ages, origins, languages, sentiments, once compared, criticised and coordinated, make up a harmonious setting where the attention can easily encompass the destinies of an Asiatic tribe, subdued by contact with India during a period of duration of at least 20 centuries.

BANGLADESH

POOREST POOR

It took the worst floods of the century to bring Bangladesh back into the spotlight of the international media. The sight of so much water just couldn't be ignored, even by a world weary of a long list of woes. Fortunately, the flooding this year wasn't followed by something worse, as had happened the last time around in 1988, when an assortment of Western agencies came up with a Flood Action Plan (FAP) and which required a Supreme Court decision to suspend its implementation.

Presumably, thanks are partly due to Bill Clinton's adulterous adventures, which prevented fertile Western minds from paying too much attention to Bangladesh. That, however, did not spare one of Bill Clinton's closer friends, Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank, from undergoing severe scrutiny. Yunus went on international media to say that the entire micro-credit system is under pressure. And it is.

Micro-credit is great but it is not without problems, a fact that should have been noted by the many laudatory reports that have come out on the subject. Now that these problems are surfacing, there is a danger the opposite may happen: people could get hyper-critical. One can only hope that those served by the micro-credit sector will not suffer too much.

In Bangladesh, the poor are so many that there is yet another category below "poor" – the poorest of the poor. These, as it was recently revealed, are the 25 percent of the population who live outside any social service net. Twenty-five percent of 120 million means 30 million people, and the sheer numbers have suddenly made most development success stories appear colourless and false. Neither the government nor the NGOs reaches the doors of these millions with anything but a few grains of wheat. So wretched are they that the glorified micro-credit institutions of Bangladesh, be it the Grameen Bank or BRAC (the world's largest NGO), will not touch them.

These outfits basically deal with those who can pay back loans and the poorest of the poor can't. However cliched it may sound, this policy is plain economic discrimination. So when someone says that micro-credit reaches the poor, remember s/he also means that, in the case of Bangladesh, it doesn't reach the poorest or a quarter of the total population.

These people have a name, of course, "Vulnerable Groups", probably dreamt up by some highly paid experts who are specialists in this sort of thing. There is an almost permanent support programme in operation called the "VGDP", which translates into "Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme", the modern version of the old *langarkhana* (soup kitchens). It involves food-for-work activities, which are really just an organised way to prevent mass starvation.

Against this backdrop, political activities take on a new meaning. When a decent election campaign costs an individual more than the cumulative total of 500 years of the per capita income of an average Bangladeshi (USD 250 per year against USD 125,000), one begins to get an idea of the level of absurdity that politics has reached in this country. Since elections are held regularly and aspirants are counted by the hundred one can only guess what kind of money is in some people's hands.

More relevant to the problem is the continuity that is sought of a system in which the number of the poorest of the poor increases along with the number of the richest of the rich. The major donors are soundly behind such a path. And in Bangladesh, donors not only call the tune but also hire the piper, lend the pipe and decide where it is played. They do allow the local leaders to line up and clap and collect the coins from the dust – which, it appears, is all that the latter want.

It is no secret that during the last two decades a legion of experts, local and international, have made a decent living analysing Bangladesh's problems and offering solutions. It is something like the World Bank-IMF act. First the WB funds a project and creates a growth pool in a particular sector. A number of people benefit a lot from it and defend their policies in the administration while siphoning off millions. Everyone looks the other way while the social, political and criminal laws of the country are transgressed.

ABIR ABDULLAH/DRIK

Then the inevitable sneaks up and everything crashes. All the problems which never found mention in the WB reports emerge and turmoil follows. Finally comes the IMF bail-out package and more debt, more wealth and more poverty. The cycle of "semi-developmentalism" goes on, as we have seen in Southeast Asia.

But this has not led to any sense of emergency in the political marquee. When one confronts the facts of absolute poverty rising almost every year and sees no plan to stem the tide, one fears that the objective of politicians is to preside: it doesn't matter whether it is over construction or destruction.

Alternatives to traditional politics used to be considered earlier but this is now forbidden in this age of foreign-funded democratic regimes. Both the European Union and USAID charities support numerous efforts to teach everyone, from parliamentarians to grassroots leaders, how they should behave in a West-endorsed democratic society. Huge armies of election observers descend to look at how voting is done and it is upto them to decide and declare if the people conducted themselves properly. Even public participation in decision-making issues relating to state management are now development-agency driven activities and not public matters.

Does it therefore matter if the winter of 1998 will be a long hot one with the agitational fires stoked by the rage of Khaleda Zia and her BNP supporters as she tries to oust Sheikh Hasina, the incumbent prime minister leading the Awami League, which is hell bent on preventing precisely that?

It's a game which will probably escape the minds of the 30 million people, the millions who barely get to eat and who are almost equal in number to the voters in this land.

NEPAL

POWER WITHOUT AUTHORITY

Beyond finding answers to who exercises power and how, what makes the political analysis of developing countries interesting is the attempt to understand how those in power increase their capacity to bring about change, how they respond to the demands of change, and how they cope with the social conflicts that inevitably emerge from societal change.

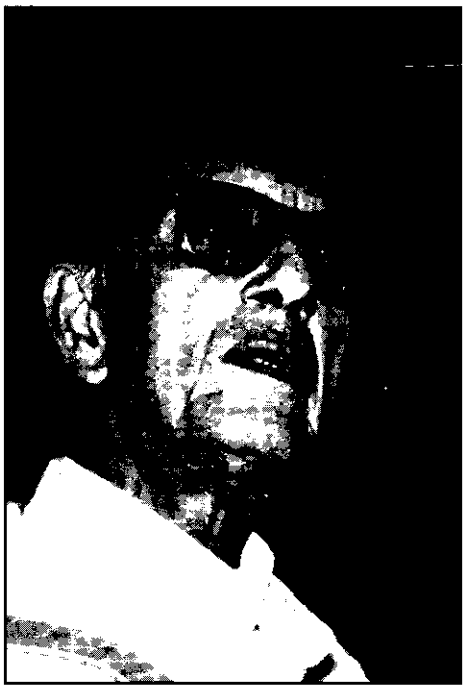
The present House of Representatives, the second after the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, has seen practically every political permutation and combination in government formation. The ruling combination – some legal experts refute the claim that it's a coalition of the Nepali Congress and a breakaway faction of Communist Party of Nepal sporting the suffix of 'M-L' – enjoys the silent support of a splinter group of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party and together commands a comfortable majority in the House. Theoretically, therefore, the government does not lack the power to introduce change.

However, despite this unquestioned legitimacy to rule, the government has been floundering in a swamp of indecision. It was browbeaten by the business community when its proposal to implement a Value Added Tax was diluted into a parody. Even the one success that the government had been gloating about, police actions against the Maoists under the widely-known code 'Kilo Sierra Two', seems to have come unstuck as the latter struck back with their "Base Area Preparation Operation" in late October, catching the government unawares. Everybody knows there is a government in the country but nobody is ready to accept that it works.

A government not seen to be working is seldom obeyed. A secretary to the government publicly challenges his departmental minister and gets away with it. Adulterators of mustard oil, when caught in the act, demand their spurious product back and get it. Glorified clerks in the donor agencies, not content with dictating terms, start meddling in the day-to-day administration of projects. Friendly countries deliberately delay, and sometimes even refuse, to send routine *agreemos* for publicly-announced ambassadorial nominees.

The government's record in handling social conflicts is no less grim. The Maoist uprising, which has affected a third of the country's districts, is believed to be more of a social unrest than a political movement. However, the government has failed to address any of the underlying social causes of the violent reactions in various areas. Advocates of *ancien regime* openly fan casteist and communal fires by harking back to the hoary traditions of Hindu society, but the government is unable to present coherently an alternative that is as glorious but a lot less unjust.

The Nepal Sadbhavana Party (NSP), a political outfit that claims to champion the rights of the *madhise* (non-hill people of the Tarai), had started disintegrating when their leaders were seen to be interested only in political musical chairs. Now, thanks to the insensitive approach of the government in Kathmandu, NSP



CHANDRASHEKHAR KARKI

Girija Prasad Koirala

leaders have hardened their stance on issues such as citizenship, language and reservations in government service, and their stock is once again up among the voters.

All of these disgruntled elements routinely take pot-shots at the Constitution, while the government watches helplessly. If power is defined conventionally as the rights possessed or given by the electorate, the national government has all the power it needs. Sadly, it lacks the authority, which is the power to give orders and have others obey. Part of this situation can be explained by the paradox of politics: governments that face the most formidable tasks are generally the ones with the least capability. A more convincing explanation can perhaps be found in the nature of power itself. Unlike despotic regimes, democratic governments cannot rely on authority that is solely coercive – much of it has to be moral.

In the first-past-the-post elections to the parliament and winner-takes-all form of government formation, the chances of a government truly representing the majority are extremely unlikely. In such a situation, the leaders acquire paramount importance. Their conduct has to be beyond suspicion and inspire confidence. Until and unless the government lasts long enough to establish a record of sincere performance, it is the moral authority of the leader that is the source of the government's authority. At the most charitable, Nepali Congress President and Prime Minister of Nepal, Girija Prasad Koirala, has been found wanting in inspiring confidence. Little wonder that he continues to use the fear of impending elections to keep his flock together. He has little else at his disposal.

The power that flows from the barrel of the gun is definite, but dangerous. The power emerging from the ballot box is wholesome, but not definite. Only the moral authority of visionary leaders can shape traditions and institutions to offer the best of both. No such figure appears on Nepal's political horizon for the next elections – due in November 1999, but which may take place earlier.

Hope has to be pinned instead on the possibility of a clear single-party majority emerging so that even some perfectly ordinary people can do extraordinary things by working together under one ideology. Until then, there is little else to do other than take solace in the fact that power without authority may be inconvenient; but the other extreme, authority without power, is truly insufferable.

-C.K. Lal

PAKISTAN

CA-15 AND PUPPETS

Entertainers, intellectuals and liberals in Pakistan are being squeezed. They were already a threatened species, thanks to the policies of successive governments which have resulted in the rise of the religious right. But the ill-conceived and ill-timed introduction by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the 15th Constitutional Amendment (CA 15) has triggered off fears that such people may actually become extinct – a worst-case scenario that is not as unlikely as it once seemed. After all, neighbouring Afghanistan too once harboured educated, liberal thinking individuals. Those who are left there now dare not reveal their true colours, others have fled the country or been killed.

Opposition to the amendment has been projected by the government and the country's right-wing forces as heresy. Religious zealots have gone as far as to urge their supporters to kill those who oppose it. One of them has even asked his followers to launch a crusade against journalists, whom he describes as *kafir* (infidels). "They are ridiculing the enforcement of Shariah. Kill them wherever you see them," he told a Peshawar congregation in October.

But the atmosphere of repression and fear has done nothing to curb cultural expression, at least not yet. It seems that the more repression there is, the more people clutch at this straw. The rock band Junoon has never been as popular as it is now, after being 'banned' by the government for its allegedly anti-Pakistan statements during a tour of India this summer *(see page 37)*. Classical dancer Naheed Siddiqui, recognised as one of the world's leading Kathak exponents, back in Lahore from her base in Birmingham, says she has never encountered as much interest in dance as there is now, when it seems that dance will again become as taboo as it was in Zia-ul Haq's time, or even more so. The privately organised Mu-

sic Conference in Lahore, an annual event held in the last week of October, drew record audiences. On the last night, there was not even standing room in the 3000-seat open air theatre and the performance went on well past 3.00 am. Record numbers of people and performers attended the Fourth International Puppet Festival (theme: Peace). As many as 38 troupes from 27 countries, including India, showed up and 150,000 tickets were sold.

Such festivals – dance, drama and music – take place against all odds. Most have to be privately organised, given the lack of government support and funding. In fact, events are actively hindered by officials uncertain about what the cultural policy is. Over the years cultural events have taken place under a lengthening shadow of religious militancy, bigotry and threats of violence.

The Puppet Festival has become a leading international biennial event since it was introduced by the Peerzada family in 1992. Arrangements for it were jolted by Sharif's announcement in August that his government would "make the holy *Qur'an* and Sunnah (Islamic traditions) the supreme law of Pakistan". At that time, the festival organisers were putting the final touches on the Fourth Puppet Festival. (Work on each festival starts two years before the event).

For the first time, the Peerzadas, who have been through three puppet and two dance and drama festivals since 1992, had to work at convincing participants to come, besides doubling security at the festival premises. Delegates from the USA and Sweden dropped out at the last minute, and the Pakistani government refused visas to 19 puppeteers from Iran, on the grounds that their security could not be guaranteed. Foreign delegates arrived apprehensively, their heads full of news reports about violence in Pakistan and warnings from their foreign offices.

And for the first time, a performance had to be taken off the programme, after audiences walked out of the first showing by a Kerala-based group presenting a folk technique in heavily accented English interspersed with Malayalam songs. Although some of those walking out complained that it was "boring", the guards reported that a couple of men had objected to the temple-based theme of the play (the slaying of Mahishasura) and threatened to set the tent on fire if the play was repeated. Unwilling to take the risk, the organisers reluctantly pulled it out, with profuse apologies to their guests – who were understandably upset but not disheartened. They have promised to return again when things improve.

Despite this, most performers – including a Delhi-based Indian group which gave eight performances of its play on AIDS – encountered friendliness, openness and hospitality. The festival's carnival atmosphere attracted a huge audience, with thousands of men, women and children crowding the ticket booths for the 20 performances that took place daily for 10 days, costing PKR 30 (a little over 50 US cents) per person.

Given the volatile socio-political situation in the region, the frequent law-and-order problems in Pakistan and finally, Sharif's announcement of CA-15, the very fact that such a festival even took place is amazing. Pluralism and cultural activity must be allowed to flourish in Pakistan.

As the wise know, culture is the antithesis of anarchy, and that is clearly what Pakistan faces – unless the Sharif government does an immediate about-turn, and begins focussing on the economic mandate it was voted into office for. Such a change would save the country more surely than playing into the hands of religious extremists, who can never come to power except through the back door.

INDIA

TEXTBOOK STRATEGY

Each time there is an election on the horizon, the Indian political parties play out a great game. In the last few years this game has been enacted along the following lines: the BJP attempts to push through an agenda it knows will be termed foul, sectarian and anti-minority by the 'secular' parties. Sometimes it succeeds, but when it doesn't, it uses that opportunity to point out that 'anti-communal' has now come to mean 'anti-Hindu'.

With assembly elections due in four states, one could have ignored the farce this time around had it not, regrettably, been about education. The distressing irony is that the real farce being played out in the country is in primary education. To talk about "spiritualising, nationalising and Indianising" education, without providing teachers, blackboards, books or class rooms, is rather like debating the contents of a cookery book for the really poor. It is so vile that one recoils in horror to think what the BJP will think of next.

Manohar Joshi, the human resource development minister and RSS voice, was arrang-

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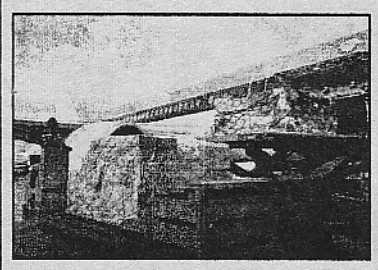

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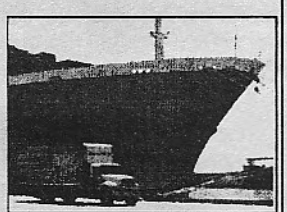

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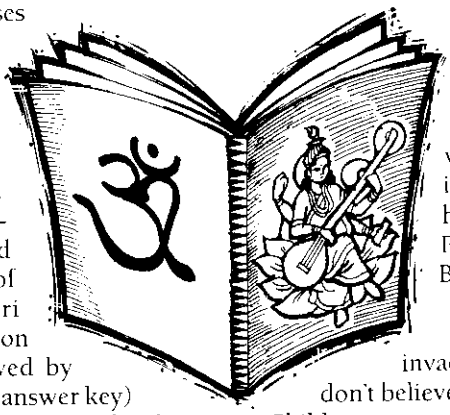
ing an education ministers conference when he came up with the idea that there should be in the discussion papers a note – the origins of which can be traced back to Vidya Bharati (the education wing of the RSS) – which delineates exactly how the Indian education system should be changed. Its recommendations included compulsory Sanskrit in schools.

To further spice up the meeting, Joshi decided that he would begin it with Saraswati Vandana (in praise of the Hindu goddess of learning). The expected happened. It was like a scene from parliament; walkouts and protests, including by those from the Akali Dal and the Telugu Desam (both BJP allies), forced Joshi to withdraw his agenda, while the prime minister apologetically explained that his esteemed colleague should not be misunderstood, and that his minister had no plans of pushing through a sectarian agenda.

That is where the prime minister went wrong. Joshi did plan to do exactly that. Vidya Bharati, the provider of the ideology for the discussion papers, uses in its schools, textbooks in which the map of India includes Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Tibet. This it calls "Punyabhoomi Bharat". These books contain questions like "Name an island which touches the feet of India?" The answer? Sri Lanka. There is a section on the Babri Masjid followed by questions (and a detailed answer key) like "Who was the first Muslim to plunder Ramjanambhoomi shrine, how many times, who built this temple and why is it not a Masjid?" Or better still, "Why is 2 November the blackest day in the history of the country?" to which the answer is "That day *kar sevaks* were attacked in Ayodhya". This is what is being taught to 10-year-olds.



SUBHAS RAI

Indian school curricula were created at a time when socialist intellectuals wanted to create the building blocks for a pragmatic society that drew its inspiration from the utopian socialists. Even colleges use texts that still retain the "original socialist flavour", capitalism for instance is taught from a book written by Maurice Dobb (a pragmatic socialist).

The BJP's argument is that the existing system is "rootless" and that it attempts to create an identity that goes against the natural grain of the spiritual Indian. They start with the assumption that the Indian is naturally spiritual, and therefore Indian-ness, and by extension nationalism, has to be taught through spirituality. This inevitably ties in with the concept of a unified identity under the Hindu umbrella. They would do better to leave the question of identity and spirituality to the social environment in which the child is reared. In other words, let the parent decide where to "root" early attempts at planting identity.

The solution lies in empowering the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) to bring together from each state historians, teachers, writers, and teacher-trainers to review texts and make recommendations. The NCERT must be revitalised and its workings made completely autonomous. Its recommendations must then be taken seriously and its state-level committees must clear standard texts for all government schools. Private schools that follow the All India Board (and therefore uses NCERT textbooks) should be made to fund this project.

It is not difficult to convince a 10-year old that there is an unbroken continuity in the spirit of India, which stems from its remarkably pure Hindu past and, which was preserved by valiant individuals and childhood heroes like Shivaji, Rana Pratap, Ahilya Bai and Laxmi Bai. It is easy to follow that argument to its logical conclusion and single out the invaders and marauders. If they don't believe you, show them the book. Children want to believe the written word; it is purer than anything they touch. The word is the easiest thing to exploit. The RSS know that well: they have been in the education business for a long time. They also know how important it is for teachers to be trained. The students' attention span, their interest, and their desire to stay on at school depend on the abilities of their teachers. Imbue the teacher with the correct message and it is sure to permeate down to the classroom. There is a lot at stake, and the only people who seem to realise this are the ones who believe that students will be more Indian once their history books confirm which ones among them are the really pure ones.

Now that the Saraswati Vandana has been 'desecrated', the BJP has something to go to the polls with. When the elections are over, predictably this fracas will die down. But the issues that have been raised merit serious attention.

-Shantanu Nagpal

COUNTDOWN

The bomb cult represents the uprising of those who find themselves being pushed back from the table. It's the rebellion of the rebelled against, an insurgency of an elite.

by Amitav Ghosh

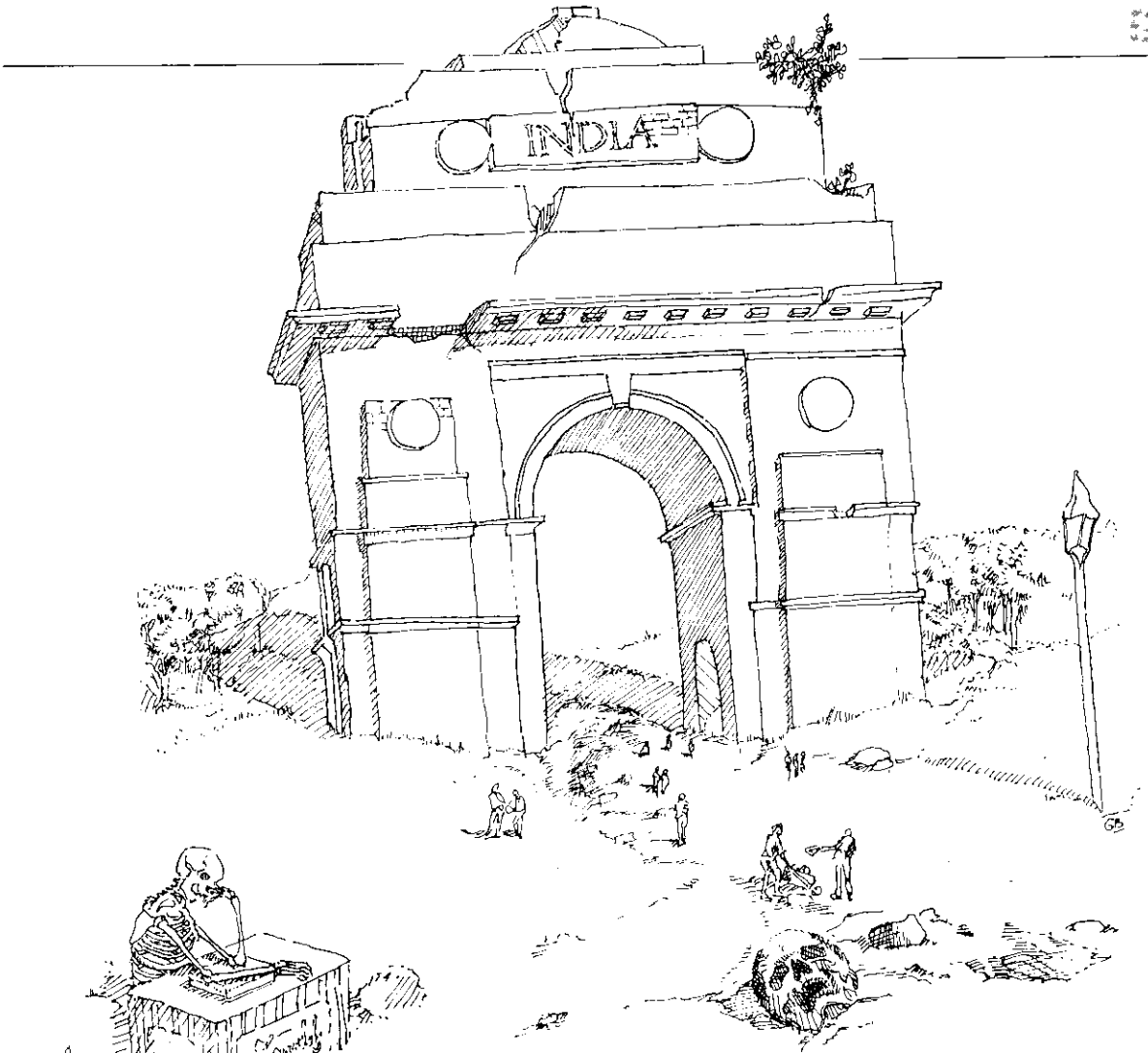
On 11 May, the Indian government tested several nuclear devices at a site near the small medieval town of Pokharan, on the edge of the Thar Desert. My visit coincided with the 51st anniversary of Independence, the start of India's second half century as a free nation. As I was heading towards Pokharan, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, was addressing the nation from the ramparts of Delhi's Red Fort – an Independence Day tradition. Driving through the desert, I listened to him on the car radio.

Vajpayee's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, came to power at the head of a coalition in March, and the Pokharan tests followed two months later. The tests occasioned outpourings of joy among the BJP's members and sympathisers. They organised festivities and handed out sweetmeats on the streets to commemorate the achievement. There was talk of sending sand from the test site around the country so that the whole nation could partake of the glow from the blasts. Some of the BJP's leaders were said to be thinking of building a monument at Pokharan, a "shrine of strength" that could be visited by pilgrims. Nine days after the tests, the prime minister flew to Pokharan himself. A celebration was organised near the crater left by the blasts. The prime minister was photographed standing on the crater's rim, looking reverentially into the pit.

But now, three months later, speaking at Red Fort, the prime minister's voice sounded oddly subdued. The euphoria had faded. On 29 May, Pakistan had tested its own nuclear devices. This had had a sobering effect. In the following weeks, the rupee fell to a historic low, the stock-market index fell, prices soared. The BJP's grasp on power was now none too secure.

I was travelling to Pokharan with two men whom I'd met that morning. They were landowning farmers who had relatives in the town. A friend had assigned them the task of showing me around. One man was in his sixties, with hennaed hair and a bushy moustache. The other was his son-in-law, a soft-spoken, burly man in his early forties. Their Hindi had the distinctive lilt of western Rajasthan.

It was searingly hot, and the desert wind chafed like sandpaper against our eyes. The



GAUTAM BHATIA

road was a long, shimmering line. There were peafowl in the thorny trees, and the birds took wing as the car shot past, their great tails iridescent in the sunlight. Otherwise, there was nothing but scrub to interrupt the view of the horizon. In the dialect of the region, my guides told me, this area was known as "the flatland".

In Pokharan, my guides were welcomed by their acquaintances. A town official said he knew exactly the man I ought to meet. This man was sent for. His name was Manohar Joshi, and he was 36, bespectacled, with a ready smile. He'd grown up in Pokharan, he told me. He was 12 in 1974, when a nuclear device was first tested in the district. The prime minister then was Indira Gandhi.

"In the years after 1974, there was a lot of illness," Joshi said. "We had never heard of cancer before. But after the test people began to get cancer. There were strange skin diseases. Sores. And people used to scratch themselves all the time. If these things had happened anywhere else in the country, in Bihar or Kashmir, people would rise up and stop it. But people here don't protest. They'll put up with anything."

Growing up in Pokharan, Joshi had developed a strong interest in nuclear matters. His family hadn't had the resources to send him to college. After high school, he'd started to work in a shop. But all the while he'd wanted to write. He'd begun to send opinion pieces to Hindi newspapers. One of them had taken him on as a stringer.

On the afternoon of 11 May, he was preparing for his siesta when the ground began to shake, almost throwing him off his cot. He knew at once that this was no earthquake. It was a more powerful jolt than that of 1974. He recognised it for what it was and called his paper immediately. This, Joshi said proudly, made him the first journalist in the world to learn of the tests.

KHETOLAI

Joshi told me about a village called Khetolai. It was just six miles from the test site, the nearest human habitation. The effects of the 1974 tests had been felt more severely there,

he said, than anywhere else in the district.

We drove off into the scrub, along a dirt road. The village was small, but there were no huts or shanties: the houses were sturdily built, of stone and mortar.

Khetolai was an unusual village, Joshi explained. Its inhabitants were reasonably prosperous – they made their living mainly from the tending of livestock – and almost everyone was literate, women as well as men. Many were Bishnois, members of the small religious sect whose founder had forbidden the felling of trees and the killing of animals. They thought of themselves as the world's first conservationists.

We stopped to look at a couple of buildings whose walls had been split by the tests, and we were immediately surrounded by eager schoolchildren. They led us into a house where three turbaned elders were sitting on charpoys, talking.

On 11 May, at about noon, they told me, a squad of soldiers drove up and asked the villagers to move to open ground. People who owned refrigerators and television sets carried them out-of-doors and set them down in the sand. Then they sat under trees and waited. It was very hot. The temperature was over 120 degrees Fahrenheit (c. 50 degree Celsius).

Some three and a half hours later, there was a tremendous shaking in the ground and a booming noise. They saw a great cloud of dust and black and white smoke shooting skyward in the distance. Cracks opened up in the walls of the houses. Some had underground water tanks for livestock. The blasts split the tanks, emptying them of water.

Later, the villagers said, an official came around and offered them small sums of money as compensation. The underground tanks had been very expensive. The villagers refused to accept the money and demanded more.

Party activists appeared and erected a colourful marquee. There was talk that the BJP would hold celebrations in Khetolai. By this time, the villagers were enraged, and the marquee was removed, for fear that the media would hear of the villagers' complaints.

"After the test," a young man said, "the prime minister announced that he'd been to Pokharan and that there was no radioactivity. But how long was he here? Radioactivity doesn't work in minutes." Since 1974, he said, some 20 children had been born with deformed limbs. Cows had developed tumours in their udders. According to the young man, calves were born blind, or with their tongues and eyes attached to the wrong parts of their faces. No one had heard of such things before.

The young man held a clerical job for the government. He was articulate, and the elders handed him the burden of the conversation. In the past, he said, the villagers had cooperated with the government. They hadn't complained and they'd been careful when talking to the press. "But now we are fed up. What benefits do we get from these tests? We don't even have a hospital."

Someone brought a tray of water glasses. The young man saw me hesitate and began to laugh. "Outsiders won't drink our water," he said. "Even the people who come to tell us that everything is safe won't touch our water."

My guides were subdued on the drive back. Even though they lived in the neighbouring district, it had been years since they were last in Pokharan. What we'd seen had come as a complete surprise to them.

Bikaner

I spent the rest of the day in the town of Bikaner, about a hundred miles away. That evening, I walked around its royal palace. It was vast, empty, and beautiful, like a melancholy fantasy. Its palace was of a stupefying lavishness. It was built around the turn of the century by Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh of Bikaner – a luminary who had cut a very splendid figure in the British Raj. He had entertained viceroys and sent troops to Flanders. He was a signatory of the Treaty of Versailles. There were photographs in the corridors showing Maharaja Ganga Singh in the company of Winston Churchill, Woodrow Wilson, and Lloyd George.

In New Delhi, many people had talked to me about how nuclear weapons would help India achieve "great power status". I'd been surprised by the depth of emotion that was invested in that curiously archaic phrase "great power". What exactly would it mean, I'd asked myself, if India achieved "great power status"? What were the images that were evoked by this tag?

Now, walking through this echoing old palace, looking at the pictures in the corridors, it occurred to me that this was what the nuclearists wanted: treaties, photographs of themselves with the world's powerful, portraits on their walls. They had pinned on the bomb their hopes of bringing it all back.

SUBRAHMANYAM

The leading advocate of India's nuclear policies is K. Subrahmanyam, a large, forceful man, who is the retired director of the Insti-

K. Subrahmanyam

tute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi. Subrahmanyam advocates an aggressive nuclear programme based on the currency of global power. "Nuclear weapons are not military weapons," he told me. "Their logic is that of international politics and it is a logic of a global nuclear order." According to Subrahmanyam, international security has been progressively governed by a global nuclear order made up of the five nuclear weapons powers – the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France. "India," Subrahmanyam said, "wants to be a player and not an object of this global nuclear order."

I had expected to hear about regional threats and the Chinese missile programme. But, as Subrahmanyam sees it, India's nuclear policies are only tangentially related to the question of India's security. They are ultimately aimed at something much more abstract and very much more grand: global power. India could, if it plays its cards right, parlay its nuclear programme into a seat in the United Nations Security Council and earn recognition as a "global player".

Subrahmanyam told me a story about a film. It was called *The Million-Pound Note* and it featured Gregory Peck. In the film, Peck's character uses an obviously valueless piece of paper printed to look like a million-pound note to con tradesmen into extending credit.

"A nuclear weapon acts like a million-pound note," Subrahmanyam said, his eyes gleaming. "It is of no apparent use. You can't use it to stop small wars. But it buys you credit, and that gives you the power to intimidate."

Subrahmanyam bristled when I suggested that there might be certain inherent dangers in the possession of nuclear weapons. Like most Indian hawks, he considers himself a reluctant nuclearist. He says he would prefer to see nuclear weapons done away with altogether. It is the nuclear superpowers' insistence on maintaining their arsenals that makes this impossible.

Issues of safety, he told me, were no more pressing in India than anywhere else. India and Pakistan had lived with each other's nuclear programmes for many years. "It was the strategic logic of the West that was madness. Think of the United States' building 70,000 nuclear weapons at a cost of $5.8 trillion. Do you think these people are in a position to preach to us?"

Subrahmanyam, like many other supporters of the Indian nuclear programme, sees little danger of the deployment of nuclear weapons. In New Delhi, it is widely believed that the very immensity of the destructive potential of nuclear weapons renders them useless as instruments of war, ensuring that their deployment can never be anything other than symbolic. That nuclear war is unthinkable has, paradoxically, given the weapons an aura of harmlessness.

MITRA

I went to see an old acquaintance, Chandan Mitra, a historian with an Oxford doctorate. I had come across an editorial of his entitled "Explosion of Self-Esteem", published on 12 May. At Delhi University, when I first knew Chandan, he was a Marxist. He is now an influential newspaper editor, and is said to be a BJP sympathiser.

"The bomb is a currency of self-esteem," Chandan told me, with disarming bluntness. "Two hundred years of colonialism robbed us of our self-esteem. We do not have the national pride that the British have, or the French, the Germans, or the Americans. We have been told that we are not fit to rule ourselves – that was the justification of colonialism. Our achievements, our worth, our talent have always been negated and denied. Mahatma Gandhi's endeavour all during the freedom movement was to rebuild our sense of self-esteem. Even if you don't have guns, he said, you still have moral force. Now, 50 years on, we know that moral force isn't enough to survive. It doesn't count for very much. When you look at India today and ask how best you can overcome those feelings of inferiority, the bomb seems to be as good an answer as any."

For Chandan, as for many other Indians, the bomb is more than a weapon. It has become a banner of political insurgency, a kind of millenarian movement for all the unfulfilled aspirations and dreams of the last 50 years.

The landscape of India teems with such insurgencies: the country is seized, in V.S. Naipaul's eloquent phrase, with "a million mutinies now". These insurrections are perhaps the most remarkable product of Indian democracy: this enabling of once marginal groups to fight for places at the table of power. The bomb cult represents the uprising of those who find themselves being pushed back from the table. It's the rebellion of the rebelled against, an insurgency of an elite. Its leaders see themselves as articulating the aspirations of an immeasurably vast constituency: more than 900 million people, or "one-sixth of humanity", in the words of the Indian prime minister. The reality, however, is that the number is very much smaller than this and is dwindling every day. The almost mystical rapture that greeted the unveiling of the cult's fetish has long since dissipated.

Chandan Mitra

PASWAN

While in New Delhi, I visited the Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Parliament, to watch a debate on the foreign-policy consequences of the nuclear tests. Most of the speakers were vociferously critical of the government for permitting the tests. Several of the speeches were ringing denunciations of the BJP's nuclear policies. Later, I went to see one of the speakers, Ram Vilas Paswan. Paswan is a Dalit. He holds the distinction of winning his parliamentary seat by record margins and is something of a cultural hero among many of the country's 230 million Dalits.

Paswan is a wiry man with a close cropped beard and gold-rimmed eyeglasses. "These nuclear tests were not in the Indian national interest," he told me. "They were done in the interests of a party, to keep the present government from imploding. In the last elections in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif campaigned on a platform of better relations with India. For this he was pilloried by his opponent, Benazir Bhutto, but he still won. The people of Pakistan want friendship with India. But how did our government respond? It burst a bomb in the face of a man who had reached out to us in friendship. And this in a country where ordinary citizens don't have food to eat. Where villages are being washed away by floods. Where 200 million people don't have safe drinking water. Instead, we spend 35,000 crores of rupees a year" – about eight billion dollars – "on armaments".

On 6 August, Hiroshima Day, I was in Calcutta. More than 250,000 people marched in the streets to protest the nuclear tests of 11 May. It was plain that the cult of the bomb had few adherents here, that the tests had divided the country more deeply than ever.

GEORGE

In New Delhi, I went to see George Fernandes, the defence minister of India.

I have known Fernandes, from a distance, for many years. He has a long history of involvement in human rights causes, and when I was a student at Delhi University he was one of India's best-known anti-nuclear activists.

George Fernandes

GURU DUTT M.

New Delhi is a sprawling city of some 10 million people, but its government offices and institutions are concentrated in a small area. The capital was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, in the waning years of the British Raj. Two gargantuan buildings form the bureaucratic core of the city. They are known simply as North Block and South Block and they face each other across a broad boulevard. The buildings are of red sandstone and are ornamented with many turrets and gateways of Anglo-Oriental design. From this fantastically grandiose complex the power of the Indian state radiates outward in diminishing circles of effectiveness.

I was taken to Fernandes' office, in South Block, by Jaya Jaitly, the general secretary of Fernandes' political party, the Samata Party. The idea of my striding into the defence ministry was no more unlikely than the thought that these offices were presided over by George Fernandes, that perennially indignant activist.

At the age of 16, Fernandes, who had harboured ambitions of becoming a Catholic priest, joined a lay seminary. At 19, he left, disillusioned (he remembers being appalled that the rectors ate better food and sat at higher tables than the seminarians), and went to Bombay, where he joined the socialist trade-union movement. For years he had no permanent address and lived with members of his union on the outskirts of the city. Disowned by his father, he did not visit his home again until he was in his forties.

Fernandes still considers himself a socialist. In India's most recent elections, last February, the Samata Party won a mere 12 seats out of a total of 545. There was a time when the Congress regularly commanded a decisive majority. But today no single party controls a sufficient number of seats to form a stable government. The country has gone to the polls twice in the last three years. Last February's elections gave the BJP, with 181 seats, a slight edge over the Congress. For the first time, the BJP, with its programme based on assertive, militant Hinduism, was able to form a government, but only after fashioning a coalition with smaller parties. (The Samata Party entered on very advantageous terms securing two positions in the cabinet, Fernandes' included.)

We went up to Fernandes' office in the minister's elevator. A soldier in sparkling white puttees and a red turban pressed the buttons.

Fernandes is 68 but could pass for a man in his mid-forties – lean, with a full head of curly graying hair. He always dresses in long handwoven cotton kurtas and loose pajamas. He wears leather sandals – no socks or shoes – and washes his clothes by hand.

Two officers marched in, and Fernandes turned to talk to them. It was clear at a glance that, despite Fernandes sandals and rumpled clothes and the officers' heel-clicking starchiness, there was a genuine warmth between him and the soldiers. It occurred to me that Fernandes, too, wore a kind of uniform. It was a statement of simplicity.

The room was large but dank. Two pictures hung high on a wall. One was a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi; the other was a photograph of the ruins of a church in Hiroshima. It was probably here, at this desk, under these pictures, that Fernandes had deliberated on the tests of 11 May.

I thought back to India's first atomic test, I was 18, in my second year at Delhi University. The voices of dissent were few: all the major political parties, right and left alike, came out in support. Fernandes was one of the very few political figures who openly criticised the test. For those such as myself, people who were opposed to nuclear armaments in an instinctive, perhaps unreflective way, Fernandes became a kind of beacon.

It was lunch-time, and Fernandes led the way to a spiral staircase. I spotted a small simian figure observing us from a landing. I stopped, startled. It was a monkey, a common rhesus, with a muddy-brown mantle and a bright-red rump. The animal stared at me calmly, unalarmed, and then went bounding off down a corridor.

"Did you see that monkey?" I said.

Fernandes laughed. "Yes. There's a whole troop living on this staircase."

"Sometimes," one of his aides whispered, "they attack the generals."

At lunch, I said to Fernandes, "Are you comfortable with the recent nuclear tests? I ask you this because I have read your anti-nuclear writings and seen you at peace marches."

"I was opposed to the bomb from Day One till the 19th of July 1996," Fernandes said. On that day, the Lok Sabha was debating the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty banning further tests. "In these discussions there was one point of unanimity: that we should not sign this treaty. I went through deep anguish – an atom bomb was morally unacceptable. But why should the five nations that have nuclear weapons tell us how to behave and what nuclear weapons we should have? I said we should keep all our options open – every option." The implication was that even then, he hadn't been able to endorse nuclear weapons.

After lunch, as he was rising to leave, Fernandes told me that he was scheduled to visit military installations in the embattled state of Kashmir. From there, he planned to fly further north, to Ladakh and the Siachen Glacier, in the Karakoram Mountains. Across these snows, at altitudes of up to 22,000 feet, Indian and Pakistani troops have been exchanging fire regularly for 14 years. The trip was to be a tour of inspection, but Fernandes would also address some political meetings. If I wanted to join him, he said, I should tell his office.

SURANKOTE

On the morning of 24 August, I boarded an Indian Air Force plane with Fernandes and his entourage. The plane was a twin-engine AN-32, an elderly and unabashedly functional craft of Soviet manufacture.

We stopped for lunch at a large military base in eastern Kashmir. I found myself sharing a table with several major-generals and other senior officers. I was interested to learn these senior officers' views of the nuclear tests, but I soon discovered that their curiosity exceeded mine. Did I know who was behind the decision to proceed with the tests? they asked. Who had issued the orders? Who had known in advance?

I could no more enlighten them than they could me. Only in India, I thought, could a writer and a tableful of generals ask each other questions like these. It was confirmation, at any rate, that the armed forces' role in the tests had been limited.

The views of the military personnel were by no means uniform. Many believed that India needed a nuclear deterrent; some felt that the tests had resulted in security benefits for both India and Pakistan – that the two countries would now exercise greater caution in their frequent border confrontations.

But others expressed apprehensions. "An escalation of hostilities along the border can happen very easily," a major-general said to me. "It takes just one officer in the field to start it off. There's no telling where it will stop."

None of the generals, I was relieved to note, appeared to believe that nuclear weapons were harmless icons of empowerment. In the light of my earlier conversations, there was something almost reassuring in this.

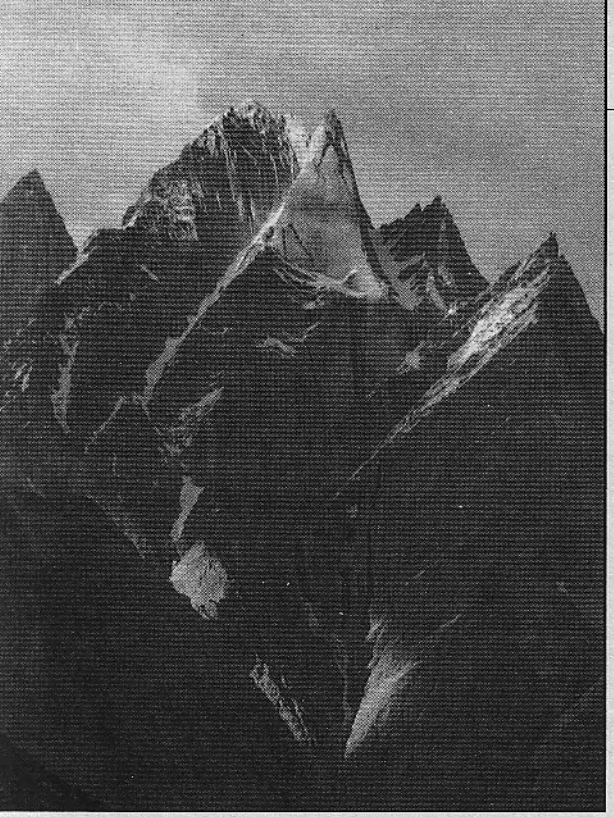
After lunch, we went by helicopter to Surankote, an army base in the neck of territory that connects Kashmir to India. It is set in a valley, between steep, verdant hills. The sunlight glowed golden and mellow on the surrounding slopes. We were whisked off the launching pad and taken to the base. I found myself riding in a vehicle with a young major.

"What's it like here?" I said.

"Bad." He laughed. "Bordering on terrible." The Pakistani front lines were just a few miles away, he explained. It took just a day to walk over the hills.

At the base, there was a crowd of a few hundred people. Fernandes had mounted a podium with several other politicians and

Kanti Bajpai



Karakoram crags.

local dignitaries. Behind them were green hills, capped by clouds.

The major pointed at the hills. "While we're standing here talking, there are half a dozen operations going on in those hills, right there."

He led me aside. "Let the politicians talk," he said. "I'll show you what's happening here if you want to know." We went into a tent and the major seated himself at a radio set. "This is where we lis- ten to them," he said. He scanned the wavelengths, tuning in to several exchanges. "Listen," he said, turning up the volume. "They're speaking Punjabi, not Kashmiri. They're mercenaries who've signed up on two-year contracts. They're right there, in those hills."

The voices on the radio had a slow, dreamlike quality; they were speaking to each other unhurriedly, calling out cheerful greetings in slow-cadenced rural Punjabi.

As we were leaving the tent, the major darted suddenly into a group of journalists and took some rolls of film from a photographer. "I don't know what they've taken pictures of," he said. "I can't trust anyone here."

We walked back to listen to the speeches. "The politicians talk so well," the major said. "But what we have is a war. Does anyone know that? Does anyone care?"

LEH

The next day, we flew to Leh, the principal town in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. Ladakh is only a few hundred miles from the valley of Kashmir, but near Leh, in the east, it is a world apart, a niche civilisation – a far outpost of Buddhist culture which has flourished in a setting as extreme, in climate, altitude, and topography, as that of Tibet.

Leh is at 11,500 feet. On landing, we were handed pills to prevent altitude sickness and warned of short-term memory loss. In the afternoon, driving towards the Siachen Glacier, we went over the 18,300-foot Khardung Pass. A painted sign announced this to be the world's highest motorable road. Ahead lay the Karakoram Range. Among the peaks in this range is the 28,250-foot K2, the second-highest mountain in the world.

The landscape was one of lunar desolation, with electric-blue skies and a blinding sun. Great sheets of glaciated rock rose sheer out of narrow valleys; their colours were the unearthly pinks and mauves of planetary rings and stellar moons. The mountains had sharp, pyramidal points, their ridges honed to fine, knifelike edges. Below, along the valley floors, beside ribbonlike streams, were trees with silver bark. On occasional sandbanks, dwarfed by the vastness of the landscape, were tidy monasteries and villages.

SIACHEN

The Siachen Glacier is known as the Third Pole. Outside of the polar wastelands, there is perhaps no terrain on earth that is less hospitable. There are no demarcated borders. Kashmir has what was once called the Cease Fire Line, which serves as a *de facto* border, but it stops short of this region, ending at a point on the map known as NJ 9842. The line was created in 1949, after the first war between India and Pakistan. At the time, neither India nor Pakistan conceived of needing to extend it into the high Karakoram, beyond NJ 9842. "No one had ever imagined," a Pakistani academic told me later, when I visited Lahore, "that human beings would ever wish to claim these frozen places."

But in the late 1970s several international mountaineering expeditions ventured into this region. They came through Pakistan and used Pakistani-controlled areas as their trailheads. This raised suspicions in India. It was discovered that maps were being published with lines drawn through the region, suggesting delineated borders where none existed. There was talk of "cartographic aggression".

It was these notional lines, on maps used by mountaineers, that transformed the Siachen Glacier into a battleground. It is generally agreed that the glacier – an immense mass of compacted snow and ice, 70 miles long – has no strategic, military, or economic value whatsoever.

In 1984, the Indian army launched a large-scale airlifting operation and set up a number of military posts. Pakistan responded by putting up a parallel line of posts. There was no agreement on where the posts should be: shoving was the only way to decide. Since that time, the Indian and Pakistani armies have regularly exchanged artillery fire at heights that range from 10,000 to 20,000 feet.

On the glacier, we stopped to visit a dimly

lighted hospital ward. There were a dozen men inside. None of them had been injured by "enemy action": their adversary was the terrain. They were plainsmen, mainly. In the normal course of things, snow would play no part in their lives. Most of the men were in their late 30s or 40s – family men. They stared at us mutely. One had tears in his eyes.

Every year, a thousand soldiers are injured on the glacier – about the equivalent of an infantry battalion. "We allow at least 10 extra men per battalion for wastage," an officer told me.

At some posts on the glacier, temperatures routinely dip to 40 degrees Celsius below zero. At these altitudes, wind velocities are very high. The soldiers spend much of their time crammed inside tents that are pitched on the surface of the glacier or on ledges of rock. Such heat as they have comes from small kerosene stoves, which produce a foul-smelling, grimy kind of soot. The soot works itself slowly into the soldiers' clothes, their hair, their eyes, their nostrils. When they return to base camp after a three-month tour of duty, they are enveloped in black grime.

The Siachen Glacier costs India, I was told, two million dollars a day. The total cost of defending this mass of ice is beyond estimate, but it certainly exceeds several billion dollars.

In the evening, I ate with a group of junior officers. I was interested to note that Indian soldiers always spoke of their Pakistani counterparts with detachment and respect.

"Most of us here are from North India," a blunt-spoken major said to me. "We have more in common with the Pakistanis, if you don't mind my saying so, than we do with South Indians or Bengalis."

The next morning, in a Cheetah helicopter, I followed Fernandes through the gorges that lead up to the glacier. It was cloudy, and the brilliant colours of the rock faces had the blurred quality of a water-washed print. There was a majesty to the landscape that I had never seen before.

On our return, we drove to the snout of the glacier. A *bara khana* – a kind of feast – had been arranged under an open hangar, in Fernandes' honour. Fernandes left the officers' table and began to serve the other ranks, taking the dishes out of the hands of the kitchen staff. The men were visibly moved, and so was Fernandes. It was clear that in this job – arrived at fortuitously, late in his career – Fernandes had discovered some kind of vocation, a return, perhaps, to the austerity and brotherhood of his days as a seminarian or a trade unionist.

I was introduced to an officer who had just returned from three months on the glacier. He was proud of his men and all they had accomplished: they had dug caves in the ice for shelter, injuries had been kept to a minimum, no one had gone mad. He leant closer. While on the glacier, he said, he'd thought of a plan for winning the war. He wanted to convey it to the defence minister. Could I help?

And the plan? I asked.

A thermonuclear explosion at the bottom of the glacier. The whole thing would melt, he explained, and the resulting flood would carry Pakistan away and put an end to the glacier as well. "We can work wonders."

He'd just come off the glacier, I reminded myself. This was just another kind of altitude sickness.

The next day, sitting in the Air Force plane, I talked to Fernandes about Pakistan. "Isn't it possible for both sides to disengage from the glacier?" I asked. "Can't some sort of solution be worked out?"

"Does anyone really want a solution?" he said quietly. "Things will just go on like this." In his voice there was a note of despair.

I came to be haunted by an image of two desperately poor protagonists, balancing upon a barren mountaintop, each with a pickaxe stuck in the other's neck, each propping the other up, waiting to bleed to death.

In Leh, late one night in an empty dining room, Fernandes made the cryptic comment "There are no Indians left."

"What do you mean?"

"There are no Indian parties today. There are only groups, gathered around individuals."

He was referring to the powerful sectional and regional interests that have prevented any stable government from forming, precipitating the several elections in quick succession.

I asked him about his alliance with the BJP. "You were always a secular politician," I said. "How did you come to link yourself to a reli-

RANA/INDIA

North Block.

gious party?"

Fernandes spoke of an old political mentor who had urged him to maintain a dialogue with every segment of the political spectrum. He spoke of a bitter feud with a former protege, Laloo Yadav, the powerful Bihar politician. Then, suddenly, he cut himself off. "Look," he said, "I'm rationalising."

He had gone to the BJP as a last resort, he explained. He had tried to reach agreements with various secular left-wing parties. He tried many doors, he said, and "only when all other doors were closed" did he go to the BJP.

The causes of Fernandes' despondency were suddenly clear. He had spent a lifetime in politics, and the system had spun him around and around until what he did and what he believed no longer had the remotest connection. I knew that he still possessed a certain kind of idealism and personal integrity. But what had prevailed finally was vanity – the sheer vanity of power.

Fernandes is not alone. This sense of deadlock is an essential part of the background of the nuclear tests of 11 May. To the leaders of the BJP, hanging on to power by the good will of a tenuous coalition, the tests must have appeared as one means of blasting a way out of a dead end. But if the BJP bears the principal responsibility for the tests, the blame is not theirs alone: it was Indira Gandhi and her Congress party who set the precedent for using nuclear technology as political spectacle. Since then, many other Indian politicians have battled with the same temptation. Two other recent prime ministers, Narasimha Rao and I.K. Gujral, resisted, to their great credit, but they both came very close to succumbing. In the end, it is in the technology itself that the real danger lies. As long as a nuclear establishment exists, it will always tempt a politician desperate to keep a hold on power.

That night in Leh, I thought of something Fernandes had said to me earlier: "Someday we will sink, and this is not anything to do with China or with Pakistan. It is because this country is cursed to put up with a leadership that has chosen to sell it for their own personal aggrandisement." This seemed now like an unconscious self-indictment.

There are, in fact, many reasons to fear nuclear catastrophe in South Asia.

Both India and Pakistan have ballistic missiles. Their nuclear warheads will necessarily be produced in only a few facilities, because of limited resources. India's nuclear weapons, for instance, are thought to be produced at a single unit: the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, in Bombay. Both sides are, therefore, realistically able to destroy each other's production capacities with not much more than a single strike.

Several major cities in India and Pakistan are within a few hundred miles of each other, so, once launched, a missile would take approximately five minutes to reach its target. Given the short flight time, military planners on both sides almost certainly have plans to retaliate immediately. In other words, if either nation believed itself to be under attack it would have to respond instantly. In moments of crisis, the intelligence services of both India and Pakistan have historically had unreliable perceptions of threat. They have also been known to produce outright faulty intelligence.

The trouble will probably start in Kashmir. India and Pakistan have already fought two wars over the state. In recent months, the conflict has spilt into other parts of India, with civilian populations coming under attack in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, for example. The Indian government once mooted the idea of launching "hot pursuit" attacks across the border, against insurgents sheltering in Pakistani-held territory. In Pakistan, such assaults are likely to be perceived as an invasion. The risks of escalation are very real.

Zia Mian, a Pakistani-born nuclear expert at Princeton, said to me, "There are soldiers on both sides who have a hankering for a grand act of heroic erasure. A day might well come when these people would say, 'Let's get it over with forever, once and for all, no matter what the cost.'"

DELHI

On a hot and humid August day, I drove around New Delhi with an old friend, Kanti Bajpai, trying to picture the damage the city would sustain during a nuclear explosion. Kanti has a doctorate in strategic studies from the University of Illinois, and he was among the many anti-nuclear activists who, on learning of the tests of 11 May, immediately went to work. At the time, the BJP's cadres were organising celebrations in the streets of several Indian cities. Opposition politicians looked on in stunned silence, struggling to gather their wits. It fell to citizens' associations to take on the task of articulating a critical response. Kanti came to national attention at this time.

Kanti believes that India, in pursuing a nuclear programme, has gambled away its single greatest military advantage over Pakistan: the overwhelming superiority of its conventional forces. In legitimatising Pakistan's nuclear programme, India's military planners have, in effect, rendered their ground troops redundant. Kanti sees no threat from China.

Zia Mian

There is no history of persistent antagonism. No Chinese emperor ever invaded India; no Indian over sought to conquer any part of China. In thousands of years of close coexistence, Chinese and Indian soldiers have fought only once, during the war of 1962.

Along with a number of other academics, Kanti has been trying to assess the consequences of nuclear war in South Asia. A friend of his, M.V. Ramana, a research fellow at the Centre for Energy and Environmental Studies at Princeton University, had recently computed the possible effects of a nuclear attack on Bombay. It was one of the first such studies to be done of a South Asian city. Ramana's findings caused some surprise: the casualty rates that he cited, for instance, were lower than expected – about 200,000. This was because in his calculations Ramana assumed that neither India nor Pakistan would use bombs much greater than what was dropped on Hiroshima – with a yield of about 15 kilotons.

We set out on our journey through New Delhi armed with a copy of Ramana's seminal paper. Kanti wanted to apply the same calculations to New Delhi.

We drove up Rajpath, the grand thoroughfare that separates North Block from South Block at one end. Ahead lay the domed residence of the President, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, once the palace of the Imperial British Viceroy. The palace looks down Rajpath towards India Gate. In the distance lie the ramparts of the 16th-century fort, Purana Qila.

Ground zero, Kanti said, will probably lie somewhere near here: in all likelihood, between North and South Blocks.

On detonation, a nuclear weapon releases a burst of high-energy X-rays. These cause the temperature in the immediate vicinity to rise very suddenly to tens of millions of degrees. The rise in temperature causes a fireball to form, which shoots outward in every direction, cooling as it expands.

South Block and North Block, like many of the ceremonial buildings in New Delhi, are made principally of pink Rajasthan sandstone. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, granite surfaces and ceramic tiles up to several hundred feet from the explosion melted. Sandstone is considerably less dense than granite. The facades of the two blocks will probably melt like candle wax; so will the dome and walls of Rashtrapati Bhavan, and possibly even a portion of India Gate.

As the fireball expands, it generates a shock wave called the Mach front, which delivers a massive blow to everything in its path. This, in turn, is followed by an enormous increase in air pressure and very high wind velocities. The pressure of the air in the wake of the Mach front can reach several thousand pounds per square inch: it's like being inside a pressure cooker, but with many thousands of times greater pressure. The shock can generate winds that blow at speeds of more than 2000 miles per hour.

"Human beings will become projectiles," Kanti said. "If you're here and you're not incinerated immediately, you will become a human cannonball."

We drove towards the Jamuna River, passing the enormous circular building that houses Parliament. Everyone here, Kanti said, will be either incinerated or killed by the radiation.

We proceeded to the National Archives and the vast bureaucratic warrens that house the government's principal administrative offices. These, too, will be destroyed. The recorded basis of government, Kanti said, will vanish. Land records, taxation documents – almost everything needed to reconstruct a settled society – will perish from the blast.

The changes in pressure caused by the explosion, Kanti explained, even a small one, will make your lungs burst. You won't necessarily die of burns or poisoning. "Your internal organs will rupture, even if you survived the initial blasts and flying objects."

Later, I asked Gautam Bhatia, a New Delhi architect, about the effects of the blast on the city's buildings.

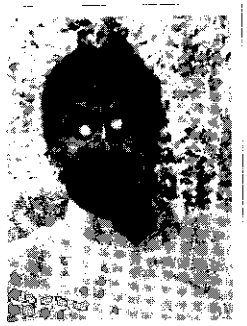
Many of the landmark buildings of British-era New Delhi, he wrote me, have very thick walls and are laterally buttressed with cross walls. These are capable of withstanding great pressure. But many of the city's contemporary public buildings, like some of its five-star hotels, have glass curtain walls. "Such structures have a poor rating for withstanding pressure, poor facilities for egress, and virtually no fire-fighting equipment."

New Delhi's newer residences will fare very badly. Most of the buildings are designed to withstand winds of about 160 kilometres per hour; in the event of a nuclear explosion, they will face wind speeds of up to 20 times that. "The walls would be blown away instantly; if columns and slabs remain, the pressure will rip the building out of its foundations and overturn it."

In Indian cities, many households use canisters of liquid petroleum gas for everyday cooking. For about a mile around ground zero, Ramana estimates, those canisters will explode.

Kanti explained to me that the geographical spread of New Delhi is such that a single

Gautam Bhatia



15-kiloton nuclear explosion would not destroy the whole area. He estimated that the casualty figures for New Delhi would be much lower than those which Ramana had cited for Bombay: as low, potentially, as 60,000. Only the central parts of the city would be directly affected. "The city would continue to function in some way," Kanti said, "but its municipal, medical and police services would be in total chaos. The infrastructure would disappear."

Fatalities, however, will account for only a small part of the human toll. Several hundreds of thousands of people will suffer burn injuries.

In New Delhi, I met with Dr Usha Shrivastava, a member of a group called International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. She told me that over the past few decades, while New Delhi's population has more than doubled, the total number of hospital beds in the city has increased only slightly. She estimated that there are only six to seven thousand beds in the government-run hospitals that serve the majority of the city's population. These hospitals are already so crowded that in some wards two or three patients share a single bed.

But the major bospitals – including the only one with a ward that specialises in burn injuries – are all within a few miles of the city's centre, and they will not survive the blast anyway.

In the event of a nuclear explosion in New Delhi, Dr Shrivastava said softly, "The ones who will be alive will be jealous of the dead ones."

When it's over, millions and millions of people will be without homes. They will begin to walk. The roads will soon be too clogged to accommodate cars or buses. Everyone will walk, rich and poor, young and old. Many will be nursing burn wounds and other severe injuries. They will be sick from radiation. There will be no food, no clean water, and no prospect of medical care. The water from the mountains will be contaminated. The rivers will be ruined. Epidemics will break out. Hundreds of thousands will die.

I had always imagined that a nuclear blast was a kind of apocalypse, beyond which no existence could be contemplated. Like many Indians, I associated the image of *pralay* – the mythological chaos of the end of the world – with a nuclear explosion. Listening to Kanti that day as we drove around New Delhi, I realised that I, like most people, had been seduced into a species of nuclear romanticism, into thinking of nuclear weapons in symbolic and mythic ways. The explosion that Kanti was describing would not constitute an apocalyptic ending. It would be a beginning. What would follow would make the prospect of an end an object of universal envy.

Asma Jahangir

KAMAT DAR

LAHORE

My journey would not be complete without a trip to Pakistan. It was to be my first visit, and the circumstances looked far from propitious. The week before, the United States had fired Tomahawk missiles to land in southern Afghanistan. Some had landed near the border of Pakistan. There were reports of Indian and American flags being hurnt in the streets.

At the airport in Lahore, I steeled myself for a long wait. My Indian passport would lead, I was sure, to delays, questions, perhaps an interrogation. But nothing happened. I was waved through with a smile.

When Indians and Pakistanis visit each other's countries, there is often an alchemical reaction, a kind of magic. I had heard accounts of this from friends: they had spoken of the warmth, the hospitality, the intensity of emotion, the sense of stepping back into an interrupted memory, as though an earlier conversation were being resurged. Almost instantly these tales were confirmed – in taxi-drivers' smiles, in the stories that people sought me out to tell, in the endless invitations to meals.

At mealtimes, though, there were arguments ahout how long it would be before Taliban-like groups made a bid for power. After dessert, the talk would turn to the buying of Kalashnikovs.

I went to see Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's principal religious party. The Jamaat's headquarters are on the outskirts of Lahore, in a large and self-sufficient compound, surrounded by a high wall and manned hy sentries.

Ahmed has a well-trimmed white beard, twinkling eyes, and a manner of great affahility. "Other than the army," he said, "all the institutions in this country are more or less finished. These are all institutions of a Westernised elite, of people who are corrupt. We are now paying the price of their corruption. All the problems we have now – the economic crisis and so on – are the fruit of their corruption."

I was hearing a strange echo of voices from India.

"We are not for nuclear weapons," Ahmed told me. "We are ourselves in favour of disarmament. But we don't accept weapons and others shouldn't. We say, 'Let the five also disarm.'"

On one issue, however, his views were very

different: the probability of a nuclear war. "When you have two nations," he said, "between whom there is so much ill will, so much enmity, and they both have nuclear weapons, then there is always the danger that these weapons will be used if war breaks out. Certainly. And in war people become mad. And when a nation fears that it is about to be defeated, it will do anything to spare itself the shame."

Almost without exception the people I spoke to in Pakistan – hawks and doves alike – were of the opinion that the probability of nuclear war was high.

ASMA

I spent my last afternoon in Lahore with Pakistan's leading human-rights lawyer, Asma Jahangir. Asma is 48, the daughter of an opposition politician who was one of the most vocal critics of the Pakistani army's operations in what is now Bangladesh. She spent her teenage years briefing lawyers on behalf of her frequently imprisoned father. Today, she cannot go outside without an armed bodyguard.

"Is nuclear war possible?" I asked.

"Anything is possible," she said, "because our policies are irrational. Our decision-making is ad hoc. We are surrounded by disinformation. We have a historical enmity and the emotionalism of *jihad* against each other. And we are fatalistic nations who believe that whatever happens – a famine, a drought, an accident – it is the will of God. Our decision-making is done by a few people on both sides. It's not the ordinary woman living in a village in Bihar whose voice is going to be heard, who's going to say, 'For God's sake, I don't want a nuclear bomb – I want my cow and I want milk for my children.'"

I often think back to the morning of 12 May. I was in New York at the time. I remember my astonishment both at the news of the tests and also at the response to them: the tone of chastisement, the finger-wagging by countries that still possessed tens of thousands of nuclear warheads. Had they imagined that the technology to make a bomb had wound its way back into a genie's lamp because the Cold War had ended? Did they think that it had escaped the world's attention that the five peacekeepers of the United Nations Security Council all had nuclear arms? If so, then perhaps India's nuclear tests served a worthwhile purpose by waking the world from this willed slumber.

So strong was my response to the West's hypocrisy that I discovered an unusual willingness in myself to put my own beliefs on nuclear matters aside. If there were good arguments to be made in defence of the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, then I wanted to know what they were: I wanted to hear them for myself.

I didn't hear them. What I heard instead was a strange mix of psychologising, grandiose fantasy, and cynicism. The motivation behind India's nuclear programme is summed up neatly in this formula: it is status-driven, not threat-driven. The intention is to push India into an imagined circle of twice-born nations – "the great powers". In Pakistan, the motivation is similar. Status, here, means parity with India. That the leaders of these two countries should be willing to risk economic breakdown, nuclear accidents and nuclear war in order to indulge these confused ambitions is itself a sign that some essential element in the social compact has broken down: the desires of the rulers and the well-being of the ruled could not be further apart.

I think of something that George Fernandes said to me: "Our country has already fallen to the bottom. Very soon we will reach a point where there is no hope at all. I believe that we have reached that point now." I think also of the words of I.A. Rehman, of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan: "This is the worst it's ever been. Everything is discredited, Everything is lost, broken into pieces."

I have never had so many utterly depressing conversations, so many talks that ended with the phrase "we have hit rock bottom". There was the college student who said, "Now even Bill Gates will take us seriously." There was the research scientist who believed that, now, his papers would get more international attention. And there were the diplomats looking forward to a seat in the Security Council. Has the gap between the realities of the Subcontinent and the aspirations of its middle classes ever been wider? Talking to nuclear enthusiasts, I had the sense that what they were really saying was: "The country has tried everything else to get ahead. Nothing worked. This is our last card and this is the time to play it." I am convinced that support for India's nuclear programme is occasioned by a fear of the future. The bomb has become the weapon with which the rulers of the Subcontinent wish to avert whatever is ahead.

The pursuit of nuclear weapons in the Subcontinent is the moral equivalent of civil war: the targets the rulers have in mind are, in the end, their own people.

New York-based A. Ghosh is a writer whose works include In an Antique Land *and* The Calcutta Chromosome. *This article is published by arrangement with* The New Yorker.

I.A. Rehman

COURTESY: SAHR

Musical orchids

STRANGE TO SAY, orchids at a farm near Guwahati, the capital of Assam, are indeed swaying to *bhajans*. And going by their brisk growth, they seem to be enjoying every moment of it. Every morning for long hours, 100,000 orchids at the ICL Flora Exotica, a division of the India Carbon Limited, are treated to devotional music rendered by Anup Jalota, India's top *bhajan* singer.

Speakers have been placed across the five-acre farm so that the plants can hear the classical crooner. The audience is made up of rare orchids belonging to species like Dendrobiums, Oncidiums, Mokaras, Aranda and Aranthera.

"It is amazing – we never thought that the orchids would be responding to the music so well," says a jubilant Rakesh Himatsingka, the managing director of India Carbon. "We are so encouraged by the success, we are planning to expand our farm and go for exports very soon."

The trouble-torn Northeast of India is a storehouse of rare tropical orchids specific to this region. Fully 750 of the existing 1200 orchid species in the world occur naturally in the Northeast's dense jungles. Orchid cutflowers, especially of the tropical variety, are in heavy demand in Japan, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the Gulf countries where they sell for as much as three dollars apiece.

It is obvious that everything possible should be done to enhance the export potential of the orchid farms. And if it takes *bhajan*s, then so be it.

"Some wonderful changes have occurred since we began to make the musical nourishment available to the orchids," says D.K. Saikia, a botanist at the farm. "For example, their grade has improved and we have more high-quality flowers now. There is also more vegetative propagation, that is, the number of new shoots springing from the orchids have also gone up. All this bas increased our turnover."

Interestingly, musical botanical therapy, while rarely applied in the country today, traces its origin to India. It was the renowned Indian botanist, Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose who in 1926 first mooted the theory that plants would respond positively to musical stimuli.

Shall shear the sal

THE FACT IS that there are too many expert quacks amongst us. And the ones representing government are perhaps the pick of the lot. Consider this situation: An epidemic strikes the hardy *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) trees in the middle Indian state of Madhya Pradesh; the state government, ably backed by an expert committee appointed by the Centre, is quick with its quack remedy and orders the cutting of all the infested trees. The result: Some three quarters of the slow-growing sal are no more.

It was the sal borer (*Hoplocerambyx spinicornis*) beetle that induced the authorities to get axe-happy. And if you were to go by the law, they were playing by the book. Written some 70 years ago, the law sanctions the felling of beetle-infested trees.

It was time then for the conservationists to get off their blocks. When the expert committee ordered the felling of the trees last December, including those in the state's famous Kanha Tiger Reserve, environmental activists and World Wide Fund for Nature (India) cried foul. The trees got a temporary reprieve in January, with the matter taken up by a special task force and a wildlife subcommittee.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests in New Delhi, however, had other ideas. Without consulting the task force, it issued a notification to the state government, virtually giving a go-ahead for the tree massacre. On the crucial issue of stocking the infested timber, the ministry was lenient, stating that "felled material should *preferably* [italics added] be located at least five kilometres away from the sal forest". Any forester would tell you that infested logs should be kept as far away (and not "preferably" so) from the forest as possible, with the stumps burned and debris disposed of, leaving nothing for the viral agent to feed on.

The matter made its way to the Supreme Court, which promptly called a halt to the cutting. Later, however, the court allowed the felling of dead trees, while the affected ones were to be re-marked. The state government complied, but the committee in charge of the operation reported that the affected area was too large for the task to be carried out properly.

The situation recalls a similar epidemic some 70 years ago. Back then,

The custodians of the farm in Guwahati schedule the *bhajans* for the peaceful morning hours. Hindustani classical music is also turning out to be a great favourite with the plant audience. Audio cassettes of some of the top names in the country are regularly slipped into the cassette player by the farm staff.

Says Saikia, "Every day, we play instrumentals on the flute, the tabla, the sarod, or the santoor. Not to mention the old melodies, romantic songs from Hindi movies of the 1960s, which has become a regular feature in the evenings between 3 and 5 pm."

At the end of the day, it is not just the orchids who are left happy and satisfied. The farm workforce, including its 18 gardeners, seem to be even more delighted with the entire experience. Says Gopal Das, a gardener who started working here four years ago, "Our eight-hour shifts are now so much more enjoyable. There is no more boredom."

It might be that the Guwahati orchids have become music connoisseurs. Or, it could just be that the workers are happy. Either way, music is supporting a spurt in orchid productivity; the export market beckons.

-Shankhadeep Chowdhury

between 1923-28, of the seven million infested trees, only about 5 percent were felled. Today, due to the government's policy, of the three million infested trees, around 30 percent are in danger of being felled in just a year.

The tussle is intense – between those who favour the felling on the grounds that otherwise all of the sal forest would be wiped out, and those who want nature to take its own course without any human intervention. While the former points out that scientific forestry knows no way to stop the deadly beetles, the latter believes that nature will offer its own healing touch, as proved by the partial or complete recovery of some of the infested 'dead' trees.

Shall we leave it then to nature to decide the case, for or against the sal of Madhya Pradesh?

Bomb boom

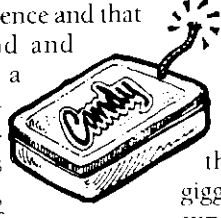
IF IT'S AUTUMN-END in Dhaka, can bombs be far behind? The country's bomb-making cottage industry has gone into an over-drive to respond to the winter demand. "Politics is coming. We are all stocking up on raw materials," said Torab Ali, a bomb-maker.

As a precursor of things to come, the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by ex-PM Khaleda Zia, called for a *hartal* in October. Two persons died during the shutdown: one in Dhaka, whom BNP called its own, and the other, a central committee member of BNP's student wing, was found dead in a pond the day after in the port town of Khulna, south of Dhaka.

It may have been, as the BNP accuses, that the police bashed them to death. Or it could be, as the government has stated, that the Dhaka "activist" was really a druggie who was caught snatching a bag and killed by a hostile mob, and the Khulna activist might well have been a victim of within-party conflict. Whatever, the deaths mean more mayhem and, consequently, a higher demand for bombs.

There are more than a hundred bomb factories in Dhaka, and business is booming. "We used to bring them from India before but it's much cheaper to make bombs here. Everyone benefits. You don't need to place orders early. I can supply any order in two days. So can others." Bomb-maker Ali's voice was full of pride.

Here is a classic case of supply and demand interacting at the ground level. Politics means violence and that means bombs; demand and regular supply result in a booming import-substituting home-grown industry. The industry is thoroughly indigenous, with a high degree of self-employment. Most of the factory owners started as makers and then shifted to hiring others either because they lost a finger or two or because the business became too big.



Buyers are offered a choice of bombs – *dibba* bomb (made with Dano milk powder tins), bulb bombs, coconut bombs (empty nut shells), chocolate bombs (easy to carry though not a biggie like a *dibba* bomb) and at least 25 other kinds. Built with an eye on appropriate technology, the components, including petrol, nails, switches, wiring and connections, are all locally available and easily assembled. They are a genuine by-product of the industry of politics and crime.

Bomb factories are cottage industries that operate with few, if any, safety features. Children, whose nimble fingers are so useful at assembling the deadly components, find easy employment. (One of the victims this year was eight-year-old Runa who lost both her hands from the wrist down in an explosion at her manufacturing unit.) The factories are, literally, holes in the ground, so that accidental blasts can take a whole large building with them.

The sustainability aspect of the bomb industry is obvious. Not everyone can access guns to roh a bank or take over a university residential hall. But bombs can be used for any occasion. "Even if one has guns, one need bombs to get away by creating noise and smoke," said Salma Begum, probably the only woman actively involved in the business.

Not that fancy weapons are not available. Automatic rifles are being used more frequently, and last year even two rocket launchers were recovered in a police raid. But easy availability and cost-benefit make bombs the more sought after tool for violence. Just about anybody can get a bomb anytime in Dhaka.

Even this reporter gingerly held a bomb in his hands, while the factory workers milling around giggled. When asked which party they supported, the reply was, "We hate politics. It's ruining the country."

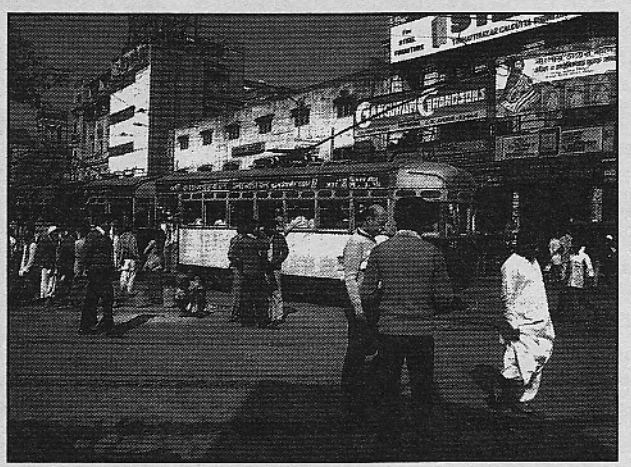
Ruining the country, certainly, but hardly their business.

-Afsan Chowdhury

Saving Calcutta's trams

THERE IS GOOD news for trams in Calcutta: whatever its detractors may have to say, the 125-year-old transport system is still a long way away from fading into oblivion. And if the West Bengal government acts upon a proposal for the Calcutta Tramways Expansion and Rehabilitation, the tram could very well don a slicker *avatar*. The proposal is based on a study which said the trams would do better if faster and sophisticated versions are used after elevating the existing tracks.

That will truly be a good turn since Calcutta is the only city in India to still have the tram. Bombay discarded it a long time ago; so did Madras. Even in Calcutta, it has been an 'on-now-off-next' story since the two lobbies – for and against – are equally strong. Those wanting the trams to be withdrawn say that these monoliths unnecessarily slow down traffic, creating snarls in a city where only 6 percent of the total surface area is available for roads. Those favouring



trams point out that in a city where pollution from vehicles is high, abolition of the environment-friendly trams would not be a wise decision. The space from removing the tracks will only be taken up by more fuming automobiles, they add.

Dipanka Chakraborty, director of the School of Environment at Jadavpur University, says that an average Calcuttan, if exposed to busy traffic crossings for eight hours a day loses 15 years in life-span due to the pollution.

In the early 90s, when the state-owned Calcutta Tramways Company (CTC) had thought of phasing out the trams citing economic reasons, the opposition was intense; it even spilled outside the country. Letters were written to Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth as well as to the International Union of Public Transport, Brussels, for intervention. In 1994, 100 non-resident Indians handed Chief Minister Jyoti Basu a petition to reconsider the is-

Designer drug

TRIGGERED BY *The Wall Street Journal*'s expose of the lethal effects of Quinacrine, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the United States in October banned the steriliser, which was primarily meant for Third World women. The FDA noted that, among other things, Quinacrine could induce cancer in the reproductive tract, and block the menstrual cycle.

The 18 June 1998 *Journal* report was a thorough documentation of the fatal consequences of Quinacrine, providing statistics of the countries where it was in use the highest: Vietnam (50,000 cases), India (26,000), Pakistan (15,000) and Chile (5,000).

In Vietnam, the Quinacrine programme was called off in 1983 under pressure from the World Health Organisation. Investigating the situation there, *Journal* reporters found out that in a remote rubber plantation, scores of woman workers had been sterilised without their permission in hasty operations which had later led to deadly infections. Their attempts to interview angry workers ended when the security forces threw the reporters out of the plantation.

Quinacrine is banned in Bangladesh, but the newspaper reported that one defiant Dr Naseem Rahman had used it to sterilise 2900 women. When informed of the potential side-effects of the pellets, this was her response: "First, let these women be accepted as humans and then let's talk about human rights. As it is, they're going to die, so what do the long-term complications of Quinacrine matter?"

At a rural outpost in India, the local doctor was under the impression that the drug was accepted in the US. When told that this was untrue and that the drug may contain a carcinogen, the doctor said in fear, "People might come and kill the doctor."

They might as well go for the US-based researchers and sole distributors of the steriliser worldwide, Dr Elton Kessel and Stephen Mumford. It turns out that the two are pursuing a sinister anti-immigrant agenda. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, both are strongly opposed to immigration from the Third World to America. In the battle against immigration, Mumford sees Quinacrine as a powerful ally: reducing the Third World population will reduce the sup-

sue. Many blamed the powerful automobile lobby for putting pressure on the government, which finally backtracked. The CTC, nevertheless, went on to withdraw many of the tramways, and introduced buses.

During the time of protest, Calcuttans were startled to find a full-page ad by a Dane, Troels Holch Porlsen, in leading English dailies pleading for the tram. As interesting has been the "Save the Calcutta Tram" campaign by Roberto N. D'Andrea of Melbourne, a city which shares with Calcutta the oldest tramways in the world. D'Andrea visits Calcutta every year to raise funds, alerting citizens and authorities in the process. He even goes about working as a conductor, and has decorated the inside of one coach with scenes from the trams back home in Melbourne.

Environmental reasons apart, the tram makes good sense as it can carry more people than a bus. This comes handy to a city where about 4.5 million people commute daily by public transport during rush hour. Moreover, in the long run, trams are more cost effective: a bus has an average life span of 10 years compared to the 50 years of a tram.

There is also the nostalgic element. Horse-drawn trams were introduced in Calcutta in 1873 to transport goods to and from Howrah station and the river *ghats* (docks). The electric versions have been around since 1902. They are as much part of the 300-year-old Calcutta city as are its Victoria Memorial and the Howrah Bridge. Indeed, Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar*, a paean to the changing city, opened with a scene of a tram 'clang-clanging' its way through the city streets.

When the British left India, the agreement between CTC and the state government was that the latter would take over management of the company whenever it felt the need to do so. Anticipating a takeover, CTC, then headquartered in London, stopped providing money for infrastructure improvements. In the 60s and 70s, the left-led labour militancy further triggered the trams' decline. In 1978, CTC became a government concern. By then rot had already set in. Now on a possible track to recovery, India's only tramway needs all the help it can get.

-Ranjita Biswas

ply of hungry immigrants. Mumford talked in apocalyptic terms to a *Journal* reporter about the increase in immigration: "This explosion in human numbers, which after 2050 will come entirely from immigrants and the offspring of immigrants, will dominate our lives. There will be chaos and anarchy." In the same report, Dr Kessel said, "The present rate of illegal immigration isn't healthy."

It is no surprise, therefore, that Mumford's North Carolina-based Centre for Research on Population and Security receives financial support from the Scaife Family Foundation, the Dallas oil magnate family, Fikes, and two individuals, Donald Collins and Sally Epstein. All four are big contributors to, and board members of, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), long regarded by human rights activists as a racist, xenophobic organisation strongly opposed to immigration from Third World countries.

But the problem is that even the FDA ban may not stop Kessel and Mumford. The FDA has jurisdiction only over drug manufacture inside the US and its export (in fact, the FDA often allows drugs to be exported even when they are not legal in America), and can do nothing about its manufacture abroad. Consequently, Mumford will most likely get away with his statement that "arrangements have already been made to manufacture and distribute Quinacrine overseas".

Where does all this leave people like Nguyen Thi of Vietnam – one of the 100,000 women in 20 countries who was sterilised without being informed about the deadly effects? Talking angrily about the Thai doctor who gave her Quinacrine and the two American suppliers, Thi asked: "Did they consider us lab rats so that they could do whatever they wanted with our bodies?"

-Naeem Mohaiemen

Toni Hagen's **Nepal**

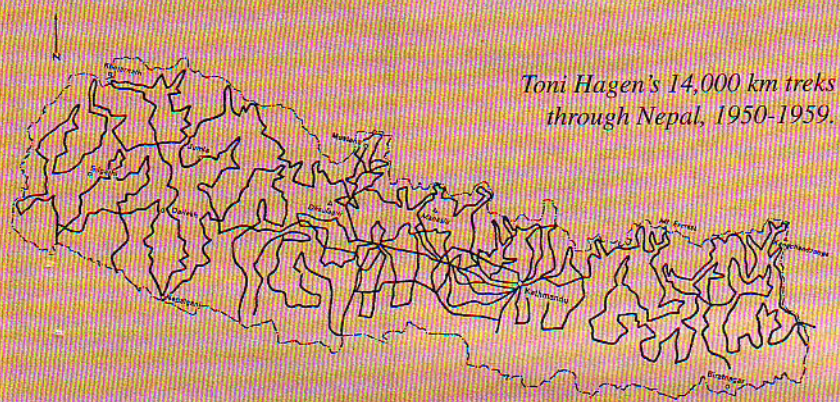
Himal Books, October 1998

Toni Hagen first set foot on Nepali soil in 1950, when Nepal was still 'forbidden' to outsiders. Starting from the Tarai plains, then still malarial, he traversed Nepal's populated midlands, and up to and beyond the high Himalaya. He walked a total of 14,000 km over nine years while carrying out the first-ever reconnaissance of the country for the United Nations.

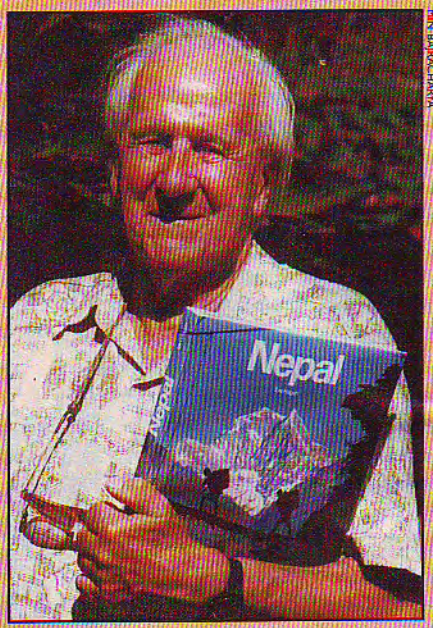
The Swiss geologist saw Nepal like no one had before him, and very few have since. He visited areas that are till today closed to tourists and observed so much of the country that has been overtaken by the march of time. With the meticulous mind of a scientist and the rendition of a storyteller, Toni Hagen first published *Nepal* in 1961. This, then, became the original book to introduce Nepal, in text and unmatched pictures, to the world as well as to the administrators of the newly awakened country.

Over time, as a development expert and a valued friend, the author has been returning regularly to these mountains, hills and plains. He has seen the country's transformation from a medieval-era state to a parliamentary democracy, and the population's rise from eight million when he first came to 22 million today. Toni Hagen has not been just a casual observer; he has continuously engaged in discussion on issues that affect the people, such as the merits of the prevalent development model, or questions of political evolution and ethnic assertion.

There have been others who have since studied more thoroughly certain areas and become better acquainted with various communities of the country, but Toni Hagen is undoubtedly still *the* expert of Nepal as a whole.



Toni Hagen's 14,000 km treks through Nepal, 1950-1959.



MIN BAJRACHARYA

Toni Hagen's
Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalaya
revised and updated with
Deepak Thapa
Fourth Edition, 1998
Himal Books, Lalitpur, Nepal
pp 251 (172 plates: 121 colour+51 b&w)
U$ 60 *(including postage)*

This 1998 edition of *Nepal* is the result of a unique transcontinental collaboration between the Swiss geologist-turned-development philosopher Toni Hagen and Nepali journalist Deepak Thapa, who is an editor of Himal magazine in Kathmandu Valley. This revised and updated Fourth Edition includes the original reports and photographs by Toni Hagen; at the same time, it brings the reader abreast with the changes the country has witnessed and the ideas that have evolved over the decades. An impressive amount of new information is collected in this edition, including up-to-date data and discussion on matters as diverse as history, development, tourism, agriculture, geography, ethnography, and the process of modernisation. The book ends with an essay looking ahead, maintaining that the country still has the potential to deliver a fine quality of life to its population.

The earlier editions of *Nepal* helped define Nepal to the world for the last four decades. The 1998 updated and revised edition will continue to do so for many years hence.

HIMAL BOOKS is the publishing wing of the not-for-profit Himal Association, Lalitpur, Nepal.

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Miss (Third) World

The Subcontinent buys into the beauty pageant myth, even as the West abandons it.

by Andrew Russell

When, on 26 November, the various Misses representing their countries cavort on the stage at Seychelles to be Miss World 1998, the event will be hard not to notice in South Asia and other parts of the developing world. In contrast, if you are living in Europe or North America, you probably will not even notice it is being held. Last year (1997) this nearly happened to this writer, living in England, when India's Diana Hayden was crowned Miss World in the "tropical paradise islands" of the Seychelles. It was just by chance that I phoned friends in Shillong, Meghalaya, a few days before the pageant took place, and so realised that a whole year had rolled by and the event was coming up again. I had watched the contest live on TV while visiting these same friends in 1996. That was the year of Miss World in Bangalore. The passion and politics which surrounded this and the following Miss World, makes it perfectly clear that "Miss World" is now a bigger deal in the so-called "Third World" than in the "First World" where it all began.

While all of South Asia was glued to television screens watching the Hyderabad beauty Diana Hayden make away with the crown last year, it was quite difficult for an uninitiated Miss World buff in London to access the event. Having heard that the event was taking place, I perused the British TV guides and saw it was only being broadcast on the satellite channel Sky TV. No one in my family (comfortable English middle class) nor any of my immediate friends or acquaintances had a satellite dish to receive Sky TV. After extensive phon-

Bangalore 1996.

GAURI GILL/OUTLOOK

ing around, my nephew in the south of England (I live in the north) was finally able to get the programme recorded by a friend. He sent the videotape to me a couple of days later.

The lack of easily accessible programming demonstrates how the market for "Miss World" and other beauty pageants has shrunk in "the West", compared to "the East", "the South", or wherever you want to draw the line between the affluent and the developing nations. In South Asia, the current wave of beauty pageant fever, which has reached deep into the growing suburban middle-class strongholds of India in particular, can be traced to the success of Indian representatives Aishwarya Rai and Sushmita Sen in the 1994 Miss World and Miss Universe contests, respectively. Bangladesh sent a representative to Miss World in 1996 (but not in 1997), while Nepal and Sri Lanka were both represented in 1997. Miss World, and the beauty pageants which feed into it around the region, is very much a current event in South Asia.

Political incorrectness

Diana Hayden's win in 1997, broadcast in India on the then fully government-controlled channel Doordarshan, only served to make the media hype that much stronger. Few who watched the contest could have doubted the wisdom of the judges in awarding Diana Hayden the crown from amongst the 86 contestants. (She also won the "Miss Photogenic" title and the award for best beachwear during the event.) Anyone who could quote Yeats ("In dreams begin responsibilities...") in her "personality" speech deserved to win.

After the contest, *The Times of India* carried a daily column, "Diana's World", while the beauty queen visited London as a guest of Erica and Julia Morley, the organisers of the contest. When the column was not written by Diana herself, staff journalists filled in from London. One of them, Rashmee Z. Ahmed, came close to the truth when she remarked that Diana Hayden is little known or recognised in London, in part because Miss World has become "Miss Third World, staged in the developing world and won by girls from parts of the globe where political correctness could not push the show off TV".

Ahmed was perhaps a trifle simplistic in suggesting that political correctness was the sole reason the show was available on but one satellite television channel in the UK. However, it is true that Miss World, which was first held there in the UK in 1961, has since largely faded from the public eye in that country. From the very beginning, there was resistance to Miss World, and the commodification of women's bodies (turning them from people to 'objects') that it represented. The organisers responded to criticism by launching the "beauty with a purpose" slogan, and introducing more by way of personality tests for contestants (so that they could still

be objects, but with personality and purpose).

After a flour bomb attack which sprayed compere Bob Hope, among others, the contest was moved to Las Vegas. It was subsequently relegated to Sun City, a resort complex in the South African homeland of Bophuthatswana. Television viewing figures began to fall and, in 1984, the BBC announced its decision to stop televising beauty contests such as Miss World because they were "anachronistic and offensive". While political correctness was the ostensible reason for the BBC taking them off the air, falling ratings (reflecting growing public indifference) and rising broadcast costs were undoubtedly as decisive factors in the decision.

In today's Britain, Miss World competes in a far larger media market for what is, in terms of viewing figures, an increasingly small piece of the pie. According to Sky TV, the 1997 Seychelles contest was watched by 365,000 people in the UK. Extrapolated (quite unjustifiably, but why not?) to the rest of the world, this represents a viewing figure of approximately 36.5 million. In 1996, the organisers of Miss World claimed a 2.5 billion audience and in 1997 they claimed 3 billion! Such figures seem on the border of fantasy, but how is anyone going to check?

Imperialism? Conspiracy?

The facts on the ground render accusations that beauty pageants are vestiges of "cultural imperialism" quite untenable. Most people in the UK (apart from the minuscule 0.7 percent of the population who have Sky TV and chose to watch the pageant and some interested "cultural observers" such as this writer) do not know and could not care less about Miss World or Miss Universe. One would be hard put to find a Briton who would be able to give the name or nationality of the current Miss World, or the name of our own Miss UK for that matter. Whose culture is it that is supposed to be imperial? Certainly not that of the average British person in the street.

Likewise, whose culture are we talking about when arguing, as did critics of the contest in India in 1996, that "Miss World" compromises the modest ideals and values of the stereotypical *pativrata* Indian woman? Most commentators on the contest in the Indian media (comfortable middle class) spoke in its favour, and there were plenty of letters and articles by current and former beauty queens in India arguing that beauty pageants offered a valuable and harmless "way out" of the powerlessness, repression and stultification that much of middle-class Indian represented for go-ahead young girls.

Some critics see Miss World as a conspiracy by multinational cosmetics companies to enable them to market their products in South Asia more effectively. This, too, seems unlikely. The beauty industry (cosmetics, designer wear, fitness centres, beauty salons) appears to be doing quite well among the South Asian middle classes with or without beauty contests. While successful companies are always on the look-out for high-profile commercial sponsorship opportunities to further increase their profit margins, media and popular responses in places where beauty contests are ascendant would suggest that this is not a particularly "top-down" phenomenon.

Modernity symbol

It could be that the social sciences can provide a different model to explain the Miss World mystique, one that goes deeper than theories of cultural imperialism and multinational conspiracy in explaining the 'Miss World' phenomenon and the disparities between east and west, north and south described here. Modernity is the cultural form associated with progress, singularity and hope. Postmodernism is the cultural form associated with flux, hybridity, and cynicism.

ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY

Also in Bangalore 1996.

"Miss World" is essentially a 'modern' phenomenon, one which has been taken up with vengeance in those parts of the world which aspire to the trappings of a 'modern' Western lifestyle (and where religious mores or economic devastation do not preclude it). In a country like the UK, meanwhile, the population at large has moved on to a state of postmodernity. Certainly, back in the 1960s, there were families in living rooms across the land who sat down to watch Miss World, not only because it was exciting but because it was one of the few things on TV to watch at that time. It was also a symbol and celebration of the new globalisation, with the technology that made it possible and the beauty which was its efflorescence, the way of the future (just like the Eurovision Song Contest, equally big at that time and equally small now, was a symbol of the new Europe).

This, too, is how Miss World has prevailed in many of the developing countries in the world, as it did in Britain after World War II. The Miss World pageant is a symbol of modernity, of shared cultural values (and standards of beauty). The "queens" celebrate their nations' arrival on the global stage in a way that has become outdated and old-fashioned in Western eyes. The "Miss World" myth (that it really means something in the global arena) is perpetuated and willingly subscribed to in many developing countries, and by the contest organisers. Where economics is lacking, it offers the chance of what French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu called "symbolic capital" for countries desperate to buy their way in to what is seen as "the modern world". What is sad, in the wake of the protests that took place during the 1996 contest in India, is that the world they seek to enter has moved on.

A. Russell is a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, University of Durham, England.

Other worlds beyond the stars

Image from "Azadi".

Junoon's fame has deeper roots in the hearts of Pakistanis than any notification from the Ministry of Culture.

by Kazim Saeed

When the Pakistani band Junoon toured India in May earlier this year, the success they achieved far exceeded expectations. The summer tour gave young Indians an opportunity to see Junoon's scintillating live performances, with their mix of the high-adrenaline frenzy of rock concerts and the delirium of Sufi *khanqahs* (shrines), that have caught the imagination of their Pakistani counterparts across the border.

The popularity of the remarkable phenomenon that is Junoon, however, did not prevent the Pakistani government from raking up trouble for the group back home.

In September, the government interrogated the band about its "subversive", "objectionable remarks" made in interviews to Zee TV and the BBC. Junoon was accused of "belittling the concept of the ideology of Pakistan" during its India tour. It was also charged with emphasising "cultural similarities" between India and Pakistan and hinting at "reunification".

The entire incident is laced with heavy irony, considering that Junoon is not just Pakistan's most popular band, it is also Pakistan's most incredibly, even distressingly, patriotic band. One of its hit albums includes a rock rendition of Pakistan's national anthem. Junoon (in Urdu, "obsession to the point of insanity") has consistently recited lines from the holy *Qur'an* in its songs. It has made spirited rock ballads out of the verses of Allama Iqbal, Pakistan's celebrated national poet. The band also came up with the 'greatest' patriotic song of the past few years, "Jazba-e-Junoon", which was a big hit during the last cricket World Cup in 1996. With the holy *Qur'an*, the national anthem, and Allama Iqbal's poetry, Junoon's brand of patriotism is right up the Pakistani state's alley.

The question therefore is: how was it possible for the government to take on the immensely popular Junoon? Simple: by exploiting the blind spot in Pakistan's collective psychology – India. It is really quite difficult to imagine Junoon "belittling the concept of the ideology of Pakistan", and the government action relies on engaging the psychological value of India as the forbidden link in the minds of the Pakistani people.

On its part, Junoon has been making the fundamental mistake of responding in kind, that is, by defending its credentials as the most patriotic band in Pakistan. Junoon's strong sense of outrage seems to have led to this reaction. It does not seem to understand that you can't beat the Government of Pakistan on the India wicket. It just is not possible. Junoon is playing to the government's beat here. That is why the matter sounds so mindless.

Junoon's best bet would be to change the discourse of the debate itself. Instead of trying to justify themselves on as controversial a question as India, they could challenge the very legitimacy of the government's action. On what grounds did the government interrogate Junoon? Were these grounds reasonable and were the charges justifiable given the facts of the matter?

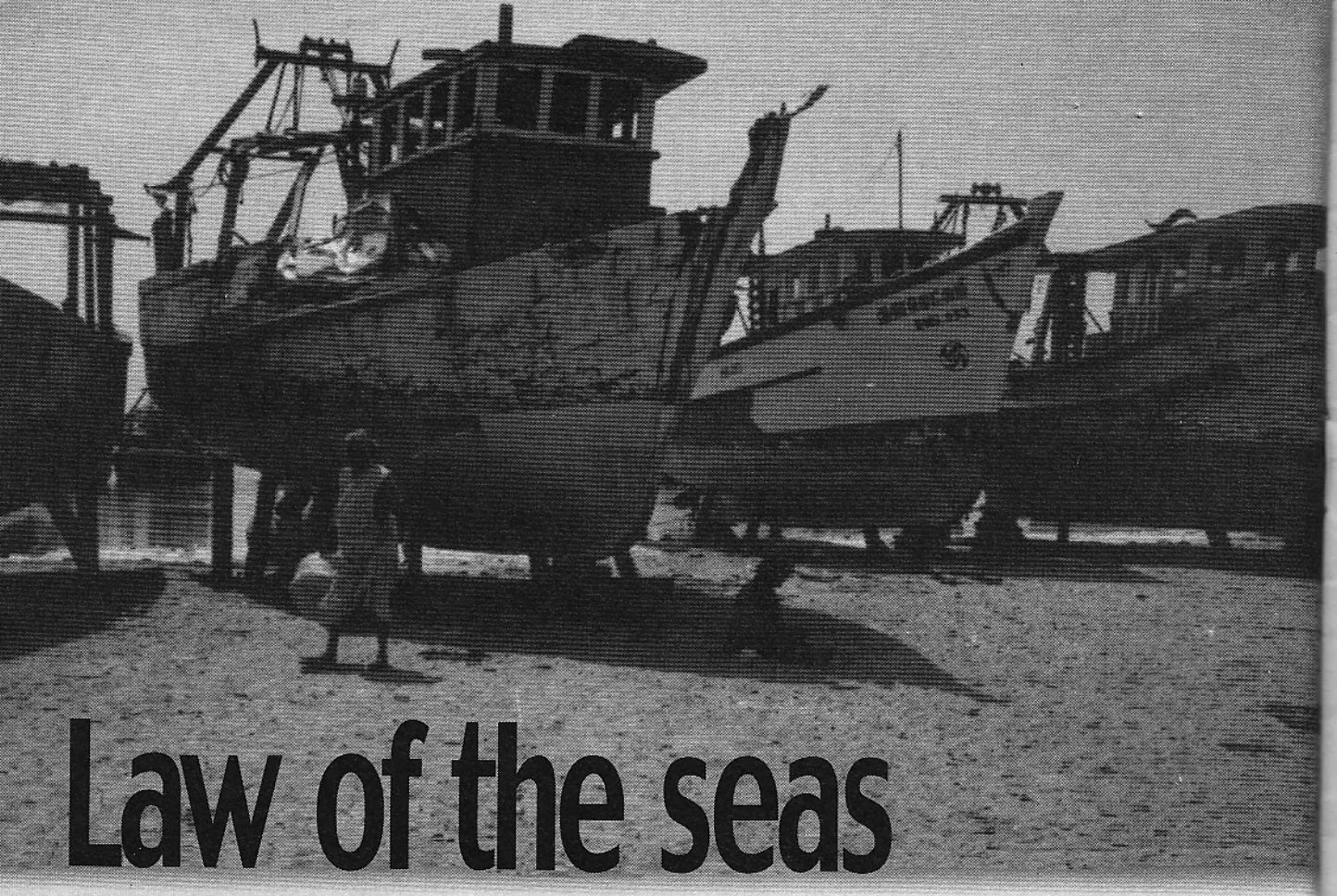
One cannot deny, though, that this is a slightly dangerous game for anyone to play. The government may come down harder on Junoon. For there is more to the Junoon affair than the Pakistani state and its hatred for another country. Junoon is a band which has had definite political overtones in its work. It has constantly spoken for change in the interest of the people of Pakistan.

The satellite media and the sales of Junoon's music can guarantee a voice for Junoon in the worst of government excesses. But it is still a dangerous game. Does Junoon have the gumption to do it? Given its popularity, given its anti-elite, anti-corruption political stance, will Junoon embark on this harder path of protest?

For the moment, it's not over. And it should not be. In the interest of that larger mission, the popular perception of Junoon's exit from this mess has to be something more dignified than a public whine. Junoon is currently on a tour of the US and when it gets back, it will still need to re-appear cleaner.

Junoon's fame has deeper roots in the hearts of Pakistanis than any notification from the Ministry of Culture can ever aspire to. And expectations can only be sublime from a band which has named its successive albums *Talaash* (Search), *Kashmakash* (Struggle), *Inquilaab* (Revolution), and *Azadi* (Freedom). Junoon should see itself in a constant struggle and this identity is not unknown to it. After all, it is no accident that the most apt message for Junoon's situation comes from one of the group's favourite poets, Allama Iqbal: *Sitaron say aagay jahan aur bhi hain. Abhi ishq kay imtihaan aur bhi hain.* (There are still other worlds beyond the stars. There are other ordeals of love yet.)

K. Saeed is a student of public affairs at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School.



Law of the seas

Onshore in Vercode village, a boat damaged by the Sri Lankan Navy.

Forgotten fishermen of the Palk Strait are caught in the crossfire between the Indian Navy, the Sri Lankan Navy and the Tamil Tigers.

text and pictures by ***Mukul Sharma***

As the experience of Kashmir indicates, borders between states can be extremely dangerous flashpoints. When militancy looms large, the local population suffers disproportionately. At the other end of the Subcontinent from Kashmir, on the narrow Palk Strait splitting India and Sri Lanka, it is the fishermen who are caught in the crossfire.

Largely unknown to the rest of the world, thousands of fishermen from India and Sri Lanka have suffered at the hands of those guarding the sea border. And if it is not the navy or coast guard of either side, it is the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka who are the tormentor.

The Palk Bay waters have always been rich in fish. But to earn a livelihood from this stretch of sea both the Lankan and Indian fishermen have to deal with harassment, arrests, boat seizures, and death. Most often, the charge is of illegal entry into foreign territory, which may later transform itself into allegations of smuggling, and helping terrorists.

The figures, sketchy and remote as they are, have their own tale to tell. Sri Lankan authorities claim that between1993-97, 338 Lankan fishermen were detained in Indian jails. On the other side, the Tamil Nadu government states that between1983-91, 50 of its fishermen were killed and 57 injured in attacks by the Sri Lankan navy. The victims are definitely not buying the fuzzy official figures. Says one angry Tamil Nadu fisherman, "The government figures of deaths and injuries are quite partial. We estimate that in the last seven years, 600 Indian fishermen have been shot dead and an equal number of them have been injured. What is this? Are we being asked to abandon fishing and take to begging?"

Tamil Nadu

The sea here is still the Bay of Bengal, and it is the Tamil Nadu coast of Ramanathapuram district. Offshore lies the 15-sq-mile island of Rame-

swaram, home to a fishing community of about 35,000. Rameswaram has nearly 8000 active sea-going fishermen. To the north is the Palk Bay, and on the island's eastern tip lies Danushkodi, from where it is only about 16 km to Talaimannar of Sri Lanka.

In Pamban village near the town of Rameswaram, lies Saghai Nagar, a settlement of around 1000 fisherfolk. They have witnessed, and have been the victims of the Sri Lankan navy's fiercest actions against Indian villagers. Here, 45-year-old Pathinathan lives with his wife and six children.

Pathinathan's tale: "I had a country boat. In the late evening of 5 November 1996, I and three others – Richard, Armstrong and Adaiklam – went fishing. It was a windy and stormy night, and our boat crossed to the Sri Lankan side near Talaimannar. When we realised this, we started coming back. But suddenly we were confronted by a boat of the Sri Lankan navy. We put on the light, raised our hands and begged for mercy. But they were firing and shouting at us. They then captured all of us, and took off our shirts, tied them on our eyes, and started beating us. They pushed us into their boats and continued the beating."

Pathinathan and his friends then found themselves in Sri Lanka's Mannar Jail. It took ten tortuous days and a hunger strike before help arrived. Recalls Pathinathan, "Somebody from the Indian embassy came to see us and assured us that we would get justice. But altogether we had to spend 100 days in several police stations and jails before we were taken to Jaffna and handed over to an Indian naval ship in mid-sea."

Paithanan's boat was returned four months after his own repatriation. It arrived badly damaged and without the engine. "Now I am no longer a boat owner but a boat worker under a heavy loan," he says.

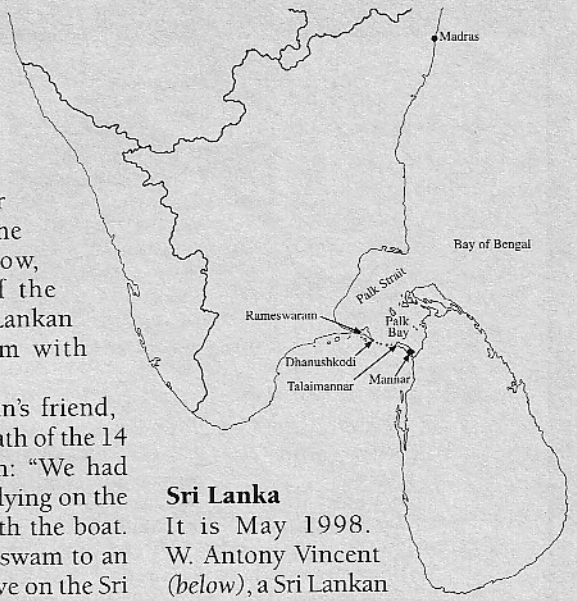
Saghai Nagar residents might consider Pathinathan and his friends lucky. Nobody got killed, no one left widows and fatherless children behind, no one got crippled. Like Susha Raj's six friends who got killed, Austin and George who drowned during an incident, and Sebastian who ended handicapped.

The story of Sebastian's group has moral overtones that should not be missed. It is a story of how the ocean currents took their unsuspecting team to the Sri Lankan side, of how, for all the brutality of the Lankan naval officers, Lankan fishermen treated them with compassion.

This is how Sebastian's friend, John, narrates the aftermath of the 14 July 1997 naval ambush: "We had seen Austin and George dying on the spot and going down with the boat. The rest of us somehow swam to an island called Nedundhevve on the Sri Lankan side. There some Sri Lankan fishermen rescued us and a local organisation took us to Jaffna for medical treatment... Altogether, we were in Jaffna jail for five and a half months. Leave alone compensation for the dead, their families have not even got death certificates till now. Our lives have been ruined without any fault of ours. It was the wind and water currents that took us to the other side. There are widowed mothers and wives left behind."

With a crippled right hand, Sebastian cannot fish any more. He says, "I cannot think about my future. I am married with three children and now we are dependent on my father."

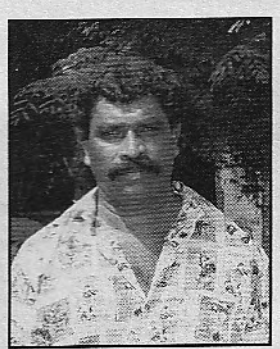
Tales such as these run across all the nearby fishing hamlets of Tamil Nadu, only the degrees differ. Antony Doss of Vercode village narrates an absurd incident where the captives had to fish for the Sri Lankan navy and survive on two slices of bread. One-time boat owner Sahyaraj is left hapless by the questions of anxious parents whose sons have never come back since they left with his boat last December. Sahyaraj, who says he was tortured at the hands of the Sri Lankan navy, asks: "Is this the 50th year of Independence for us? Our very lives and livelihood are in danger and no government does anything."



Sri Lanka

It is May 1998. W. Antony Vincent *(below)*, a Sri Lankan boat-owner, is waiting outside the Madurai Central Jail in Tamil Nadu. His mission in India is a difficult one, that of the release of five fishermen and his boat *Philip Sahana*. Vincent has already spent INR 10,000 in travelling to Trivandrum and Madurai to meet concerned people. His five-year-old boat cost him INR 900,000, of which 300,000 was bank loan. He is unable to pay the INR 15,000 monthly installments to the bank because the boat has been confiscated by the Indian Navy.

Vincent says: "I was not on the boat, so I do not know how the capture took place. The captive fishermen – K.S. Nicholas, W. Wilbert, K.S. Joseph, Sirinimal Fernando and Wijendra Wadugu Chandra – wrote to me that they were fishing on their side of the Gulf of Mannar, when the Indian navy came and captured their boat and them. I want my boat back, then only can I survive. I am also trying for the release of the fishermen... Maybe after some time I will get rid of all this and shift to some other profession."



At the Madurai Central Jail, the captured Wilbert lends a fresh twist to the story: "The navy people said that we were being caught because the Sri Lankan navy was killing Indian people." Other than this talk of revenge, Wilbert maintains that no one ever told them what

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their offence was, even after they were produced before the magistrate several times. "The magistrate did not ask us anything, nor did we tell anything."

But Wilbert could easily have been charged with smuggling, which is usually what the Indian navy does when it picks up straying Sri Lankan fishing boats. H. Mahadevan, a prominent leader of the All-India Trade Union Congress, recalls a typical incident involving 15 Lankan fishermen in the Madurai Jail who were being held on the "concocted" charge of smuggling shark fins into India. Mahadevan recalls that although no shark fins were found in the vessel full of fish, a confession was obtained from the Lankans, who were slapped with a fine of INR 47,000 by the Indian Customs. The irony is that the price of shark fin is much the same in both India and Sri Lanka. Says Mahadevan, "What happened was a miscarriage of justice, and genuine fishermen were convicted as common smugglers."

Once arrested on Palk Bay, a Sri Lankan fisherman generally has to wait anything from six to 12 months for release. His captured boat, however, will have to wait a couple of years before it is returned. The fisherman will be disappointed if he is expecting any help or legal support from his country's mission in Madras. The Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner in Madras, S. Gautama Das, admits, "We do not provide any legal support to the captive fishermen. When we get any information regarding the arrest of our fishermen, we inform the Tamil Nadu state government. Then the state government gets reports from the concerned departments and sends them to the central government. The central government takes a political decision about the release."

The mission in Madras is unable to readily supply information about the whereabouts of its captured citizens. These men are left to fend for themselves in a hostile, alien setting for what is difficult to call a crime.

Troubled waters

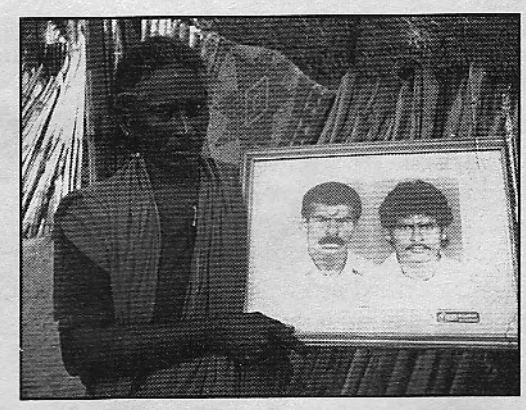
The maritime agreements between the two countries reflect the power balance, the political and security interests of national governments which take precedence over the rights of the poor fishermen on both sides. The two maritime agreements signed between Sri Lanka and India, one in June 1974 and the other in March 1976, demarcated the Palk Strait maritime boundary and gave Kachchativu to Sri Lanka. (Kachchativu is a small, uninhabited island in the Palk Strait at a distance of eight and 10 miles from the nearest points of Sri Lanka and India respectively.) However, the Tamil Nadu fishermen were not barred from the area. Article 5 of the 1974 agreement said: "Subject to the foregoing, Indian fishermen and pilgrims will enjoy access to Kachchativu as hitherto, and will not be required by Sri Lanka to obtain travel documents or visas for these purposes." Article 6 further emphasised the 'open' nature of the territory, saying, "The vessels of India and Sri Lanka will enjoy in each other's waters such rights as they have traditionally enjoyed therein."

But as is the case with so many bilateral arrangements, it was political expediency that had led to the agreement. Getting Kachchativu for Sri Lanka was important for the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government after its loss of face in the 1971 insurrection by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and India was looking for support from regional governments in the wake of the May 1974 nuclear test in Pokharan. The agreement, in some ways, also helped quell the prevailing anti-India hysteria in Sri Lanka.

The 1976 agreement represented a different kind of settlement altogether. It demarcated the boundary in the Gulf of Mannar and the Bay of Bengal, barring either country's fishermen from casting their nets in the other's waters. Paragraph I of the Exchange of Letters said: "With the establishment of the exclusive economic zones by the two countries, India and Sri Lanka will exercise sovereign rights over the living and non-living resources of their respective zones. The fishing vessels and fishermen of India shall not engage in fishing in the historic waters, the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone of Sri Lanka, nor shall the fishing vessels and fishermen of Sri Lanka engage in fishing in the historic waters, the territorial sea and the exclusive economic zone of India, without the express permission of Sri Lanka or India, as the case may be."

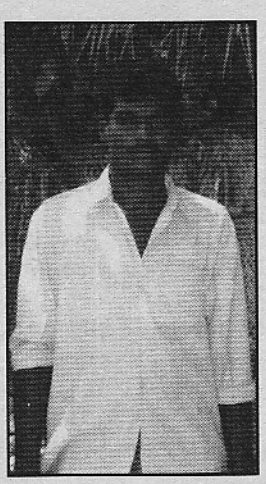
It is from the different interpretations of the above paragraph and Article 5 of the 1974 agreement that controversy has arisen over whether Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen can fish in each other's waters. The Sri Lankan government argues that the 1976 Exchange of Letters effectively supersedes the free access clause in Articles 5 and 6 of the 1974 agreement. About Article 5 itself, Colombo claims that it only provides for Indian fishermen to dry their nets in Kachchativu, and not the right to fish.

Several bilateral meetings later, the dispute shows no signs of a solution, even though fishermen continue to be harassed and killed. The official apathy is aptly captured by Madras University professor, V. Suryanarayan, who has been studying the problem: "It is always a fire-fighting exercise by both the governments, without re-



Mother from Pamban village with picture of two dead sons. Another bereaved mother, Maria Nevis (top).

moving the causes of fire. In fact, who cares in Delhi and Colombo regarding shooting and killing of some hundred poor fishermen?"



M. Sahayam has been captured by the Sri Lankan Navy 13 times.

Tigers

The main cause behind the fishermen's plight is the factor of militancy. Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, the presence of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) militants in coastal Tamil Nadu, and the killing of Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, have all taken a heavy toll on the livelihood of villagers on both sides of the Strait. It is not only the coast guards and naval forces who harass the fishermen, but the LTTE also have attacked these helpless men and their vessels.

"It is quite a regular happening that LTTE people take away our fishing boats and send back the crew. We have lost at least 40 boats belonging to the people of the Rameswaram area in the recent past," says Murganandan, the president of Ramanathapuram District Fishermen Association.

The immediate fallout of the rise in militancy has been that since 1993 Sri Lanka's navy has been given *carte blanche* to open fire on all unauthorised boats in its territorial waters extending from Trincomalee to Mannar. Lankan fishermen from Jaffna and Mannar, meanwhile, face restrictions on the types of boats they can own, areas they can fish in, and the time they can spend in the sea. In times of heightened conflict, Colombo promulgates emergency regulations whereby its waters become a prohibited zone. The Indian government has also adopted tough measures to prevent infiltration and movement of LTTE guerrillas. In these situations, nobody makes a distinction between militants and fishermen.

Prawns

To be sure, there are some grey areas as far as the relationship between the fisherfolk and the militants is concerned, especially in the case of the Tamil Nadu villages. While leaders of the state's fishermen take pains to explain that none of their men abet militancy, it is alleged that there are some 30 mechanised boats in Rameswaram which actually do no fishing, but are involved in reaching goods to Tamil militants on the other side. Some fishermen say this activity is not political in nature, but a means to make quick money. But as is often the case, the ones who carry out shady deals are never caught, and it is the innocent fishermen who face the brunt of the repercussions.

What is it that makes the waters beyond Kachchativu so special that Indian fishermen cannot resist fishing in it despite the proven dangers? One answer is prawns. The ocean currents and sedimentation on the Sri Lankan side of the Palk Strait make it a rich field for the expensive tiger prawns.

There is also the incentive system which puts pressure on the fishing fleets to go for big catches, especially of shrimp which, too, are found in abundance on the Sri Lankan side. For a kilo's catch of shrimp, the driver gets INR 20, the second hand INR 15, and the deck hands ten rupees each. This provides the fishermen with the motive to catch more, disregarding the dangers involved.

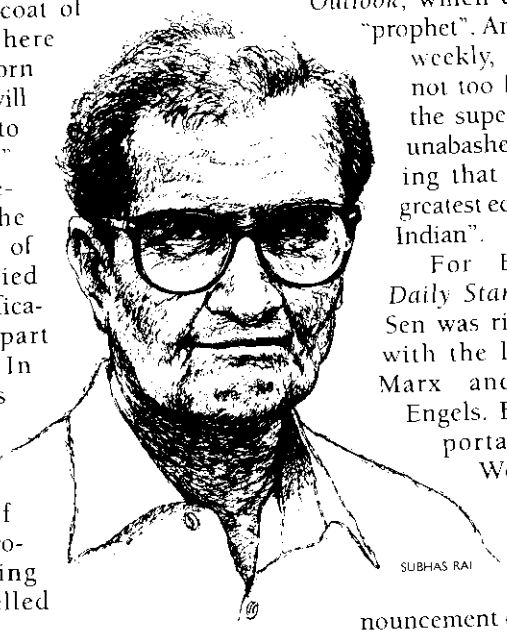
It is the survival instinct in a competitive fishing area that is pushing Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen to go into each other's areas. Palk Bay, by virtue of its rich fishery resources, is one of the most active fishing areas in the Subcontinent. Here, hundreds of trawlers vie night and day with each other for the best catch. And if national boundaries come in the way, they might as well be ignored. But with paranoid state structures, that can be a fatal mistake.

M. Sharma is a Delhi-based journalist with special interest in labour issues. This report was prepared with support from the Panos Institute.

Owning Amartya-da

THE NOBEL PRIZE is a pampered institution. Nobel laureates more so. So when Amartya Sen won this year's "Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences", the tom-tomming of his achievement hardly came as a surprise. But what was exasperating was the way those who had nothing remotely to do with Sen fell over one another to own his legacy. If Indians were more than proud that one of "us" had attained the "ultimate" award, the Bengali Indians went absolutely wild over "our" Amartya Da. Not to be outdone, the Bangladeshis went about reminding everyone that the "amiable" Amartya Sen had spent his first 12 years on their soil. As for the politically inclined, both the right and the left found ample proof in Sen's works that he was one of them.

Amartya euphoria stretched to ridiculous levels. A Calcutta caterer cashed in by declaring: "We're proud to have served food at his daughter's wedding." A Bangladeshi participant on an Internet discussion group revealed pearls of information about the house Sen had lived in during his Dhaka days: "The present owner of the house is Mr Amanullah...The original structural design of the house has not been altered much except for receiving a few coat of paints." Then there were the new-born babies who now will have to live up to their "Amartya" moniker (hopefully without the marital disasters of the thrice-married economist). Deification was also part of the mania. In Calcutta, India's Nobel cradle, *puja pandals* were erected in the name of Sen, with the protagonist looking more dishevelled than ever.



SUBHAS RAI

The Indian and Bangladeshi media boasted to all who wanted to know that it was the father of all Indian Nobel laureates, Rahindranath Tagore, who had christened Amartya. The most cloying compliment came from the prominent Indian weekly, *Outlook*, which called him a "prophet". Another Indian weekly, *Sunday*, was not too far behind in the superlative game, unabashedly trumpeting that "the world's greatest economist is an Indian".

For Bangladesh's *Daily Star* newspaper, Sen was right up there with the likes of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But more important was the West Bengal-Bangladesh connection. Said the paper: "The announcement of his winning the prize sent waves of joy around the Subcontinent...but the cel-

Sen bashing

...SEN DESERVES to get bashed a bit, because he did, after all, win this year's Nobel. Even at his best, he can be at his worst. Consider one of the few areas in which he said something important – his work on the history of famines. On that topic, I don't for a moment question his passion or compassion, especially since he lived through the 1943 Bengal famine at the age of nine. But I do occasionally question his good sense.

Sen's finding was that the starvation associated with these awful events has mainly been due to lack of access to food, rather than lack of its availability; the food, he says, was there all along, except the access was denied. That's a pretty simple and stark distinction, but amazingly, Sen dresses it up with an absurd formal apparatus.

At the beginning of his 1981 journal article, "Ingredients of Famine Analysis" (one hopes he used that title ironically), we confront a graph with lots of lines and curves on it, in which the horizontal axis is labelled "Food" and the vertical axis "NonFood" and underneath it we read, "With a price ratio p, and a minimum food requirement OA, the starvation set Si is given by the region OAB. If the endowment vector is xi, the person is in a position to avoid starvation...." and on and on in that vein.

All this is in the service of drawing that simple distinction between access and availability before he goes on to the actual evidence.

And even regarding his actual analysis of famines, it's hard to completely trust his judgment. By solely grinding the socialist axe of access to supply over supply

ebrations paled in comparison to the pride and sense of achievement that had swept across West Bengal and Bangladesh."

Now to the man himself; how gung-ho is he about his roots? Well, disappointingly enough, this is what Sen had to say to *The Asian Age* : "I think it would be pompous and arrogant to think it is a great credit to Bengal, Bangladesh or India. I would have to be aggressively self-confident to take that view."

Meanwhile, among the many bouquets that Sen received, there were also a few brickbats. Some accused him of indulging in jargon-ridden economics which does not have the possibility of ushering in social change. The harshest critic was Gene Epstein writing for the investment weekly, *Barron's*: "I see scant evidence of the brilliance that so impressed the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and far more of the mind-rot that is so characteristic of academic economists." *(see longer excerpt below)*

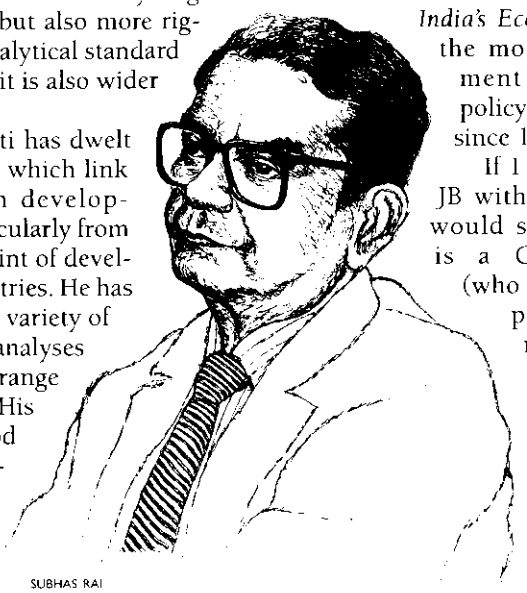
It is indeed tempting to call Amartya Sen, first and foremost, a South Asian. But it would still be hard to believe that a region's greatness depends on the number of Nobel laureates, especially when a strong bias within the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta regions leave the rest of the Subcontinent in a Nobel drought.

Meanwhile, Jagdish

Providing a reaction to Amartya Sen's having won the Nobel Prize, Mohammed Muzammil, Reader iu Economics at Lucknow University, writes:

IF THERE IS a question which Indian economist is next or rather, who has been denied the Nobel so far, I am sure most will agree it is Jagdish Bhagwati (JB), Arthur Lehman Professor of Economics and Political Science at Columbia University. JB's contribution is not only larger in volume but also more rigorous in analytical standard than Sen's; it is also wider in scope.

Bhagwati has dwelt with issues which link trade with development, particularly from the viewpoint of developing countries. He has produced a variety of economic analyses on a wide range of themes. His active period as an established economist is longer and he has been more closely associated with economic policy making in India. In that way, he is closer to India and to knowing the Indian economy. The document, which he wrote (with T.N. Srinivasan) for the Indian government's Ministry of Finance in 1993 entitled *India's Economic Reform* is the most quoted document on economic policy changes in India since 1990.



SUBHAS RAI

If I were to compare JB with Amartya Sen, I would say Amartya Sen is a Gunnar Myrdal (who shared the Nobel prize in Economics in 1974 with Friedreich A. von Hayek) and JB is a Paul A. Samuelson (who was crowned with the Nobel in economics earlier in 1970).

availability, he gives the latter issue a short shrift that is inappropriate.

For instance, he writes sweepingly that the food security of people in the Western capitalist economies "is not the result of any guarantee that the market or profit-maximisation has provided, but rather due to the social security the state has offered."

Really? Could food security have nothing to do with the enormous gains in productivity that the market has brought to the farm? Even Sen himself writes of "deaths on a very large scale" because of famine conditions in China during 1959-61. The way agriculture was then organised probably had something to do with that awful tragedy, just as Soviet collectivism has a lot do with the dreadful prospect of food insecurity currently faced by the Russian people.

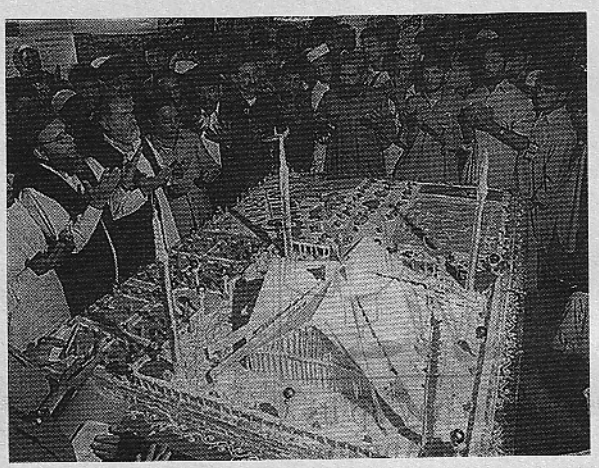
But getting back to how he combines those "tools from economics and philosophy", in the 1997 expanded edition of his book, On Economic Inequality, *Sen writes, "Even for limited application of the merit principle – giving more than the 'norm' to the specially meritorious but not less than the 'norm' to the demented – it can be argued that the measure of merit is culture-specific."*

He then goes on to dismiss the merit principle thus: "While many of us may be content to live in a society which values the ability to lecture more than it values, say, the ability to make loud, shrill noises by blowing sharply through one's nose, we might be perfectly able to give long lectures about possible societies in which the latter quality would be the more desired virtue."

Excerpt from "Is it really reasonable to assume that the newest Nobelist deserved the prize?" by Gene Epstein (*Barron's*, 19 October 1998)

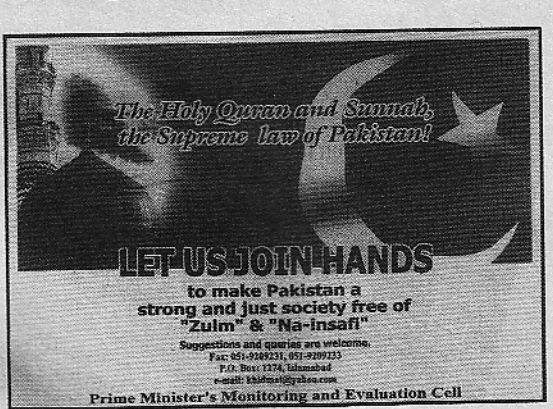
DOWN IN THE south of the Subcontinent, women are getting undue attention as is the case everywhere in the world. In what must come as heart-breaking news to gropers, Madras on 12 October became the first in India to have a women-only train, between Madras beach and the suburban Tambaram, 28 kilometres away. "We have now been **freed from Romeos**...," says commuter Pushpalatha in *The Asian Age*. Disappointingly, the paper carries no quote from said Romeos.

WHILE TALKING OF **female transportation**, Kerala's bus drivers must be cursing their luck. Known for long as much for their flirting skills, if not for the driving ones, they will now miss the eminently enjoyable company of the women in the front seats reserved for them. *The Times of India* report says women's seats will be shifted to the rear to avoid accidents by distracted drivers. One driver lamented to the paper, "The colour has gone out of my life." Not all women are happy though with the decision, for in the bargain of losing the drivers' wanted or unwanted attention they have gained a bumpy ride.



ANOTHER SOUTHERN STATE, Kar-nataka, is getting a bit too chauvinistic about its language, **Kannada**. The government in Bangalore has decided that vehicles will now sport number plates in mother's own Kannada. Sounds ok enough, until you realise that in the multilingual city of Bangalore Kannada is as alien as Latin to many. How would one report a traffic accident? "Learn Kannada," some would say. Others are proposing bilingual Kannada-English number plates, which seems to make sense.

NOW THIS IS a measure of PM Nawaz Sharif and his coterie's **copywriting** skills. But to give them credit, they may be charting out new territory here – not many ads have been done to push religion. Over across the border, the Hindutva freaks, in that Indo-Pak spirit of 'what you can do, I can do better' could begin splashing saffron-streaked full pagers in grateful dailies and magazines. But of course, they have to do better cliches than Sharif's spin writers. If this is the sales pitch for an Islamic society, how dreary the real thing would be.



THE MAN WHO got the West to learn the meaning of *fatwas* can finally go back home. After years of reluctance, the Indian authorities are now open to the idea of giving Salman Rushdie a visa. But the ban on his book, *The Satanic Verses*, stands. Small matter, as long as **pirated copies** are still doing the rounds. Question is, what will Salman do in India once he gets there?

THIS ONE IS **custom-baked** for Nawaz Sharif's Islamic Pakistan. And in far better taste (literally) than what his copywriters have done. The picture shows activists of Pakistan's largest religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami, offering prayers around a 500-pound cake replica of Islamabad's famous Shah Faisal mosque. Whoever came up with this idea for the opening of a religious gathering, I wonder. And if by cake, I am to understand the concoction of flour, baking powder and cream, does such a decadent Western concoction deserve to open an Islamic conference? Stuff of blasphemy, what?

WHAT ARE THE wives of New Delhi's bureaucrats – "IAS housewives" – up to now? Yet another **kitty party**? No, they are up to headier stuff. Bored perhaps of boredom itself, these wives of the *burra* sahibs, walked (sashayed, perhaps) on the lawns of Union Cabinet Secretary Prabhat Kumar, in saris and salwar kameezes. Diwali, diwali was the excuse. I can only hope that they don't start getting ideas and ask their *gauche* spouses – the IAS officer's sartorial sense, to put it politely, has long been a disaster of legendary proportions – to join them the next time around. I also hope there's no next time.

IF YOU DIDN'T know this one, take a note. India's, and more correctly, **West Bengal's hero** of the freedom struggle, "Netaji" Subhas Chandra Bose still finds himself in the British government's list of war criminals. This was brought to light recently by the Orissa high court which has asked the central government to get Netaji off the list. The surprise was that this plea comes from Orissa, not West Bengal. The Bengalis and Oriyas have no love lost between

them, one had thought. The court also has asked the government to make a written declaration to the people about the mysterious disappearance of Bose, which is one of the enduring unsolved puzzles of South Asia – so claim the Bengalis, though most others seem to have a sneaking suspicion that there is no mystery. Nevertheless, a bestseller waits to be written upon Netaji's last moments. Let an Oriya do it.

WASH-COLORADO

Mark Udall, 48, of Colorado, U.S.A. is running For election to the United States House of Representatives for the Second district in Colorado. Mr. Udall has visited Nepal many times including Expeditions to Nangpa in 1979, Cho Oyu in 1987, and Kanchenjunga in 1990. He also went to the North Face of Mt. Everest in 1994.

Mark Udall is a friend of Nepal and good Friend to many Nepalese. He will continue to be a friend to Nepal, if he is elected on Nov. 3, 1998.

All Mark's Friends in Nepal wish him best Luck.

Dawa Sherpa & his Families
Taksindu-7/Chhelemu
Solukhumbu
(Nepal)

This ad, inserted by one "Dawa Sherpa & his Families" in *The Rising Nepal*, is moving in its transcontinental nature. A Nepali campaigning for a little-known US congressional candidate advertises in a Kathmandu newspaper?

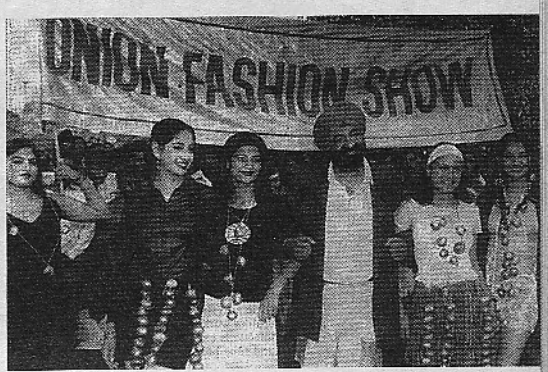
A BELATED PLEA to Sonia Gandhi: Madam, please for sense's sake, **take back** the Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration which you gave late October to a certain A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the godfather of the Indian nuclear bomb. Madam, was this some kind of a joke? The only integration that came about in India is among those who wanted to eat *laddoos* on that fateful day of 11 May. Please send somebody over to Kalam's deadly lab right now and get back that award. I may even give you the National Integration Award the next time around.

ONCE AGAIN, A pompous point to be made by the Chief Photo-Inspector of South Asia. They say – or was it Marshall McLuhan – that a picture is worth more than a thousand words. But not this one. This picture notches up points for poignancy only because of the caption. It turns out that the man in the frame is not an idle beach bum using his lungi to know which way the wind is blowing. I can imagine that someone who is looking for dead fellow fishermen might conceivably be drying his lungi, but is it good photo-editing to choose this particular picture to describe the event?

THIS IS THE kind of "in-depth studies" I don't give a **hoot** for. Just by button-holing 243 individuals, an Indian Ministry of Home Affairs-funded 'research' has come out with this apocalyptic finding that marital disharmony is more prevalent among illiterates. Nonsense, I say. It may as well depend on the shape of your partner's toes.

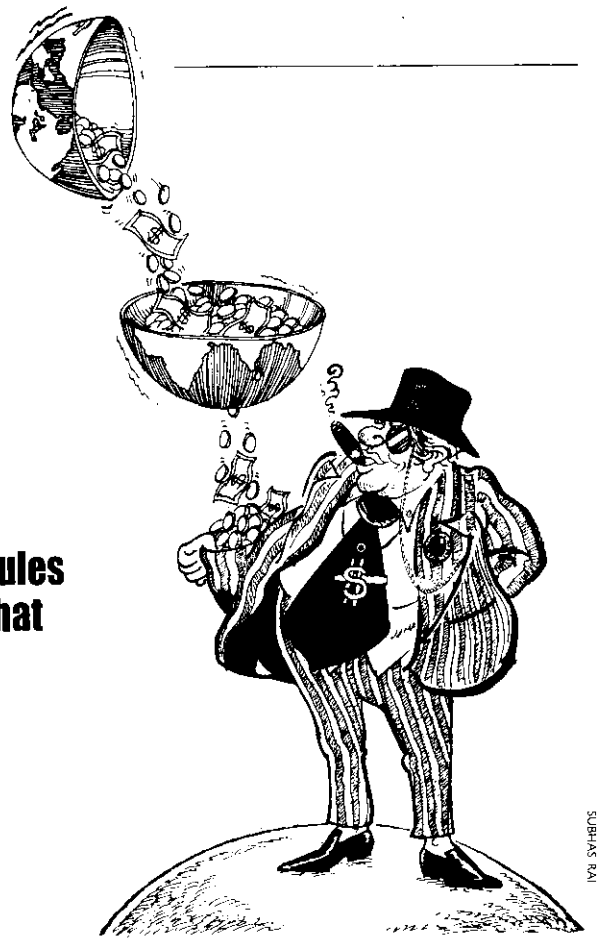
ATTENTION, EDITORS OF South Asia! Great that you receive thousands of "kudos" letters from your appreciative readers via e-mail. But why are you behaving like ***noveau* e-mailites** and flaunting it unnecessarily? Instead of the letter writer's address, why do you have "received via e-mail" which says precious nothing about the sender's location? Do you not know that an average intelligent reader in South Asia would like to know at least some antecedents of the person sending in an e-mail, such as where he/she lives? If no postal address is given, you should at least print their email addresses.

FINALLY TO THE onions. The sky-rocketing prices of the **bulb** in the Subcontinent have spawned an interesting genre of protests, cartoons, spoofs, housewives' interviews, sarcastic columns replete with 'onion-idioms', photos of the pell-mell and the queues at onion vendors', far-out headlines ("Crocs are shedding onion tears"), governmental promises and explanations, and even a fashion show. Many even say that the Delhi Chief Minister Sahib Singh was sacked because "he didn't know his onions". All this makes me think that if the prices of the *Allium cepa* persist to hit the ceiling, we will all, in that rich tradition of idioms, lose our onions. But the happy note is that at least we would be spared of some leaders' onion-induced virility which blasted all those bombs.



-Chhetria Patrakar

Most favoured nations



An international treaty which will liberalise rules on international investments the same way that GATT did on trade is drawing flak.

by Kavaljit Singh

The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) is an international economic agreement under negotiation within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Discussions on the MAI were initiated in 1995 and agreement was scheduled to be reached by May 1997. However, due to the delay in reaching consensus on all the provisions of the MAI, coupled with strong protests from NGOs, citizens' groups and labour unions (especially in the OECD countries), the negotiations were first extended till April 1998 and then until October 1998 *(see update pg 53)*.

The Agreement on Investment is designed to remove all barriers and controls on the movement of finance capital and production facilities. Backed politically by the United States and the European Union, MAI is designed on the framework of the investment provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Unlike NAFTA, which applies only to three countries (Canada, Mexico and the US), however, the MAI would have worldwide application.

Initially, the 29 member countries of OECD – the source of 85 percent of the world's foreign investment – would adopt the agreement, and then others would be invited to join. Since a majority of restrictions on foreign investments happen to be in the developing countries, critics argue that the MAI is intended to serve as an instrument to further open up their economies to foreign (Western) capital.

What is significant is that there is no participation of developing and other non-OECD countries in the negotiations, which are conducted in secret. But that is hardly likely to matter given that there is growing consensus among the ruling elite of developing countries on the need for foreign investments. Further, because joining MAI will in all likelihood become an international requirement for attracting foreign investment, even the developing countries which are cautious will have no alternative but to accept the Agreement.

It is important to understand MAI in relation to other major developments in the international economic and political spheres. In the present global context, investment and trade liberalisation are the main items on the economic agenda set by the transnational corporations (TNCs) and supported by the G-7, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation. Economic globalisation is no longer seen as merely an economic phenomenon but increasingly as "the next great foreign policy debate".

With the end of the Cold War, the US foreign policy has geared itself for economic diplomacy. The key elements of this approach include pressuring countries to open up their economies to foreign investors in general and, more importantly, in protecting the interests of US investors. This is being achieved through use of a number of instruments, such as diplomatic pressure; political hacking to agreements such as GATT, NAFTA, MAI, and the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA); and supporting the World Bank- and IMF-led structural adjustment programmes and bailout packages which have an important component of trade and in-

vestment liberalisation. Interestingly, the industrialised countries of Europe, though wary of American corporations on home turf, happily join forces with these very organisations when it comes to dealing with the developing world.

It is true that recent years have seen a sudden spurt in private capital flows, especially to developing countries. Private capital flows are now nearly five times the size of official ones. Out of USD 285 billion of total financial flows in 1996, more than 80 percent of the total flows, or USD 244 billion, came from private sources. Foreign direct investment (FDI) continues to be the largest component of net private flows and accounted for 45 percent of total private flows in 1996. Portfolio Investment (PI), negligible during the 1970s and 1980s, had become sizeable by the early 1990s. In 1996, PI totalled USD 46 billion.

The share of developing countries in the global FDI flows is currently almost 40 percent, compared with 15 percent in 1990, and their share of PI flows is now almost 30 percent, compared with around 2 percent before the start of the decade. However, private capital flows are highly concentrated in the East Asian and Latin American region, with the top 10 countries receiving nearly three-quarters of all capital inflows.

Another major development is the rapid liberalisation of trade through various regional and international agreements such as NAFTA, GATT and now, WTO. These agreements include investment liberalisation measures. Similarly, a number of international investment agreements (both bilateral and regional) have been signed in recent years. In 1996, there were 1160 bilateral investment treaties, out of which nearly two thirds were signed in the 1990s. Since there is no multilateral investment agreement which protects and institutionalises the interests of global investors, the MAI (as a multilateral agreement) will liberalise rules related to investment in the same way that GATT did on the trade front.

Outwardly, investment liberalisation and trade liberalisation may look like two different things but, in actual fact, they complement and reinforce each other to strengthen economic globalisation. Free trade tends to encourage foreign investment, and foreign investment tends to encourage trade. Since TNCs dominate much of world trade and foreign investment, a combination of investment liberalisation and free trade will enable TNCs to expand and restructure their operations on a world-wide scale. By making capital mobility a legally enforceable global property rule, the TNCs will further consolidate their power. There is, meanwhile, very little evidence to support the assertion that investment liberalisation benefits the host countries.

Key provisions: impact and implications

Let us examine the main proposals laid down under the MAI, their impact and implications.

Definition of investment: The MAI definition of investment says, "Investment means: Every kind of asset owned or controlled, directly or indirectly, by an investor." In simple terms, it includes FDI, PI, intellectual property rights such as patents and trademarks, and contract rights and concessions rights. Any move by governments which can affect any of these "assets" is covered by the MAI. Thus, regulations on labour, environment and repatriation of profits besides controls on hot money flows would have to abide by the MAI.

National treatment: Under this rule, a country that signs the MAI has to give foreign investors "treatment no less favourable than the treatment it accords [in like circumstances] to its own investors." In simple terms, foreign investors and companies are to be treated in the same manner as domestic ones. The rule says that any special concessions and protection accorded to domestic companies and any laws meant to promote domestic companies could be challenged because they discriminate against large foreign investors and companies.

For instance, if India joins the MAI, the government will have to remove existing restrictions which prohibit foreign companies to own agricultural land and property; foreign investment curbs in certain sectors (e.g.

Glossary

- *Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Investment which makes a physical presence in a foreign country. Considered to be a long-term investment, it can include plants, machinery or control over a company through the purchase of shares and stocks.*
- *Portfolio Investment (PI): The investment in stocks, bonds and financial derivatives. Also, known as "hot money" because it is short-term, fluid and footloose – moving from one country to another within seconds.*
- *North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): A trade and investment agreement among Canada, Mexico and the United States in place since 1994. Many of the MAI's rules are based on the investment rules of NAFTA.*
- *Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA): This agreement was proposed by the leaders of 34 countries, belonging to the western hemisphere, in December 1994. The proposed agreement is intended to create a free trade area, linking all of the hemisphere's economies (except Cuba) by the year 2005.*
- *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): Called the "rich man's" club, consisting as it does of the 29 most industrialised countries from Europe, North America and the Pacific region, it carries out research and analysis, and therefore, is also known as a "think tank" of these countries. The MAI is the first attempt by the OECD to propose binding international rules. It has invited some non-OECD countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the Slovak Republic, and Hong Kong, China) to the MAI discussions in the capacity of observers. There has been no participation from South Asia so far in these discussions.*

insurance) will have to go; and it will not be able to extend economic assistance, for instance, to the weak domestic small-scale industry. Surprisingly, while governments are prohibited from discriminating against foreign investors, there is no rule under the MAI, to stop governments from treating foreign corporations more favourably than domestic ones. There are ample instances where the Indian government has offered special taxes and other concessions to foreign investors in recent years, such as in the power sector.

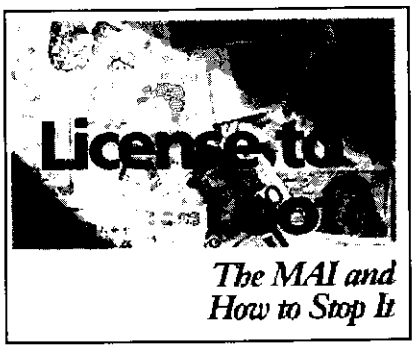
Performance requirements: No performance requirements, that is, conditions imposed by governments on foreign and domestic investors to get a better deal for the country and public at large, will be allowed under MAI. Performance requirements could include export obligations, equal pay for equal work, preference to local people in employment, location of an industry in a 'backward' region, and so on. Although these requirements are intended to benefit the host country and its people, the TNCs tend to view them as inefficient and unnecessary.

In India, the government has often imposed export obligations on TNCs for two reasons: first, to avoid downward pressure on the balance of payments; and second, to ensure that corporations earn enough foreign exchange to balance the foreign exchange outgo in terms of repatriation of profits and other payments. In India, the tendency has been for TNCs to make all kinds of false promises and to undertake obligations in order to gain entry into a market. Once they have a foot in the door, they have tended to forget their commitments. Presently, Pepsico, along with other TNCs such as Nestle, Whirlpool and BioCon, are being investigated for violations of export obligations.

Disregard for obligations is a serious matter and need not be taken lightly by policy makers and law enforcement agencies. What is worrisome is that, instead of pushing rules to ensure that the foreign corporations meet their performance requirements, the MAI proposal seeks to remove these obligatory provisions altogether. Under the MAI, governments cannot impose export obligations or other performance requirements on foreign investors, even if the same requirements are applied to domestic investors.

Similarly, under the MAI, governments cannot insist that a TNC take on a local partner or form joint ventures; hire a certain number of local people; invest a minimum amount in the local community; or, transfer technology to the government or local companies. The extent to which the MAI would limit performance requirements is still under negotiation.

Expropriation and compensation: Under the MAI, governments which take over a foreign investor's property will have to pay adequate compensation immediately. The rule of expropriation under the MAI is based on the investment rules of NAFTA, which is the first agreement that entitles companies to sue governments they believe are raising unfair barriers to trade. Surprisingly, expropriation would be defined not just as the outright seizure of property but would include governmental actions "tantamount to expropriation". By broadly defining expropriation, the MAI opens a new door for foreign investors to challenge governmental regulations and seek compensation.



Anti-MAI message of the group, Friends of the Earth.

A recent case filed by a US corporation against the Canadian government under the provisions of NAFTA explains the ramifications of this MAI provision. When the Canadian government in April 1997 banned the import of a potentially toxic gasoline additive, its US manufacturer sued for USD 251 million, claiming "expropriation" of its "property" (namely, its anticipated profits). Realising that its chances of success were slim, the Canadian government entered into a compromise with the company, allowing resumption of sale of the additive, and paying USD 13 million in compensation, in addition to announcing that the additive posed "no health risk". This particular case could well serve as an eye-opener to governments seeking to join the MAI.

Dispute resolution: If a foreign investor believes that a host country is violating the MAI, it can either complain to its own government, which, in turn, can take the other country to binding international arbitration; or, the investor can directly challenge the host country. In either case, investors have an option to sue a country before an international tribunal rather than in the country's domestic courts. This investor-to-state dispute resolution mechanism is worse than the GATT mechanism under which governments can file complaints against other governments. The MAI's dispute resolution process does not provide any role for citizens or public access to disputed cases. Furthermore, the resolution system is one-sided as it does not allow citizens or governments to use the dispute procedures to sue foreign investors for not following local rules and regulations. This mechanism clearly puts foreign investors in an advantageous position vis-a-vis citizens and governments.

Apart from those mentioned above, there are other provisions in the MAI which need close scrutiny. The most favoured nation (MFN) clause requires countries to treat all foreign countries and investors in the same manner, preventing the country from using human rights, environmental or labour standards as investment criteria. The MAI proposes doing away with all restrictions on the repatriation of profits or the movement of capital. Under the proposal, countries cannot prohibit or delay an investor from moving profits and assets from an operation, or sale of a local enterprise to the investor's home country. "Roll-back" and "standstill" provisions require countries to eliminate laws that violate MAI rules (either immediately or over a period of time) and to refrain from passing such laws in the future. Although

country-specific exemptions for some existing laws are under negotiation, national, state and local laws would be drastically changed in tune with the rules of MAI.

Opposition

Human rights and legal groups have sharply criticised the MAI for provisions which come into fundamental conflict with the objectives of the international human rights regime. They argue that the rules of the MAI will undermine the widely-ratified international treaties on economic, social and cultural rights, as well as the conventions on racial discrimination and on gender equality. These instruments encourage national governments to provide special protection to socially disadvantaged groups, whereas the MAI's MFN provision also prohibits the state from utilising human rights criteria in the formulation and execution of investment policies.

A number of social activists, NGOs, labour groups and political parties within the OECD countries have rejected the MAI and launched campaigns against the draft instrument. These critics contend that the MAI does not contain language on the responsibilities of investors regarding fair competition, treatment of employees, environmental protection and other critical issues. Although there is a discussion within OECD on including an existing OECD code of corporate responsibility in the MAI, critics rightly argue that these provisions would be non-binding.

While maintaining a common position of "No" to the MAI in its present form, some groups, realising the need for an international investment treaty to make the global flows of capital accountable and responsible, are demanding strong, enforceable rules requiring investors to behave responsibly in both home and host countries. In this direction, a citizens' MAI with emphasis on the citizens' rights and democratic control was recently prepared.

Even if the negotiations at the OECD break down, many of the MAI provisions could be pushed through other forums, including the WTO. Therefore, it is important to monitor the developments very closely. The campaigns against the MAI are yet to develop and gather momentum in the non-OECD countries. It is high time that social movements, labour groups, political parties and others initiate a wider debate on the MAI and its implications.

K. Singh is the coordinator of Public Interest Research Group, New Delhi.

MAI update

The October negotiations on the MAI turned out to be a one-day informal meeting with nothing concrete on how to proceed further. Interestingly, much before the meet, the French government announced its withdrawal from the negotiations. France's withdrawal, along with the failure of the talks in October, is being taken as a major victory and there is a mood of celebration among some citizens' groups, labour unions and political groups, particularly in the member countries of the OECD, which have opposed the MAI.

It would be naive to assume, however, that the MAI is dead. The negotiating group is meeting again in December 1998 and there will be more meetings to initiate the process of transferring the MAI to the WTO. The groundwork to include investment regulations in WTO's millennium agenda is being worked out, and a formal announcement to this effect is expected during the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Washington DC next year. Discussions on the new MAI are likely to begin at the WTO Ministerial Meeting (Millennium Round) at the same venue in 2000.

At the same time, however, realising that it is relatively easier to get an agreement from a select 29 member countries of OECD rather than through the WTO (with has a membership of over 100 countries, including many developing countries that are likely to oppose some of the basic provisions of the MAI), the US is still trying to get the agreement through the OECD.

V O I

SCISSOR SENA. *From an Agence France Presse report datelined New Delhi: "Hindu body wants 'un-Indian' poem and story off school books."*

Vidya Bharati secretary Dinanath Batra named the offending poem – being taught to 14-year-olds – as "The Highwayman" by British poet Alfred Noyes and quoted the lines he said were "objectionable":

One kiss, my bonny sweetheart,
I am after a prize tonight,

and

He rose upright in the stirrups,
he scarce could reach her hand;
But she loosened her hair in the casement!
Her face burnt like a brand.

Batra said the short story, "The Muscular Son-in-law" written by an Indian, had a letter from a wife to her husband in which she says she was "eagerly waiting for you to be with me."

This, Batra said, was also objectionable.

Batra said Indian schools should not teach the young "graphically about the female body and her emotions."

CRICKETER GANDHI. *C.K. Subramaniam, in a letter to* The Asian Age, *comes up with a trivia gem – that Mahatma Gandhi, of all the people, was a cricket freak.*

Not many people are aware of the incident when Mahatma Gandhi, obliging a request for an autograph, "played with a straight bat" and "became a member of an official England team". How he was chosen cannot probably be explained by Marylebone Cricket Club selectors. The only documentary evidence of the event is provided by Ms Laxmi Merchant, sister of Vijay Merchant. Accepting a request for an autograph, Gandhiji turned over the pages and put his name as the 17th player of the MCC team led by Douglas Jardine in 1933-34. The book is one of the treasured possessions of the MCC at Lords. Gandhiji was not only a cricket enthusiast but also wielded the willow. Ratilal Ghelabhai Mehta, a friend and schoolmate (at Alfred High School, Rajkot) wrote, "It is not commonly known that Gandhi was a dashing cricketer and evinced keen interest in the game. Many a time we played cricket together and I remember that he was good at bowling and batting though he had an aversion for physical fitness exercises at school. Once we were watching a cricket match together. In those days there were dingdong battles between teams of Rajkot City and Rajkot Sardar (camp) Area. At a crucial moment, as if by intuition, Gandhi said that a particular player would be out and hey presto, that batsman was really out."

PARALLEL PARLIAMENT. *Excerpt from the Myanmar government's dismissive missive of 6 October after the National League for Democracy decided to form a parliament of its own to govern Myanmar.*

The Government of Myanmar noted with interest the announcement by the National League for Democracy on 17 September that it was forming a 10-person committee that will serve as a parliament to govern Myanmar.

It is also interesting to learn that the NLD has decided that all laws enacted in Myanmar since September 18, 1988 are illegal.

It remains unclear which responsibilities of government this new committee intends to take over, what its policies are, or how it intends to implement these policies. Will the committee also serve as the judicial and executive branches of government, or only as the legislative branch? Under what constitution will it govern? Will it defend Myanmar sovereignty? Will it send envoys to

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other countries?

It would be interesting to hear more about how this committee intends to govern. Since it was formed ten years ago, the NLD has never put forth any serious, specific ideas on the structure of government; economic policy; counter-narcotics policy; foreign policy; defence policy; or, in fact, any other area of governing.

Moreover, the new committee appears to be confused even about its own decision. For example, the NLD has decreed that its new committee will serve as a parliament until another parliament can be convened under the 1990 election law. However, the NLD has also decreed that all laws enacted since 1988 are illegal. So is the 1990 law valid, or invalid? Under what law should the parliament be convened?

While the NLD's committee puzzles over these issues, the current Government will conclude to shoulder the real responsibilities of governing Myanmar, and will continue the National Convention that is writing a Constitution that will lead to a stable, sustainable democracy in Myanmar.

RIDICULOUS INTELLIGENGE.

V. Gangadhar marvels at the Indian 'intelligent agents' in his column "Media Musings" in Sunday, *the weekly from Calcutta.*

There must be someone who is very 'intelligent' in our intelligence agencies. Every two months or so, they con the newspapers to publish detailed accounts on Union home minister L.K. Advani being on the hit-list of the ISI, Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray targeted by the ISI and other extremist units and so on. The media swallows all this and publishes the reports without any investigation of its own. Recently, the Gujarat minister of state for home, Haren Pandya, claimed that a Pakistani agent sent to 'assassinate' Advani was killed in a police encounter in Ahmedabad.

Unfortunately, the media had to rely only on the police version on these developments. And knowing the 'credibility' of our police and intelligence agencies, it is rather ridiculous for the media to publish these news items under banner headlines. Reading these media accounts, one got the impression that the 'killers' were incompetent bunglers. Now, the ISI has a sinister reputation and it was hard to believe it would recruit such bunglers on major killing missions.

INDIAN OR AFRICAN?

For those who came in late, the Darwin Awards is an annual honour given to those who provided the universal human gene pool the biggest service by getting killed in the most extraordinarily stupid way. The 1998 winner is...

Overzealous zookeeper Friedrich Riesfeldt, who fed his constipated elephant Stefan 22 doses of animal laxative and more than a bushel of berries, figs and prunes before the plugged-up pachyderm finally let fly and suffocated the keeper under 200 pounds of excrement.

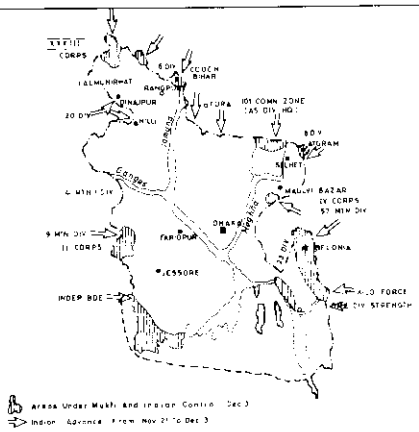
Investigators say ill-fated Friedrich, 46, was attempting to give the ailing elephant an olive oil enema when the relieved beast unloaded on him like a dump truck full of mud. The sheer force of the elephant's unexpected defecation knocked Mr Riesfeldt to the ground, where he struck his head on a rock and lay unconscious as the elephant continued to evacuate his bowels on top of him, said flabbergasted Paderhorn police detective Erik Dern. With no one there to help him, he lay under all that dung for at least an hour before a watchman came along, and during that time he suffocated. It seems to be just one of those freak accidents that happen.

English language press was of the Pakistani army for losing the war. At the same time, with Benazir Bhutto then in the prime ministerial seat, there was the glorification of 'martyr' Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. According to Niazi, however, it was Bhutto, in complicity with some generals, who was responsible for the breakup of Pakistan.

Describing Bhutto's gameplan, Niazi writes that first he got 'rid' of East Pakistan so that he could become prime minister of a truncated Pakistan, all the while blaming the army for the breakup. Next, he got Lt Gen Gul Hassan, the then chief of General Staff, to organise a coup in cahoots with Air Chief Rahim Khan in order to get rid of the President and Supreme Commander, Gen Yahya Khan. Later, Bhutto double-crossed Gul Hassan as well. Bhutto paid dearly for the games he played with the generals. After all, it was ultimately the same Zia-ul Haq, whom he had appointed army chief out of turn over nine generals, who saw him to the gallows.

Self justifications

Niazi's book reveals all the intrigue and duplicity that was then routine in both the wings of Pakistan. It was against this background that Niazi, a veteran of insurgencies in Punjab and Sindh, was elevated, superseding 12 other officers, to replace Lt Gen Tikka Khan's suave successor in East Pakistan, Lt Gen Sahibzada Yaqub Khan. Anyone familiar with the Sahibzada from Rampur would know that he



Indian invasion: 21 October-3 December 1971.

would not have the stomach for the hutchery perpetrated on the Bengalis by his predecessor. Less than four days after assuming command, he announced, "I refuse to kill my brethren."

Niazi's mission appeared simple: "Your task is not to allow the Indians to establish a government of Bangladesh on the soil of East Pakistan." Indeed, on the other side, the task given to Aurora was to carve out an enclave in East Pakistan where a provisional government of Bangladesh could be set up and to later create conditions for the return of the refugees.

Last year, in his own book, Jacob told the world that the capture of Dhaka was not the military objective. So what was? With hindsight, both Jacob, and now Niazi, have doctored their versions to suit their personal interests. Their writings are nothing more than self-justifications.

However, Niazi's task was altered mid-stream – he was also required to tie down the maximum number of Indian forces in the east for as long as possible. A difficult task was made impossible as Niazi's strategic theory rested on the thesis that the decision for the war in the east lay on the outcome of the war in the west. He may have been right. But his 45,000-strong force proved no match for "the 12 divisions and 39 BSF battalions". By the time the war started on 3 December, Niazi was already doomed to defeat. Talk of help from the north (Chinese) and south (Americans) proved illusory.

Full marks should go to Niazi's courage and stamina for continuing to fight for 'vindication' 37 years after it all ended in a defeat for his side. However, his book has not created as many ripples in India as it has in Pakistan. Despite its many blemishes, it is a useful work because of the identity of the writer. Niazi has also demanded a new enquiry to reject the as-yet unreleased Hamood ur Rehman Commission report. More significantly, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* seems to have set the cat among the pigeons, because now Tikka Khan, Gul Hassan and Yaquh Khan have all joined in the battle of recrimination.

Thanks to Niazi, it looks like the 1971 war has not yet ended.

A.K. Mehta is a journalist, a former army officer, and founder-member of the Indian Defence Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

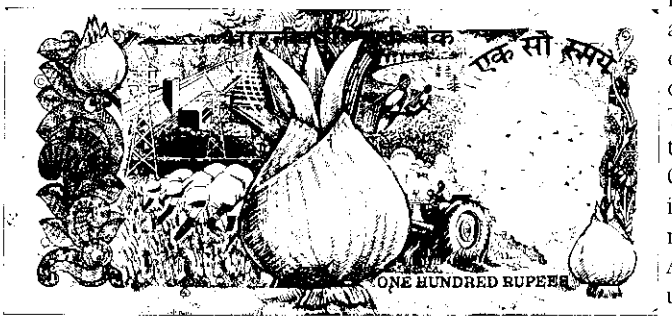
Abominably yours

No Indian worth his onion believes any more that the present dearth of this precious veggie is caused by El Nino. As a matter of true fact, I am convinced firmly (and so is the public enlarged) that onion is just an escaped goat. Our gowerment why is shedding crocodile tears over absconding onion otherwise? The real reason India has lost its onions is that the entire strategic stockpile of this commodity was exported, presumably to be able to afford weapons of a more offensive nature. Deprived of this valuable ingredient in their diet, our luminaries are going for a more exotic fare. Film stars are shooting black bucks (I had always thought black bucks were undeclared tax-free cash that our famous actors are fond of hoarding, until the media shed light on the situation and we were told that they are actually a species of holy deer), and ministers are dining on peacock. Something must be done before our politicians eat the national bird into extinction.

Anyway, in strictest off the record confidence (if this statement is ever attributed to me I shall deny ever having made it) I am also informing the reading public that most Indian onions were bought by Pakistan, which planned the purchase to increase its own onion arsenal. The might of modern nations in the Subcontinent today is measured by the number of bulbs, not bombs, at their disposal. So, before either side realised it, there was a fullscale arms race in progress as both bought out the other's onions. At the moment it looks like Pakistanis are ahead. But wait till they both graduate from onions to mustard.

The military use of the onion and garlic is not new. In pre-Columbus America, Aztecs used a garlic-like tuber as a biological weapon to poison enemy armies. Ancient Abyssinians believed onion had supernatural properties that protected them from attacks so they stuck a pod under each armpit. There is no record to show how well this worked, but I can say from experience that onion under the armpit is an old quack remedy that does not even protect you from lecherous husbands.

The French were smarter. In medieval times, they ate large amounts of garlic before marching off, burping, to battle so that even before it came down to hand-to-mouth combat the enemy was knocked unconscious by the overpowering odour that emanated from their oral region as they yelled blood-curdling battle cries like: "The German bastards crossed the Rhine. Parlez-vous!" This was in keeping with warfare principles



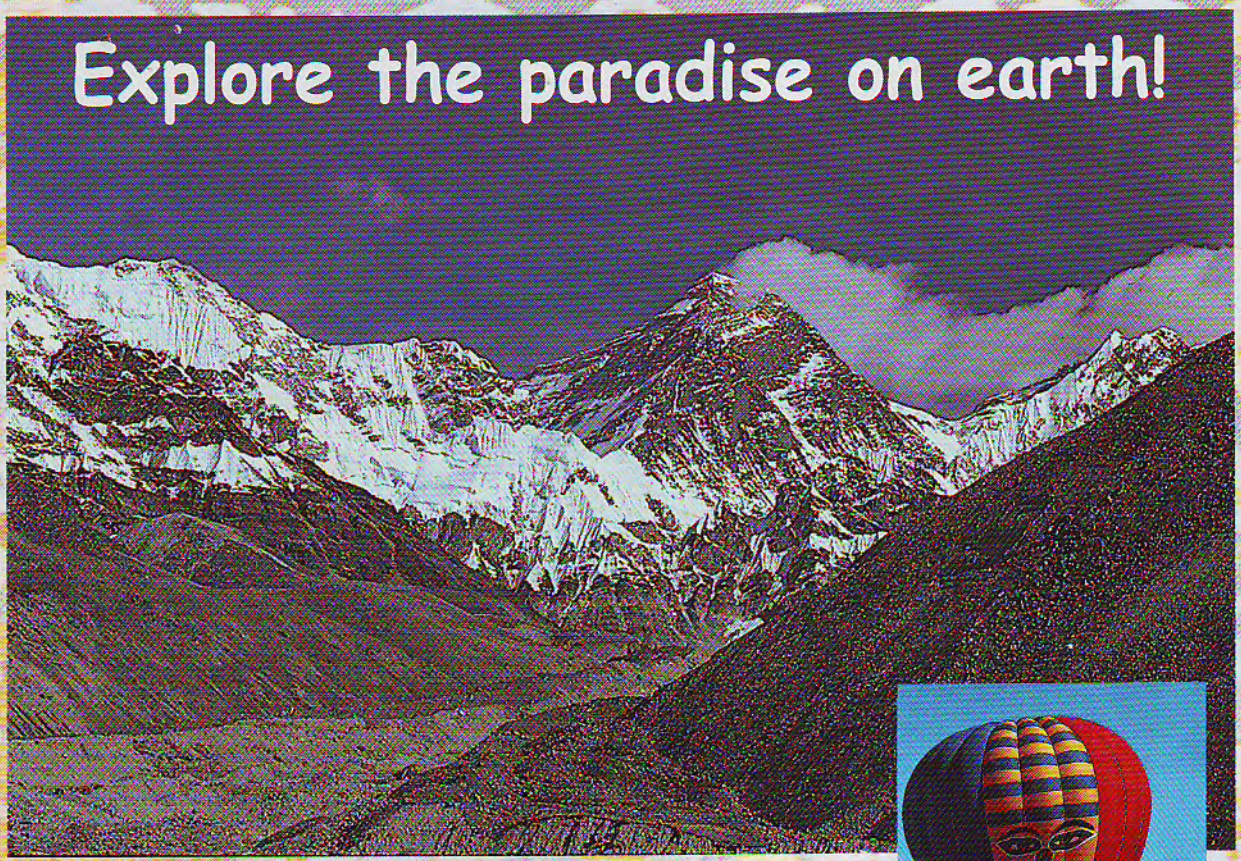
espoused by Chinese strategist Sun Tzu who said the best wars were those that could be won even before fighting. Have to admit, though, that garlic did not protect the French too well in Napoleon's Russia Campaign where Tartar regiments felled the French because they (the Tartars) had more lethal and longer range bad-breath. This is why, to this day, the other word used by dentists to refer to plaque is tartar. "More dentists recommend Grin than any other toothpaste brand because it contains the anti-tartar agent, Gargoyle-X."

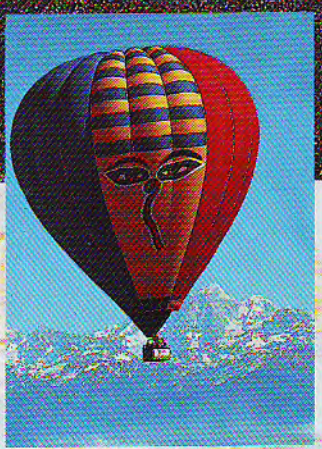
Keeping large supplies of onion and garlic as weapons of mass destruction was a part of the defence strategy of every blood-thirsty ruler since Alexander of Macedonia, who created the first ever shortage of onions in the Punjab by sneaking behind enemy lines and cutting off supply in what has since come to be known as The First Great Onion War. But, as any sepoy will tell you, in warfare one can never be too careful about the integrity of ammunition. That is why in the final analysis when it comes down to pushing and shoving, it is not the quantity of the onion that matters, but the quality. The newly imported Central Asian onions just don't carry the same punch as our own *swadeshi* warheads. The recent case of adulterated mustard oil must serve as a warning to all: what if our secret stash of mustard gas does not work anymore because a contractor mixed the stuff with Servo Engine Oil?

Today, it is not the military application of the onion that makes it such a sought-after commodity: in the Subcontinent the onion has replaced the gold standard as nations vie with each other to bolster their hard currency onion reserves. The Indian Rupee is now trading at 10 Rupees per Onion, and as it continues its freefall in currency markets, the Punjab Agriculture Bank has begun unloading onions to stabilise the exchange rate. Hedge fund managers are left standing in the manure as the deflated rupee sags. The crisis comes as the rupee is also under severe pressure from other currencies: The Garlic, The Mustard and The Pulse which have all appreciated against the rupee in recent weeks.

All this is happening as investor confidence in fiduciary instruments is shaken by the East Asian contagion, sanctions, and the fall from grace of mutual funds like the Unit Trust. Flummoxed fund managers are looking for new areas to park their money safely so that it will not only ride out the storm, but also outrun inflation. Onion, frugally, thriftily invested in the bank carries with it the best hope for a financially secure future. If you invest wisely in onions today you not only have a formidable arsenal to deter potential foes but you can also afford to eat peacocks. And protect yourself from Tartars.

Explore the paradise on earth!





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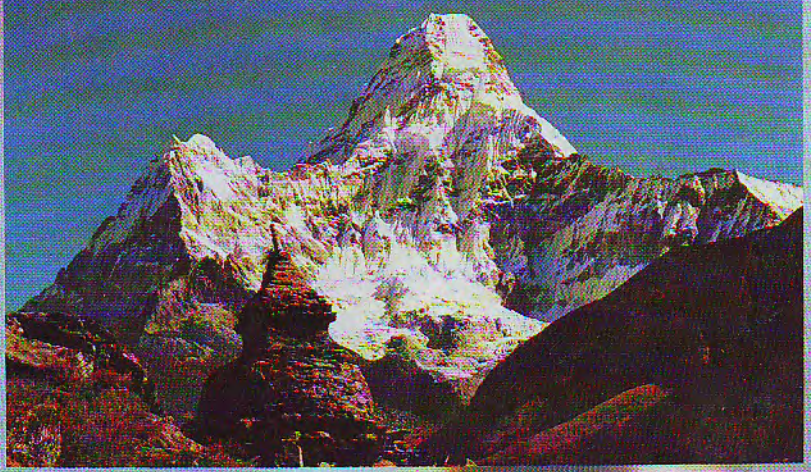

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