

# HIMALAYAN

SOUTH ASIAN

October 1999



# Gods in Exile

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**COMMENTARY** 5

Kashtimor  
Brute majority

**COVER** 8

Gods in exile  
*by Kanak Mani Dixit*  
Non-resident Nataraja  
*by Ranjit Devraj*  
An antique land  
*by Massoud Ansari*  
The missing hand and other stories  
*by Farjad Nabi*  
Where is the Bactrian gold?  
*by Khaled Ahmed*

**MEDIAFILE** 26

**FEATURES** 28

This believer was a communist  
*by Hasan Mujtaba*  
A house of my own  
*by Zaigham Khan*  
In a hole over coal  
*by Nireesh Eliatamby*  
"Foreign staff, English medium..."  
*by Cassandra Balchin*  
Bangladesh bioscope  
*by Afsan Chowdhury*  
Director's choice  
*by Sujoy Dhar*  
Malayalee avante garde  
*by Rajiv Theodore*

**REVIEWS** 46

Earth Door Sky Door  
*reviewed by Ratan Rai*

**OPINION** 50

Intrusions, infiltrations and  
Surinder Singh  
*by Ashok K. Mehta*

**VOICES** 52

Kashmir deadline  
Fair is unfair  
UN in Lanka  
A bomb for a bomb  
Are you a true South Asian?  
Let them be

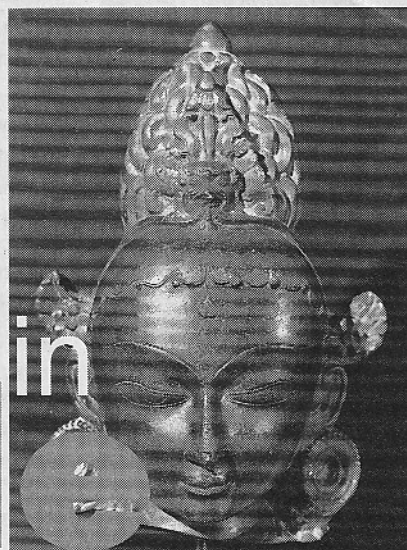
**LITSA** 58

The last nomads  
*by Joel Issacson*  
The year of the earth rooster/Before the  
rain/Carried from here/Love letter 19  
*by Tshering Wangmo Dhomba*

**ABOMINABLY YOURS** 64

8

## Gods in Exile



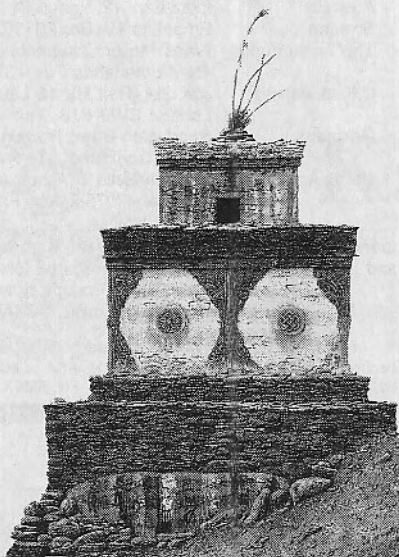
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46

## Mustang architecture



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Cover shows statue of Saraswati from Pharping in the southern rim of the Kathmandu Valley, photographed by **Juergen Schick** in May and December of 1984. The stolen head was returned to Nepal in August this year.

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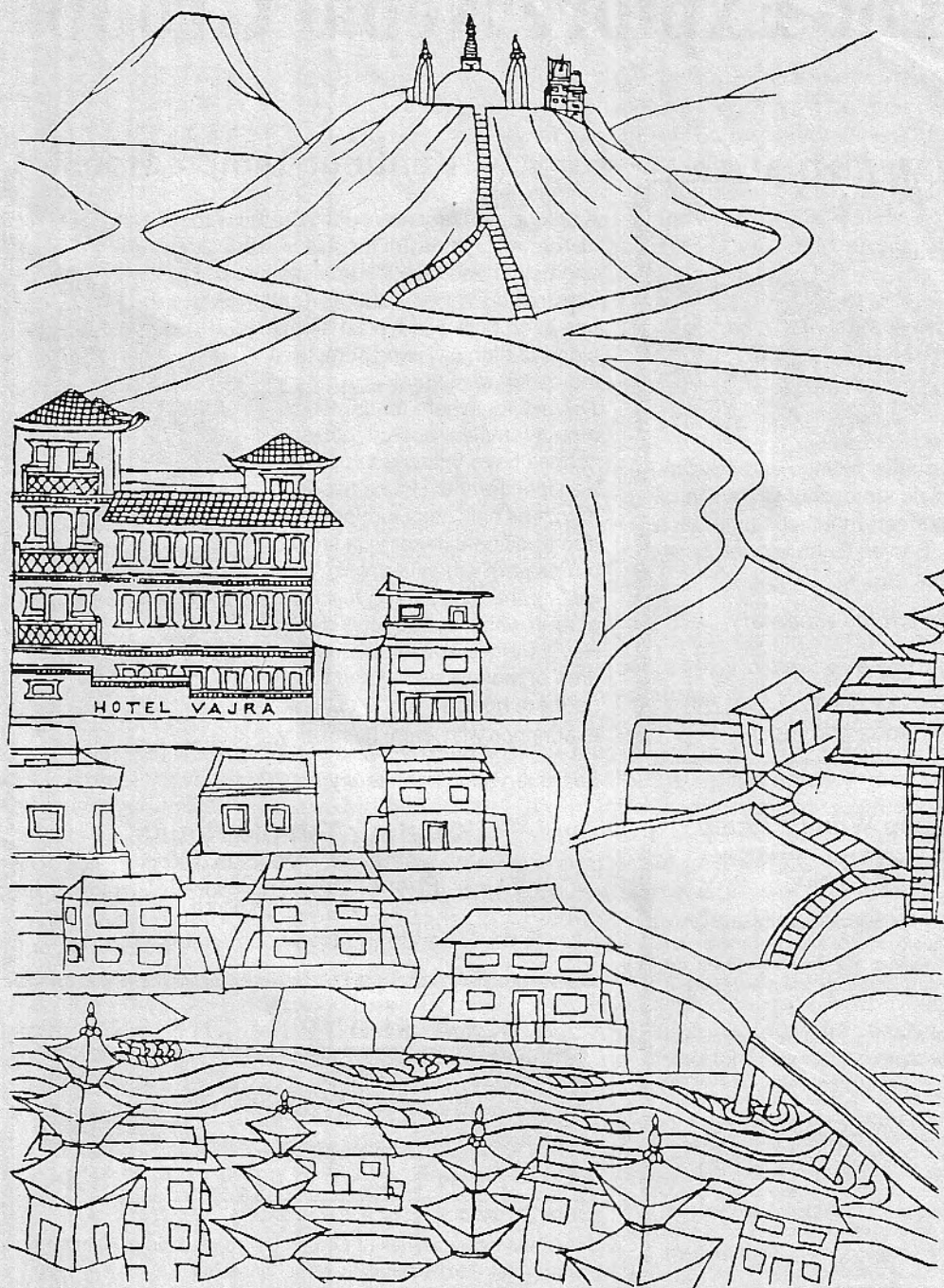
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**Ketaki Sheth**  
*Inside Outside.*

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*The London Observer.*

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*Time.*



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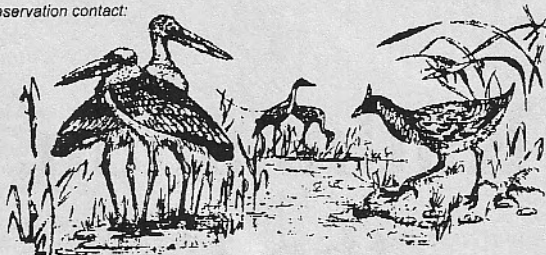
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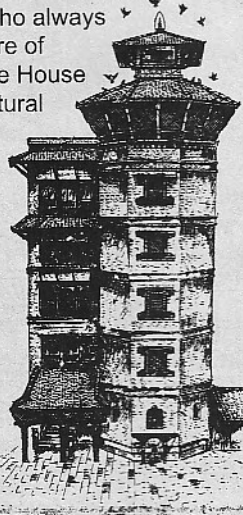
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OS4446	Saturday	KTM	VIENNA	1300	1900

INDIA • PAKISTAN

# KASHTIMOR

**WHAT DOES** the fate of a small island in the Pacific Ocean have to do with the conflict in Kashmir? If the island is East Timor, the answer is everything and nothing, with the Indian and Pakistani governments apparently unable to address the fate of the Indonesian-occupied territory without looking at it through the prism of their own battles.

No sooner had the UN-authorized intervention in East Timor, which led to the landing of Australian-led troops on 20 September, been carried out than it turned into a political football for India and Pakistan. The latter was quick to draw parallels between the crises in East Timor and Kashmir, while India, along with a range of Western powers, sought to downplay any such comparison.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz made the most ambitious effort to pair the two situations in a speech to the UN General Assembly on 22 September, in which he praised the East Timor intervention. What the world had learnt from the East Timor and Kosovo crises, he argued, was that "a people's aspiration for freedom cannot be suppressed indefinitely; a free exercise of the right of self-determination is invaluable for peace; self-determination can best be exercised in an environment free of fear and coercion; (and) the United Nations is best placed to oversee the exercise of self-determination."

Aziz went on to note that "these conclusions were already accepted for Kashmir 50 years ago". Just as the UN intervened to allow the Timorese to decide their fate in the 30 August referendum, Aziz implied, so too must nations intervene to allow Kashmiris to determine their national status. "Human rights must be upheld, not only in Kosovo and Timor, but also in Kashmir," he argued.

That was a plea readily echoed by Kashmiri separatists. The Kashmiri American Council, in a recent lecture, drew parallels between Indonesia's 24-year occupation of East Timor and the Kashmir dispute. The central principle, the group asserted, was that the UN had pushed for the right to self-determination—a key point for Kashmiris who have wanted the UN to prod India to hold

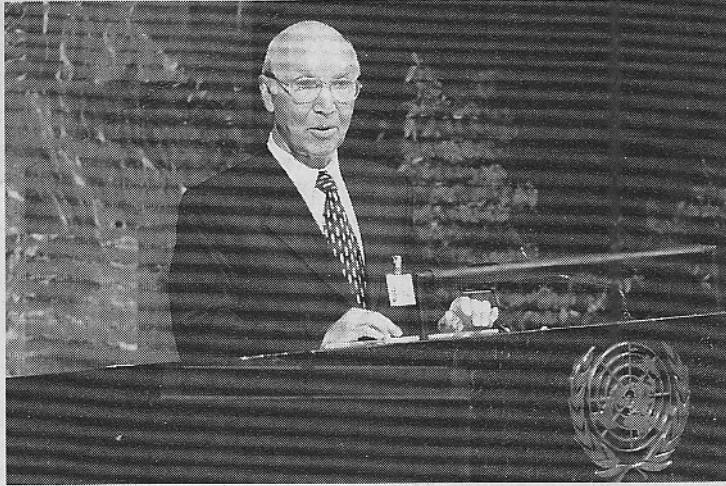
a plebiscite on Kashmir's status, in accordance with the 1948 UN Security Council resolutions on Kashmir. (The resolutions asked for a *complete* withdrawal of Pakistani troops from the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, while enjoining that India withdraw the *bulk* of its forces before a plebiscite was held under UN supervision. India made a guarded acceptance of the proposal but Pakistan did not, leading to a series of unsuccessful attempt at mediation by the UN.)

But the idea of a parallel as broached by Pakistan was quickly shot down for one, by Foggy Bottom. "Kashmir is not East Timor," US State Department spokesman James Rubin said, urging anyone who would make that comparison "not to get trapped into facile analogies that don't apply".

Why doesn't the comparison apply? For Antonio Monteiro, UN ambassador for Portugal—East Timor's former colonial power—the answer is simple: Kashmir is a disputed territory internationally, while East Timor's status was never in dispute. "Indonesia's annexation [of East Timor in 1976] was never recognised by the UN," Monteiro noted, which means that Portugal was, and continues to be, recognised as the "administering power" of East Timor, even after 24 years of Indonesian occupation. By contrast, Kashmir is a disputed territory, with no clear administering power ever established.

Of course, there is another reason as well. Indonesia remains a quasi-authoritarian state following Suharto's fall, with the military still hovering ominously over the country's democratic transition. Moreover, due to its precari-





Aziz at the UN.

ous financial situation since the Asian financial crisis, Jakarta can do little to prevent countries like Portugal and Australia rallying support for East Timor.

In contrast, few world powers would want to meddle with India's 'thriving' democracy and 'promising' economy for the sake of Kashmir, any more than they would want UN involvement in Belfast, or in Chiapas. So India, for the moment at least, has little to worry about in terms of East Timor setting a precedent. But that hasn't stopped South Block from rebuffing requests for Indian participation in the Australian-led peacekeeping force fearing precisely such an antecedent.

On the other hand, Pakistan has smelt a fresh opportunity and agreed to provide Pakistani troops for the East Timor force, its optimism undimmed by its lack of success so far in linking the tiny Pacific island to the lush Himalayan valley. ▲

—Farhan Haq

## INDIA

# BRUTE MAJORITY

It took New Delhi two days to respond to the sharp rebuke administered in September by the US State Department to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its militant affiliates like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal (BD), for rising violence against Muslims and Christians in India.

Obviously, the State Department was provoked into making the statement by the killing of an Australian missionary and his two sons in Orissa in January by a Hindu fundamental-

ist (and suspected Bajrang Dal activist) who is still at large nine months after committing the crime (although he surfaced in August to kill a Muslim trader in full public view), and the attacks on Christians in Gujarat, incidents that received worldwide coverage. Its report also dealt at length with the plight of Muslims, as "governments at the state and local levels only partially respect religious freedom", and "local police and government officials abet violence against minorities". Significantly, the State Department also noted that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani are members of the RSS, as are the chief ministers of BJP-ruled states.

When the caretaker government finally did respond, it dubbed the reprimand as an "intrusive exercise", and suggested that instead of India, "where the constitution guarantees religious freedom" and so on and so forth, the US should "focus its efforts on countries which remain under the pall of bigotry and intolerance, where religious minorities are discriminated against by law..."

This evasive response revealed that the Vajpayee-led government—notwithstanding illusions of superpower status and eagerness to strut the global stage after last year's nuclear tests—is simply unable to stand up to rich and powerful nations even when they whip India publicly. The Indian government did not dare tell the US to refrain from sanctimonious preaching and policing. It was left to principled votaries of secularism and equality to point out that while it is true that India has to bear the cross of the Sangh Parivar, the US too is haunted by the spectre of right-wing militias with anti-minority agendas.

The point is not to highlight America's delinquencies so as to sanction the sectarian plank of the BJP. Rather, it is to take note of the fact that the consequences of the open encouragement given by the Vajpayee government to the RSS, the VHP and the BD is causing concern well beyond the country's borders. A senior Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader, Anil Biswas, recently quoted from classified Home Ministry files to reveal that there had been as many as 698 "communal flare-ups" in the country in 1998 and 1999 during BJP rule.

The campaign for the September-October general election saw the BJP's anti-Muslim movement back on track, coming as it did after the country's tiny Christian community had been targetted earlier in the year. Addressing an election rally in Lucknow, the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Kalyan Singh, is reported to have called upon the Indian government to



cross the line of control in Kargil "to change history as I did on 6 December 1992 when the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground".

The Kargil conflict is being exploited by other parties too, but it is the BJP that has given the matter an overtly religious colour. The party has taken the lead in organising funeral processions for Hindu soldiers who died in Kargil (during which anti-Muslim slogans were known to have been raised). Even more dangerous has been the BJP's attempt to communalise the armed forces. The RSS recently roped in the army to organise a religious function in the disputed Kashmir region where anti-Pakistan, and anti-Muslim, slogans were heard, while VHP

leaders visited an army hospital to distribute copies of Hindu scriptures, and deliver religious sermons.

The BJP and its fighting arms—RSS, VHP and BD—have already turned India into a soft Hindu state. Further descent into fascism has so far been blocked only by that marvellous document, the Indian Constitution. But there is always the fear that if the BJP ever gains a brute majority in Parliament, it will amend the constitution to create the Hindu rashtra envisaged decades ago by the BJP's forerunners—the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jana Sangh. ▲

—S.N.M. Abdi

## Orientation Course in South Asian Peace Studies

The **Peace Studies Programme at South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR)** is offering a fifteen-day orientation course in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 7-21 February 2000. The course is intended for peace and human rights activists, media persons, researchers and academics in peace studies and diplomats involved in policy making in conflict resolution. The course will include examination of themes such as peace as value in South Asian cultures, traditions of conflict resolution, peace accords in the region, civil society in peace process in South Asia, refugee and minority rights, sharing and common management of scarce resources, bilateralism and regionalism as the way to conflict resolution, economics of war and peace, women in peace, media as a catalyst of conflict and peace and evolutions in the notion of rights and peace. Participants will have to support their own travel. Registration fee for South Asian participants is US \$ 100 (or its equivalent in Nepali rupee) and participants from outside the region US \$ 250 (or its equivalent in Nepali rupee). Board, lodging and other expenses for the selected candidates will be provided by SAFHR. Travel grant is available for limited number of candidates for which they will have to apply separately. The preferable age limit for participation is 35 years. Women, members of mi-

nority communities and refugees are particularly encouraged to apply.

Applications must reach Peace Studies Desk in the South Asia Forum for Human Rights by **November 15, 1999**. Applications by fax or e-mail will also be valid. Applications will have to be supported by full particulars, 500-word summary of the relevance of the course to the work of the participant, and names of two referees whose recommendations should reach independently SAFHR peace studies desk by November 15, 1999.

The application must include all necessary details such as language skill, experience and nature of current work. The summary has to include the candidate's own idea of peace and human rights activism, and the relation of the applicant's work with SAFHR's peace studies programme. In selection of candidates the 500-word summary will be accorded importance. The course will be participatory, and will involve intense course and field work. Frontline activists and researchers will be sharing their knowledge and experience with the participants who will leave the course with a critical understanding on issues of peace in South Asia.

## South Asia Forum for Human Rights

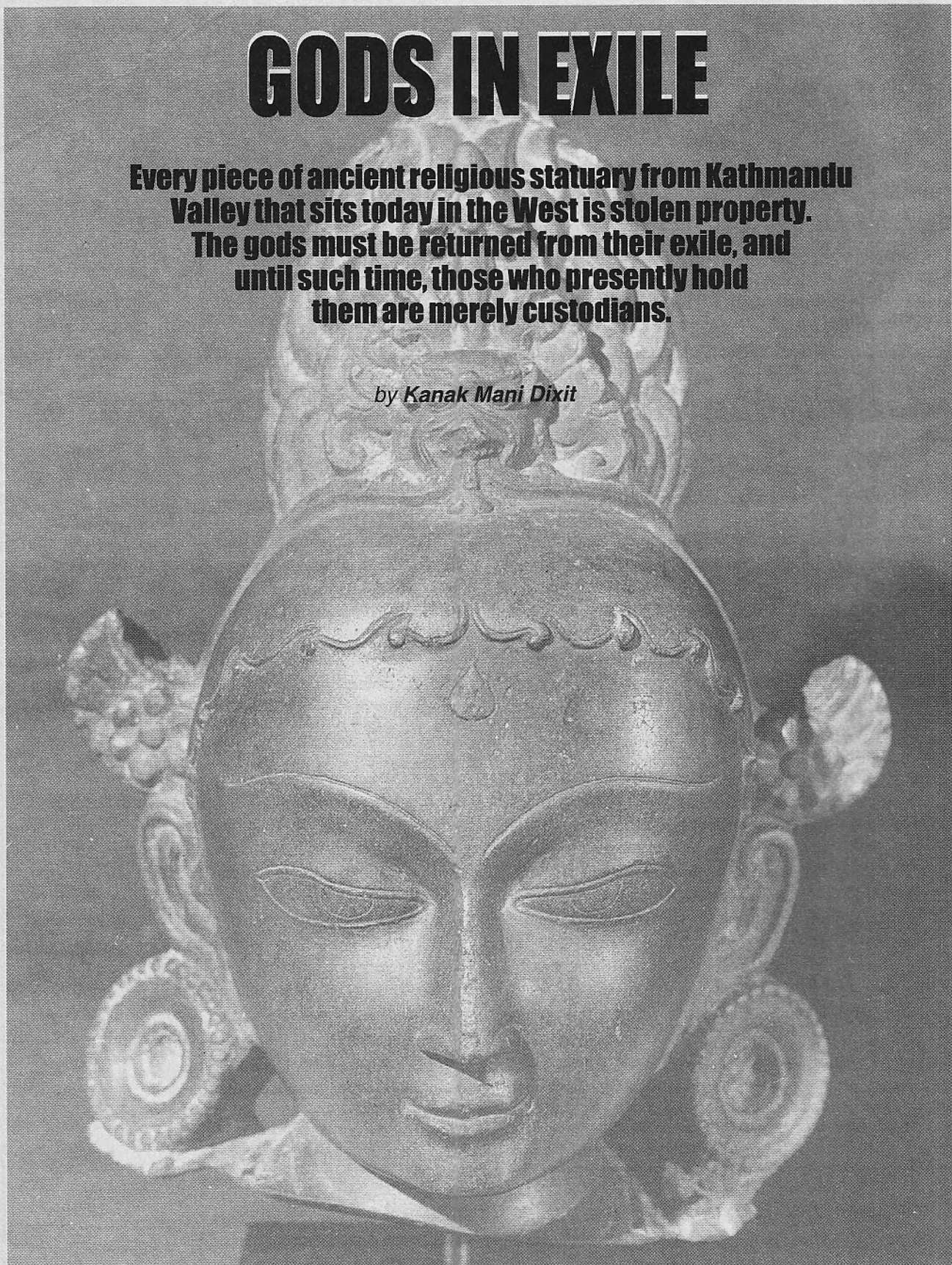
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# GODS IN EXILE

**Every piece of ancient religious statuary from Kathmandu Valley that sits today in the West is stolen property. The gods must be returned from their exile, and until such time, those who presently hold them are merely custodians.**

*by Kanak Mani Dixit*



For 900 years, a sculpture of Uma-Maheshwar, showing Shiva-Parvati and attendant deities in Mount Kailas, had stood in a shrine at the Wotol locality of Dhulikhel town, east of Kathmandu. The grey limestone statue standing 20 inches was stolen in 1982 and today sits on a lonely pedestal at the Museum für Indische Kunst in Berlin.

A 15th-century Laxmi-Narayan, half-Vishnu and half his consort Laxmi, was included in the 1990 sales catalogue of Sotheby's. Dark granite shining under the spotlights, the image was valued between USD 30,000-40,000 and sold off for an undisclosed amount by the New York auction house. The people of Patko Tole of Patan town have not had the deity to worship since it was lifted in 1984 and today make do with a crude replica.

An 11th-century Uma-Maheshwar image, which for eight centuries adorned a *hiti* water-spout in Nasamana Tole, Bhaktapur town, is now a prize in the collection of the Musée National d'Arts Asiatiques—Guimet in Paris ("one of the largest art museums in the world"). Since 23 May 1984, when the sculpture was pried off its brick and mortar backing and taken away, the celestial couple has not received propitiation from the devout who come to collect water at the *hiti*.

Since the 1960s, thousands upon thousands of stone sculptures have disappeared in this manner from the temples, monasteries, fields and forests of Kathmandu Valley and nearby towns. The only way devotees can view these deities is by travelling across the oceans to see them displayed, spot-lit and isolated in private drawing-room pedestals and museum niches. Others remain locked up in storage vaults, and quite a few still turn up for sale, advertised in glossy magazines specialising in oriental art.

There are compelling reasons to become emotional about the theft of these Kathmandu Valley sculptures, wrested from the lap of worshippers and their sites of consecration centuries ago. In a museum, the statue stands polished and alone, its surface cleaned of worshippers' grime of decades. An object of worship becomes an object of art. Says Chandra Prasad Tripathy, a specialist at the Department of Archaeology in Kathmandu, "When a statue is displayed in a museum, it is converted into an archaeological item which has lost its current cultural value."

As the deities continued their journey overseas through the 1970s and 80s, Kathmandu Valley residents suffered the loss but did little else. Meanwhile, the Valley's cultural vanguard showed a singular passivity. Partly, this fatalistic inaction was due to the logistics of tracing stolen items in the murky arena of antique art commerce. The larger explanation, however, has to do with the severely disorienting fall-out of headlong modernisation, under whose weight the Valley's age-old communal institutions have crumbled, and the value of ancient heritage become terribly downgraded. While the citizenry watched helplessly as the gods and goddesses went into foreign exile, the cultural elite looked the other way.

#### Four stone objects

Till even a couple of months ago, it would have been difficult to conceive the idea of stolen divinity actually being returned to Nepal, but things have now changed dramatically. The beginning of August was witness to the first-ever voluntary return to Nepal from overseas of three stolen statues and a fragment (a severed Saraswati head). The cache was returned by an American art collector confronted with proof of their theft, and the very act of willing restitution—welcome in itself—now holds great promise for the thousands of statues still out there in the occidental cold.

Going beyond the matters of international legality and obligations, the August restitution was made on the force of moral and ethical considerations by a remorseful collector. This gives rise to the hope that thousands of other collectors, connoisseurs and dealers who hold their art treasures in private—unlike the more transparent custom of museums which may be persuaded more easily—may also follow suit if and when confronted with the reality of theft.

There is now, more than ever, a need for community activists, archaeologists and other public and private custodians of Nepal's heritage to work together to actively seek the return of sculptural heritage that is today scattered throughout the West, from North America to Europe, Australia and Japan. Besides seeking the return of stolen cultural property, it is important to note that a loud and visible campaign would force down the value of artefacts, enough to destroy the future market for ancient Nepali statuary.





LAIN S. BANGDEL/STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL

The gleaming Laxmi-Narayan as featured in the 1990 sales catalogue of Sotheby's (above) and in its original place at Patko Tole in Patan.

Fortunately, some solid groundwork for such a campaign has already been laid by Lain Singh Bangdel of Nepal and Juergen Schick of Germany, thus far criers in the wilderness who have worked for long years with commitment and courage against the idol-lifters (see page 12). Over the course of two decades, working independently of each other, Bangdel and Schick photographically documented hundreds of statuary in their original places, and also took subsequent pictures of the sites which had been ravaged. Taken together, these 'before' and 'after' pictures provide incontrovertible proof of theft of more than 140 pieces.

The August restitution was itself the result—ten years later—of Bangdel's 1989 work *Stolen Images of Nepal*. Among other things, the book contained before-and-after pictures of four particular shrines. It was Pratapaditya Pal, the US-based authority on Himalayan art, who noticed that a West Coast private collector held four of the pieces included in *Stolen Images*. Says Pal, "When I saw the sculptures in Bangdel's book, I mentioned the problem to the art collector. The collector, who chooses to remain unknown, immediately agreed to return them unconditionally."

Alerted by Pal, Bangdel wrote to the Department of Archaeology in Kathmandu, which acted quickly with the help of Nepal's embassy in Washington DC to have the statues transferred to Kathmandu. Today, the four pieces are secure in the National Museum at Chhauni in Kathmandu, and are currently being displayed in a special exhibition (see page 13).

### The Disappeared

The process of idol theft started soon after Nepal shed the Rana era and opened up to

the world in the late 1950s. Western connoisseurs of Oriental art came upon a Valley which hosted a treasure trove of iconography in stone, bronze and wood—the artistic outpouring of the Valley's prosperous and accomplished urban culture going back beyond the 5th century. As Bangdel puts it, "The early visitors found Kathmandu Valley like an open museum populated by tens of thousands of gods and goddesses."

The theft of religious art began with small items that could be easily lifted—ritual paraphernalia, wooden articles, free-standing bronzes or those pried off *torana* friezes, and *pouba* and *thangka* hangings. In the early 1970s, the art smugglers shifted their gaze to the Valley's ubiquitous granite sculptures, and the trade in stone statuary did roaring business over the next couple of decades. Like the Nataraja images of the Chola Dynasty of southern India (see following article), the Uma-Maheshwar images seemed to have been particular favourites of the collectors, for their reverential themes and fine sense of artistic proportion.

Together with the museums and art collectors in the West, some Nepalis too had come to realise the value of images that lay strewn about their Valley. From the most powerful in the land to the neighbourhood thief, as well as functionaries of *guthis* (community trusts) and neighbourhood groups, many colluded in the theft of Valley statuary. Besides this, the acceleration of idol theft through the 1970s and 80s was made possible by the inaction of an entire spectrum of the Valley aristocracy and national elite, including the royal preceptors (*gurujiyu's*), the state-appointed administrators at the Guthi Sansthan responsible for religious property, and that very intelligentsia which sees itself as heir to the Valley's glorious past.

Says a Western conservationist long involved in the restoration of Nepali cultural heritage, who prefers not to be named, "The worm is deep in the fruit on the Nepali side too. Look at the way the Guthi Sansthan operates as custodian, and the private *guthis* which are going to seed because of loss of income and breakup of clans and families."

The period following the 1980 plebiscite in Nepal (which gave a mandate for continuing the autocratic Panchayat system under the king's direct rule) was one marked by lawlessness and a lack of accountability among those in authority. This

period saw a spurt in the disappearance of the Valley's religious art. In fact, the bulk of the disappearance identified in the Bangdel and Schick books refers to the period between 1980 and 1986. Such was the extent of this plunder that there are some who believe that almost all that was worth stealing from the Valley's open spaces was taken away during this period. "There is nothing left to steal."

### Contraband deities

It can be said with confidence that, with hardly any exception, every ancient stone statue in the Nepal—has been the subject of loot. They had to be stolen because these communally-owned religious objects in public shrines could never have been gifted or sold. Juergen Schick is unequivocal, "The collectors in the West should know that almost all Nepali art that came into the market over the last 30-35 years was procured through theft." Bangdel concurs: "Almost all the idols in the Western collections are definitely stolen."

Pratapaditya Pal prefers to make a distinction between the taking of art objects from a site and their departure from the country. "Some of the objects belonged to certain communities, which may have had the legal right to sell them," he says. "However, one can claim that most objects left the country illegally."

While it is indeed possible that some of the smaller free-standing bronzes and religious wall-hangings may have been willingly given or sold by their Nepali trustees

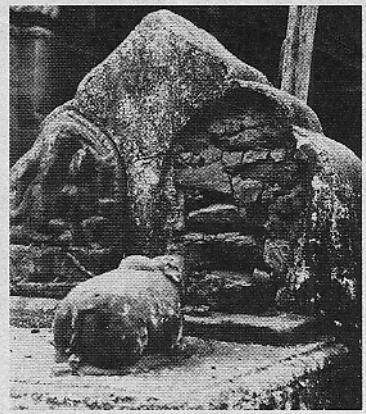
or custodians, even these would have left Nepal against the country's laws governing ancient art (which prohibits the departure of any item more than a hundred years old). However, even this fig leaf of minimal respectability is not available for those who currently possess stone sculptures, all of which would invariably have had to be pried away from temples niches, altars and shrines on their way to foreign exile.

Says Riddi Pradhan, Director General of the Department of Archaeology in Kathmandu, "There is no doubt about it, nearly every one of our statues left the country as contraband, against our laws. They are stolen goods, and hence remain the property of Nepal, owned by the country and the communities where they were originally situated."

"Thousands of pieces from the Valley today fill up 25 museums of the world. The Valley is bled white of its heritage, while the museums' collections gain incredible riches," says Schick. Adds Bangdel, "The fact is that, while they may not know it, collectors, art dealers and museums all over the West are in possession of objects which have been stolen from their sites or illegally smuggled out. Once it is proved that they are stolen art objects, no one has the right to possess them."

### Push and pull

As with any cultural property, the attraction of Kathmandu Valley sculpture has to do with the collector's need for rare artefacts of ancient, exotic and unusual pedigree.



Shiva's mount Nandi kneels in front of the missing master atop Mrigasthali Hill at Pashupati, Kathmandu.

## WOTOL AND NASAMANA

**IT IS** natural for neighbourhood residents to want their stolen statues back. In Dhulikhel's Wotol, elderly ladies crowd around a copy of Lain Singh Bangdel's *Stolen Images of Nepal*, which shows clearly the image of their Uma-Maheshwar as it was originally in the neighbourhood shrine. They find it hard to believe that the statue has been located years after it disappeared, at the Berlin Museum.

"Do everything you can to bring it back, please!" says 75-year-old Nanimaya (see picture) as she studies Bangdel's book. She then agitatedly points to the spot where a rounded rock receives the flowers and tikas meant for the Uma-Maheshwar. The nandi bull is still there in attendance of Shiva and Parvati, even though the godly couple are some thousands of miles away.



Among the elderly menfolk gathered in Nasamana Tole in Bhaktapur's Ward No 1.3 to study *Stolen Images* is Ram Bhagat Twayana. Unlike some of the younger residents present, he easily recognises the image of the Uma-Maheshwar which disappeared from above the *hiti's* water spout on the night of 23 May 1984. When the group is told that the icon is presently at the Musée Guimet in Paris, every member is emphatic that it has to be returned. Says Krishna Gopal Hada, the Ward's representative in the Bhaktapur town council: "We must get this statue back. We will go to the airport when it comes and welcome it back with *baja gaja*, with pomp and festivity. The whole town of Bhaktapur will celebrate the event!"

# BANGDEL AND SCHICK

**FOR THREE** decades, while the Kathmandu Valley public remained largely blasé and uncaring about the terrible loss being inflicted upon its heritage by idol thieves, two individuals with origins elsewhere were unrelenting in their campaign to document the loot.

Artist and art historian Lain Singh Bangdel and Juergen Schick, an art connoisseur from Essen, Germany, emerged as guardians of statuary in a Valley where modernisation and breakdown of community spirit had left thousands of icons in the fields and neighbourhoods virtually orphaned. Bangdel's and Schick's writings and photographic records of important statuary, the shrines before and after theft, as well as their publication of endangered icons, have been the most potent weapons thus far against the spectrum of art bandits which stretches from the petty thieves in Kathmandu Valley to faraway galleries.

Lain Singh Bangdel, born in Darjeeling in 1924, arrived in Nepal in the early 1950s after completing his study of art in Paris and London. He was immediately impressed by the Valley's ancient treasures, and set about studying them, publishing several scholarly volumes. As art theft peaked in the mid-1980s, he began preparing his book *Stolen Images of Nepal*. It was published by the Royal Nepal Academy (which he had earlier headed as Vice Chancellor) in 1989.

Juergen Schick arrived in Nepal overland as a budget traveller in 1973, and he came back to settle in 1980 with his Nepali wife. His plan was to document the art heritage of this vast "open museum"; but as he started travelling to far corners photographing iconography he realised that they were being stolen even as he recorded them. Schick recalls, "With ever greater frequency I would come across gaping emptiness where just a few days previously I would have photographed a beautiful god."

Schick made his personal shift from art connoisseur to activist in the spring of 1984, when idol-theft in Kathmandu Valley was at its high-water mark. The robbery of two images hit him particularly hard. One, an 800-year-old black granite statue of Laxmi-Narayan in Bhaktapur which disappeared one night, and the other an exquisitely carved 16th-century image of 'veenadharini' Saraswati, from the village of Pharping on the Valley's southern rim. Schick had photographed the sculpture in May 1984, but when he returned in December, he found it decapitated. Unable to lift the whole statue, the thieves had severed the head with a sledge-hammer blow and taken off with it. "It was then and there that I decided to pursue this phenomenon of cultural crime," recalls Schick. (This Saraswati of Pharping is pictured on the cover of this issue, and the head is one of the pieces returned in August. See opposite page.)

Working independently of each other, for both Bangdel and Schick, the exercise in photographic documentation rapidly evolved into a race against time. Their task was to



photograph as many images as possible so that at the very least there would be proof of origin of stolen statuary. Says Bangdel, "I felt it was important to provide strong and authentic photographic evidence of sculptures which were stolen from the Valley and surrounding areas."

It was important not only to document, but also to publish the 'before' and 'after' photographs, so that a) the fact of theft was proven, and b) the market value of statues still in place would plummet amongst museums, collectors, antique shops and auction houses.

The same year that Bangdel came out with his celebrated *Stolen Images*, Schick produced *The Gods Are Leaving the Country* (published in German and only recently out in English, by White Orchid Books, Bangkok).

As Schick says, "Both Mr. Bangdel and I produced our books to bring down the market value of the images. Also, the pictures would provide undeniable proof that the pieces were stolen. If we do a good job of publicising the art that still exists in shrines, then they will stop turning up for sale in the West."

At a time when Nepali society as a whole, including the Valley communities themselves, seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about the flight of the ancient objects of worship, a Nepali artist and a German activist thus courageously took up the task of documentation. Those were lonely and dangerous years for both, as the autocratic Panchayat regime was at its arrogant worst — to the extent that robbers connected to the most powerful in the land felt confident enough to use a crane to try to pry the full-size Bhupatindra Malla statue from atop its pillar at the Bhaktapur Durbar Square.

Bangdel, despite his stature as one of the country's foremost artists and head of the Royal Nepal Academy, was threatened with his life if he kept up his photographic crusade, and foreigner Schick was harassed, as is the custom, over his visa. He spent one whole desultory year in Germany with his family when he could not even enter Nepal. Recalls Schick, "When I found Mr Bangdel at the Academy, at last I had the one Nepali who showed a sensitivity to this subject. No one else."

But both kept at it, and have ended up making a small difference—the best proof of which is the return in August of four pieces pictured in *Stolen Images*. If a few more statues remain in Nepal, credit must go to their books which brought down the market value for them in the international arts bazaar. And if there is still a possibility to have the scores of stolen statues returned to the Valley, it is because they have documented the theft to such an extent that it is impossible for any fair-minded collector not to return them. (The information in the main story on the whereabouts of the idols in the various museums was also provided by them.)

"I only wish I had come to Kathmandu a decade earlier so that I could have documented much more," says Schick. "So much art had already disappeared over the 1970s."



This artistic inclination becomes a travesty when the collector directly or indirectly is involved in the chain of events which surround the theft, transport, sale and accession of an Uma-Maheshwar or Laxmi-Narayan, representatives of a living culture far enough away to feel detached and 'cultured'.

According to one Kathmandu scholar who minces no words, "Idol theft is a demand-driven trade led by rapacious cultural cannibals. The culprits are not the petty thieves who in any case earn a pittance compared to what the art will fetch under the gavel in New York City." The only way to stop this trade in contraband deities, he says, is by hitting at the demand so that impoverished Nepalis at the bottom of the smuggling chain do not feel the need to wrest statues from their moorings to ship them off.

The overseas demand for Valley loot constitutes the 'pull factor' as far as the trade is concerned. The 'push factor' is located in the weakened traditional institutions of Kathmandu Valley, an absence of social leadership, as well as the greed of Nepali thieves right up and down the social ladder. "There is hardly any sense of responsibility here for the incredible treasures handed down by history," says the Western conservationist referred to above resignedly. "There is a near-total absence of outrage, and no thought given to reclaiming the statues." He has a point there, but nothing to change the fact that every ancient stone statue currently held by private and institutional collectors in the West is

stolen property. *And if something is stolen, simply and irrefutably, it must be returned.*

There are, of course, international treaties which lay out the principles for restitution of stolen art (even though most of the Western countries which hold stolen art are not signatories). The most important instruments are the 1970 Unesco Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. (UNIDROIT is the Rome-based International Institute for the Unification of Private Law.) There are also elaborate modalities for the reporting and return of stolen objects, using Interpol, the World Customs Organisation, the Art Loss Register, the International Council of Museums, and other governmental and non-governmental agencies.

However, it is the Paris-based United Nations agency Unesco that is the point organisation when it comes to requital of cultural property, and the agency is clear when it comes to smuggled Nepali statuary. As Lyndel V. Prott, who is with Unesco's Division of Cultural Heritage, wrote in a letter to Himal, "Unesco shares your concerns regarding thefts of sacred and ancient works of art in Nepal and is naturally willing to assist in recovering this cultural heritage through wide dissemination of the information, education of the local communities, and sensitisation of dealers, collectors and museums."

The 1995 UNIDROIT convention was developed to deal with some of the legal is-



*The return of the gods: The four pieces of Nepali statuary that were brought back to Nepal in August after their voluntary return by an unnamed American collector. The head of the 12th-century Veenadharini Saraswati from Pharping's Kamalpokhari (the image at top of the page), and (right to left) the 9th-century Buddha from Bhinchhe Bahal, Patan; the 14th-century Surya from Panauti's Triveni Ghat; and the 10th-century Garudasana Vishnu from Hyumat Tole, Kathmandu. These are on display at a special exhibition in Kathmandu's National Museum. "We hope everyone interested in our history, culture and religion will come to view them," says curator Rehana Banu.*

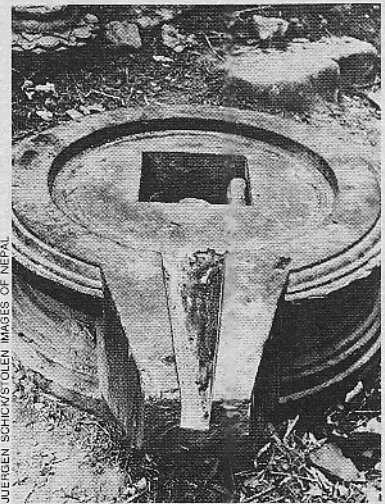


ALL PICTURES: DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY, KATHMANDU

JUERGEN SCHICK/STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL



JUERGEN SCHICK/STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL



Before and after:  
The 15th-century  
Chatrumukha  
Siva-linga at  
Pashupati.

sues insufficiently covered by the 1970 Unesco convention and provides an international framework to enable claims of illicitly trafficked cultural property to be pursued within national legal systems. The Convention states, as Prott emphasises, "that the possessor of a stolen cultural object must return it regardless of personal involvement or knowledge of the original theft". Additionally, the Convention denies any compensation for the return unless "the possessor neither knew nor ought reasonably to have known the object was stolen".

### Elgin Marbles to Uma-Maheshwar

These two international instruments and various other modalities will come into use in the larger campaign to have stolen Nepali art returned to the country, and it will help when 'the countries which host most of the stolen artefacts (e.g., Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) join them as full-fledged state parties. However, the moral and ethical imperative itself is strong and impelling enough to begin the campaign for the restitution of stolen Kathmandu Valley art. Indeed, the voluntary despatch of religious objects by the American collector in August is the first and most eloquent example of the feasibility of this exercise.

Bangdel's "Conclusion"  
from Stolen Images of  
Nepal.

Demanding the return of images and icons taken away by Western museums is hardly anything new.

One of the most celebrated examples is that of the so-called Elgin Marbles, statues from the Parthenon which were transferred to the British Mu-

seum for "safekeeping" more than a century ago. This campaign for restitution is being pursued even today by both the Greek government and independent activists.

However, inasmuch as there is compelling basis to demand the return of the Greek marbles—or Inca jewellery, Pharaonic statues or (much closer to home) Gandharan Buddhist art for that matter, there is a significant difference with regard to Kathmandu Valley iconography. For, the smuggled Valley images were part of a living culture rather than merely part of Nepal's archaeological heritage. As Lain Singh Bangdel observes, these are not mere objets d'art, but pieces made "alive" by veneration. Till the day they were stolen, these idols were being revered and their loss is still deeply felt. (The empty pedestals of statues lifted decades ago still receive tika in Kathmandu Valley to this day.)

There can be no questioning the suggestion that religious art which received tika and flower offerings till the day (night, mostly) of plunder should be returned with an even deeper sense of urgency than archaeological loot. As far as Kathmandu Valley iconography is concerned, the process of restitution can be said to have begun with the return of the four pieces in August, but there are thousands of statues out there which await recovery. A concerted campaign to return statuary would have to start with the understanding that because every ancient religious stone statue originating in Kathmandu Valley and surrounding region is known to have been stolen, every person and institution possessing such statuary must consider himself/itself to be in possession of stolen property. Those who currently hold such cultural property must regard themselves as a custodian holding the object(s) in trust.

The place to start with the campaign for restitution seems to be bringing back the stolen works documented by Lain Singh Bangdel and Juergen Schick. Among them, the whereabouts of the statuary taken from Nasamana Tole in Bhaktapur, Wotol in Dhulikhel, and Gahiti in Patan is known – they are in the the Musée Guimet in Paris, Berlin Museum fur Indische Kunst and the Denver Art Museum, respectively. Also, since it is known that the Laxmi-Narayan from Patan's Patko Tole was sold in 1990 by Sotheby's of New York, the auction house would be duty-bound to help trace it. And if both the return of Nepali statues

## CONCLUSION

All the stolen images published in this book are religious objects. For generations and centuries they have been worshipped and venerated by the people of Nepal. For them, the sacred icons are live symbols of gods and goddesses whom they worship and pray daily with deep faith and devotion. The devotees offer them flower, vermilion, honey, milk, butter, grains, sweets and water as though they were alive and not mere pieces of art to be admired. They go to their gods and goddesses both in happiness and sorrow to offer prayers. They celebrate and worship their deities on different occasions with great pomp and festivity. When the devotees and people of the country are deprived of their gods and goddess their hearts bleed. The stealing of such religious images is an atrocity, a serious crime which the civilized world should take steps to stop. Let us hope that some day these stolen sculptures will be returned to their respective temples and shrines.



in August and the experience of India (see following story) is any indication, it should not be all too difficult to begin the process of their return.

### Before and after

The next step for the activists would be to attend to the remaining more than hundred figures, the fact of whose theft has been similarly photographically documented by Bangdel and Schick. Identification, location and return of these gods and goddesses will require sustained investigation and activism by art and heritage lovers in Nepal and elsewhere. Before-and-after images of the burglarised shrines should receive the widest possible distribution, through individual mailings, magazines and newsletters, over the Internet, and so on.

Lastly, and on a global scale, art and heritage lovers would have to get involved in the task of sensitising everyone engaged – in whatever manner – with Oriental art that each and every piece of stone statuary with origins in Kathmandu Valley is presumed stolen unless proven otherwise. Further, those who hold stolen Valley art must be reminded that at most they are, as suggested earlier, custodians or trustees of what they hold and not owners. A high-volume, well-documented campaign for restitution of valley statuary would serve the dual purpose of returning stolen artefacts as well as killing the demand which would lead to further thefts.

Given the state of insecurity even today regarding openly-kept statuary in Kathmandu Valley, it is not necessary (and may not even be desirable) that every recovered statue be returned at this time to the shrine or site of origin. Indeed, the recent spate of thefts in Patan (including the head of a bronze Mani Ganesh stolen recently from the heart of town) points to the need for extreme caution in this regard. Only local communities which are united and confident in providing security may and receive permission from the Department of Archaeology for complete restitution.

In the case of the majority of recovered objects, given the overall state of Nepali politics, economics and societal inaction which leads to an insecure environment, a 'partial restitution' is probably advisable, where the gods and goddesses are returned to Nepal, to await a secure day in which to enter their original shrines and abodes. The repository for returned statuary till such time would



JUERGEN SCHICK/STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL



JUERGEN SCHICK/STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL

## QUICK AND EASY

**NUMEROUS STATUES** all over Kathmandu Valley can be found today protected behind iron bars, locked in steel casings, or fixed to unsightly cement. But better this than in a museum in the West.

Fewer stone statues from all over Kathmandu Valley would have been stolen since the 1960s, had some innovations been tried in times of security. Today, the security of deities is still left largely in the hands of inadequate, often elderly, attendants. To the last one, where there are even doors to temples, these are flimsy wooden contraptions with latches that can come off with a simple hammer blow or push. Temple doors could easily be backed by steel plates without taking away from the aesthetics, electronic burglar alarms and movement detectors could be used at affordable costs, and shrines could be floodlit at night...

Stone statues, mostly in stele form, seem to have departed with remarkable ease. This is because when they were carved and consecrated in their spots, no one considered that centuries later they would be the target of collector-bandits. As a result, most were put in place with a simple backing of brick and mortar (see above). All that is required to carry them away, therefore, is to shake them from their moorings.

A majority of free-standing stone statues could be protected by merely making it a little more difficult for a thief to carry them away, something which would make him work on the theft, take some time and make some noise. For example, the Uma-Maheshwars steles can be secured by giving them full-size backing, in which a rim of stone, cement or metal would overlap the edge of the statue by as little as a centimeter. This would require the thieves to, at the very least, use pick and hammer to pry the statuary loose. This would be time-consuming and create a bustle enough in the majority of cases to alert the neighbourhood and send the thief fleeing.

In other words, anything that prevents quick and easy theft will help in securing the statuary of Kathmandu Valley, those that are still left.

be the National Museum at Chhauni, Kathmandu, where the Nepali army stands guard. The National Museum already houses scores of locally lost-and-found images, and is also where the four pieces which came back in August are in safekeeping.

There will come a time when all the returned statues will have been restored with confidence to their original homes. This time will arrive when the market for stolen art from Nepal will have been destroyed, when their spiritual value is understood by everyone and their dollar value will have plummeted. This will not happen, however, before Nepal's social elites themselves begin to understand and feel for their gods in exile. ▲

# NON-RESIDENT NATARAJA

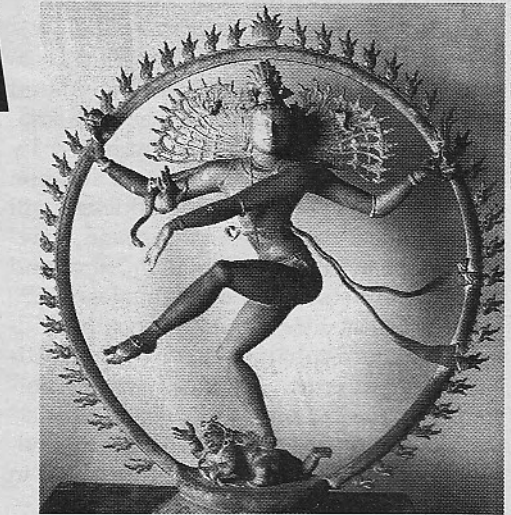
**There are many kinds of thieves: smugglers, customs and conservation officials, museum staff, and your venerable neighbourhood priest.**

by *Ranjit Devraj*

When the American art collector Norton Simon paid one million dollars to buy a stolen 10th-century bronze Nataraja in 1973, he certainly had no idea that it was so much money down the drain. For when he sent the idol to the British Museum for repairs, it was impounded as stolen property by the Scotland Yard, acting under pressure from Indian officials. A protracted litigation followed during which Simon pleaded "innocent purchase". Finally an agreement was reached whereby the Norton Simon Foundation in Los Angeles was allowed to keep the idol for 10 years until 1986, after which it was reinstalled at its original place of residence, the Sivapuram temple in Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur district.

It was only by good fortune that the Sivapuram Nataraja returned home, and credit for it goes to Douglas Barret and his book *Early Chola Bronzes*. An expert with the British Museum, Barret, during a visit to India in 1964, happened to see the original idol in the possession of an executive with a foreign company in Madras, a fact he recorded in his book. This led to an enquiry by the Tamil Nadu government in 1969, which soon brought to light the fact that the idol residing in the Sivapuram temple was a masterly fake. But, by then, the idol had already been sold and, changed hands several times to end up with Norton Simon in 1973.

The happy ending of the Sivapuram Nataraja saga is one that evokes hope



INDIAN BRONZE MASTERPIECES

among those concerned about the fate of Indian antiquities. But the very fact that a saga is there to be told reflects the ease and impunity with which art thieves have been steadily depleting the Indian countryside of the treasures it is strewn with—bronze Natarajas from the Chola period being only one among them.

## Coveted idols

The Cholas were a powerful South Indian dynasty who ruled over half of India between the 9th and 12th centuries from their base in Thanjavur in today's Tamil Nadu. They also controlled a sea-borne empire that extended to Sri Lanka and as far as Indonesia. Sri Lankan Tamils still revere the Cholas, from whom the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) have borrowed the emblem of the tiger to signify ferocity and fearlessness. But a more lasting and benign legacy of the Cholas are the incredibly graceful Nataraja idols they so favoured, which today rate as collector's items alongside Ming vases and Greek sculptures.

But what is it that makes these Natarajas so special? "Siva's cosmic dance in magnificent bronze sculptures of dancing figures with four arms whose superbly balanced and yet dynamic gestures express the rhythm and unity of life," is how Fritjof Capra described them in his best-selling *The Tao of Physics*. An eloquent description indeed, but one that hastened the speed with which the Natarajas, and other Chola

*Nataraja (circa 915 AD)  
from Siva temple at  
Sikkil in Tanjore district.  
Is it the real thing?*

bronzes, left Indian shores for the sumptuous living rooms of private collectors and respectable museums in the West.

These bronzes stand out for the emphasis of maleness in the gods and beauty in the goddesses, says J.E. Dawson, an expert on bronzes at the National Museum in New Delhi. Chola artists breathed life into their work by using the *cire perdue*, or lost wax process, with minute details worked into the clay moulds closely following the *Silpa Shashtra* texts. The craftsmen approached their task with the right *Dhyana Shlokas* pertaining to the particular deity so that their minds would be imbued with the essential quality of the deity. Materials were chosen with great care at every stage—fine beeswax, clay taken from termite mounds, and of course, the delicate proportions in the *panchloha*, or alloy, made out of five metals. Because the mould is broken once the casting is complete, no two idols can be alike and that essential uniqueness adds to the value of each piece for the worshipper and the modern-day collector alike.

### Weak protection

Another famous Nataraja which went on a world tour is one stolen from the Easwaran temple in the Tiruvilakkudi village, also of Thanjavur, in 1978, and traced with the help of Interpol to the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Recently, a Buddha head, believed to have been sold by the Hindu priest of the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhi Gaya, found its way back from New York after a senior official of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) spotted it in a museum there.

Restitution of stolen artefacts becomes difficult unless the item in question has been catalogued or documented as being in India after Independence in 1947. This is because during the colonial era, whatever was taken out by Britain and other Indian princely states, was done 'legitimately' and so not returnable, and these include items such as the Kohinoor diamond, the marble bath of Shah Jehan, or the famed Amaravati marbles. This also covers whatever is *claimed* to have been taken out before 1947.

The Indian government is currently trying to prove that two gold *mohurs*, or coins, weighing about 12 kilograms each lying in the vaults of a bank in Switzerland were taken there after Independence by the present Nizam of Hyderabad whose ancestors received it from the Mughal emperors.

Because of the gaping loophole offered by the colonial period, most antiquities stolen from India reach the UK which is a nodal point for further dispersion particularly to the US. It is a well-known fact that the auction house Sotheby's conducts a thriving trade in Indian antiquities.

But while the British may have plundered the country of its cultural artefacts during two centuries of rule, they also set up the ASI and began the task of excavating archaeological sites and cataloguing items. The task is still far from complete and is not likely to end anytime soon due to lack of funds and expertise. Open-air warehouses set up in British times at the sprawling archaeological site in Khajuraho still exist, and now contain several thousand pieces of exquisite stone sculptures yet waiting to be properly housed. That itself is partly responsible for the rampant idol theft, says D.K. Sinha, retired director of the ASI. There are so many archaeological sites and many are situated in remote areas often inaccessible by road, which cannot possibly be monitored by the ASI.

Sinha says the real enemy is the massive poverty and ignorance at home combined with the high prices that items like Chola bronzes command abroad. Often foreigners, who are likely to be more aware of the true value of antiquities than the impoverished villagers who live near archaeological sites, are involved in the thefts. Some years ago, two Thai students were caught with stucco heads of the Buddha they had removed from Nalanda in Bihar, site of the world's oldest university.

It does not help that laws against cultural theft is very weak. Last year, the CBI seized 42 heads of the Jain saint Mahavira which turned out to have been removed from the 2nd-century Jain temple in Shivpur in the Guddar district of Madhya Pradesh. Nine persons are now undergoing trial for it, but if convicted they face imprisonment of just six months and a fine of INR 1500 under the 1971 Antiquities and Art Treasures Act. For tougher sentences, it is possible to charge the thieves with other offences such as desecration of public places, but that is left to the discretion of the prosecutor. "What we need is to



For sale: A Chola bronze figure of Goddess Bhudevi (circa 13th century) in Sotheby's catalogue.



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As sure as taking it there yourself

make the trafficking of antique items a cognisable offence attracting far more severe punishment," says M. Ram, superintendent of the antiquities wing of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), adding that it is easier to tackle local thieves who are at the root of the problem than chase after items which have gone abroad.

### Plunderer priests

It is possible that many idols that are now in the temples of Tamil Nadu may in fact be fake, with the originals having long been spirited away, says Ram. Sinha agrees, adding that the theft or disappearance of ornaments used on deities are not uncommon and simply cannot happen without the knowledge of priests, many of whom consider it their sole right to dispose off temple property. For their part, ASI officials complain that they cannot verify the authenticity of the various statues since priests or owners of private temples are reluctant to allow them entry into the sanctum sanctorum where the idols are kept. This is either because they have something to hide, or, as happens in many cases, the temple custodians are afraid of offending the deity.

But CBI's Ram goes further and says that temple priests alone cannot be blamed for the stealing and export of "living idols", meaning idols which are still worshipped. Officials at several levels including those from the ASI and the customs are also involved, he claims. The ASI issues no-objection certificates (NOC) to replicas of valuable artefacts to be exported as ordinary handicraft, and it is quite easy for some ASI and customs officials acting in collusion to send out originals. In some cases, however, the ASI is duped into providing NOCs against a fake and the real stuff is exported 'legally'. Photographs of the original and the replica are tagged to the NOC, but it takes a trained eye to spot any difference, a task the customs is hardly equipped to deal with.

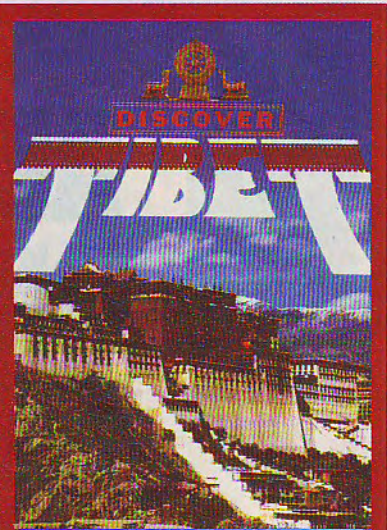
Both Ram and Sinha agree that a major problem was the fact that

only 10 percent of exports are actually examined at air and sea ports, and it is the case that customs officials are often in cahoots with art smugglers. There are also known cases of Indian antiques being smuggled out in diplomatic bags and the CBI is unable to proceed for fear of starting up a diplomatic row. Yet, over the years, the CBI has seized so many antique pieces that there is even a move on the part of the investigative bureau to establish a museum of its own.

The CBI has also been taking a close look at the activities of agents for Sotheby's who have been scouring the Indian countryside with the connivance of Indian art smugglers for items for their famed auctions, a fact that has been recorded by arts reporter Peter Watson in his book *Sotheby's: Inside Story*. CBI official Ram says there exist networks of antique smugglers operating in the major metropolitan cities which have contacts with foreign buyers, the most notorious of whom are Britishers Bruce Miller and George Fletcher.

Ram also says that customs channels are so porous that there have been instances when items in the possession of art dealers have left India and were returned once suspected by the CBI. He gives the example of a terracotta panel depicting the fight of the monkey gods, Bali and Sugreev, which was promptly returned to an Indian art dealer after a cautious buyer referred the item to the CBI before buying it in London. "We couldn't proceed because there was no proof that the item, registered as being in the legal possession of the art dealer, had actually been sold in London. Anyway, it was back in India," he says.

But for every item returning to its land of provenance, there will be hundreds leaving its shore. And the exodus is not likely to stop anytime soon. ▲



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# AN ANTIQU LAND

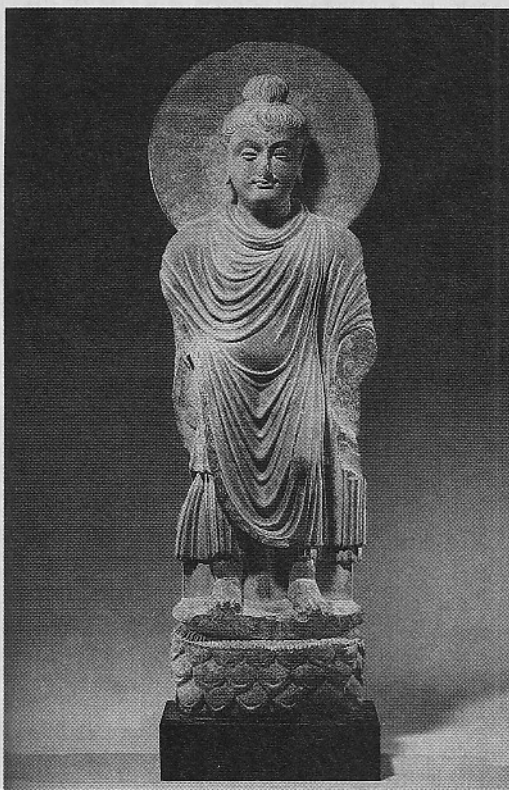
**Pick your favourite heritage site in Pakistan, get a spade, and dig your way to big money. The law is the last thing that will come in your way.**

by *Massoud Ansari*

**E**very second month or so, Azra flies to Karachi from New York. It is not love for her relatives that brings her to Pakistan; her purpose is to buy ancient Afghan jewellery and other antiques from the local markets, and sell it off in the US. She has been in this business only for the last couple of years, but has already amassed a fortune.

Azra is only one among the many buyers of Afghan antiques available in Pakistani markets. Sold at throwaway prices, these articles fetch a handsome sum abroad. Afghan refugees who brought these artefacts into Pakistan dispose them off without realising either their historical value or material worth. Pakistani markets, especially at Karachi and Islamabad, are brimming with such 'merchandise'. Says Shahid, a shop owner at Zainab Market, one of Karachi's main business centres, "I don't know what is legal or illegal. The Afghan refugees come to our shops, sell us their belongings, whatever they could carry with them during the war, and later on we sell these articles to our customers." Most of his customers are either foreigners or people from uptown areas. "They take lot of interest in this jewellery and offer us very good prices."

Another shop owner in Zainab Market



says he has stopped selling Afghan silver jewellery. Instead he collects it for a lady who comes nearly every three months, after confirming over phone about the availability. The shopkeeper says the lady pays him a "very good price" and sometimes extra as a goodwill gesture.

Pakistan itself has a cultural and archaeological heritage dating back many millennia. These include the Indus Valley Civilisation sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, but it is the hub of the Gandhara civilisation, Taxila, with its Buddhist stupas, monasteries and temples, art, architecture and sculpture, that the country is most famous for. Gandhara is the ancient name for Kandahar, the tract of land on the west bank of the Indus river comprising Peshawar Valley and the modern Swat, Buner and Bajuar. It was one of the 22 provinces of the Persian empire in the 6th century BC. Buddhism came to the area around the 3rd century BC, and the religious art that took root and developed in this region came to be known as Gandhara, representing the life story of Buddha, and illustrating Buddhist traditions. Taxila, as the centre for Gandhara, has bequeathed a wealth of ancient artefacts.

But ever since Pakistan came into existence in 1947, the state has neglected its cul-

*Another Sotheby's booty: a Gandharan grey schist figure of Buddha (circa 3/4 century AD).*

tural heritage. As a result, most of the country's cultural monuments are heading towards destruction, even as many a treasure remains undug. The few departments set up to preserve historical and culturally valuable items are passive. Almost no real preservation work has taken place, and unexcavated sites are left unguarded. Lack of funds is the official explanation for what is literally a case of monumental neglect.

The field is thus wide open to the wheelers and dealers in heritage, who dig into these items to make a killing in the international market. A local at one of these sites had this to say, "So far I have collected more than 300 ancient coins of copper during my frequent visits to Jukkar jo Daro near Mohenjodaro."

More revealing is the story of the Karachi resident who hit upon a lot of ancient Gandhara relics, including two large Buddha statues, on her land in Taxila bought two decades ago. After keeping these in her drawing room for some time, she says she then took some of them to Canada and sold them for "very good prices", while the rest remain in her drawing room like so many pieces of Gandhara art in so many rich Pakistani households.

The plunder is so blatant that a visitor to a place like the Harappa ruins, some 100 kilometres southwest of Lahore, will have any number of locals scurrying to sell statues freshly unearthed from the ruins, saying: "*Sahib murti chahiya*" (Sir, you need statues?), with no fear of any authority pulling them up. Many of these items being sold will just be clever replicas.

The Antiquities Act of 1975 punishes smuggling in antiques by five to 20 years imprisonment. Not a single person till date has been prosecuted under the Act, even as heritage items are being sneaked out of

the country.

An official at Pakistan's Department of Archaeology says it is the duty of the Pakistani customs to control the smuggling, not theirs. In normal circumstances, the customs is expected to inform the Archaeology department about impounded artefacts. But a look at the Karachi customs warehouse makes it clear that someone has not been doing his job. At this warehouse, many articles of antique value have been lying dumped for years, well on their way to ruin. Either the customs officials have not informed the Archaeology Department, or the Department has not found it necessary to come forward and identify these items.

Around the world today, archaeologists and others are involved in claiming back icons to their original sites (remember the uproar last year in India during Queen Elizabeth's visit over getting back the Kohinoor), but Pakistan's conservation officials have not even begun a token campaign to get back the stolen art of Pakistan. Says archaeologist Manzoor Baloch, "The original statues of the King Priest of Mohenjodaro and that of the Dancing Girl are lying in museums outside the country, and no effort has yet been made to get them back."

If the present rate of smuggling continues, they fear that Pakistan's children will have to go overseas to take in their country's historical and cultural wealth. And that is very likely to happen given the official apathy towards antiques, as summed up by this sneering comment from an archaeologist: "When we cannot trace our children who are kidnapped and sold to other countries for the rich men's pleasure there, what are we to do with tracing useless articles made of clay and copper?" ▲



Archaeological treasure trove at Taxila.

# THE MISSING HAND AND OTHER STORIES

by *Farjad Nabi*

The train sped into the night and the passengers struggled to stay awake against the hypnotic rhythm of the travelling sounds which gently seduced everyone into sweet sleep. I was at the very back, facing the inmates of the compartment as we all gently bobbed as if performing some obscure Irish dance to an inaudible beat.

I knew the young man next to me was getting restless. Having already exhausted his conversational ammunition with the person on his right, he was looking for another captive. Which was me, of course. He

started by asking for the newspaper, went straight to the ads for films and ogled at the steamy sirens who beckoned the viewer to see more of them in the cinema.

"I've seen this one," he said pointing to one especially buxom beauty standing next to a snarling impression of a man painted in blood.

I told him I hadn't. Which was enough for him to launch into his life story.

He worked in an antiques shop next to a cinema in Islamabad. The shop was owned by two brothers who had literally brought him up since he was a little boy. He was no relation to them, no, they had found him somewhere. He had paid back the kindness by serving the family by running the odd jobs, graduating slowly to being a house servant. He had his own room where he listened to music, he said with obvious pride. When he became a man, as he put it, the brothers had other tasks in mind for him.

By now I had been sucked into his world. He had the knack for story telling and one couldn't help but listen with interest as he animatedly moved his hands around. He was wearing a golden watch, fake but expensive, and joggers. The train sped on.

The brothers were dealers in antiques, and not your average blackened-by-shoe polish antiques either. The real thing, he said with eyes gleaming. And what was the real thing, I asked tentatively. Real antiques, thousands of years old. Statuettes, figurines, utensils, jewellery, things no one had ever seen, not even in their dreams.

I had to sit up. Was this man trying to impress me? Was he exaggerating? What was he upto? I decided to grill him.

So how do you go about getting these unimaginable things? I asked casually.

Feeling important he got into the story. The brothers worked very systematically. They bought small plots in areas where antiques could be found. They mostly operated in Swat in the North-West Frontier Province.

Swat. A picturesque mountainous land with an emerald green river running through it. Once the Gandhara dynasty stretched to Swat, and one can still go visit stupas there.

So far the story was close to the mark. I waited for him to go on.

After the plots were bought, labourers were hired on daily wages and the digging began. They never dug during the day, he confided, only when the night was deep and dark. The young man's job was to supervise the digging. Supervision consisted of stopping work as soon as a sound was heard. What sound, I queried.

"Tunn!!" came the reply.

The sound of a pickaxe hitting a rock. Most of the times it was a false alarm but sometimes it was not. As soon as a discovery was made, the labourers were paid their wages on the spot and politely told that their job was over. Now the supervisor took over the excavation himself. He had dug up innumerable statuettes with his own hands. What sort of statuettes? What era? What did they look like? I fired one after another.

He could not tell. All he could tell was that they were old, very old. But then his job was not that of a historian. His job was to safely bring his bounty to Islamabad where





the Big Book lay. What on earth was this book, I had to know.

Again he was stumped for an answer. All he knew was that it was some kind of an encyclopaedia which listed various antiques and the estimated prices of each. How could a book list such antiques if they were not even found yet, retorted my logic. No answer. His only knowledge of the Big Book was that it was published in Japan and was the bible of every antique dealer.

Never mind, go on, I urged.

Well things were simple after that. The brothers had contacts outside Pakistan and the goods were smuggled out at astronomical sums. How much was an astronomical sum? He paused. Let me give you an example, he said with obvious relish. We have this statuette of a goddess but one of her hands is missing. As soon as we find this hand, the goddess would sell for two crores (20 million) rupees.

Bloody hell! Out of some instinct I looked around to check on my fellow passengers. They only nodded assent in their sleep. Although I knew it was a naive question, I had to ask it anyway. How did they smuggle the goods out of Pakistan without getting caught?

By air, by sea, by land, any which way that was suitable. The consignments were seized occasionally. But it was not a big problem, he hastened to add. Once when a seized consignment was lying in a police station, the brothers hired some artisans to make replicas. One by one, the originals were smuggled out of the police station and replaced by fakes. During the trial that en-

sued, the fakes were presented as evidence. Fantastic as it did sound I had to believe him. Those artisans had to be damn good to make exact replicas.

Oh, there was no dearth of talent in Pakistan, he said wisely. You know the Lahore museum? I did. Well over half of it is fake. Come on now, this was getting a bit out of hand, I said uncomfortably thinking about the times I had stood agog in front of antiques of breathtaking beauty marvelling at the hands that shaped them thousands of years ago.

No, I'm serious, it was his turn to sit up. You know the Starving Buddha in the museum? I did, I said with growing dread. That's a fake. I looked at him closely, checking for any signs of deceit. I couldn't see any. I didn't have to believe him. But why would this young man travelling by train, having no allusions to archaeology or history, want to fib? Maybe he had good imagination. Maybe not.

The station was approaching. The inmates of the bogie were rousing and elbowing their relatives to rouse as well. Babies started to cry, luggage began to be lugged. I and my antique friend sat in silence. The train slowed down and I got up to leave.

"Here, I want to show you something", he said fishing out his wallet.

I stood frozen. What could it be? A certificate that the Starving Buddha was a fake? A photo of the two crore goddess? His visiting card?

"Here, see this." I found myself staring at a fading photo of a girl with black hair and red lipstick. "This is my girlfriend." ▲



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# WHERE IS THE BACTRIAN GOLD?

**The war in Afghanistan started in the middle of the excavation of six Kushan graves in Tillya Tepe. Through the war, the world wondered about the Bactrian 'golden hoard' excavated at Tillya Tepe thought to be as valuable as the treasure of Tutankhamen. We still don't know.**

*by Khaled Ahmed*

**I**n the *National Geographic* of March 1990, Viktor Ivanovich Sarianidi wrote that he had discovered an ancient city in Tillya Tepe (mound of gold) in 1978. He dated it to 2500 BC, making it contemporary with Mohenjodaro. He saw traces of subsequent settlements and noted its Hellenisation in 400 BC. He was excavating layers related to 100 AD when he discovered six royal graves. These were of Kushan princes and princesses decked out in Greek-style ornamented regalia. His team collected over 20,000 gold objects, catalogued them, and transported them to Kabul where the famous Kabul Museum became their repository.

Tillya Tepe is in the Jozjan province (old name Balkh), north of the Hindu Kush and south of Amu Darya forming the frontier with the former Soviet Union. This is the region known to ancient history as Bactria, the land of the Greek people whom the Persians employed as their soldiers.

As the Soviet archaeological team dug through the graveyard, modern-day war-

riors appeared and started plundering the site. This was Uzbek territory, the bailiwick of warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam and his dreaded militia. Sarianidi writes that the two remaining graves were opened by the warriors and their contents sold in the international market "before we had a chance to make plaster copies of the pieces, before they could be studied or displayed, war and confusion closed on Afghanistan." Continues Sarianidi, "Today the priceless golden hoard of Tillya Tepe is in Kabul, but its condition is unknown, and scholars have no access. My efforts to have the trove fully safeguarded have so far met with disappointment." As the war progressed, Sarianidi and his mission became the subject of a persistent rumour that the Russians had carted the treasure off to Moscow.

## **Where is it now?**

Kushans were a nomadic tribe from western China who had been pushed out to the southern expanse of Siberia by the Huns. There they had joined up with the Scythians

*Bactrian Aphrodite. The Greek goddess of love sports wings of Bactrian tradition and a tika that shows Indian influence.*

and come down in 130 BC to Central Asia to occupy the Bactrian Greek city of Tillya Tepe, and learnt to live as city people. Here, the Kushan kings were Hellenised and they ruled in the land of Gandhara. Kanishka was their "greatest" king who reigned over an empire that stretched from the Aral Sea all the way upto Bengal from his seat in Peshawar.

The Bactrian hoard contains evidence of Silk Route commerce. It has the biggest Greek coins yet found; it has Roman coins (which have not been found in Pakistan); and enough Chinese artefacts to prove that it sat on the crossroads of a flourishing trading network between three civilisations.

Museums all over the world wondered about the fate of the Bactrian treasure throughout the Afghan war. The Kabul Museum, where it was supposed to be lying, was one of the world's richest store-houses of archaeological objects. During the war, scholars kept visiting Kabul in the hope of finding out the fate of the Bactrian treasure. Theft and looting were regularly reported from the museum, but it was not until the civil war of the mujahideen that threat to the security of the museum became real.

In 1993, the museum fell in the area which had come under the control of Hezb-e-Wahdat led by Ustad Abdul Ali Mazari. That year it was bombed and was gutted beyond repair. The world's most precious treasures thus became vulnerable to wholesale plundering. In 1994, Nancy Hatch Dupree, a scholar on Afghanistan, gave a lecture in Islamabad in which she disclosed that in November 1993, the UN representative Sotirios Mousouris had succeeded in persuading Mazari to let UN experts examine the museum. This inspection revealed that almost all the boxes containing the exhibits had been disturbed and that theft was considerable, including disappearance of miniatures contained in 20,000 rare books.

Dupree gave the audience the first information about the Bactrian treasure since Sarianidi's report in the *National Geographic*. Writing in a Pakistani paper, she said: "Dur-

ing the 1980s an oft-repeated rumour started that the Soviets had carted off the museum's treasures to an unknown destination, or more particularly, to the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. This was false. The origin of the rumour was in the fact that in April 1979 the contents of the museum had been moved for safekeeping to the residence of Sardar Mohammad Naim Khan (brother of Sardar Daud) in Shahr-e-Nau. The move was described in a letter from Garla Grissman who was working at that time in the museum and had helped with the arrangement.

"But rumours that the gold had been stolen, either by the Soviets or by the government itself, persisted. About six months before the fall of President Najibullah, in April 1992, the Kabul government made an attempt to quell these rumours. The Tillya Tepe hoard was put on display in Kotli Baghcha to which the diplomatic corps was invited. Following this special showing, the gold was packed in seven boxes and placed in a vault of the Central Bank within the Arg compound."

Do we know whether the treasure is still there? Did it survive the fall of the communist government? Who got to it first from among the mujahideen? And what is its fate now under the Taliban? A cash-strapped regime in Kabul would be compelled to sell it for crucial funds. As it is, religious leaders attach no importance to 'pagan' objects relating to pre-Islamic times. During the war against the Soviets, and during the current civil war, Afghan archaeological heritage has been heard to be sold in Pakistan, in Chitral, Peshawar and Islamabad, where Pakistan's own museum pieces are regularly sold clandestinely. Like the old Silk Route finds, has this treasure too been taken out to the West? This is what scholars like Dupree want to know. Unless the present regime in Kabul arranges another exhibition, the doubts expressed by Sarianidi in 1990 will persist. ▲

(Adapted from an earlier article in *The Friday Times*, Lahore.)



*The goddess of wisdom, Athena, on a signet ring from the Bactrian hoard.*



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

A READER from Bombay sends me this flyer from Citibank, presenting "the first ever card designed specially for women". And so Ms Anita Kumar, forward looking representative of **Indian Womanhood**, what does she get for signing on for the plastic? A free one-year subscription to *Elle*, "the world's largest-selling fashion magazine", and "a special Pond's gift hamper". Further, Citibank will contribute to two organisations helping women in need, but we are not told what percentage of transaction. The best part is the form that asks the applicant to fill in whether she is male or female...



NEWS ITEM like this warm the cockles of Chhetria Patrakar's hardened heart. An 11 September article by Amit Baruah of *The Hindu* datelined Islamabad, which reports on **Jatindra Nath Das**, a forgotten hero of the Indian freedom struggle. The story is from Pakistan because Jatindra Nath died in Lahore Central Jail on 13 September 1929 after a 63-day hunger strike. Why do I like this item? Because it retroactively unifies the India which was broken-up in 1947.

HOW DID Jatindra Nath Das die? Amit Baruah quotes from the historical records of what M.R. Jayakar, a member of the Central Legislative Assembly, had to say the day after the martyr passed away: "He died slowly, inch by inch; one hand gone paralysed for want of sustenance, another hand gone atrophied for want of nourishment, one foot gone, another foot gone, and the last of nature's precious gifts, eyesight, gone; the fire of those orbs slowly quenched, inch by inch, not by the sudden and merciful death of the guillotine, but with the slowness with which nature builds or destroys. Oh, the anguish of this slow torture."

## Gobar Times

ENVIRONMENT FOR KIDS

DO YOU know of *Gobar Times*? It is published by the same people who bring you *Down to Earth*, and it is good. The tabloid-sized eight-pager is meant for children, and teaches them to be environmentally conscious, such as about villagers creating wealth from waste in using gobar. How do you get *Gobar Times*? Contact Rustam Vania, whose concept it is, at [cse@cseindia.org](mailto:cse@cseindia.org).

SPEAKING OF which (I mean, gobar), this is the opportunity to bring up a matter where I think there is some kind of gender discrimination in this here South Asia. *Gobar* is always translated as cowdung, but what of bullshit? Would that not have the same ingredients, consistency and sanctity? The cow and the bull, I am sure, share the same metabolism. Because of my South Asian upbringing, I feel all warm and mushy when you say "cowdung", but because of the Occidental influence on my brain-cells, when you say "bullshit", I say yukk. What to do?

SUNDAY SOLILOQUIES in *The Deccan Herald*, by columnist N.J. Nanporia, I recommend to anyone who has access to that paper. I loved his lambasting, in a mid-September column, of the certitude-laden Tim Sebastian of BBC television's *Hardtalk*, whom every Indian discussion host is trying to copy (other than in dull *Doordarshan*). Here is what Nanporia had to say, "... Sebastian asks his questions within the framework of the values and political culture with which alone he is familiar. And he does this with all the smugness and self-satisfaction of one who makes no allowance for any other kind of framework."

HERE IS a headline the kind of which I would like to see more of, so that we can quickly convert ourselves into highly effective communicators of the corporate arena. Sarath Malalasekera's piece in Colombo's *Daily News* of 24 August, is headlined, "Steeltec to manufacture high tensile steel 'C' purlins and lipped channels". May I curl my own lips in utter amazement at this news, that Steeltec, the very company which has "revolutionised the construction industry in Sri Lanka by building factories of metal sheets instead of cement mixture is now ready to face the millennium by manufacturing [aforementioned, and I seek forgiveness for the repetition] high tensile steel 'C' purlins and lipped channels using roll forming technique for the use of construction industry".

THE IS simply a matter of simple, and what seems to be unprejudiced reportage by Seethalakshmi S. for *The Times of India*, that in the village of **Bandri Bandri** (in Bellary) women "outdo men in consuming alcohol, so much so that nearly 80 percent of the women are addicts". Ms Seethalakshmi goes on to interview the extremely voluble respondents in the persons of Roopa (27), Thimmakka (70), Revathi (30) and Saraswati (26), and presents the fact that everyone loves their tippale of arrack, sold by the redoubtable Hanumanthappa (no age given for this one, the vendor). Something tells Chhetria Patrakar that s/he should go to Bellary to confirm this story, and also to confront 30-year-old Revathi to see whether she really said, "After putting my children to sleep, I drink everyday. That's the only way to relax." Meanwhile, isn't Bellary the self-same district where Madame Sonia headed off to cast her ticket, but lost her way getting there. Could it be ...?

MORE POWER to regional cinema! Anything to break the tyranny of Hindi film, Lata, Swiss pastures and Mauritius beaches.



According to a report in the 11 September *Assam Tribune*, Assamese producers seem to have finally discovered how to best Bollywood, and that is by spending on elaborate posters and cutouts. Apparently, Trikon Production's maiden venture *Maharathi* has pasted Guwahati and all other major towns in the Brahmaputra valley with posters and oversize cutouts. Apparently this publicity has resulted in great 'collections' in the first weeks of the showings. I can only cheer Assamese cinema along, and tell others to hop on to the publicity wagon. As Simanta and Mridumoloy write in their piece, "Hope this trend set by *Maharathi* will give a wider reach to Assamese cinema taking it to a new high."

**DID I** miss something? When Mahbub ul Haq was around, his South Asia Human Development Report used to receive a fair degree of well-deserved publicity all over. However, I read here in the 21 September *Nation* of Islamabad that this year's report was to be released on 23 September, and that the theme for this year's report was the lack of **good governance**. That is very important. Was I, then, hibernating when the rest of South Asian media missed this good story op?

**THE MAHARISHI** Open University offers (as per ad in *The Times of India*) under the auspices of the Maharishi Shiksha Sansthan "Consciousness-Based-Education which provides for the total utilisation of the brain, and in that surpasses all existing universities". Name of course: **Total Knowledge**. Duration: 6 months, two days a week. Fees: INR 1200. Then there is the next course, *Creating Perfection in Human Life*. But then that is "only meant for those who have already done their total knowledge". Well, that certainly screens me out. Phew!

**THERE IS** only one country in South Asia where 'before' and 'after' maps like these are required, and even relevant. These maps were printed by the Colombo *Daily News* on 19 August on the 5th anniversary of the Peoples' Alliance Government of Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, and show the "progress made by our security forces in this struggle to usher in peace for all". The shaded area in the north signifies territory under LTTE control.

**'SIR' ARTHUR C.** Clarke, science fiction author and honorary citizen of Sri Lanka had no need to do this. That is, curry favour from Madame President by writing in a futurology piece in *Asiaweek* that in 2007, President Chandrika would get the **Nobel Prize** for restoring peace in

Sri Lanka. Are things so bad for him in his adopted home that he needed to throw this little sop? Oh yes, he also has predicted that in 2005 the Dalai Lama would return to Tibet. Highly unscientific, if you ask me. Science fiction, more likely.

**I CANNOT** seem to get off the case of Madame President on this one. Here is a letter in the *Daily News* by A. Waduge from Colombo, congratulating the president for inviting the people to **fax** her directly if they had any

**The President's request - a good thing**

In my opinion, it is a good thing that the President has invited the people to Fax directly to her any allegations of corruption on the part of ministers, MPs and public officials. Although we do not know if anything would come of it, to obtain the best results it would be good that copies of such complaints be forwarded to the Leader of the Opposition too. This would ensure not only possible action by the president but also prodding and public exposure on such allegations by the Opposition and definitely, action that could be taken by the latter when they come to power.

A. WADUGE  
Colombo 4.

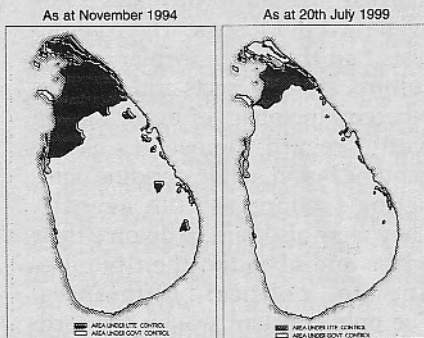
allegations of corruption against her ministers and public officials. Now, Mr/Ms Waduge is a sharp person. S/he adds that to obtain the best results, "copies of such complaints be forwarded to the Leader of the Opposition as well..."

**THERE WAS** a workshop on **bananas** held recently at the Sri Lanka Mahaweli Centre auditorium. "The creating of awareness among school children on the importance of fruit consumption, preparing food items from bananas at home, making use of bananas in the tourism industry, and experiences in making banana food preparations were discussed."

**PROFESSIONAL, RELIABLE** and luxury, non-stop air-conditioned bus service between Rawalpindi and Gilgit was inaugurated on 12 September, with "fully equipped **armed security guard**", "complete life insurance" and two drivers, I presume in case one gets bumped off to maintain continuity of journey. Boy, this sure makes me want to go from Rawalpindi to Gilgit!

**IN BANGLADESH**, it says here in the letters column, Mr Sunil Kumar Baruwa has moved to open an international organisation called Foundation for Moral Development Approach, with the very appropriate, pleasing and to-the-point acronym FMDA. Now, FMDA has developed a global programme to curb moral degradation as it is (moral degradation, not FMDA) the number one enemy of mankind which is causing the following evils: corruption, bribery, poverty, rape, human rights violations, environmental pollution, oppression and repression of women and children, terrorism, drug abuse, etc. *Ataha*, as they used to say back in the days of the Vedas, moral development is the only solution, which is why FMDA has sent a detailed proposal to the United Nations, "which should take up the matter immediately". I am sure it will. As they say these days, *nut-to-wari*.

-**Chhetria Patrakar**



# This believer was a communist

**When it snowed in Moscow, overcoats would come out in Karachi. No longer.**

by *Hasan Mujtaba*

There used to be a time when the village Bulhereji near Mohenjodaro in Pakistan's Sindh province used to be known as Little Moscow, so strong was the communist influence there. Today, Bulhereji shows hardly a trace of the once-active Left movement.

The waning of communist fervour is the same all over Pakistan. Former members of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) are now a divided lot. Some have surrendered to other political ideologies, some have taken solace in Islam, while there are also those who desperately bank on the comeback of communism. Some praise Mikhail Gorbachev, others curse him; many have nothing to do with their past and a few proudly clutch on to it.

The collapse of the Soviet Union may have shattered the belief of many in communism, but not so for the few who maintain that it was not communism that fell but a "handful of corrupt communist leaders". This never-say-die group is no longer active in politics, but that does not prevent it from celebrating even a small communist victory in any part of the world, and being crestfallen when reverses take place. It rejoiced when the communists returned and replaced Lech Walesa in Poland, came to power in Nepal, and maintained their hold in India's West Bengal. On the other hand, there was deep shock

when the Taliban hung the communist leader Najibullah (who, incidentally, was the brother-in-law of a former Peshawar communist).

## Lenins, Ches, Castros

In the Cold War past, entering the Russian embassy or consulate meant being hounded by Pakistan's secret service. Successive rulers in Pakistan declared communists a "serious threat" to the country's security and religion. But, despite bearing jail, torture and punishment, Pakistani communists persevered in their 'cause' and they would proudly name their children after communist heroes—Lenin, Che, Castro—or after characters in post-revolution Russian novels—Tanya, Natasha, Kibral, etc.

The communists were men and women from every class background. Many of them had been to Moscow for studies, mostly via Afghanistan, India and Sri Lanka. Some married Russian women and a few even died in Moscow. The communists had their own insular jargon, culture, attitude, sects and factions, whereby members of every faction would regard themselves as the genuine brand, while deriding competing factions as "CIA agents". They were also said to divorce their wives and abandon their families due to political differences. The only constant was in the form

of address—"comrade".

Not only politically and economically, the communists also seemed to be connected to Moscow in spirit. So much so that there was a joke on the communists: "They wear overcoats in Karachi when they hear of snow fall in Moscow."

But that was a long time ago. Says a former member, "After the 1970s, the Communist Party gradually lost its significance in the political sphere and acted as no more than a marriage bureau or travel agency sending people to the USSR and serving as an institution where men and women met."

But the lifestyle and politics of the Pakistani communist was so secretive that the public came to know of the full extent of leftist activity only after the fall of the Soviet Union. Until the collapse of the USSR, there were only three declared communists in Pakistan—Imam Ali Nazish, Jam Saqi and Hassan Nasir. Others referred to themselves as "Leftists", "Progressives", "Marxists", or "Maoists". The term 'communist', however, was the convenient label by which politicians slandered their opponents. When the first supposed *coup d'etat* in Pakistan in 1953, led by the first commander-in-chief, Maj Gen Akber Khan, failed, it was promptly dubbed a "communist conspiracy" by the rulers. In what came to be



*Communist forever. For Sobho Gayanchandani (above) the collapse of the Soviet Union reflected the failure of the party bureaucracy, not of communist ideology. Among the senior-most communists in the Subcontinent, Sobho was a founding-member of the CPP. A Hindu by birth, he refused to leave his native Sindh after Partition and had to pay heavy price for that. As Sobho himself puts it, "I was told by an intelligence official that you are Hindu, Sindhi and communist so you have to be jailed all your life." During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, he was detained and during the 1971 war, he had to go into hiding. He then gave up membership of the CPP since it was difficult to continue with party work because of his Hindu background. Picture on left from the 1940s shows Sobho (garlanded) with other comrades, including well-known Hindi film actor A.K. Hangal (2nd from left).*

known as the "Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case", General Khan and some other army and airforce officers were tried, along with civilians and leftists including celebrated Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sajad Zaheer (the first secretary general of the CPP) and Sobho Gayanchandani. Following this crackdown, in which the accused were convicted, the CPP and its sub-organisations were banned and a manhunt for leftists was ordered. It has now come to light that the entire episode was a government frame-up.

### Party partition

During the struggle for independence, the Communist Party of (undivided) India had supported the formation of Pakistan. "This was because the USSR was an ally of Britain's during World War II," recalls a veteran communist, and supporting the idea of Pakistan was equal to helping the British. A number of Pakistani communists, poet Faiz included, even joined the British Indian Army. (It was only in 1976, during the second congress of the 'underground' Communist Party of Pakistan, the communists admitted that their support for the formation of Pakistan had been a "blunder".)

Following the creation of Pakistan, some CPI members were directed to relocate and start propagating communist ideology in the new

country. Sajad Zaheer, scion of an aristocratic Indian Muslim family (known as "Bunnay Bhai" to family friends Sarojini Naidu and Jawaharlal Nehru), returned from Oxford and took up the task of organising the Left in Pakistan, leading to the formation of the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1948. He became the party's first secretary general.

Zaheer was followed to Pakistan by another young communist, Hassan Nasir, who became the office secretary of the party. While Zaheer went back to India in 1954 after the CPP was officially banned, Nasir went underground. He died in mysterious circumstances in 1959. The government of Ayub Khan claimed his death was a "suicide", but many Pakistanis did not buy that account, and still believe that Nasir succumbed to torture at the notorious Lahore Fort. (Pakistani communists idolised Nasir, and his death for them was comparable to Che Guevara's in 1967. Nasir's life became the theme and metaphor for the poetry and prose of many Leftist writers in the country. Many named their sons after him and his death anniversary on 13 November is still observed by the remnants of the Pakistani Left.)

Like communist parties everywhere, the underground CPP too split into "pro-China" and "pro-Moscow" factions in the 1960s. The differences between the

two widened when India and China went to war in 1962, and came to a head during the India-Pakistan war of 1965. The pro-China communists supported the Pakistani government, and many pro-Muscovites were jailed as "suspected enemy agents". It was only when the USSR threw its weight behind the Tashkent ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan that the Moscow faction got a reprieve.

Meanwhile, with the banning of the CPP, many communists and other Leftists, had joined various mainstream political parties. The majority of pro-Muscovites became part of Wali Khan's National Awami Party, while most of the pro-Chinese joined Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani's National Awami Party based in East Pakistan. After Ayub Khan's foreign minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto resigned protesting the Tashkent Treaty, a number of the pro-Beijing communists, especially from West Pakistan, supported Bhutto and joined his newly formed

Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Even as the communist cadre infiltrated other 'like-minded' political organisations, they never admitted to being communists. They would rather say they were sympathisers, and preferred to be vaguely called "Leftists". The communists had also formed "fronts" in many professions and institutions such as the Anjuman Taraqi Pasand Musnifeen (Association of Progressive Writers), Anjuman Jhamooriat Pasand Khawateen (Association of Democratic Women), Kisan Party, Sindh Hari Committee, Tulba and Mazdoor Kisan Rabita Committee. The last organised its "Conferences of Democratic Forces" against the Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto regime in all big cities of the country, which was attended by a large number of Leftists in 1976.

### Cigarette idealism

Like many of their counterparts elsewhere, Pakistani communists too were cafe-sitters and drawing room intellectuals. "We were day-dreamers. The dreamers of revolution," concedes one. Many idealists considered smoking expensive brands of cigarettes as bourgeoisie indulgence, and stuck to the 'down-to-earth' local brand, K-2. When those from the upper classes gave up their rich lifestyle, it was called "declassification".

The communists had their own press, periodicals and publishing houses, set up with party funds. The better known among them were Lahore's People's Publishing House, Standard Publishers in Karachi and Hyderabad's Qaumi Kitab Ghar. Along with Russian fiction, the People's Publishing House brought out Urdu translations of political treatises of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, while Standard Publishers and Qaumi Kitab Ghar mainly sold communist literature published in English and Urdu from Moscow. Aided by Urdu and Sindhi translations, Mao's *Red Book* and Che's *Bolivian Diaries* were widely circulated among young comrades.

After Bhutto came to power in

December 1971, the administration came down heavily on the communists (while also purging the PPP of Leftists like J.A. Rahim, Mairaj Muhammed Khan, Khurshid Hassan Mir and Mubashir Hasan, all of whom were once Bhutto's close associates). But even in those days, serious radical literature was being produced by communist ideologues like Syed Sibte Hassan and Abdullah Malik. The books written by them were bestsellers among Pakistani leftists. Hassan's famous works *Moosa Se Marx Tuk* (From Moses to Marx) and *Secularism Kya Hay?* (What Is Secularism?) bear particular mention because they helped define "communist" for a Pakistani mass fed on the idea that it meant "infidel".

Though the ban over the CPP had unofficially been lifted by the early 1970s, the communists remained underground. From 1973, the CPP began secretly circulating underground publications with mostly anti-American and anti-martial law content, and provided an alternative to the censored press. This was when the communists were able to show their expertise in producing dissent literature in the form of hand bills, pamphlets and graffiti.

### Zia years

When General Zia-ul Haq overthrew Bhutto and imposed martial law, the CPP and other Leftist groups, whatever their opposition to Bhutto, condemned the act. "We looked upon Bhutto as a representative of the rising bourgeoisie against the monopoly of capitalists or ruling oligarchy, the clergy and military bureaucracy," says a former comrade. "The people of Pakistan know that Bhutto was toppled and killed because he opposed America, and called it a 'white elephant'."

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave Zia an excuse to persecute the communists. "Though there were only a handful of communists in Pakistan, Zia convinced America that they posed a serious threat to American interest in the region," says Mir Thebo, an ex-communist. "This way



he not only succeeded in getting approval from the West for his unpopular rule, but also exposed communists as paper tigers at home."

During Zia's rule, a large number of communists were jailed, or went underground or left the country. There were also those who opted for Afghanistan after the communists came to power there, and later made their way to Western Europe (where some of them have now become rich businessmen). Those that stayed back in Pakistan, meanwhile, published a mimeographed handbill against Zia titled "Snatch Power from the Usurpers". On Bhutto's first death anniversary, the party raised slogans such as "Welcome, welcome, Russia, welcome"; and "Snatch, snatch Pakistan, as you have snatched Afghanistan".

Afghanistan's communist regime allegedly used many communists from the NWFP and Balochistan to work against Islamabad. Many of them became rich overnight, apparently from money distributed by Khad, the Afghan secret service, a fact that led to rifts among the Pakistani comrades.

It was during this period that Jam Saqi, "the only self-proclaimed communist in Pakistan", was arrested in December 1978. Within a year of his arrest, the government raided two rented houses in working- and middle-class Karachi and netted Jamal Naqvi, a communist ideologue, Ahmed Kamal Warsi, a





Jam Saqi the preacher, and, above, in prison during his communist days.

labour leader, journalists Sohail Sangi and Shabir Shar, writer Badar Abro and student leader Nazir Abbasi.

The arrested communists were tried by a special military court in what has come to be known as the "Jam Saqi Case". The trial was widely covered by national and international media, and Saqi and his associates benefitted by airing their views in the courtroom. They sought as their defence witnesses some of the country's top leaders, including Benazir Bhutto, and a number of intellectuals. Saqi even wanted Zia as his defence witness, but the request was turned down. Benazir Bhutto, who was under house arrest, was brought to court to record her statement. She said later, "Zia probably wanted to show me as a collaborator with the communists." The accused were given prison sentences of 8-10 years, and were only released following the restoration of democracy in 1985-86.

In the meantime, an incident occurred that showed the intransigence of the communist prisoners towards any compromise on their fate. In March 1980, a PIA plane was hijacked, and in the list of prisoners whose release was demanded by the hijackers, the names of the accused in the Jam Saqi Case also figured. The martial law authorities complied with the demand and prepared to send the prisoners to Damascus. But Jam Saqi and his comrades, despite hav-

ing been tortured to make them agree, refused to board the plane. "General Zia needs to be sent," they said.

#### Don Quixotes

Ironically, martial law's departure also signalled curtains for communism in Pakistan. A number of factors contributed towards this end: ruthless torture during Zia's rule; the restoration of quasi-civilian rule under Muhammed Khan Junejo; Junejo's signing of the Geneva accord leading to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan; and Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*. "When we came out of jail, we found ourselves standing nowhere," says one of the accused in the Jam Saqi Case. "Our Don Quixotic saga came to an end by the crumbling of the first brick in the Berlin Wall."

"There were no more perks they were receiving as part of the party," says a former party member. "No more roubles, Russian books or trips to Moscow, Sofia and east Berlin."

"With the demise of communism in the mid-80s and early 90s many of us became 'politically unemployed' and this came as a 'culture shock' to us," says another.

Many of the former communists picked up mainstream journalism, while others turned to human rights organisations and other NGOs—over a 1000 foreign NGOs working in NWFP and Balochistan after the end of the Afghan war accepted Leftists

into their folds. The communist missionaries returning to lead normal social lives between 1980s and early 1990s was akin to the hippies tripping back home to the West in the late 1970s.

Perhaps the most striking metamorphosis of the Pakistani communist is seen in the lives of those who sought refuge in religion and religious preaching. People like the late Shaikh Ayaz, the Sindhi doyen of poetry and prose who inspired generations of communists (and atheists) and who once said, "Be it the dyed beard of the mullah or the black pony tail of the pundit, to me both are the same because the two deceive the masses by preaching religion. I do not accept them because I am a rebel." When Ayaz passed away on December 1997, the possessions he left behind included a book of prayers; Ayaz had turned to religion in his last days.

Until a few days before Ayaz passed away, Ghulam Rasool Sahito, the former peasant leader and member of the Sindh Committee of CPP, had been saying, "The ideology still possesses the romance and appeal of dying for the cause." But Sahito these days goes by Ayaz's book of prayers and preaches to his erstwhile comrades the "right path, the path of religion". As for Jam Saqi, once the general secretary of the CPP and the proudest of communists, he is today a sufi preacher.

The decline of communism in Pakistan is mirrored in the isolated lives led by those who refuse to give up the ideology. Before he died, some months back, Iman Ali Nazish spent his last days as an inmate at Karachi's Ojha TB Institute. Hardly any of his former comrades used to visit him. For them, Nazish might well have been a ghost, much like the party they had given up on, but Nazish continued to claim to be the secretary general of the Communist Party of Pakistan. By then his party didn't even have the members to contest that claim. ▲



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# A house of my own

by Zaigham Khan



TARIG MAHMOOD

The empty expanse of the Lahore-Islamabad highway.

**M**ega projects and Nawaz Sharif seem to be made for each other. Sharif has to his credit a 16-billion-rupee yellow cab scheme and a 40-billion-rupee Lahore-Islamabad motorway. And now he has come up with *Mera Ghar* (My Home), a project so big that his two previous ventures stand dwarfed in comparison.

Estimated at PKR 400 billion (c. USD 8 billion), *Mera Ghar* is one of the largest development schemes in Asia. It envisages constructing 500,000 housing units for lower- and middle-income groups on 20,000 acres of state land in different cities within the next three years. According to the plan, the government is to provide land free, while the buyer has to come up with 25 percent of the cost of the house, with the remaining 75 percent to be paid in installments spread over 15 years. Sounds grand indeed, but economists fear that if the scheme flops it will take the whole banking system of the country and the economy, along with it.

Officially inaugurated in August, the programme is running with the unholy haste that has almost become the hallmark of Sharif's style of governance. No less than 300 sites have been identified, and preliminary development has already begun on 120 of these sites. The housing authority says that contracts for construction of 100,000 units, amounting to PKR 50 billion, will be awarded within the current financial year.

The government is optimistic that the sheer size of the project will help jump-start the sluggish economy. Since the housing sector has no less than 40 other industries attached to it, it says the project would help three million people find work. Consider the other merits touted: helping overcome the massive housing shortfall; intro-

duction of industrialised construction; promotion of mortgage culture for housing loans; checking unplanned urban growth; and so on.

A tall order, but made taller only by Sharif's earlier mega-follies. The yellow cab scheme, initiated during Sharif's first prime ministerial tenure (1990-1993), was to provide employment to thousands and a decent means of public transport. Instead, it left banks reeling under unpaid debt as the well-off made off with the taxis for private use. And, the Lahore-Islamabad motorway, begun in the same period, promised the sky to all those living in the areas it cuts across. But in its third year of operation, the majestic highway is not generating the revenue to pay off the investment.

Now with *Mera Ghar*, the government is thinking big once again. And as usual, proper methods and procedures are being ignored. No laws are yet in place to monitor the newly formed Prime Minister Housing Authority (PMHA). "Much to the people's dismay, the newly established PMHA is fast emerging as the biggest and most powerful land grabber in the country," commented an editorial in the daily *Dawn*.

Almost everyone outside of the ruling party is certain that the project will be shelved once the government falls, a fact that is driving fear into most would-be investors. But even if it were to be a success, some economists are afraid that it will ring the death knell for the banking sector. This is because the PMHA is adamantly keeping the mark-up on the loans at below 10 percent. Since this is lower than what it costs the Pakistani banks to generate the money, a whole system of cross-subsidies will have to be devised. "Private banks will be unwilling to give soft loans while government banks are already very weak," says Shahid Kardar, a well-known

economist from Lahore. "If soft loans are taken out of government banks, the government will not be able to privatise them as it intends to do and the whole banking sector as well as the State Bank of Pakistan will be in serious trouble."

If one were to ignore the economic niceties, the programme seems quite impressive. Pakistan has a backlog of 6.5 million housing units required, and a shortfall of 150,000 pile up annually in a country where affording a house is becoming increasingly difficult. "This scheme brings housing to the people who can't afford it otherwise," says Lahore-based Nayyar Ali Dada, one of the country's leading architects and a consultant to the project.

Even if one were to grant Dada's argument, it would be true only for the middle classes. The debate so far has not addressed the increasingly shelterless poor. Less than 5 percent of the housing units appear to be in the reach of the low-income group. (The cheapest is priced at around PKR 100,000.)

Activists like Karachi-based Tasneem Siddiqui, a well-known expert for low-cost housing, hold that the poor do not need built-up units. What they need is a piece of raw land with the minimum of services where they can build their house with their own resources incrementally. "Our planners," says Siddiqui, "are woefully ignorant about the economics, culture and sociology of low-income people. Their approach lacks the human angle, rather than trying to bring about a qualitative change in the lives of the target groups, they lay emphasis on physical outputs and quantitative results."

Someone should try telling Sharif that. Megalomania without merit is just that and nothing more. ▲

# In a hole over coal

**A controversial power plant pits a bishop's word against a president's silence.**

by Niresh Eliatamby

Sri Lanka's most senior Catholic bishop recently made a startling announcement at the country's biggest annual Catholic festival. President Chandrika Kumaratunga had scrapped plans to build a controversial coal-powered power station on the west coast 100 kilometres north of Colombo, said Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando, who claimed that he was informed personally of the fact by the president.

The crowd of several hundred thousand faithfuls, gathered at the feast of Saint Ann in the town of Talawila in August, burst into thunderous applause. National newspapers reported the speech on their front pages the next day, for it meant the end of years of acrimony between the church, environmentalists and residents of the area on one side, and the government on the other.

But strangely, the government stayed tightlipped on the issue. Journalists who tried to get comments from the president's office, got none. A few days later, came a statement from the Ceylon Electricity Board, the state-owned power company that is building the 600 million-dollar station, that contradicted the bishop's announcement. "We have not received instructions to stop work on

the Nuraicholai project," said D.C. Wijeratne, additional general manager at the CEB. "Work is continuing."

Bishop Fernando, however, stuck to his statement. "She said the government is returning the 600-million-dollar soft loan to the Japanese," he told reporters. But the president continued to remain silent.

## Nervous Nuraicholai

The conflicting claims underline the intensity of the struggle over an issue that is threatening to derail Sri Lanka's already-fragile economy. CEB officials



Soldiers patrol Nuraicholai after the 1997 protests. Bishop Fernando (top).

say that increasing demand for electricity, rising by an annual 8 percent, will cause a shortfall in supply by 2004, even with the construction of several more oil-fired stations. Com-

pounding the problem is the government instruction that the CEB provide power to 80 percent of the island's houses by 2005, up steeply from today's 52 percent. A coal power station must be ready by then, the CEB says, or there will be daily power cuts. That will surely destroy the economy since foreign investors are not likely to be interested in a country that doesn't have a reliable power supply, which, as the CEB says, means economic disaster.

But villagers at Nuraicholai, where the coal power station is being built, are staunchly opposed to the project, which they say will bring acid rain and soot down on them, and ruin their fields. This area, bound on one side by the sea, is predominantly Catholic, and the clergy rushed to the defence of its flock. The possibility that the power station will cause acid rain and harm the 150-year-old St Anne's Church, 20 kilometres away, galvanised the rest of Sri Lanka's Catholics, who form 8 percent of the population.

Environmental organisations are also in the thick of protests, lending scientific weight to the opposition. The southwest monsoon winds, blowing for half the year, may spread the acid rain as far as the ancient Buddhist holy city of Anuradhapura, while affecting the much-nearer Wilpattu National Park, the country's largest wildlife sanctuary. CEB officials, however, disagree with such assessments, and have promised to install state-of-the-art systems that will remove almost all harmful chemicals from the power plants' emissions.

Unfortunately for all concerned, with presidential and general elections scheduled in less than a year, the politicians are trying to placate both sides, rather than deal with the issue once and for all and be done with it. With a one-seat majority in

the 225-seat Parliament, President Kumaratunga can't risk alienating the Catholics. But neither does she want to be blamed for the possible economic crisis in 2004, predicted by those in favour of the project, if the power station isn't built.

Rumours and fear rule Nurai-cholai. With no clear government policy, politicians and officials in the area are unsure of themselves when they face the protesters. Protests at the site have often turned violent, as happened two years ago when police fired into a crowd of demonstrators, killing one person. Threats to call in the armed forces and push the project through, made by Minister of Power Anuruddha Ratwatte, who is also the deputy defence minister, have only served to strengthen the resolve of those opposed to it.

### Energy urgency

For more than a century, Sri Lankans depended on the hydroelectricity generated by the country's plentiful streams and large rivers. Ranging in size from tiny village turbines producing a few kilowatts to power stations at huge dams providing up to 250 mega-watts, hydroelectricity powered everything from street lamps to factories.

But by the mid-1980s, almost all sites suitable for damming rivers had been exhausted. Alternative sources of energy were needed and needed fast. That was the time when the country was surging ahead economically. Diesel power was one option, and a series of diesel-powered stations came up. More are under construction at present and by 2003, oil-fired stations will account for about 40 percent of the nation's power, an alarmingly high dependency for a country that doesn't have its own oil. These power plants come with a heavy price tag, for although they are cheap to build, running them is another story. "Sri Lankans already pay a very high price for electricity. The more we add oil-based stations, the more the price will increase," says CEB's Wijeratne.

Since other sources, such as wind, solar power and natural gas, are also expensive, coal seemed to be the only choice left. Coal is cheap, and available in plenty in India, Australia and many other countries bordering the Indian Ocean. The CEB thus drew up a plan to build a series of coal-powered stations, according to which, coal will supply 65 percent of the country's power by 2012. That will be as much power as the 1200 megawatts produced by all of the hydro and diesel power stations today.

Initially, in the mid-1980s, the project was to be located at Trincomalee, the huge port on the northeast coast. But international financiers shied away, since the area was in the middle of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Next, a town on the south coast was found, but a Marxist uprising against the government with roots in the south, convinced the then President Ranasinghe Premadasa to abort the plan. Other sites which were scouted were found to be unsuitable.

Finally, the CEB picked Nurai-cholai, and the government gave the green signal. The Japanese government pledged to fund the entire project. Preliminary work has now almost been completed, and the power plant is scheduled to be in operation in 2004. The Nurai-cholai station would initially generate 300 MW of electricity, and later be expanded to produce 900 MW. A second power plant is planned for the south coast, but it has already drawn opposition from environmentalists. The activists say there is still time to look for alternative sources of energy. CEB officials do not refute this, but neither are they seeking alternatives. They haven't received instructions from the president, they say.

"We are banking on the Nurai-cholai project. The increasing power requirement, and the lack of hydro-power makes it essential that we go ahead with the project," says Ananda Dharmapriya, senior assistant secretary at the Ministry of Power. The CEB and the government

say there isn't enough time now to find another location. "It takes about eight years to plan a power station, do the feasibility studies, find the money, and then construct it," says Wijeratne. "We originally planned to have the first 300 MW coal plant ready around 1998. We are now six years behind schedule. We have already taken most of the stopgap measures that can be taken, like building more thermal plants."

The indecision even has the Japanese worried, and getting funding for another site will be difficult. Officials of the Japanese lending agency, Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund, which has pledged an interest-free loan for the coal power plant, have expressed concern over the bishop's statement. The controversy does little good to attract loans and investment.

Sri Lanka's economy, once the envy of the Third World, and held up as a model to emulate by poorer countries 50 years ago, is in no shape to face a power shortage. The civil war in the northeast continues to sap the economy of its resources, consuming a quarter of government revenue. Sri Lanka's main money-spinning industries are also suffering. Tea exports are tottering due to low world prices. Garment factories that employ a large percentage of young men and women are shutting down, unable to cope with competition from China and other Asian nations where low wages keep production costs at a minimum. With the United States set to scrap its quota system in 2004, which was the only reason Sri Lanka managed to compete with China all these years, the future is even more grim. Tourism, shattered by Tamil guerrilla bomb blasts in the capital in 1995 and 1996, driving European tour operators away, is only just getting back on its feet.

The energy clock is ticking for Sri Lanka, and the dithering of politicians, more interested in votes than in announcing a clear-cut policy, is doing nothing to help. ▲



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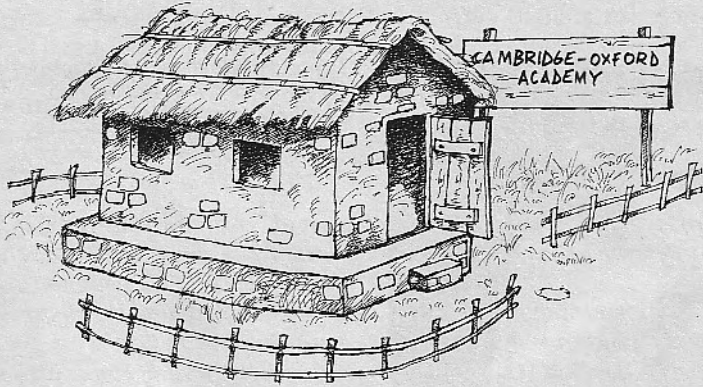
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# "Foreign staff, English medium, Quranic and Islamic studies"



**P**ink-cheeked, top-hatted schoolboys walking across vast playing fields surrounded by medieval stone buildings: surely that's what Eton Hall is all about? Wrong. Eton Hall is a concrete suburban bungalow with a couple of swings rooted in the dusty earth along its frontage. The pupils are definitely not pink and they do not wear top hats. At least, not in Eton Hall, Lahore.

Eton Hall is just one of the thousands of private schools to have sprung up in this city of four million over the past 15 years to fill the yawning gap between the collapsing state education sector and the inaccessibly elitist, colonial-style private schools.

Pitched largely at families with new wealth earned by migrant workers in the Gulf, and in more recent years illicitly through corruption, the private schools wage a cut-throat battle for customers—and profit. As with all commercial products, image is everything, and the names of many schools read like an audit of social aspirations in today's Pakistan.

The yearning to be admitted into the elite is reflected in names which hark back to colonial times: there's an Oxford Public School and a Cambridge Public School (although no annual boat race). In fact, anything goes, however irrelevant

to the local environment, as long as it sounds English: Kimberly Hall School, Comprehensive Aims School System, Balsam House, Regent Grammar School (whose newspaper ad promised "Foreign Staff, English Medium, and Quranic and Islamic Studies"). Legend Hall School (housed not in a castle but in a circa 1980s bungalow) promises hoards of young King Arthurs and Queen Guineveres charging out after hours on their trusty steeds. The name of Bloomfield Hall, one of the more expensive of the private schools and whose English principal is a refugee from Britain's state school system, was reportedly decided on by the owners as they were passing a block of council flats in down-market Walthamstow in London.

In case the Americans should feel left out, there are the Disneyland School ("admission in Senior Classes only on merit basis") and the Snow White Montessori. The French, too, have not been forgotten, with Les Anges Montessori—even if no one has a clue what the school's name actually means. And finally, for true internationalists, there's the International School System (which opened with a single building for play-group through Class VII and a promise of "Instruction Based On Latest Educational

Research; Air Conditioned Class Rooms"). Occasionally, colonial aspirations are moderated by a sudden recollection of national pride, giving us the Sir Syed Cambridge School, named after the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University.

Intellectual aspirations are reflected in the outrageously expensive Kids Kampus, the middle-class professionals' Toddlers Academy and the decidedly down-market Tiny Tots Academy, all nursery schools producing

PhDs of an average age of 6. The Nobel Grammar will obviously boost Pakistan's number of prize-winners up from the current total of one, while Scholars' Inn Cadet School & College offers the prospect of some very bright, militaristic but drunken children.

The oldest and most successful private school, Beaconhouse, which was established by the Kasuri industrialist family and which largely caters to middle-class professionals, has spawned its own set of lower income copycats. From the names one would believe that education in Pakistan has a bright future: The Gleaming Way, Light-house Hall, Beaconsfield House, Gleaming House...

Finally, there's the category of too cute for words: Little Angels, Pixie Land, Little Darlings, again all nursery schools for children of over-optimistic parents. The most recent nursery school to pop up in the city is Mushrooms—perhaps a name that most appropriately captures the spirit in which new schools come up. ▲

by *Cassandra Balchin*/  
Women's Feature Service



# Bangladesh bioscope



Talent drain to the west: Bangladeshi actress Champa in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Lal Darja*.

by **Afsan Chowdhury**

**M**id-shot of a row of men sitting and looking bored in the middle of nowhere in Bangladesh. Camera pans the faces.

It was raining hard as they trudged through the muddy lands of rural Bangladesh searching for women who had suffered and survived 1971. They are shooting a documentary on the role of women in the liberation war. But insistent rains had put a brief halt to their work. They are sitting on the plain wooden chairs so kindly offered by the hosts – total strangers naturally – who are being the typical generous rural people who let urban people, any urban people, muddle through their courtyard and life, and never receive a word of apology. Lazy conversation flows.

What's the biggest problem in

making a video?

Shortage of common sense.

The very desire to do it.

Crowd control. See them wait till the rain ends so that they can come around and watch us shoot. Just imagine what happens when a full-fledged film is done. It is a massive task.

Don't worry. There won't be any crowd left very soon. What's the time?

Why?

Because at 3 pm sharp Bangladesh Television will start showing the weekly Bangla film and that's when the crowd goes home to watch something more interesting than makers of a video.

Close shot of rural Bangla salons watching the mini screen. Hundreds of people are fading into homes and

neighbour's homes. They forget to brush muddy feet, and enjoy themselves to the hilt. The most popular programmes of Bangladesh Television are the film shows. The next most popular is the movie song show. There's an irony somewhere but it's lost in the sound of the first song-and-dance routine.

**CUT TO** Ahmed Zaman Chowdhury (AZC), editor of *Chitrali*, Bangladesh's oldest cine weekly. *Chitrali* was established even before films were produced in Bangladesh. AZC is not just an editor but a dialogue, script, story and song writer as well. He has now forayed into film and TV. "If you take South Asia I would say that the Bangladesh film industry is the most successful one after Hindi and South India. We are better off than Pakistan and other SAARC countries and much bigger than most Indian regions, including West Bengal. Calcutta's Tollywood is nowhere near Dollywood."

How many are produced every year? What is the size of investment per film?

"In 1993-94 the industry produced over 70 films. The figure would be higher now, certainly more than 80 films. There are of course a number of films which get started but never finish because



of so many reasons."

That would take a lot of cinema halls to show, right?

"Of course. In 1972 there were around 300 cinema halls, that figure now stands at around 1200. If you take the thousand who watch every day, day in day out, you will see that it reaches more people than any other medium. TV hits its highest ratings when they show films. This is a cinema-driven mass culture."

**CUT TO** rural and rainy Bengal filled with the depressed TV crew. The cameraman is a Poona Film Institute graduate of two decades' vintage. He is a seriously respected veteran with many tales of the movie world. He says it's a world of its own with its own sub-culture and hierarchies. It seems that the movie

**CUT TO** AZC holding forth with great relish. "The cost of film-making is high here but it attracts a huge number of people because there is the promise of instant money and a few other things."

What are these other things?

"Well, there is the glamour factor for one thing. And the proximity to stars, pretty women in general are rather heady inspirations for many, especially with some extra and sometimes unaccountable cash to spend."

So how much does it cost to produce a movie? How many actually make a profit?

"The average cost of production is 1 crore [10 million] taka, that is over 200,000 dollars. About 30 percent of the films manage not to lose money but the rest are just break evens or lose some money."

and connections, you can be assured of 70 percent of your initial investment. And that will keep a lot of people coming in and those who enter rarely leave. You have to admit it's got a narcotic effect. Film-making is an addiction."

**CUT TO** the TV crew feeling more cheerful as the rain drifts away. Some kids who have probably not been allowed to watch the film on television edge closer. A few women step out to finish chores, but otherwise the village scene is deserted.

Do you watch movies?

The boys nod their head.

Whom do you like?

Villains. They smile happily as they answer. (Great intellectual debate ensues on the role of villains in movie history).

**CUT TO** Chinmoy Mutsuddi, editor of *Binodon Bichitra*, a cine magazine and author of a large volume on the history of Bangla film. A journalist who dabbles in development activities, he was close to Zahir Raihan, the man who made "art, commercial and polemical" movies with great success. The great icon of the tinsel world. He died in 1972. He was killed when he went to look for his brother who had been abducted by Pakistani partisans holding out in a Dhaka suburb. "Zahir Raihan was the stuff with which legends are made. His commitment was not just to the art form but to the cause of people. His documentary *Stop. Genocide* on the plight of the people in 1971 is a classic and is still the best work on that period. In that film, created under great difficulties and limitations, he showed the talent he had.

"Had he survived, he would have been able to lead a new wave. He did leave behind a stream of followers like the late Alamgir Kabir who tried to make commercially valid quality films but the mainstream is very different from what can be national cinema. It is a market sensitive sector and caters to an audience which is interested in passing time. I believe such films



world is a fertile ground for anthropological studies with its gradations, fraternities, conflicts and classes. Some suggest it is not anthro- but ethno-graphy. Meanwhile the crowds have melted away to many homes and the TV sets are blaring away. The rain threatens to stop. A solitary kid with school-books under his arm has still not given up hope. He hangs around to watch the crew.

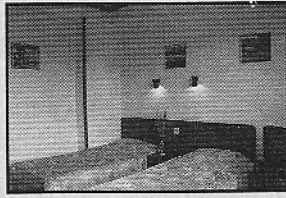
So why invest if it's so insecure?

"It's not insecure at all. About five to seven movies are mega hits every year. That means they make three to four times the investment. Another five-seven films return double the investment and generate more films. Say 10 films just make it. Of course half of the films made never make any money. But if you have the right stars, right amount of pre-release publicity

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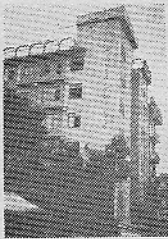
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will naturally be made but other types of movies should flourish as well."

**CUT TO** AZC who nods his head. "To be honest the movies made here are mostly copies of Hindi films. There is no demand for original films..."

But cable TV allows them to see the real ones, why do they want to see reconstructions?

"Because it's in Bangla and they can understand. Because the stars and locations are their own and they can identify with them. It's the psychological frame of the mass culture, a subject I taught at the university for a period."

**JUMP CUT** to the video crew now getting ready to start shooting. This time the crowd control effort is minimal but light is fading. Most of the crew members are earnest young people who are members of the Short Film Forum (SFF). They are driven by the adrenalin of youth and dreams. One day they all hope to make that definitive film which will leave a mark, will be in the grand tradition of Satyajit, Mrinal, Ritwick... Meanwhile, they lend shoulders to such efforts working without payment or for a meagre amount, happy to turn idealism into practice.

But members of the SFF haven't done too badly. A number of their films have won awards. They are certainly very competent with documentaries. Tareq Masud is a good example, whose *Muktir Gaan* is one of the best-known documentary films in the country, made by cutting a quarter-century old archive. Some others like Morshedul Islam (*Chaka*), Niyamat Ali and Mashiuddin Shaker (*Surya Dighal Bari*) and a few others have won prizes at home and abroad. Humayun Ahmed, the country's leading TV playwright and best-selling novelist, has produced films which have won national awards and have collected money as well. And there is a growing list of films which are of the parallel variety. It's always this way at

the beginning. Their face brightens as the sun appears and the camera goes into action silently.

**CUT TO** AZC who is relaxing with the plot of a commercial he is planning to make. "You are right. The growth of the unofficial Bangladeshi film market in West Bengal is a strange but interesting scenario. It began with *Beder Meye Jotsna*, the all-time greatest hit made in the mid-1980s. The story line is a folk tale which touches everyone. After it became a hit here, a producer there recognised the potential and remade the film with the heroine Anju Ghosh and it was a mega-hit there as well. And then came the deluge. Now Bangladeshi remakes are a serious growth industry there."

But West Bengal film makers there are protesting about being swamped by cheap Bangla products. "Actually Tollywood was in serious trouble after the super growth of Hindi films. They were making only 15-20 films a year although it costs only about 40 lakhs at the most. And what they do now is remake Dhaka-made Bangladeshi remakes of the Hindi movies. The industry there simply can't compete with Bollywood. The golden era of Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen is long over."

And we hear that many Bangladeshis have shifted there?

"Yes. Anju Ghosh and a few other actresses, Narayan Ghosh, Dilip Biswas, etcetera, are all working there full time. In fact,

some have even migrated to India. Many already had their families there. They had connections from before."

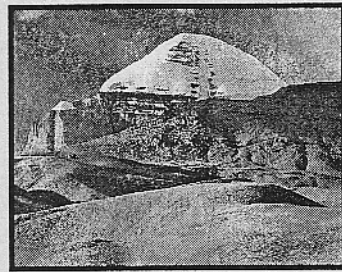
**CUT TO** Chinmoy Mutsuddi supervising the pasting of the centre-spread. It's Ayesha Julkha, the Bollywood starlet who is acting in a Indo-Bangla joint production. She had said that Dhaka and Calcutta are miles behind Bombay in terms of production value.

"Calcutta cinema is also playground of people who have drawn the face of Indian cinema. Ray, Sen, Ghatak, Utpalendu and others including Buddhadeb who has made films with stars from Bangladesh."

**CUT TO** the video crew walking back to their temporary shelter in some remote part of Bangladesh. Their dreams grow large as the night falls and they talk of the film they must make. Night falls. Insects blare. TVs blare. Dreams blare. ▲

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# Director's choice



by Sujoy Dhar

For long years, the rest of India and the Western world identified Bengali cinema with either the pain and poverty of Satyajit Ray's pathbreaking *Pather Panchali* or with the strong political celluloid dramas of Mrinal Sen and Ritwick Ghatak. Not without reason too, given the themes that permeated films of that generation (even though it ignores the fact that most of Ray's films did not deal with poverty). But with the changing socio-political situation of West Bengal, as also in the rest of India, by the 1990s the audience had begun to move away from topics of social discontent. Their concerns now had more to do with the onslaught of a consumerist society, and to represent this angst, a new brand of *avante garde* Bengali filmmakers zoomed into the scene.

The turning point may have come in 1994 with *Unishe April*. Bengali moviegoers, fed up with the

diet of 'intellectualese' in the 'art movies', and weary of the shoddy tales in the 'commercial' ones, suddenly discovered in former adman Rituparno Ghosh a director capable of representing the society they lived in. Themes of feminism, male chauvinism, modernity and consumerism, all find play in his movies. *Unishe April* was breaking new ground in its exploration of the love-hate relationship between a celebrity single mother and her misunderstood daughter through events on the death anniversary of the girl's father.

Ghosh did a repeat with his second offering, *Dahan*. Released in 1998, the film opens with a horrific molestation attempt on the beautiful wife of a junior city executive on the streets of Calcutta. While the ruffians beat up the husband senseless, the wife is rescued by another young woman, a school teacher, who is promptly made a 'hero' by the me-

dia. What looks like a tragedy averted, however, soon snowballs into a complex drama, causing upheavals in the conservative, middle and upper middle class families to which the two young women belong. As the film progresses, the masks of the progressive Bengali facade peel off, and, in what is the first depiction of marital rape in a Bengali film, the husband gives vent to his anger and frustration by raping his wife.

Rather than focusing on the perils of the jungle that is the modern city, Ghosh takes the battles of the sexes from the streets to the tranquil world of a traditional Bengali family. *Dahan* was a box office hit, and this despite the lack of staple ingredients of the regular potboiler. Both *Unishe April* and *Dahan* not only won national and international awards, but more importantly, the films marked the return to the theaters of the discerning audience who had stayed away from Bollywood imitations and other ludicrous excesses.

Ghosh came and conquered Bengali cinema of the 1990s, but there were others, like his mentor Aparna Sen who had been making films in a class of their own. Sen's 1981 maiden venture, *36 Chowringhee Lane*, dwells on the loneliness of an Anglo-Indian woman in a self-centred society, while her second film *Paroma* is about a housewife's search for self-identity through an adulterous liaison, for which the director was much pilloried for 'glorifying' adultery. In her last film, *Yugant*, Sen used a conjugal partnership to look at the tension between the sexes in contemporary society and her yet-to-be-released *Paromitar Ek Din*, explores the traditional stress-ridden relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and depicts a

unique empathy between the two women whose ties survive even after the daughter-in-law gets divorced.

Moving away from the routine theme of intellectualism, Sen and Ghosh have been projecting issues that concern the educated middle and upper middle class Bengali. In their movies, the women characters are never hyped-up feminists, but ordinary people with whom the audience can easily relate to. Yet, for all that, the recurring take-off point in these films tends mostly to be the strains that mar modern-day marriages. If the protagonist in *Paromitar Ek Din* leaves her first husband to marry a filmmaker, then *Yugant* calls for an end to the antagonism between men and women.

**Reality reels**

Perhaps the old master, Mrinal Sen, had anticipated the approaching change of mood much earlier, for his films made in the late 1980s are more

introspective than his earlier ones, and echo the subjects the younger directors are now dealing with. Thus in 1988 he made *Ek Din Achanak*, in which a professor leaves his home one rainy evening never to return, leaving his family to dissect the idolised father's failures. And *Antareen* (1992), so far the last film from the reclusive director, addresses the subject of a woman's confinement and alienation in a desolate house.

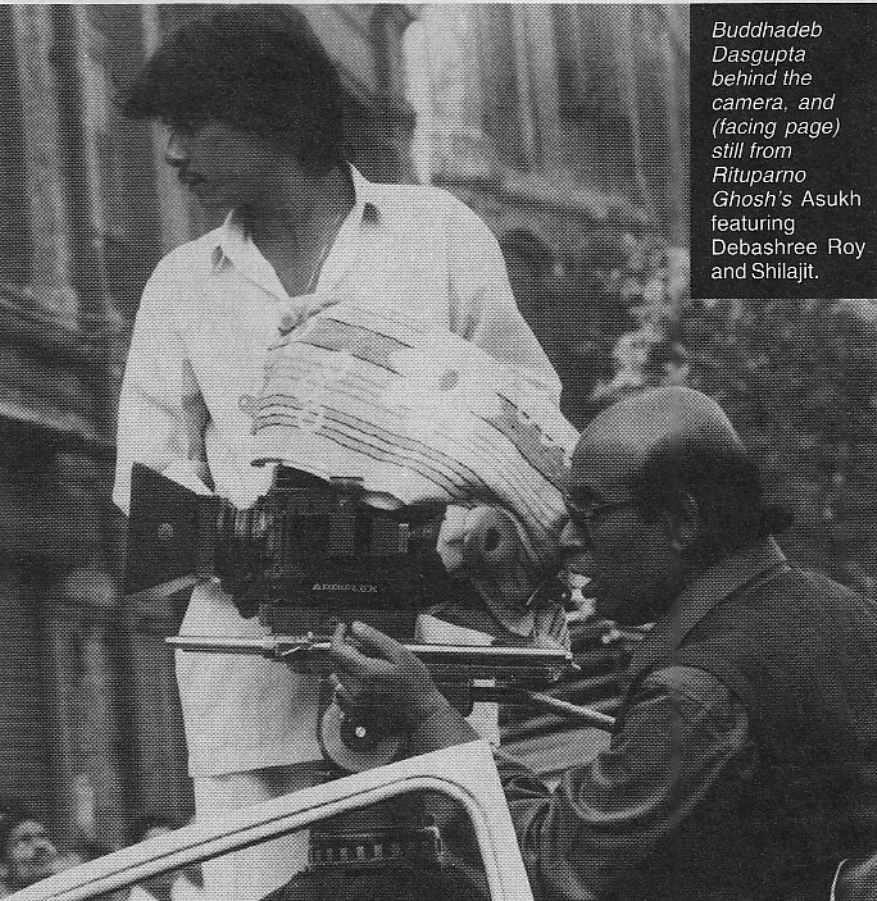
There are others such as Goutam Ghose, whose oeuvre include films like *Paar* and *Padma Nadir Majhi*. But unlike Ghosh or Sen, Ghose's beat is not relationship movies. Rather he revels in creating meaningful documentaries and adapting complex works of literature. One such is *Padma Nadir Majhi*, based on the 'classic' novel of the late Bengali writer Manik Bandopadhyay, which describes the struggle of boatmen against the elements as they ply the River Padma, that great

expanse of water that flows through Bangladesh.

Possibly the most accomplished among contemporary Bengali directors who are probing the effects of blind consumerism, crumbling family bonds and receding innocence in modern lives, is Buddhadeb Dasgupta. Dasgupta's films can be placed in the same genre as that of the late Soviet filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's, marked as they are by a non-narrative poetic style. His earlier films, such as *Grihayuddha* and *Andhi Gali* of the 1980s, were political in nature, but his works of this decade attempt to characterise man in a new version of reality. Perhaps there is no better testimony to Dasgupta's skill than his internationally acclaimed *Lal Darja* (1997).

Based on his own poem, "For Hasan", *Lal Darja* is a response to the sadness the director feels at the inevitable loss of innocence and freshness in modern life. Dasgupta's protagonist is a successful Calcutta dentist whose dull life of middle-class respectability is suddenly shaken up by an impending collapse of his marriage as his wife decides to break out in search of a new life. As he struggles in his bewilderment, he notices the contrast he stands in with his driver, a happy-go-lucky polygamist. Ultimately he finds escape from bourgeois boredom through a journey of fantasy into the lost world of his innocent childhood. Delving deep into the problems of urban life dominated by relentless consumerism, Dasgupta tries to rescue a place for spiritualism in our lives.

The quest thus continues as contemporary Bengali directors adapt themselves to the changes in society and strive to 'reelise' modern life in all its complexities. It is a sign of the times that with the death of political idealism, and much too much political opportunism in public life, the audience perhaps love to watch the political circus on the small screen of their cable TV, leaving the theaters to the fine practitioners of celluloid art. ▲



Buddhadeb Dasgupta behind the camera, and (facing page) still from Rituparno Ghosh's *Asukh* featuring Debashree Roy and Shilajit.

BIBI CHOWDHURY

# Malayalee avante garde

by *Rajiv Theodore*

Once upon a time, Malayalam cinema played to the tunes of the incredible hero, the ever-green Prem Nazir, who never tired of wooing heroines, running around trees with damsels half his age, and wiping out a dozen villains single-handedly as the film climaxed. Those were the early 1970s, when assembly-line formula films had rubbed off from Bollywood to the South of India, complete with hackneyed story-lines the future course of which could be predicted with ease. The only other choice was to view fares doled out by directors infatuated with Marxist-Leninist ideology who produced absolute tear-jerkers on the rich-poor divide.

Today, a new wind is blowing over Malayalam cinema. Call it fresh, *avante garde*, or whatever, it is fetching golden moments for Malayalam films. The brightest could be *Marana Simhasanam* that saw Murali Nair bag the coveted Camera d'Or Award at Cannes ear-

lier in the year. The movie tells the tale of a poor labourer who is apprehended while stealing coconuts, and then slapped with murder charges. The 33-year-old London-based Murali now has production offers pouring in, and is receiving invitations to prestigious film festivals across the globe. Says film historian P.K. Nair of the younger Nair, "He has a certain vision that is different from other filmmakers. He captures visuals and moods rather than being stuck in dramatic developments."

Then there is Jayaraj, whose *Kaliyaatam*, based on the Shakespearean play *Othello*, attracted rave reviews at the International Film Festival in New Delhi in 1998. Visual opulence takes centre stage in *Kaliyaatam* where the characters are exponents of Theyyam, the spectacular ritual dance of northern Kerala. Aided by a tight script and some brilliant performances, Jayaraj and cinematogra-

pher Radhakrishnan have expertly exploited the bizarre, stylised costumes of Theyyam.

Shaji M. Karun is another Malayalam director who has been making waves in international circles. Acclaimed for his *Piravi* and *Swaham*, Shaji's latest offering is *Vanaprastham*, an Indo-French production, and the costliest Malayalam film to date (USD 1 million/INR 42 million). The film is based on Kerala's well-known Kathakali dance, and as Shaji says, "My major challenge was to make a film which was not just a documentary on Kathakali and to ensure that the form did not overshadow the content."

## Social change

Kathakali dancer Kunjukuttan is at the centre of the movie, who finds himself an odd victim of art colluding with reality. Kunjukuttan's fiancée Subhadra is enamoured of his dancing role as the legendary Arjun, and not him. Things come to a head when Subhadra does not allow him to see their daughters unless he comes in his stage finery. Unable to cope with the series of tragedies piling up, Kunjukuttan kills himself. This is his *vanaprastham* (the last dance).

For top-notch hero Mohan Lal, who took Kathakali lessons to understand the spirit behind the dance, it is a "life-time role", an attempt to "break the tradition of people from mainstream cinema investing only in commercial projects".

Adoor Gopalakrishnan, the Satyajit Ray of the South if you will,

Murali Nair and his film.



has always been quietly subversive in his work. So quiet that you have to magnify Adoor's cinematic murmurs and gentle probing into the nature of oppression to understand the true import of what he is saying. *Kathapurushan* (Man of the Story), co-produced by NHK of Japan, is perhaps his most subtle and cinematically, the most stunning. And paradoxically enough, the strongest indictment of authority as well as an eloquent plea for the human spirit and individual freedom, a pat on the back for idealism in an increasingly cynical age.

Adoor is undoubtedly traversing a ground he and other filmmakers from Kerala have often trod before—changing social orders. But what does make *Kathapurushan* such an outstanding film is its scope, and the control the director has over the medium. It is not the story of one man in isolation as the title may indicate, but of a generation of men growing up in post-Independence Kerala. For someone whose cinema has always been elliptical, and admirably restrained, it is also perhaps Adoor's most abstract film so far, and his most personal—the protagonist's father leaves his mother before he is born and we never find out why. "My father and mother separated and till today I don't know why," says Adoor.

More recently, Balachandra Menon, known more for his 'commercial' ventures, has broken his own mould and come up with what he says is his magnum opus. *Sammantharangal*, which Menon produced, directed, edited, wrote the screenplay and music for, and also played the lead in, is devoid of stereotype. The actor-director plays an upright and principled railway stationmaster who is in conflict with the unscrupulous world outside. Both in content and form, *Samantharangal* marks a distinct departure from Menon's earlier films.

But even as these filmmakers experiment with different modes of expression, there is a pack of savvy Malayalam directors infusing their style and professionalism into

Bollywood cinema. They are experimenting with both content and form, and having been toasted commercially and critically, they are becoming marquee brand names. This heavily Hollywoodised generation has created a vigorous cinema of visual nuances and exuberance and are the ones almost single-handedly responsible for Bollywood's adoption of song-as-setpiece (that is, using fantastic locales to picturise songs, regardless of the story).

For these directors, the crossing over makes perfect sense. Bollywood is a great chance to go global, with a bigger market, more budget and arguably better crew. And all this with a super-fast work ethic—films are finished within a stipulated time frame, and reshooting is almost unheard of. Says Keralite director Priyadarshan, "Cinema needs no

languages. Only feelings... There are 26 cultures in 26 states. You have to think like an Indian and find universal themes."

Therein lies the contradiction of Malayalam films. While one set of directors are busy rewriting the rules for commercial cinema, their peers are creating waves in the film festival circuit. But then, contradictions are what Malayalam cinema is all about—it comes up with all kinds of movies. At 12 noon, in front of many halls in Kerala, you can see an intense all-male queue (with the exception of those plying the oldest profession) beating the heat to get to watch an "A" movie, where the rape scene is goaded on by whistles; and at the matinee, you can find the serious types trying to size up an Adoor Gopalakrishnan presentation. ▲

## Mohan Lal and Mammooty



WHILE THE Rajesh Khannas and the Dharmendras were busy stealing the thunder up north with their fair-handsome looks, the Malayalee hero was at best portly, dressed in the simplest attire, sometimes in a printed lungi and bare torso, a specimen that could not be digested by the Hindi film fan. But the superstar syndrome did not escape the Malayalee, who found in Mohan Lal and Mammooty two different personalities worthy of hero worship.



Thick at the waist and sporting moustaches and hairstyles that have the coconut oil sheen, their faces reflect what the audience want—a whole gamut of emotions from anything between a love-struck young man to a hen-pecked husband angling for another woman. Both also have a sizeable fan following among the Malayalee migrants in the Gulf, whose nostalgia is fed by the lush green native setting in which their heroes operate. Well entrenched in the roots of Kerala's tradition and history, the characters played by both Mammooty and Mohan Lal could be any of your Malayalee next door. Which is the reason for their earthy appeal.

Earth Door Sky Door  
paintings of Mustang by  
Robert Powell  
Serindia Publications  
London, 1999  
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ISBN 0 906026 53 9

reviewed by  
Ratan Rai

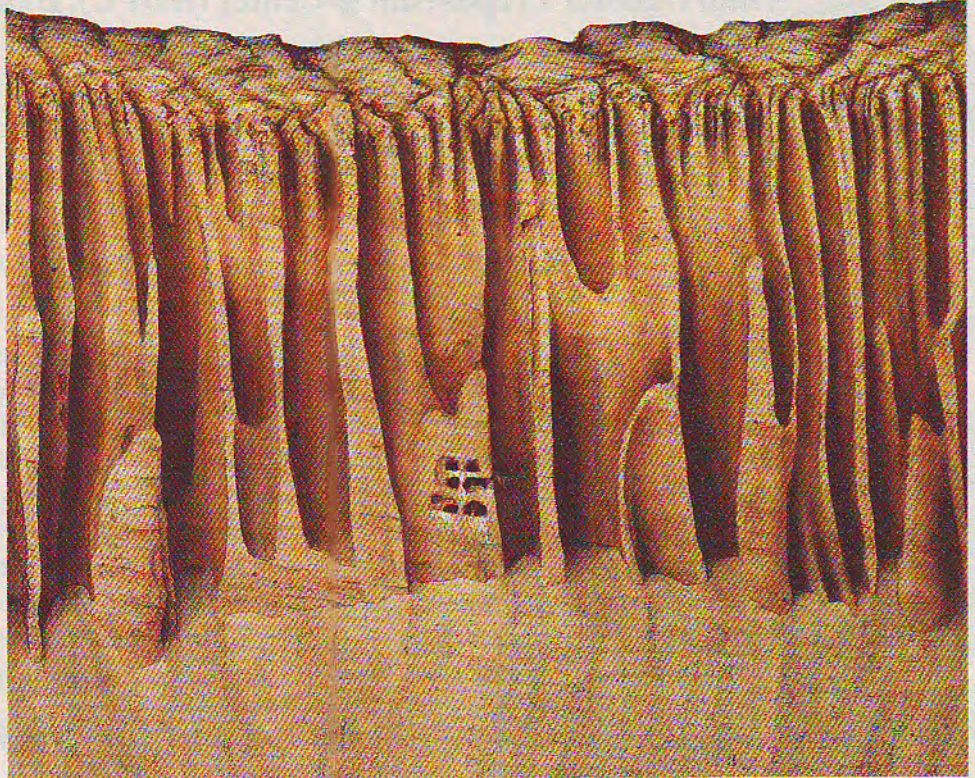
# Earth Door, Sky Door

Robert Powell is an Australian architect who came to Kathmandu in 1980 and has lived here since, painting extremely realistic art based on Himalayan architecture. Recently, as part of the Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology, he was given the task of making technical drawings of buildings, cultural monuments and excavated sites of the Mustang region. The Mustang architecture and landscapes pictured here are a result of this work, as printed in the book *Earth-Door-Sky-Door* (1999). (Of the 43 colour plates in this 110-page book, 19 were being exhibited at the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, till September). The region of Mustang was kept off the map for international visitors, and with limited touristic interest among the Nepalis themselves, had been allowed to survive in isolation, behind the Annapurna massif at the headwaters of the Kali Gandaki River. While politically within Nepal, Mustang has an essentially Tibetan culture, whose guardian is the present Raja Jigme Parbal Bista, whose dynastic origins obviously trace back to the nomads who roamed the Chang Thang steppe. Powell deliberately does not provide context to his works. For example, he does not include the sky nor people in his compositions. As a reviewer in

*Chorten on a mountain saddle near Syangboche village in Mustang.*







*The Washington Post* wrote about Powell's work, this lack of setting and context "has an almost hallucinatory impact". As another reviewer wrote, the buildings and walls are drawn "in such an animistic way that their walls heave with breath and flush with feeling, despite the superficial formality of Powell's inanimate subject matter".

Indeed, if anything, Powell is precise about detail. He firmly picks up red-ochre, white, grey and yellow paints and drips them on the paper just as the natives would while painting their houses and public shrines.

In terms of technique, it is important to note that Powell does not work *in situ*. Rather, he brings the sketches and notes back to his quiet studio in Kathmandu, where he uses supplementary support such as technical drawings, photographs and samples of earth colours and pebbles collected at site.

**The caves at Yara** (*right, above*): Of the many ancient cave sites in Thak and Mustang, this section of the trail caves is to be seen on the right side of the trail leading to Yara and Ghara villages and further up to the famous Luri cave and the sacred lake of Damodarkunda. These caves have been occupied by people of debatable origin since the Neolithic and Charcolithic periods (about 10,000 years ago), and in fact some are still inhabited in the Chosar Valley further north. Deiter Schuh, team leader of the High Mountain Archaeology Project, has postulated that the early occupants of these caves may have been none other than the Kiratas mentioned in Vedic literature.

**House at Tsele** (*right*): This little wind-blown village lies on a ridge that separates the vast expanse of the Kali Gandaki to the south from the rest of the Mustang to the north. Powell paints the north facade of the house of the late Hisi Gyaltsen, who was a builder, wood-carver, furniture-designer, toy-maker and artist. Hisi Gyaltsen had not only built his elegant house with its lamaist chapel room, but also adorned it with carved windows, doors and frescoes, which survive to this day. Pres-



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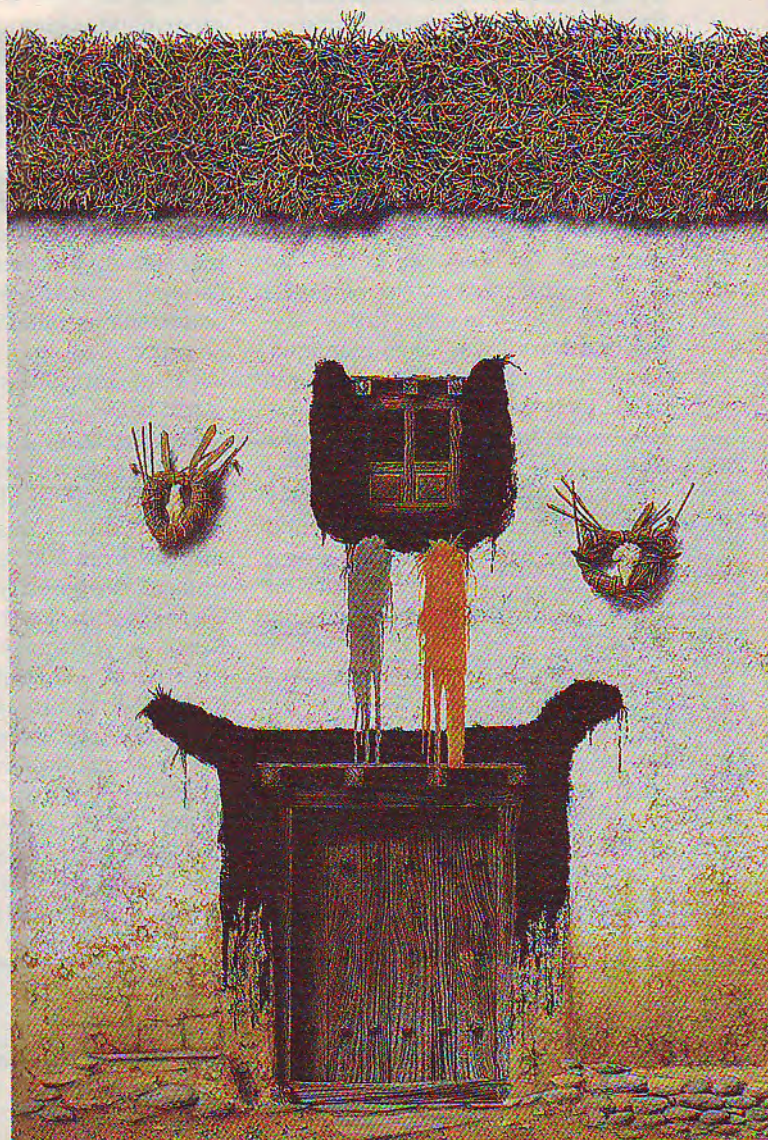
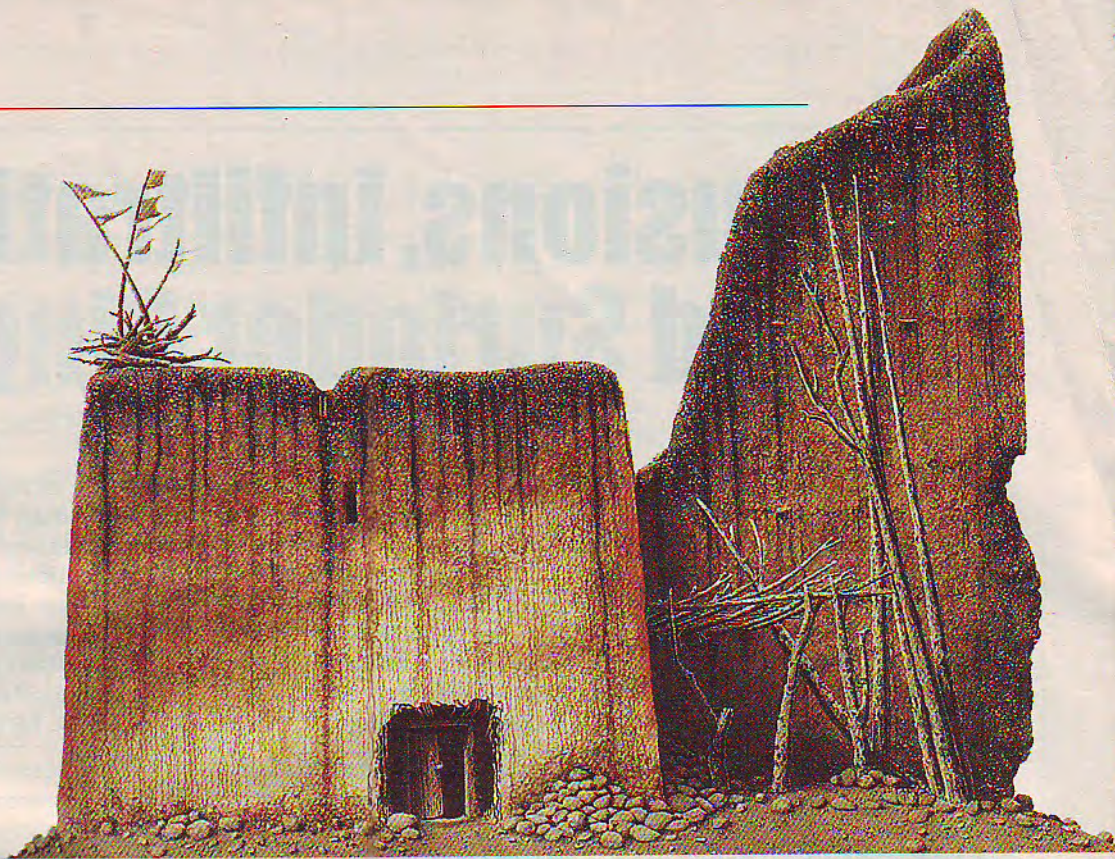
*\* Age limit may be relaxed in exceptional cases*

ently owned by a gentleman named Duli, this house at Tsele is in need of urgent repair. On the roof are seen neat piles of fuelwood and thorny shrub, signifying the all-important role of firewood in this cold, arid land. It is little wonder, then, that large piles of firewood on the roof is linked to prestige.

**Houses in Ruins, Tangye (right):**

Ruins of castle-forts of long ago form the skyline of many a Mustang landscape. These ruins may have been the result of fierce regional feuds, loss of water sources, or monastery bastions mercilessly erased as patronage of the faith shifted from one warlord to another. The area east of the old salt route, which includes Tangye, is relatively impoverished, given the reliance on meagre one-crop farming. Whereas the nobles and wealthy lived on lucrative taxes levied on salt, wool and gold flowing through the Kali Gandaki Valley, the villagers of Tangye as well as Di, Surkhan, Yara, Ghara and Te lived a more impoverished lifestyle.

**Walls of the Protectors, Lo Manthang (right):** This particular facade with a dog- and ram-skull talisman each lies west of the royal palace inside the walled capital city of Lo Manthang. These talismanic motifs have clearly captivated the artist, enough for him to name his book after *sago namgo* (Earth Door, Sky Door). The skulls of the ram (on the right, with horn) and dog are fastened at either side of the main door of a family which has recently lost a member to early death. The "Earth Door" is symbolised by the ram's skull, which faces 'earthward' and the "Sky Door" by that of the dog which is turned upward. These motifs also serve as highly decorative symbols with coloured ribbon and thread traps, offerings of grains, arrow-like sticks and wood-block prints representing the deceased child. Each motif is fastened to the centre of a thick ring made of stalks of threshed wheat or barley. As a whole, this paraphernalia represents a ritual 'trap' for unseen but harmful forces or demons, both 'earthly' and 'aerial', should they ever pass by the house. These traps are called *segu-nagu* in the local dialect and probably owe their origins to remote native cults. ▲



# Intrusions, infiltrations and Surinder Singh

Much after the fighting in Kargil had ended, came press reports that the intrusions happened because the warnings of the Kargil sector Brigade Commander Surinder Singh had been ignored by his superiors. It was said that the brigadier had, in letters to his immediate seniors sent between August 1998 and March this year, informed them of "increased threat perceptions and possibility of incursions" by Pakistan-backed infiltrators across the LoC in Kargil. These include Singh's communication to the Chief of Army Staff, which stated that his "requests and urgent communication to GoC 3 Infantry Div in view of the enhanced threat perceptions have been turned down in writing". These revelations caused an uproar in an India going into parliamentary elections, even as the army command refuted the press writings. Maj Gen (retd) Ashok K. Mehta argues that the whole matter was something cooked up by the media.

The villain of Kargil has been made into the hero. The press believes that the army has made Surinder Singh the fall guy, when in reality what the journalists did was to literally put words into the Brigadier's mouth, fabricating or doctoring letters on his behalf where none existed. It attributed to him the profundity and clairvoyance of predicting the Kargil intrusions.

The Congress party of Sonia Gandhi went one step further saying that Kargil was stage-managed. This is a rather absurd interpretation of the facts at Kargil, but one that is leading to the politicisation of the Indian army.

Anyone familiar with military procedures, chain of command, and the system of processing threat assessments will understand that Singh was at best exaggerating the threat, at worst, missing the woods for the trees. For journalists reporting the Singh episode, some knowledge of operational procedures was essential to sift the wheat from the chaff, especially in the no-war no-peace LoC environment of Jammu and Kashmir.

Equally important is to understand the difference between infiltration and intrusion. For the last 10 years, in its third proxy war in Kash-

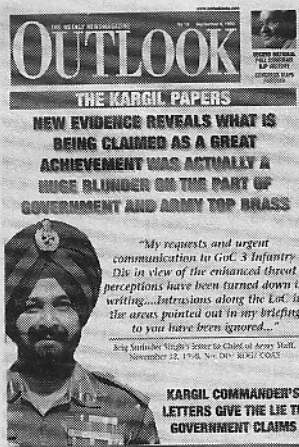
mir, Pakistan has been the post-master of infiltration. Intrusions, on the other hand, although not a routine occurrence, have occurred in areas where delineation of the LoC is disputed or are close to the LoC, but never 10 or 15 km inside Indian territory, and never more than one at a time, and certainly not on the scale demonstrated in Kargil.

The customary alarm bells Singh was ringing related to infiltration and infiltration alone. The enhanced threat was sourced from 500 Afghans reportedly training in Gunikote in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir who posed a danger by infiltration through his sector mainly to the Srinagar Valley.

At no stage, ever, either in briefings or wargames, was Singh known to have spelt out an enhanced threat to the LoC of large-scale intrusions and that too, by Pakistani army regulars. In fact, he admitted in his one and only letter of 28 June 1999 to the Chief of Army Staff Gen V.P. Malik (who has incidentally said that he

has not received the letter quoted in the introduction), that he had no inputs whatsoever about the clandestine intrusions carried out by the Pakistani army.

What Singh had been tomtomming was the threat of infiltrators to the Leh road and to his rear areas 50 km away from the LoC in the Padam Valley. When the intrusions did take place in areas under his command, they surprised Singh as much as they did the army chief. No one in the chain of command had anticipated intrusions involving wholesale violation of the LoC, 27 years after it was sanctified. The truth is Pakistan's operational expertise outfoxed the defensive, laid-back forces in the Kargil sector. The military high command failed to cope with this unexpected contingency because it had not factored it in its operational planning. It cannot be anyone's case that Singh's divine warnings were ignored by his superiors to invite Pakistani intrusions.



In view of this, the rest of Singh's complaints regarding denial of additional resources become peripheral. No professional soldier will accept denial of a helicopter or one company of soldiers or even some winter gear, as an alibi for permitting deep-seated intrusions to take place. The elementary question is what ground surveillance and patrolling were the four army and one BSF battalions doing in Kargil? The most bizarre claim is that Singh was refused permission to patrol.

**Lessons for all**

Singh is not the only villain of Kargil, though only he and one of his battalion commanders were removed from command. This is not unusual but it was avoidable. In the 1962 and 1965 wars, dozens of commanders were relieved of command. Prima facie, Singh's immediate superior, the Leh divisional commander Maj Gen V.S. Budhwar is also culpable. Budhwar came close to being sacked but as that would have further disturbed the command structure, the idea was dropped. That Budhwar's name did not figure in the Kargil gallantry list, however, is clear indication that he too was a casualty of war.

Lt Gen Kishan Pal, Corps Commander, the next senior in the chain of command, is also under a cloud as his distinguished service award was not unanimous. His fate, along

with that of others, will be determined by the findings of the Subramaniam Committee and the army's After Action Report. A separate enquiry has now been ordered to investigate the leakage of Singh's 28 June letter to Gen Malik. No one culpable, hopefully, will escape unpunished.

Singh is not the fall guy. He was removed from command for operational reasons. Sections of the India media have created a myth that the Kargil brigade is a privileged selection grade command. Until the intrusions happened, it was considered the most dormant sector in Kashmir. The only hot-seat brigade in the country is the high-altitude Siachen brigade next door.

As in the case of Vishnu Bhagwat (the voluble Indian navy chief sacked earlier in the year), Singh used and was used in turn by the media and the Congress, each for their own ends. National security interests were subordinated to political expediency. The breach of the Official Secrets Act was blatant. What followed was an infringement on the army's command structure in the run up to the elections.

Kargil has lessons for everyone. As far as politicians are concerned — the military must be made out of their bounds. Making intrusions to secure political high ground must be made taboo. The media, for its

part, requires to be more discerning in the selection of stories and verification of material. Most of all, the stories must be run past defence analysts who can help eliminate the absurdities and anomalies. Unfortunately, India is a country without trained defence correspondents. Appointing defence experts as consultants could be an interim step while the press builds up its reportorial strength.

The biggest lesson is undoubtedly reserved for the military. The army command cannot take the media for granted. Equally, they cannot ignore a Singh-like story simply because they find it ridiculous beyond rebuttal. The army has to devise a strategy to pre-empt, contain and even fight speculative stories. By doing too little too late in repudiating the Singh story, it damaged not only its credibility but also the hierarchical confidence within it.

If the Kargil war has given the army a new 14 Corps at Leh, in this age of information war, it must modernise its media liaison cell by drawing in professionals. Unfortunately, staffing defence public relations with stuffy babus who understand neither the media nor the military is the intrusion the army has been unable to evict. ▲

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## Kashmir deadline

August 23, 1992, was my first day in journalism. I was 20. My first assignment was to go to a police station here in Srinagar, the urban centre of the Kashmir Valley, and collect information on six dead bodies lying there, riddled with bullets. I accompanied several photographers to the station. They worked as I stared at the mutilated corpses in their blood-soaked clothes. Their entrails were exposed, their faces, unrecognisable. That evening, I could not eat. I couldn't sleep for days; the corpses haunted my dreams.

At the time, I didn't realise that this was a prelude to an unending tryst with death and mayhem. But as the months passed, and the deadly game between security forces and militant groups continued, the violence began to seem mundane to me, almost normal, a part of my daily reporting routine. There were exceptions of course, days when death was anything but routine.

October 12, 1996, comes to mind: I'm half asleep, sipping my morning tea. The phone rings. It's my police contact. My mind is racing as I begin to scribble notes. How many? Where? When? I call my photographer and then I'm out of my house, riding my bike like a madman. We arrive to find wailing women and unshaven, huddled men. The dead bodies lie scattered, like rag dolls discarded by careless children. I feel my legs growing heavy. I feel incredibly tired. I want to throw down my notebook and sit silently with the mourners. Then I hear the photographer's shutter clicking. The noise forces me to remember that I have a story to do. I examine the bodies. I take out my notebook and start asking my questions. Who? What time? Any witnesses?

For years, there has been nothing to write or think about in the valley except the violence. If I manage to avoid doing a news story on that day's gory details, I inevitably end up writing a feature about orphans or widows of the conflict. When violence rules the day, there is nothing but tears to jerk from the reader's soul.

Nietzsche once compared journalists to crows alighting from a wire one by one to swoop down on a hapless victim. If this is what we are, waiting with our notebooks and cameras for death to strike again, then



THE NATION, LAHORE

the killing fields of Kashmir offer a feast, even for the most gluttonous birds of prey. In the evening, no journalist here can think of leaving the office without scanning the police bulletin on the day's toll of army bunkers assaulted, houses destroyed by fire, militants gunned down. If we missed something, our editors would be most unhappy.

As I became more proficient at chronicling this unending cycle of death, I felt more satisfaction at the end of the day, rather than revulsion and sleeplessness. Killings meant bylines, headlines, good pay. Every day, my colleagues and I would gather, like vultures on a wire, to await the next tragedy, hoping we would make Page 1.

Finally, the time came when I lost a close school friend in the violence—and felt nothing. I wanted to cry, but the tears had dried up. My friend's was one of perhaps 20 routine deaths I saw that day in the police bulletin. Because I was unmoved, I felt ashamed and afraid of myself.

What has happened to me? Have I sacrificed normal human feelings to the thrill of reporting such violence? I am immune to death. I have lost the ability to mourn. I am numb.

And I watch with horror my own excitement as I launch into the next story: Ten killed, 14 wounded...that is my tragedy as a reporter in Kashmir.

MUZAMIL JALEEL IN "DRY EYES IN INDIA'S VALLEY OF DEATH" FROM *THE WASHINGTON POST*.

## Fair is unfair

For the native elite, only innate superiority could explain how a handful of whites from a tiny, distant island could rule over millions of subjects. Clearly, their pale skins put them in the ruler category: had they been dark, I am sure resistance to their presence would have been far fiercer than it actually was.

Our ancestors accepted them because their ancestors in turn had seen invasions by pale-skinned soldiers before and had been governed by a succession of such foreign armies. Once British rule was firmly established, our colonial masters were widely imitated by the native elite. Their dress, manners, speech and customs were aped with varying degrees of accuracy. But above all, a pale colouring was seen as the key to success. Fair coloured brides became much in demand, and skin bleaches and creams were applied assiduously.

As a result of these attitudes, the lives of hundreds of thousands are blighted today because they are dark, and reminded of this fact every day of their lives. Opportunities for a 'good' marriage decline in inverse proportion to the skin colour. Curiously, this is a more important matrimonial consideration for girls than it is for young men. Girls are not permitted to play outdoors for fear of a tan. Our beaches are full of women huddled together fully dressed under any shade they can find

lest the sun darkens their skins.

These customs would have been hilarious had it not been for the pain they cause. Educated mothers can be heard scolding little girls across the country to stay out of the sun; they are all too aware of the hard realities of the marriage market. Interestingly, this is a largely middle-class, urban phenomenon as farmers' daughters, wives and sisters help out under the blazing sun when required. While this is a rich field of study for social scientists, I am not aware of any research done in this area. It is ironic that when the Western world is gradually shedding at least the overt expression of racial prejudice, we have not even begun to acknowledge the presence of an unspoken apartheid in our midst.

IRFAN HUSAIN IN "THE COLOUR PREJUDICE"  
IN DAWN, KARACHI.

## UN in Lanka

Kofi Annan, UN secretary-general, in a major policy statement declared clearly that human rights must outweigh the notion of sovereignty. He spoke about "the rights beyond borders" and called for forging of "unity behind the principle that massive and systematic violations of human rights—wherever they occur—should not be allowed to stand"...

Almost all peace efforts in the past have been concentrating on bringing the parties to the conflict, the Sri Lankan government and LTTE, into the negotiating table. This is artificial and unrealistic. The history of this effort has amply demonstrated it. It is naive to expect any change in this situation. To follow this path is to give more time to greater destruction and gross abuses of human rights.

Like some situations in Africa, in Sri Lanka, both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE must be regarded as perpetrators of gross human rights abuses. They have both come under repeated international condemnation. Such condemnation must now be linked to a planned course of action.

A comprehensive plan of action must include all parties in Sri Lanka, political parties as well as the people. It must include a very strong UN component. Without a UN involvement the peace in Sri Lanka will only be plain talk, while the brutal war goes on. There is no other third party than UN that can play this role. Hardly any one took seriously the earlier discussions on the intervention of other third parties.

However, a UN involvement needs to overcome some problems, among which are: there is a section of the people suffering from the Cold War mentality who might be apprehensive of UN's role as being impartial. It will be necessary to address these fears and provide genuine assurances that can be monitored. On the other hand there are some countries, which present the warfare in Sri Lanka only as an internal problem, requiring no action on the part of the international commu-

nity. This attitude contributes to the continuation of this war in a very strong way. Those who spread such views too must take the responsibility for the continuing carnage by both sides. UN Secretary-General's policy perspectives mentioned earlier must lead to some re-thinking on the part of those who promote this perspective of non-involvement.

What the UN secretary-general can now do is to appoint a competent group to study the relevant issues and to begin a process of negotiations. Other relevant UN agencies such as the UNHCR can be invited to contribute to such an effort. If they so wish, countries like India can play a positive contributory role in such an initiative...

Local expressions of concern are very much restricted by the deeper fears of assassination by one side or the other. The fears are well founded. The carnage, taking place daily confirms these fears. Today in no other Asian country is there such heightened fear. Such fears themselves are a proof of the level of human rights abuse taking place in the country. It is not possible to boost the morale of the people without a strong backing from outside. Though there is greater reluctance to deal with specific issues due to fear, people nevertheless do express themselves at a more general level. The writings, which came out last year on the occasion of 50th anniversary of Independence, showed the great bitterness of the people and the near total loss of confidence in the political establishment. With encouragement emanating from the international community, people are more likely to discharge their responsibilities to fellow citizens of all communities with greater commitment. The absence of such encouragement can lead to further brain drain and the loss of skilled labour thereby aggravating the present situation of poverty in the country.

In short, the focus of any genuine peace strategy must be the UN involvement. Needless to say that the rest is mere bluff. We would like to be challenged, if any other realistic solution can be put forward by any one.

PRESS STATEMENT BY THE ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS  
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KUENSEL, THIMPHU

## A bomb for a bomb

India is feverishly trying to establish, within the next two decades, total military hegemony in South Asia and beyond, control the sea lanes, from the oil-rich Gulf in the West to the Straits of Malacca in the East, and compete for influence on the global stage with the major powers.

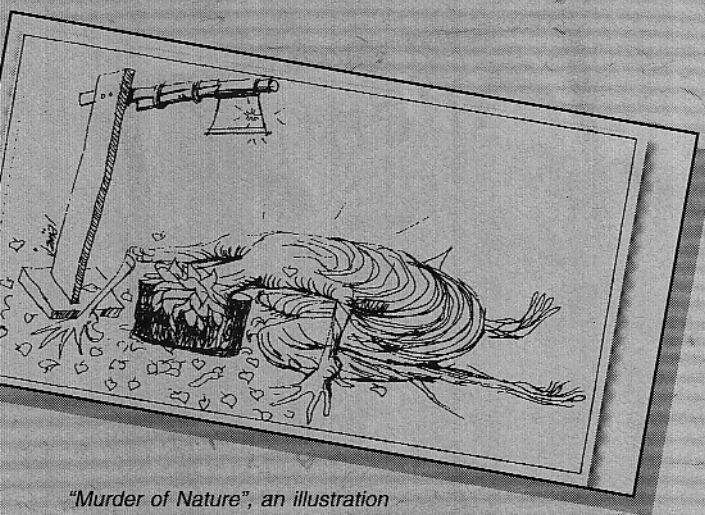
The militaristic dreams of the current Hindu fundamentalist leadership are a reflection of India's aggressive mythology to which I have already referred. The leadership in New Delhi seem to be living in a time warp. They equate greatness with military prowess. They forget that in today's integrated world, greatness comes primarily from economic and technological advancement and not from military capability.

These Indian dreams of grandeur constitute a threat to this region, to the world, and indeed to the poor and deprived people of India itself.

India's planned military programme will be extremely expensive. Estimates of the cost vary widely from 20 billion dollars up to hundreds of billions of dollars.

What also needs to be emphasised is that these huge outlays will be in addition to massive military expenditures which India is to incur under the defence supply agreements, for example, with Russia and France and its ongoing indigenous build-up of conventional forces. The manufacture of hundreds of warheads and missiles, the acquisition of satellite early-warning capabilities, the development of sea-based and submarine-based nuclear systems, will all entail huge additional costs.

The development of such a nuclear arsenal by India will oblige Pakistan to take appropriate action to preserve the credibility of its nuclear deterrence posture and the capability for conventional self-defence. One recourse is for Pakistan to engage in a nuclear and conventional arms race with India. It will require Pakistan to expend even larger resources for defence, further eroding its economic and development goals.



"Murder of Nature", an illustration accompanying a letter in *The Nation*, Lahore.

A prevalent theory is that, by pushing Pakistan into a huge military build up, India intends to destroy Pakistan's economy. An analogy is drawn with that of the Soviet economy which crumbled as a consequence of the Cold War arms race against the United States. The error in this theory is the assumption that we will, like lemmings, follow India's militaristic example.

Let me state clearly and unequivocally that Pakistan can and will find ways and means to maintain credible nuclear deterrence against India without the need to match it—bomb for bomb, missile for missile.

FROM THE STATEMENT MADE BY PAKISTANI FOREIGN SECRETARY SHAMSHAD AHMAD AT THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC STUDIES, ISLAMABAD, ON 7 SEPTEMBER 1999.

## Are you a true South Asian?

1. You unwrap Christmas gifts very carefully, so you can save and reuse the wrapping (and especially those bows) next year.
2. You have a vinyl table cloth on your kitchen table.
3. You use grocery bags to hold garbage.
4. You hate to waste food.
5. All your Tupperware is stained with food colour.
6. You don't own any real Tupperware: Only a cupboard full of used, but carefully rinsed, margarine tubs, takeout containers, and jam jars.
7. You never order room service.
8. You fight over who pays the dinner bill.
9. You majored in engineering, medicine, accountancy or law.
10. You feel like you've gotten a good deal if you didn't pay tax.
11. You have a drawer full of old pens, most of which don't write any more.
12. If you don't live at home, when your parents call, they ask if you've eaten, even if it's midnight.
13. Your parents use a clothesline.
14. You keep used batteries.
15. You keep most of your money in a savings account.
16. You call an older person you never met before "uncle".
17. The first thing uncle asks you is "where are your parents from?"
18. When your parents meet strangers and talk for a few minutes, you discover you're talking to a distant cousin.
19. You avoid motels, especially if there is an acquaintance within a 250-mile radius of your destination.
- 19a. You sleep on their floor.
20. Your parents don't realise phone connections to foreign countries have improved in the last two decades, and still scream at the top of their lungs.
21. You can't park your car in the garage, because you never throw anything away and keep it there (just in case you need it).
22. When dining out, your parents think \$1 is



enough of a tip.

23. You head to the clearance rack as soon as you walk into a store.
24. It's embarrassing if your wedding has less than 600 people.
25. You think an Indian (Pakistani or Sri Lankan) businessman will give you a better deal because he's Indian (Pakistani or Sri Lankan.)
26. You spew forth the virtues of India-Pakistan-Sri Lanka, but don't want to live there.
27. You use Vicks Vaporub or Tiger Balm.
28. You call fluorescent lights "tube lights" or a flashlight a "torch."



HIMAL KHABAR PATRIKA, KATHMANDU

- \*\*\* If you can relate to most of these statements, we're sorry, but you're South Asian.
- \*\*\* If you can relate to some of these statements, you're probably a second generation South Asian in a Western society.
- \*\*\* If you can only relate to a few of these statements, you're probably not South Asian.

SELECTIONS FROM  
A SOUTH ASIAN E-MAIL LIST FROM THE US.

## Let them be

We have had the misfortune of hearing and watching the ado in 1989 about the so-called rehabilitation of the sex workers around Narayanganj area. We know, the eviction took place but not the rehabilitation. Same thing happened near Kandupatti also. Once again, now, a massive attempt is going on to face the matter and I am quite confident that it will end up in a fiasco.

One due to his stupidity may obdurately remain insensitive to realities but science will continue working relentlessly according to its laws which are inscrutable and rather overpowering. The existence of female flesh trade has been going on since time immemorial. Mainly it is due to the male's animal vitality and the way they have been created by Nature or Almighty. I am feeling no sense of shame or discomfort in quoting Western medical science that "a healthy human female will never be sexually aroused by herself" whereas a particular sex act is "inevitable for the human male". Accept it or not, this will happen and has been happening. Now following this, it can be safely surmised that the act starts as an advance from the males who are not culturally bound to any ideals or with their spouses. On the other hand, it is poverty with the women, mostly, causing their entry into the trade but with the men it is certainly carnal appetite.

Only culture (ethical and moral control of one's ani-

mal vitality) can keep a male away from fornication. If a forcible eviction takes place (no rehabilitation is ever possible) they will be everywhere on the one hand and on the other, former customers will make lives of innumerable ladies a hell by making sexual assaults even inside respectable homesteads. It is a suppressed society where there is no legitimate way of having sex like in the permissive society of the West. Even there, the trade has not been possible to be stopped. It will remain there and everywhere because customers will always be

available.

In the very pages of *Daily Star* about a year ago, a brave writer was complaining about the lack of rights for sodomites in British-made laws in Bangladesh. But alas, a late prostitute near Mashdair was refused burial rights and no person of eminence came out with protestations. What kind of pluralism is this? Offering sex is so vile but not enjoying it? How come? I strongly suggest, let the inmates stay where they are and let society have the tranquillity (which is a pretension, of course) with the clients enjoying, letting the civil and respectable portion of the populace go by honorably. While we can't manage far easier tasks like keeping the sewage system clean or boarding buses through a queue or even supplying water to all citizens let us not make caricatures with an inevitable scientific fact. I am not sorry or shy for this opinion of mine. We have seen caricatures before like "slum eradication" or "flood control". Then reality dawned and we had been advised by pundits to live with this. Likewise the fiction of "population-wealth" will then also thin away but it will be too late.

DHAKA RESIDENT IFTAKHAR HAMID'S LETTER TO  
THE DAILY STAR.



THE ASIAN AGE, DELHI

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litSA

literary south asia

HIMAL

## Announcing the arrival of Himal's Literary Pages

Something is lost when stories from different parts of south asia are not shared. **litSA** is short for literary south asia—a new department started by Himal with the August 1999 issue in an effort to bring together the literary talent of the Subcontinent. The creative voice of women and men from all over the region, we feel, are as necessary to share as the journalist's presentation or the social scientist's analysis.

Himal hopes that **litSA** will develop as an important forum for writers — contemporary and traditional, and from everywhere, inside and outside, the centre and the margins, and from all sides of the barbed wire fences that attempt to divide the south asian people. Besides featuring a wide range of literary styles, **litSA** will encourage experiment and adventure. Above all, it will champion the writer's right to be irreverent. Over the years, Himal believes **litSA** will help develop an indigenous appreciation of the region's creative talent, free from the shackles of power publishing and marketing hype. We also aspire eventually to bring to readers anthologies and collections culled from the best writings that feature in **litSA**.

## Call for Submissions

Himal invites writers and poets, whether established or new talent, to make submissions to **litSA** at:

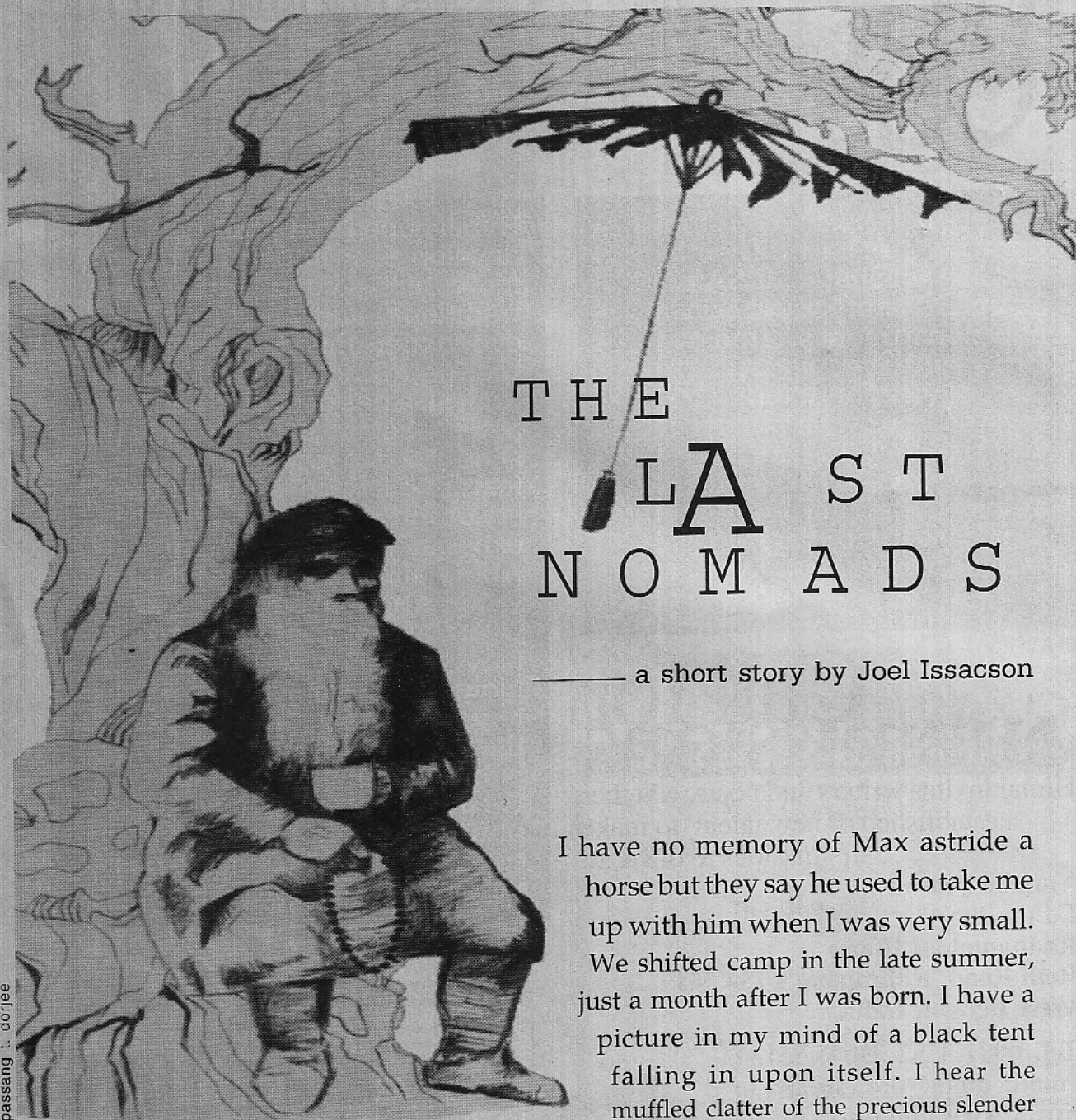
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## GUIDE LINES

1. **litSA** prefers unpublished material in the form of short fiction, poetry, memoir, travelogue, literary essays or criticism. We also welcome book reviews and literature-relevant interviews, as also book extracts which can stand alone.
2. Nationality or regional origin is no bar, as long as the submission has a link to south asia.
3. We prefer receiving submissions by email or on diskettes. If submitting on paper, please do not send in the original. Prose should be typed double spaced, and poems should be submitted individually.
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passang t. dorjee

# THE LAST NOMADS

— a short story by Joel Issacson

I have no memory of Max astride a horse but they say he used to take me up with him when I was very small. We shifted camp in the late summer, just a month after I was born. I have a picture in my mind of a black tent falling in upon itself. I hear the muffled clatter of the precious slender wooden poles as the women roll them

inside the heavy woollen skins.

They are singing. Their piercing highland chant, carries on wind that rises from below us in the canyon. It is their repartee to the preceding verse, sung by the men, who are now tightening cinches and swinging up onto their mounts.

"Wake up right now, you lazy fuckers!" they wail in piercing harmony. "We are going through the passes and you'd better get your wits about you. The long mornings in the sack are over. See, we have put away those long hard tent poles that you brought to us. We have no time for your nonsense now."

The minor modal chill of their last descending tone freezes the big



herd-dogs for a moment in their tracks. The already excited herd spooks, sending the menfolk scampering away from the horns and hoofs. The one who nearly fell from his horse has to compose the next verse, or be the butt of every joke for the whole journey down to the big winter pasture.

I know that the memory is a blending of perhaps two-dozen different moving-days when I was an infant and a boy, but there is no memory of Max on a horse. Something happened to his balance after the skinny Chinese woman rode out of the camp. That was long years ago, when he was no longer young, but a strong and full-grown man with a fair bit of snow growing into his beard.

He never spoke of her to me and since we still lived by the old ways then, no one ever questioned him.

Max was not from our place. He came from somewhere. Sometimes he said he could smell the sea of his youth off Glacier Lake when the wind was right. He learnt our ways but he was never one of us, even when he took a woman from our people who bore one son to him.

When the skinny Chinese woman rode away, Max sat down under the twisted tree that grew near where her tent had been. That is how I always remember him, sitting there under the twisted tree, telling his beads. I don't remember her at all; I was just a child. The people say she came from the government of some place whose hinterland we sometimes camped in. It didn't matter much to us; the passes were our borders in the old days, and the horsemen just smiled down at farmers, when they talked about who owned the pastures.

More than a dozen others came with her from the lowland capital, with their porters and their bearers and their cooks and tents and kitchen boys. They came to teach us how to farm. When they left, the skinny Chinese woman did not go with them. She stayed, sleeping in a small hair tent on skins with Max. She did not ride out until after the rains came. For nearly three months she hardly left the tent.

After she rode away, Old Max took to sleeping on the ground beneath the twisted tree. She had left him a golden-brown umbrella of heavy Chinese silk, with an iron ring on the tip. When the Little Rains came, he hung it from a branch as a shelter.

Old Max never shifted camp again. The seven-year drought that followed killed the twisted tree. The silk umbrella faded, then cracked in the sun. Still he sat beneath the dead tree with the umbrella's bones swaying above him, wind tearing at the last tatters of silk. He sat there telling his beads like a patient man awaiting a peaceful death that would not come for him.

In the seventh year the umbrella frame fell to the ground and only the iron ring hung above him. That was the year I came into my manhood and left that

life, to find the sea. That was the year my mother went off with another man, not so fine a man as Max had been, but better suited to her temperament. My mother gave me a small bag of money and her blessing. Old Max hung the small iron ring, from a cord, around my neck and kissed me. I never saw either of them again.

Many years later, after I heard that some government had made a road into that place, I went back there to visit, with my young wife. The people told me Max had sat for nearly 15 years after I went away. I made a gift of money to the people who had brought him food and water all those years.

The people said that on the very day the road came through (not the finished motor-road, but the narrow track that they cut into the side of the mountain to bring their workers in) a skinny old Chinese came riding into camp on a good, strong, tired mountain pony.

They could tell it was a woman by her thick white hair that blew out behind her like a horse's mane. "Who has hair like that?" the people asked each other. From the richness of her clothes they knew she was a high-born lady. From their colour they knew she was a mourning widow. She was covered with the dust of her long journey, but they saw those mourning clothes were new and so they said, "Her husband has just died."

She sat straight in the saddle in spite of the double weight of her journey and her years. She held her head high on her slender neck. Her empty gaze told the people she was blind.

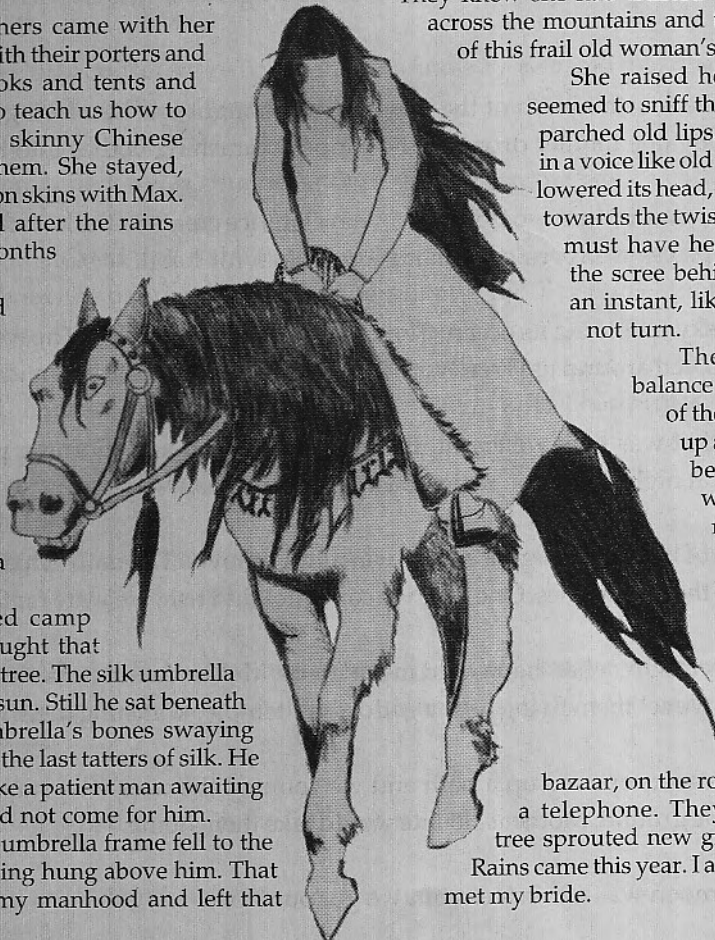
They knew she had trusted the pony to take her here, across the mountains and they wondered at the force of this frail old woman's will.

She raised her face into the wind and seemed to sniff the air. Her tongue licked her parched old lips. "The sea," she whispered, in a voice like old dry leaves. The pony turned, lowered its head, and headed down the slope, towards the twisted, old, dead tree. Old Max must have heard its hooves slipping on the scree behind him because he rose in an instant, like a young man, but he did not turn.

The strong pony caught its balance and came around in front of the old man. Old Max reached up and gently placed his prayer beads around the old blind woman's neck. He took the reins and started walking south, leading them up onto the high plateau, where no one ever goes.

I hung the iron ring back on the old dead tree before I came away from there. People ride the bus two days down to the new

bazaar, on the road now. There they can use a telephone. They tell me that the twisted tree sprouted new green shoots when the Little Rains came this year. I am sorry that my father never met my bride. ▲





T S H E R I N G  
W A N G M O  
D H O M P A

THE YEAR OF THE EARTH ROOSTER

On the fourth month of the new year we bought one hundred goldfish.  
One by one mother dropped the slippery thrashing bodies into the lake.

We knew our turn would come. A new kite, ice cream in the hot afternoon.  
The places we revealed as nature mistaken for habit.

The sky unfolding its ocean. Cloud patterns below the sky. The world  
Revolved around us. Trees with rounded heads standing stiff and long.

But that was how we learnt. Prayers before sleep and morning prayers.  
And at night the moon racing past clouds in the sky—a clear

Path of light as though we were watching a movie. The daily rituals  
And the yearly ones. One year we could not find fish, we were far from water.

I wasn't sure what that would mean for us. Mother found a market of birds  
And we set them flying near a goddesses' temple. Watching them flee blindly.

The streets opened up a path and we counted the ones who stayed  
On the ground. Mother said fate would take them home.

The moon was a thin stem but we got our story.



T S H E R I N G  
W A N G M O  
D H O M P A

BEFORE THE RAIN

Four days it rained after she died.

The plants put to bed by her broke their spines and lay flat. Turned brown so we forgot they were there.

The government declared some districts as disaster zones. We saw roofs slide down the river and foreign aid arrive on TV; midnight blue blankets.

The world cricket series began in India and a 19-year-old took the first wicket. The men wore clean white clothes.

When I cried, I was comforted with updates on the latest death tolls.

A cow floated down the tumid river from one village to the next without any injuries. The newspapers named her 'Trishuli'—for the river.

Numbers rose, the television flashed portraits of orphaned mothers and children. Mourners followed the colour of grief. Shades of white.

Three batsmen were out in two hours.

Cremation in the rain allows for little composure. Umbrellas not forgotten. Extra wood. Mud on white.

The sun hot in India. One player from the visiting team complained of migraines. Throughout the day, transistors carried the score from street to street.

Numbers had risen. On the fifth day, we had sun.

Everyone hung their clothes out in their yards.



T S H E R I N G  
W A N G M O  
D H O M P A

CARRIED FROM HERE

Due to early monsoon rains Saturday's class was dismissed.  
Seven nuns abandoned their books on the roof.

*Raindrops*, I said in English. They wanted to learn  
functional words: *immediately, approximate, conversion*

A man pissed outside the window. He drew a perfect square  
on the wall, then stuck his tongue out at me.

We took a walk and studied mud,  
reading stories in the loudness of footprints.

Night brings its night talk. Ani Yeshe hid her face behind her  
robes and asked for a precise translation of masturbation.

Stars were motionless on the street. Fifteen nuns and I  
squatted in the dark and learnt to count. One, two, three...  
twenty-one.

Water drove the dogs crazy. Ama said it had more  
to do with the place. Served strawberries to the nuns.

Green is insufficient for some shades. I told them it was green  
but a snorting green. A green nodding into slumber.

I translate letters for parents whose children are learning  
other things. Unpredictable in his allegiance to English grammar,

A Tibetan son sends orange mountains of love to his ama.  
The gloaming chews up the horizon. His mother nods her head.

The nuns want to know if I can teach them  
what the "school people" learn.

I tell them one learns according to one's needs,  
as the evening news on TV is read in crisp British.

Ani Doma pines for winter. She has a new woollen sweater,  
the style not quite nun-like. But she's ready for it.

I wanted paper for the nuns. Plain white.  
Cheap Chinese paper, she said when she touched it.





T S H E R I N G  
W A N G M O  
D H O M P A

LOVE LETTER 19

You were happiest in late summer afternoons.  
The sun taking his nap. Cat-eyes,

Your mind supple to whims. Butter tea  
Under the jacaranda tree. I see jacaranda

Even though the smell of juniper comes in.  
That gentle pat of the sun. Taciturn hands

Of a woman that become cotton  
After years of working in the sun.

The way yours might have been if your hands  
Were still here. And the stars of old days, if days could age.

Stars of grandmother eyes. So like the rheumy gaze  
Of yaks. Counting lice in hair.

Days are evasive now. They lose their stutter.  
They do not age. I want the kind of day

That learns to crawl and chew. To walk  
Outside the gate we call home.

# Abominably yours



So bad they are. No sooner had we warned South Asians in these columns last month about the hazards to public health from indiscriminate kissing than they all went around smooching each other in public. What is going on here? It would be presumptuous of us to try to claim credit for the osculating fit that has gripped one-fifth of humanity in recent times. But one thing clear is becoming now: people to us are not listening.

Knowing the taboos against kissing Indians in broad daylight, the first thing Nelson Mandela did when he came out of jail was pay lip service to Shabana Azmi. We haven't yet had a chance to view a slow motion replay to ascertain who made the first move, but it is clear from media reports that the Hero of Robben Island jumped the gun and took certain liberties with Indian womanhood.

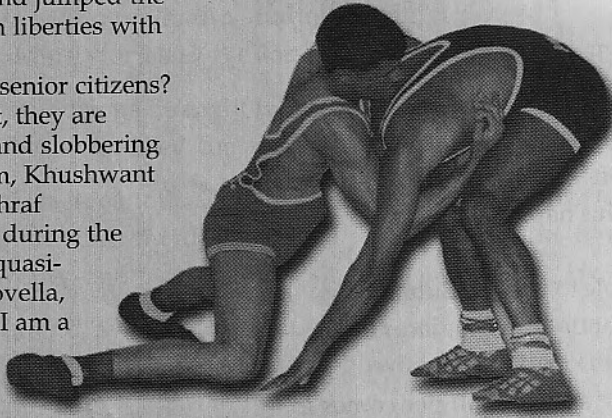
What's with our senior citizens? First chance they get, they are grabbing our faces and slobbering all over. True to form, Khushwant Singh ambushed Ashraf Jehangir's daughter during the launch of his latest quasi-autobiographical novella, *Women Who Think I am a Pathetic Arse, Or Something To That Effect*. We do not know what

Daddy, who is Pakistan's Ambassador and Plenipotentiary at the Delhi Durbar, thought of it all, but our old man bolstered his candidature for the Most Lecherous Hominoid in India, If Not the Subcontinent. And he nearly set off a nuclear war in the process. Careful there, Khushwant.

His book, by the way, is doing very well in the charts. I don't think I will be giving anything away by telling you that it is a blow-by-blow account of how the protagonist, who unsurprisingly bears a striking resemblance to the author himself, is taught the finer points of the Sri Lankan Boob Trick by a ravishing and fast-talking

Ceylonese dip. Recent investigations in Serendib did not reveal the identity of said dip, but the Boob Trick we discovered is not Sri Lankan at all. The custom in fact originates in Lapland since it involves some creative and titillating uses for ice cubes.

After the last column, many of you have written in asking what you should do when a male host at a party tries to kiss you as you cross the threshold. One rule of thumb I have developed over the years is not to reciprocate if someone tries to do a tongue-in-cheek with you. Cheek-by-jowl is the preferred way for more prudish South Asians, but in case of uncertainty, you can always grab him by the throat and shake his head until his eye balls pop out.



Having watched the APEC heads of state rubbing their proboscises with each other in Auckland last month, I couldn't help wondering what I would do next time I am invited to a New Zealand High Commission party and the high commissioner has a cold?

Bodily contact of any kind is a practice that is frowned upon in our society and culture, we just do not touch if we can help it. In fact, South Asians are the only race that have been known to procreate without any actual physical contact between the sexes.

This is why I am alarmed at the growth of contact sports in the recently concluded Eighth South

Asian Federation Games in salubrious Kathmandu. I am no great fan of boxing, but if a pair of buffoons gets mental satisfaction from bashing each others' faces into pulp that is their headache.

But what do you make of wrestling? To what do we attribute the newfound popularity for wrestling aside from the fact that there are two channels on my cable listing that devote 24 hours a day to a procession of large ugly men with long blonde hair tearing each other from limb to limb while a crazy crowd bays for blood? Lately, I have noticed women who look like they have been nurtured from childhood on a diet of steroids and hormones have joined televised wrestling. Haven't we come a long way?

Anyway, at SAF we were intrigued by the sight of a swarthy Pakistani man in a swimsuit putting his arms between the legs of his Indian counterpart in a futile attempt to flip him over. The Indian man then yanked out a tuft of chest hair from his Pakistani brother and while he was observing the vegetation rather quizzically, the Pakistani man moved fast and got the Indian man in a firm half-Nelson. I would be using poetic license here if I said that the Pakistani man had the Indian man by his balls. But that in essence was what it was.

And what did you make of the Bangladeshi swimmer who would not let go of her bathrobe lest she be seen in her one-piece Speedo? She wore the bathrobe right till the plunge stool and took them off in a split-second as the referee went "On your mark...get set..." It is time the SAF organisers allowed South Asians to wear sports attire that are not frowned upon in our society and culture. Sarongs for the swimming events, and cricket-style pelvic guards for the wrestlers would be welcomed by all and sundry.



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