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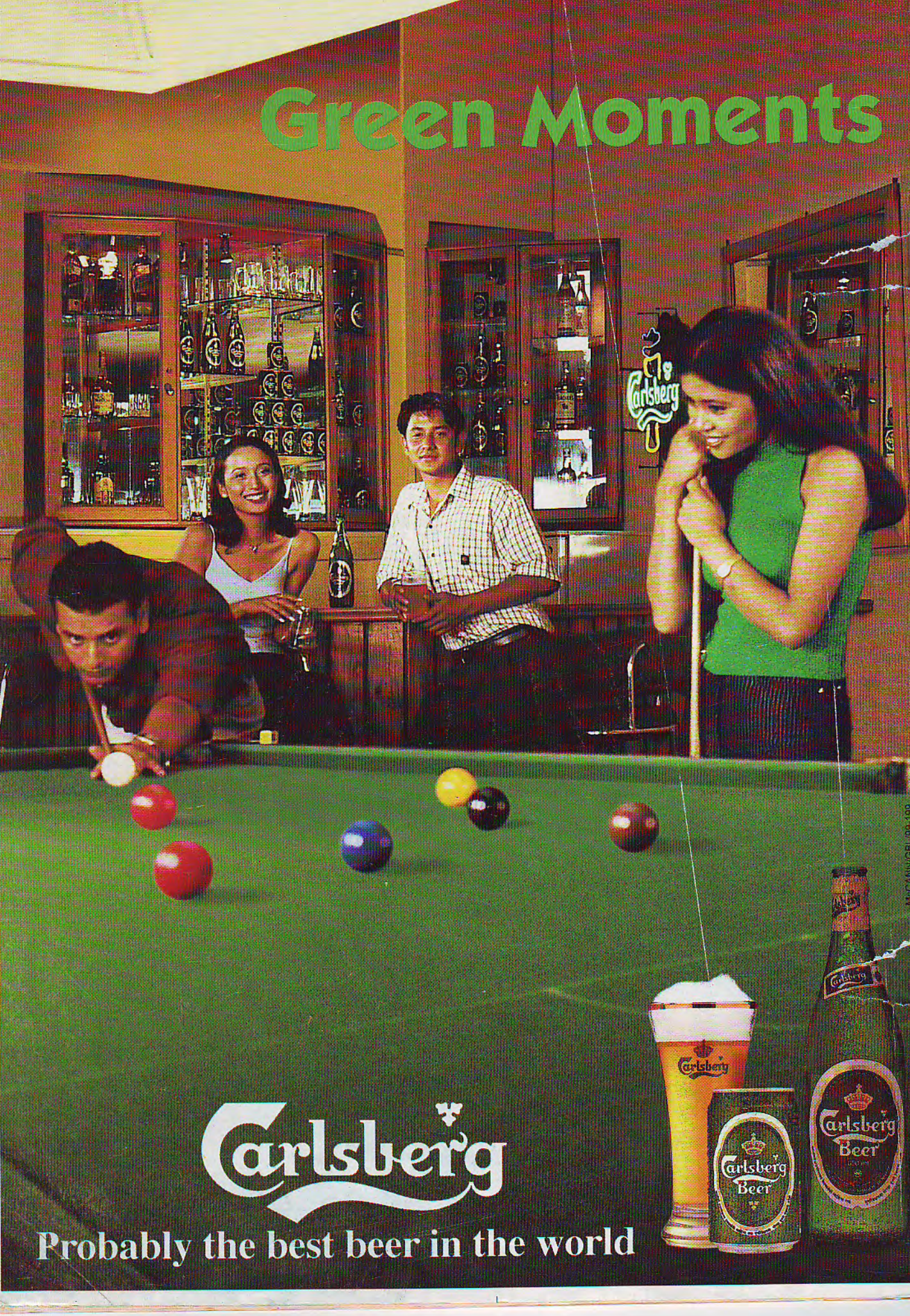
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HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 13 No 1 January 2000

Nepal's King Birendra

A new royal role

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litSA

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HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

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Cover art and design by **Subhas Rai**.

India-centric diaspora

Thank you for the look at the diaspora (Gone West, December 1999). But I would hesitate to call it a South Asian diaspora, since you have concentrated mainly on Indians who have gone abroad in the last century. What of the Sri Lankans, the Pakistanis and the Bangladeshis. The articles in your coverage were India-centric.

True, most of the emigrants are Indians, but there is a sizeable population from Pakistan and Bangladesh going out too. Maybe you should have also covered England and Europe where a lot of them are based—you seem to have American blinkers.

It's true that the diaspora is very diffuse and variegated, but after reading the articles I didn't get a sense of the common concerns, especially in terms of the problems of identity, that bind South Asians abroad.

D. Shalini
New Delhi

Whiz-bang technology

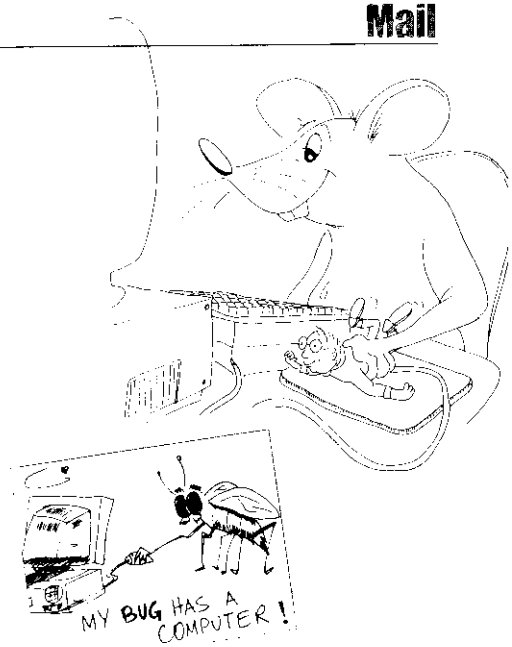
With due respect to what Kunda Dixit had to say in "Exiled to Cyberia" (November 1999), let me remind that inventions start with an Idea. In best of all words, it starts with need—a requirement which only a new technology, in this case, new software, can fulfill. At times, rather than need-driven, the development of a new software or a solution is technology-driven. That is, some new whiz-bang technology is invented and some one in marketing goes looking for applications that can use the new technology.

This type of approach rarely succeeds. On the other hand, new technologies can change customer expectations thus also requirements. Certainly radio, television, telephone and VCR are proof of that. More recently CDs, Laser Disks, DVD disks and, for that matter, the World Wide Web, have demonstrated that new technology can capture the imagination, and from that inspiration can come hundreds of successful products.

Whether the idea for solution arises out of felt need on part of consumers, or is a response to nifty technology which expands the market, that idea must be nurtured and fully understood in detail. Too often we jump to technology as a solution before we fully understand the fundamental requirements. We then land up with a product that no one much wanted.

The benefit from technology can only be felt if we understand its domino effect.

Dinesh Sthapit
Rochester, New York

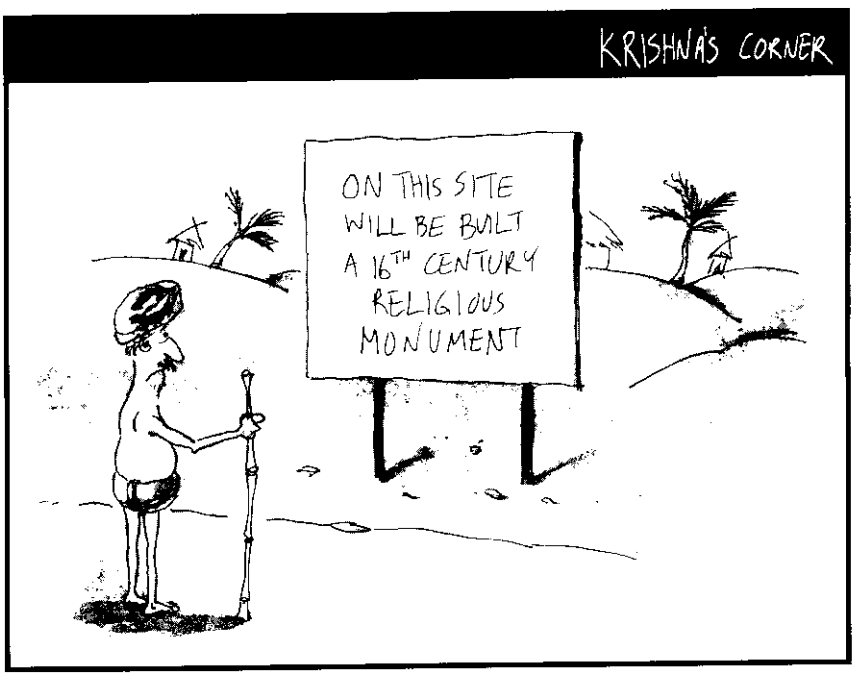


Neo-Luddite Yeti

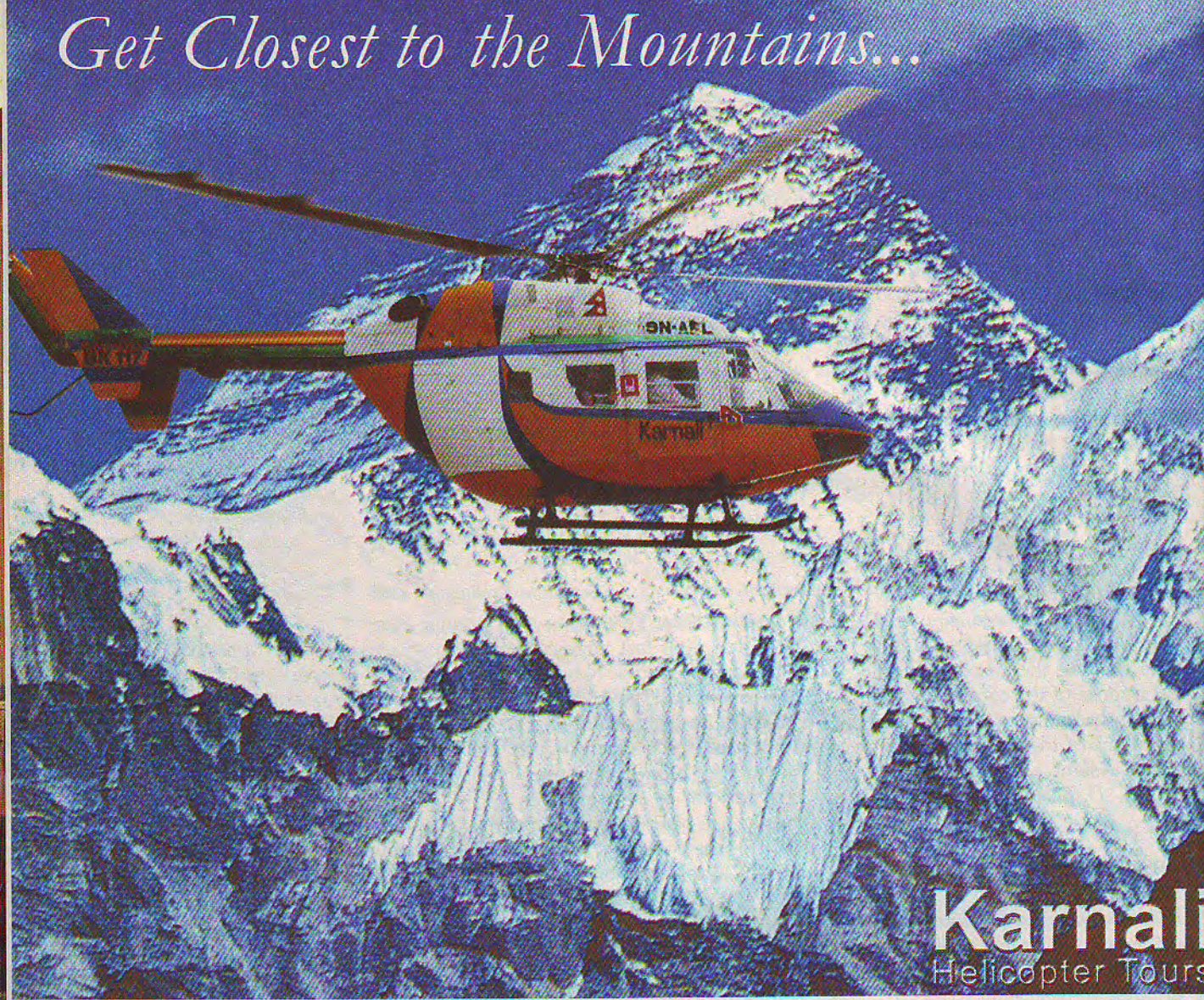
Now that your last page columnist (Abominably yours, November 1999 issue) has shown that I am not alone in being completely flummoxed by geekspeak, I would like to offer him (her?) a present. This cartoon by an unknown master has been hanging on my wall for the past two years and the neo-Luddite sentiments that drove it are close to the "my bug has a computer" that illustrates your column.

Here it is in jpg file—it has resolution compression at 300 dpi. To decompress right click on windows system and go to windows system directory with dialup networking on ISDN and MIDI instruments, open the control panel applet using ACPI , make sure you don't corrupt the registry and harddisk should be on FAT32 format, and if you don't do this you'll get a WSOCK32.TLL error. If you want to prevent the remote administrator's file attributes, enable the DCOM scandisk with a primary log on with a 32-bit DLC protocol using a SCSI device. If it doesn't work, I can always fax it to you...

M. Benesova
Prague



Get Closest to the Mountains...



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BHUTAN

FREE RIZAL

IN A move that caught everyone by surprise, the Royal Government of Bhutan freed Tek Nath Rizal, along with 39 other political prisoners and 160 others convicted for common crimes, on 17 December 1999, the kingdom's 92nd National Day. The release of 52-year-old Rizal, the country's top dissident leader, after more than 10 years of incarceration has caused more than a flutter for what it could portend for the future of the 100,000 Bhutanese refugees living in India and Nepal.

Rizal's struggle and confrontation with the government began in April 1988 when, as the peoples' representative to the National Assembly and elected royal advisory coun-cillor, he petitioned King Jigme Singye Wangchuk against the arbitrary manner in which the census was being conducted in southern Bhutan. He pleaded that Lhot-shampas (southern Bhutanese of Nepali ethnicity) were being called upon to fulfill impossible conditions to prove their bona fides as Bhutanese nationals.

The government deemed the petition seditious and detained Rizal for three days in June 1988. Granted a royal pardon, and released under stringent conditions (such as the one that he could not be in the company of more than two persons at any time), he fled the country and took refuge in Nepal.

In exile, Rizal formed the People's Forum for Human Rights to raise awareness about the situation in Bhutan, which was progressively worsening for people of ethnic Nepali origin settled in the southern part of the country. As internal dissent simmered, the government blamed Rizal for fomenting trouble. And with the connivance of the autocratic Panchayat regime of Nepal, Rizal was arrested and flown to Bhutan aboard a special Druk Air flight in November 1989.

For the next two years, he and six other activists, all in solitary confinement, were the sole inmates at Rabuna Prison in Wangdue Phodrang, western Bhutan. Following appeals by human rights groups, including Amnesty International, which adopted him and the others as "prisoners of conscience", Rizal was finally brought to trial in 1993. He was tried on charges framed under the National Security Act, 1992, promulgated three years after his arrest, found guilty, and in November 1993, sentenced to life imprisonment.

Three days later, a royal edict was issued, which stated that Rizal would be freed once the refugee problem was resolved. Despite appeals for his release on health and humanitarian grounds by human rights groups, the government refused to relent and Rizal spent the next six years in Chemgang Prison on the outskirts of Thimphu.

The sudden and unexpected change of heart on the part of the Bhutanese regime has become the subject of much speculation. Does it mean that a solution to the refugee problem is finally on the cards? Or, is it, as some sceptics see it, yet another stroke of genius and display of statecraft by the Bhutanese government? So far, there is no evidence to lead one to either conclusion.

Welcoming his release, Amnesty International said: "We hope the release of Tek Nath Rizal will contribute to a just and lasting solution to the problems faced by tens of thousands of people currently in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, who claim they have the right to return to Bhutan." Amnesty has cause to sound optimistic because the king's edict, immediately following his sentencing, had stated: "Rizal will be released from prison once the governments of Bhutan and Nepal resolve the problem of people living in refugee camps in eastern Nepal."

Rizal is now free, but the refugee crisis remains unresolved. Clearly, the political problem in the kingdom has taken a new twist. Since his release, Rizal has been surprisingly accessible by phone at the Thimphu hotel where he is staying. If the calls are being

Rizal, before his arrest, in the Bhutanese national dress, gho,

monitored, he obviously doesn't care, and if he has been cautioned about what he can or cannot say, it is clear he is not heeding the warnings. The Nepali media has interviewed him over phone and his statements, remarkably candid and often politically charged, have been carried in Kathmandu's newspapers and radio. Reportedly, he has also spoken freely to a host of Bhutanese activists in exile and other well-wishers who seem to have no trouble getting through.

The freedom of both speech and expression that Rizal obviously enjoys at the moment are worthy of note since the regime has often been accused of muzzling its critics. (However, this freedom allows Rizal to address the outside world only—neither Bhutan TV nor radio will air his views nor will *Kuensel*, the nation's only newspaper.)

The Bhutanese government has long been faulted for prolonging the refugee crisis by running circles around the Nepali government in bilateral negotiations, and there is reason to suspect the freedom granted Rizal is one more example of Thimphu's diplomatic finesse. If the release itself earns approbation for the Bhutanese monarch's magnanimity, there can be no end to the praise heaped upon the government for allowing Rizal to speak out freely.

But there are those who view Rizal's release as reflecting Bhutan's confidence and an indication that its government has no intention of changing tack. What the regime is counting on, they believe, is that the trade-off between the tremendous amount of international goodwill and any collateral damage from Rizal's access to the media will be in their favour.

On the other hand, however, if Rizal's freedom and the refugee crisis are truly interlinked, as suggested by the king in his conditional pardon of November 1993, there is hope for the 100,000 Bhutanese in exile. Rizal's release could be the first signal that Bhutan is finally willing to be more forthcoming in resolving the refugee issue.

At the moment, Bhutan is facing a more pressing problem: with heavily-armed resident militants from Assam unwilling to accept the offer of safe-passage out of the kingdom, a ground battle seems to be on the cards. That battle may have to be fought in the interior by the dominant Drukpas alone because ethnic Nepali Bhutanese, who traditionally served as the buffer, are languishing in refugee camps in Nepal. Now might be as good a time as any to bring them home. ▲

SRI LANKA

THE JUNGLE AGENDA

REFLECTING ON the 21 December presidential election, Agriculture and Lands Minister D.M. Jayaratne, who is also the general secretary of the ruling People's Alliance (PA), remarked that the country's political agenda is written in the jungles of Wanni, where the Liberation Tigers' supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, is holed out. His reference was, of course, to the suicide bomb exploded on the lawns of the Colombo Town Hall in an abortive bid to assassinate President Chandrika Kumaratunga, three days before the voting.

The armoured Mercedes Benz limousine parked between the woman bomber and her intended victim, saved the president's life, although she was hit by shrapnel in the region of the eye. Whether she will lose one eye as a result of the bomb was not clear as this was being written, but the president and her government have made it plain that she will continue to lead the country in a relentless drive to rid Sri Lanka of the scourge of Tiger 'terrorism'.

As Kumaratunga noted in a remarkably well-crafted acceptance speech after winning the presidential election, "I hold the unique distinction of being the one political leader against whom an LTTE assassination attempt had failed." She followed up that statement by confidently declaring: "I will be the one political leader against whom the entire LTTE terrorist enterprise will fail."

The vast majority of Sri Lankans, whatever their political persuasion, will certainly hope and pray that she is right. But they know only too well that Prabhakaran, who had the United National Party's presidential candidate, Gamini Dissanayake, assassinated during the 1994 campaign, thereby assuring Kumaratunga of the plum with a massive 62 percent of the vote, will revert to the old guerrilla dictum he's fond of often citing: "We have to be lucky only once while you have to be lucky every time."

No doubt Kumaratunga, or for that matter opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP, whom Prabhakaran backed for the presidency this time, will be ultra security-conscious in the future. But the fact remains that the massive apparatus employed to protect Kumaratunga was penetrated, and nearly

fatally, this time.

The LTTE did everything they possibly could, including attempting to murder the incumbent, towards seeing Wickremesinghe win the election. Prabhakaran tagged the Kumaratunga government a curse on the Tamils, and said that the five years of her rule were the worst the Tamils had known. The election results amply demonstrate that the vast majority of the Tamils, whether on their own or at the LTTE's behest, voted for Wickremesinghe, who was confident of winning the election on the back of minority votes.

So, why did the LTTE want Wickremesinghe as Sri Lanka's new president? What Wickremesinghe had publicly promised was an interim council with LTTE representation for the predominantly Tamil northeast, de-escalation of the war and negotiations. But it has to be noted here that Kumaratunga had promised much more than that in the past (in a *Time* magazine interview in 1998). She had said there that the LTTE could administer the northeast for 10 years and its cadres could serve as the police force.

The president has also been open to negotiations while actively pursuing a military option called "war for peace". The latter strategy was obviously to ensure she could negotiate from a position of military strength. But Prabhakaran, soon after the premature presidential election was announced, had turned the tables on her by seizing territory the army had painfully won from the Tigers in 19 months, in just five days. Right now, the LTTE is pounding on the doors of the Jaffna peninsula, the Tamil heartland from which they were ejected four years ago. If negotiations should begin, probably with third-party mediation the government had previously resisted, it is clear that the Prabhakaran will agree for talks only after he does his best to take back Jaffna.

Kumaratunga in her acceptance speech also made an eloquent plea for reconciliation between the PA and the UNP, which together command the allegiance of over 90 percent of the electorate. She abandoned her savage attack of Wickremesinghe, admitting that the UNP and its leader has "very significant support" in the country, whose people still intend him to play a major role in the effort to forge a new Sri Lanka. "I stretch out my hand to you to join the government, both you and your supporters, without compromising in any way with those who attempt to sow terror even for narrow political gains," she said, to honour the UNP's commitment to peace held out during the election campaign.

That was a dramatic volte face. For, even the day before the election, when the wounded Kumaratunga appeared on national television, she chose to make the preposterous allegation that the UNP was behind the conspiracy leading to the 1959 assassination of her father, prime minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Thus, although her call for a grand alliance between the PA and the UNP has set off great expectations, particularly among the business community, of a national government, the ground realities do not seem to favour such a development.

I will be the one political leader against whom the entire LTTE terrorist enterprise will fail.

—Chandrika Kumaratunga

A parliamentary election is due by August and if a national government is to take shape, it must necessarily reflect the composition of the next parliament. Dramatic developments in Sri Lanka's peace front are therefore unlikely before a new parliament is formed. Hopefully, these will be fairer than December's presidential race. The stakes are smaller, and the government will be under the pressure of public opinion to play with a straighter bat, in a country where straight bats are not really the style when it comes to elections. Prospects for peace will also depend on whether Kumaratunga will be large-hearted enough to negotiate with the man who tried to kill her, and whether two sides that do not trust each other can still conclude useful business. ▲

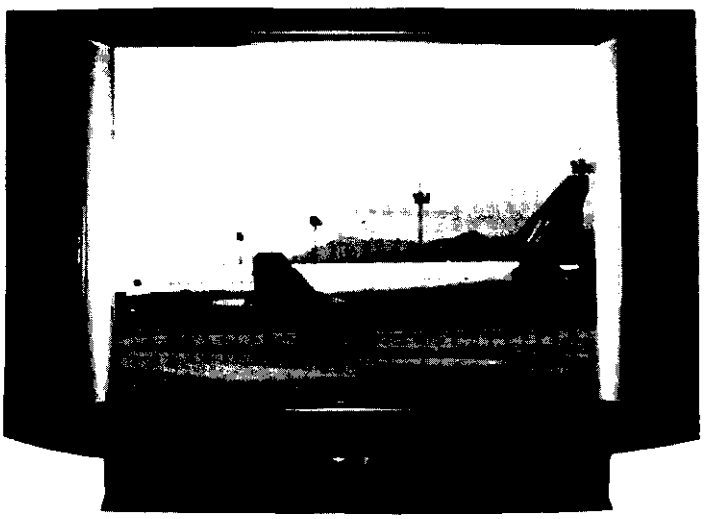
SOUTH ASIA

MEDIA WAGES INFOWAR

NEXT ONLY to the Gulf War and the Kargil conflict, the hijacking of Indian Airlines' IC 814 has become every satellite network's infotainment dream. The region's 24-hour cable

news channels stole audiences away from Bollywood films (absurdly being telecast simultaneously on Doordarshan and Nepal TV as the crisis unfolded). You had a choice of watching news as it endlessly tracked the plane hopscotching from Kathmandu, Amritsar, Lahore, Dubai to Kandahar, or you could watch a Bollywood re-run.

The voracious appetite of round-the-clock television news brought the drama into our drawing rooms, seemingly in real time. This meant that every speculative lead had to be pursued, every rumour had to be aired. Description of the trauma of hostages was



punctuated by commercial breaks for saris.

The critical line between news and entertainment was once more blurred as it had during Kargil war and the Belgrade bombing. The technological leaps of the information age allow us to hop back and forth between real violence and reel violence, making it difficult to tell the difference between the two. They are separated by station breaks, or the flick of a remote.

TV privileges the live event. And against the backdrop of "live" footage numbingly repeated, rumour is upgraded to fact, prejudice replaces reasoned judgement, and half-baked analyses of dangerous hawks drive formal policy positions.

So the Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh at a press conference takes his cue from a speculative report by Zee's Kathmandu man about five "heavily armed" hijackers simply crossing the tarmac from a Pakistan International Airlines flight in Kathmandu to the waiting Indian Airlines flight. And then Zee, reporting the foreign minister's press conference, doesn't bother to say that by this time it had been confirmed that the two flights were at least six hours apart.

Not many questioned facts, especially if it neatly fit the official Indian line about Nepal being a "hotbed" of ISI activity. Frustrated by the stalemate in Kandahar, it looked like Pakistan and Nepal were easy scapegoats for New Delhi. Hijackers, we were told, were of every nationality except Indian. Subsequently, the term "Muslim" hijackers was used. The Kalashnikovs and explosives with which the hijackers were said to be armed, gave way to a vague pistol, a knife and maybe grenades as the released passengers came out.

Glibly, commentators tossed as "fact" that in the last six months, 22 Kashmiri terrorists had been nabbed in Nepal. They publicly and irresponsibly introduced a Nepali pashmina trader who was on board as one of the hijackers. It had now become difficult not just to tell the difference between news and entertainment, it was getting difficult to tell the difference between misinformation and disinformation.

Details such as permission to land at Lahore being given at the intervention of Jaswant Singh, or the fact that the plane had first wanted to land in Lucknow were irritants to be ignored. Given the demonisation of Pakistan, commentators on the satellite news channels chose to disregard information filtering through, and clung to their prejudice about Pakistan delaying permission for a special Indian aircraft to overfly Pakistan and go to Kandahar. The delay in a negotiating team reaching Kandahar, was interpreted as linked with the Taliban wanting to be the spokesmen for the hijackers.

Much was made of the report of the Taliban refusing to allow an Indian commando unit to come to Kandahar. It took a veteran Afghan watcher Rahimullah Yusafzai of the BBC to clarify that Afghan pride would not allow anyone else to conduct a commando operation on their territory. It was not sympathy with the terrorists.

On the sixth day of the hijacking drama when the negotiating team was in place in Kandahar, the media was full of praise for Talibanised Afghanistan's principled stand against the hijackers. TV channels which just the night before had shrilly linked Taliban ideologue Mulla Omar with Osma Bin Laden suddenly began commending his stand to storm the aircraft if the hijackers killed any of the hostages.

One casualty of all this is the promise that an emergent regional TV network would help build understanding and awareness among

the peoples of South Asia. Instead, it has shown that the regional footprints of channels like Zee, Star and Pakistan Television in times of crisis simply deepen prejudices on all sides.

Like Kargil, India's first war in a media society, the hijacking drama too has proven media's tendency to get trapped in super patriotic jingoism. Today, infowar is recognised as the fourth front of war in societies where the technology for manipulating propaganda and perception have reached an advanced stage. During the Kargil war, the Indian media as "force multiplier" waged war on that fourth front. The 24-hour news channels have brought in the CNN-isation effect of saturated but superficial (and usually manipulated) coverage. Kargil demonstrated the self-induced willingness of the Indian media to be super patriots first, and journalists second.

Indeed the linkage with Kargil was overtly made on Zee News when it featured the parents of the 'martyred' Lt Vijendra Thapa to exhort the relatives of the hostages to be patient. The funeral of the killed hostage Rippin Katyal was reminiscent of the endless spectacle of the funerals of the those killed in Kargil.

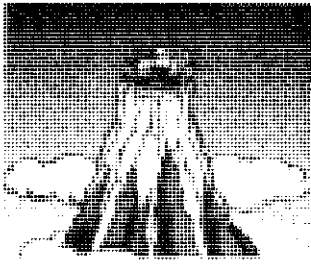
Just as in the Kargil coverage any discussion of the "why and wherefore" was closed, in the hijacking drama the root of the problem – Kashmir – was blacked out. The blame was heaped on the weakest link – Nepal as the base for ISI anti-Indian activities. Indeed, the first decision by the Indian cabinet as the hijack drama unfolded was to make the petty and bully-like move to stop all Indian Airlines flights to Kathmandu. Nepal had to be punished, to the extent of crippling its tourism industry, for allowing "security lapses". Few in the Indian media asked if after the eight previous hijackings from Indian cities, similar bans were imposed on those cities. Nepal has been judged and lynched by the Indian media, which seems to relish picking on someone much smaller, and to strike when the opponent is down.

—Rita Manchanda

Regional cooperation is dead. Long live regional cooperation.

by Kanti Bajpai

However utopian it may seem, a South Asian confederation may actually work. The fate of the people of South Asia cannot be left to nation-states alone. There is a collective regional life beyond the narrow confines of SAARC.



The postponement of the SAARC Summit in November caused a fair amount of breastbeating, with partisans taking one side or the other on India's action. But one striking thing about the postponement is that, in the end, no one, except perhaps the denizens of the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, seemed particularly disappointed.

No one is talking about burying SAARC even though it is a largely unloved organisation. Even its demise, should that happen, will not be particularly mourned. When the Association was formally launched in 1985, there were sceptics, but there was a real hope that the conclave would amount to something, that it would make a difference to the affairs of South Asia, and that in some ineffable way, it reflected the desire of the peoples of the region to come together.

Fourteen years later, however, the sceptics seem to have been proven right. The governments of the region have done little to invigorate the Association and to point it in the direction of anything that would capture the imagination of the peoples of South Asia. The best that one can say about SAARC is that a certain amount of "social capital" has been generated: expert and technical committee meetings, NGO meetings under the aegis of SAARC, and the summits have brought South Asians in various fields and at various levels into contact with each other at regular intervals, leading to a certain amount of camaraderie and trust.

Moribund status

What is wrong with SAARC? The lamentations are familiar enough, but virtually everything seems to have gone awry. By refusing to discuss bilateral and contentious issues, the Association has been depoliticised to the point of irrelevancy. SAARC is so much a creature of the member governments that it has no capacity to do anything creative and worthwhile. The Secretariat is not only unable to transcend the usual political objections of its member governments, it does not even have the human resources to offer any additional perspectives on regional issues. It has no data banks or intellectual capital that it can bring to bear, to transform the way in which the region looks at various problems. SAARC also stands accused of having taken on too much and having dissipated its energies.

The dozen or so areas of cooperation in SAARC are far too much for an Association without a bureaucracy of its own to handle. SAARC's inability to show anything for its decade and a half of labours has led to growing cynicism and demoralisation even among those who had championed its cause—the smaller states of the region.

There are other, more partisan digs at SAARC. Some think that India wants to subvert the organisation because it fears a gang-up of its smaller neighbours, including Pakistan. Others argue that Pakistan wants to stall the Association because it fears that India will dominate it. Yet others cast dark looks at the small states who they believe lost interest in SAARC when they couldn't embarrass India in it, and when in any case they cut their own deals with India on river waters or trade.

This seems like a classic case of over-determination: any one of these explanations of what is wrong with SAARC appears sufficient to account for its moribund status. It is hopeless to try and disentangle the truth, capital T. The question is: what is to be done? Can one refurbish SAARC? Or should the region adopt a different strategy altogether? If so, what are the alternatives?

Sub-regionalism

On balance, after 15 years, it seems safe to say that SAARC is beyond tinkering and rehabilitation. It represents some collective, rather repressed fantasy, and representations of that kind have their own usefulness. But it does not seem worthwhile to invest much more in it. Regional Cooperation in South Asia could be configured at four alternative levels. The first level is bilateral cooperation between the various countries of the region, particularly between India and its neighbours. This is cooperation in the traditional mould, at an inter-state level, government to government.

Obviously, there is a fair amount of this kind of cooperation already. India and Nepal cooperate in military, economic, and developmental areas. Most recently, agreements on trade and transit, and on Mahakali have underscored their ability to work together in a business-like way. India and Bangladesh have signed a river-water sharing agreement. They may be close to agreement on the trans-shipment of Indian goods via Bangladeshi territory. The two countries are also talking about a free trade agreement. India and Sri Lanka have just signed a bilateral free trade agreement, and

although this has run into trouble with some sections of Indian and Sri Lankan business, it is likely to become operational sooner or later. In effect, then, India and its smaller neighbours are doing bilaterally what they could not do within SAARC, namely, cooperate on the two great areas of regional endeavour—rivers and trade.

The second level of regional cooperation is sub-regional. Within SAARC, there has been a growing move to consider the possibility of sub-regional cooperation. There are three forms of sub-regional cooperation. The first would have a sub-set of SAARC cooperate in areas that do not necessarily involve the entire region. For instance, managing the cis-Himalayan ecology is essentially a project among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal.

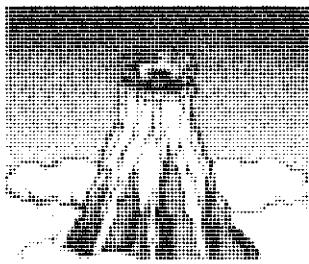
The second form of sub-regionalism would be built around the idea that cooperation could be restricted to those countries within SAARC that were in agreement on a project, leaving those who opted out, as it were. Some have argued that a sub-regional free trade area between India and its smaller neighbours constitutes a viable and rational scheme and that Pakistan could simply choose to opt out.

The third form of sub-regional cooperation would be to organise collaboration according to a transnational notion of the sub-region. In this conception, northeast India, West Bengal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal is a sub-region encompassing geographical, economic, ecological, and even cultural unities, which mark it off from the rest of the Subcontinent. It is, therefore, a more rational basis for cooperation. Similarly, southern India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives is a more rational space for common action. In the northwest quadrant of South Asia, Kashmir, Indian Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Pakistan would seem to have more in common with each other than with the rest of the region.

Within SAARC, this vision ran up against the objections of Pakistan and Sri Lanka at the last summit. But it is time to resurrect the idea, even if outside SAARC given that Pakistan and perhaps Sri Lanka continue to oppose such a development. Certainly a northeastern quadrant community is an idea whose time has come. Whether it should be expanded to include Burma and Thailand in a Bay of Bengal community is a key consideration, but clearly something should begin in this vital zone.

South Asian Parliament

The next two forms of regional cooperation are less statist in conception. The first of these is to institute a South Asian Parliament. M.L. Sondhi of Jawaharlal Nehru University and Srikant Paranjape of Pune University have popularised the idea of an assembly that would have representatives from the entire region, which would debate regional issues outside the strict confines of governmental policy. Interestingly, the Congress party's manifesto during India's last general elections endorsed the idea of



such a body.

The scheme is attractive, but, as things stand, perhaps too visionary. Presumably the representatives to the regional assembly would be elected, as they are in the European Parliament. This is the difficulty, that any country in South Asia would agree to hold such elections on their soil, and to give the resulting assembly any powers whatsoever, seems inconceivable.

On the other hand, there is the kernel of an idea here that may be built upon to advantage. Is it inconceivable that South Asia could devise a non-official parliament or assembly without elections, drawing its members by nomination? Members would be nominated by a set of private institutions dedicated to the cause of regional cooperation in each country. These institutions would be responsible for selecting individuals from various walks of life who have displayed an interest and expertise in regional affairs. These 'parliamentarians' would meet regularly, in different countries and in different locales (not just the capital cities), to debate regional issues and to put ideas and perspectives on the table that seem to be unfashionable, even utopian, as a way of articulating an alternative reality for the region as a whole.

Finally, regional cooperation might be organised by networks of non- governmental organisations active in their respective civil societies. To some extent, this is already happening. SAARC has been a catalyst in letting loose the idea of NGOs getting together and talking to each other, sharing ideas and information, and drawing inspiration from each other. These informal but often very material and strong ties have been around for at least the last two decades and have grown in density over that time. These ties can grow, given the democratic consolidation that seems to have occurred throughout the region (notwithstanding the Musharraf coup in Pakistan) and given that communication has become easier via the Internet.

One could relate this form of regional cooperation to the idea of a South Asian parliament. It may be possible to construct a regional parliament from representatives selected by the NGO community. In any case, the NGO networks constitute decentralised nodes of regional collaboration among different sectors of regional civil society. They may work with the tacit approval of their governments, but they may also work as a resistive force against the iniquities and inanities of their politicians and officials. Their collective, often unnoticed, endeavours are shaping the region, willy-nilly. It may be possible to infuse their efforts with an even sharper sense of regional responsibility and focus.

Regional cooperation is dead, long live regional cooperation. SAARC may be a dead end or terminally stalled, but there is a collective regional life beyond the narrow confines of SAARC. However utopian, a South Asian confederation need not be a cloud-cuckooland rumination. In this confederal system, nation-states would continue to exist and garner respect. But the fate of people need not be left to nation-states and their agencies. Other centres of power and ideas can cohabit the political space of South Asia and are in any case doing so. The question is how to bring them together to shape a better future for what will soon be the most populated region on the face of the earth. ▲

Cogito (I am a South A

South Asia's nation-state approach to identity has spawned an introverted polity that clips history to suit short-sighted nationalism. It ignores other ethno-linguistic and religious tapestries that define South Asianhood.

by Dipak Gyawali

With apologies to René Descartes, am I a South Asian? If yes, when did I become one?

Identities, we are told, are not innate to individuals but are socially constructed. If the SAARC region between 60 and 100 meridians south of the Hindukush-Himalaya cordillera can be characterised by anything, it is by its surfeit of identities. Whether in terms of language, ethnicity, fairly racist varna, property-based class, religious rituals, physiographic zones, ecological niches, urban-rural divides, modern political ideology or tradition-ascribed roles, identity abound here as perhaps nowhere else on the globe.

This multiple identity characterises not just the South Asian region or groups of people within this region but also the individual. A simple statement such as "A Nepali is..." cannot be completed with a single noun or an adjective, except by the grossly ignorant. A dweller of this mountain kingdom – or indeed of any other country in South Asia – can be many things at the same time. Which is why attempts to give a single identity to a group through the garb of nationalism have failed miserably everywhere, even when jackboots have been used to assure compliance.

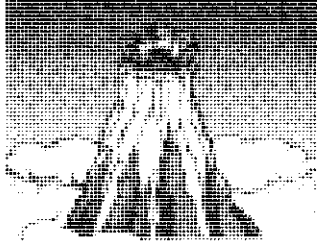
Where does the South Asian identity fit into this medley of identities in our midst? Is it even necessary? The pull of success and the poor-cousin syndrome seem stronger than history or geography when, for instance, Pakistanis try to become West Asians and Sri Lankans or the Burmese try to think of themselves as Southeast Asians. What benefit does South Asianhood have to offer?

I into infinity

In an apocryphal story, Adi Shankaracharya heard a knock at his door. When he asked, "Who's there?" his disciple replied, "It is I." Shankara is supposed to have retorted, "If this 'I' is so dear to you, then expand it to infinity, or else get rid of it altogether!"

Such a Vedantic or Sufi solution might not be every hardworking South Asian's cup of tea, but the idea of embracing a larger ecumenical fold (or being absorbed by it) is fundamental to addressing many of our destructively divisive identities. For constructive engagement between identities, the larger the common pool of historical resource from where we can all draw sustenance, the more accommodating the encounters will be. If identities are constructed from a smaller social gene pool, the possibility of accepting the 'Other' is so much lesser. And destructive encounters can be easier for fundamentalists to engineer.

The journey into South Asianhood will be different for different people since we all start from unique baskets of identity patches. Can one become something one is inherently not? Should not the seeds be there for the potential to unfold? Two trips several years back stand out in my memory as identity-



sian), *Ergo Sum!*

shaking events: a visit to Taxila (or Takshyasheela to Sanskrit purists) in Pakistan and to Nalanda in the badlands of Bihar, both remains of the seats of ancient learning in South Asia.

The Taxila ruins lie in the western Punjab plains on the route of the most mass migrations from Central Asia to the Indus-Ganga plains. Its artefacts are vestiges of several millennia of culture, from Aryan to Gandhara Buddhist and also includes one of the earliest Syrian Christian churches this side of the Khyber Pass. The most famous Taxila relic is, of course, that of the Fasting Buddha (now in a Lahore museum).

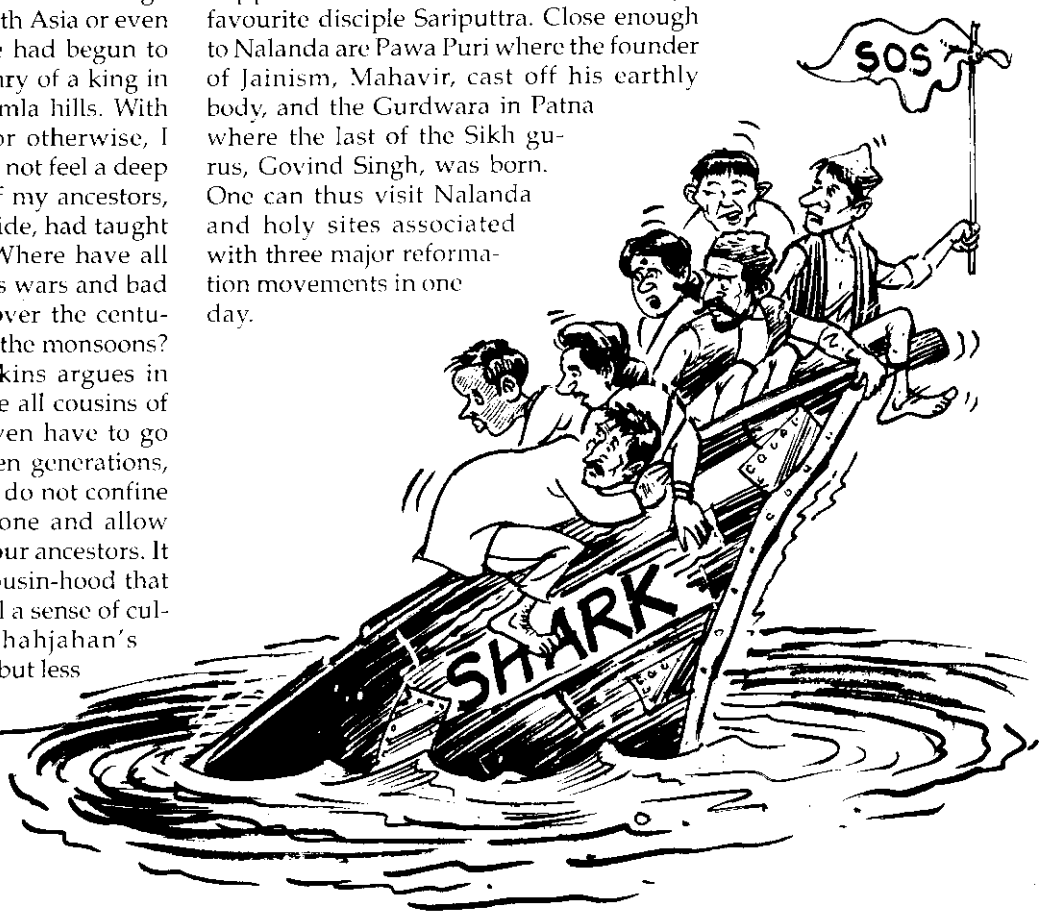
My personal link with ancient happenings in the plains of the Indus lies among the many genealogies being re-constructed in Nepal, of which my family's is also one. It builds up the idea that the Abraham of this line was a certain Ananta Bhatta who left what is now Punjab over millennia ago (before Islam's advent in South Asia or even before the Anglo-Saxon race had begun to exist) to head for the sanctuary of a king in western Nepal's Achaam Jumla hills. With this impression, mythical or otherwise, I could not stand in Taxila and not feel a deep sense of reverence. Which of my ancestors, on my father's or mother's side, had taught at this ancient university? Where have all the distant cousins spread, as wars and bad rulers plundered the land over the centuries in cycles as repetitive as the monsoons?

Geneticist Richard Dawkins argues in *River out of Eden* that "we are all cousins of the queen" and we don't even have to go too far back, just a few dozen generations, to find out—especially if we do not confine ourselves to patrilineage alone and allow for a dash of promiscuity to our ancestors. It is perhaps this subliminal cousin-hood that allows a Nepali Hindu to feel a sense of cultural ownership of Shahjahan's Badshahi mosque in Lahore, but less so of the Faisal mosque in Islamabad. Perhaps his language also helps a Nepali in this imperialism. The word *lahurey* (from Lahore's mercenary recruitment centres during the time of Ranjit Singh) refers to any economic out-migrant and the Indus-Ganga plains are still referred to in the Nepali hills as "Muglan", the land of the Moghuls. History, when it transcends the limitations of 'national' history, can be quite liberating and enriching.

Seeds of hope

The ruins of Nalanda lie in the Rajgir hills just before the river Ganga leaves the plains and enters the Bengal delta. In its heyday, this university was the font of Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism that still hold sway over Bengal, Mithila, Nepal and Tibet. This site is also very close to Rajgir where Buddha punished his body with six years of fasting and penance (as captured in the Taxila image) before heading along the ridge to Gaya and enlightenment.

One of the stupas at Nalanda is supposed to encase the relics of his favourite disciple Sariputtra. Close enough to Nalanda are Pawa Puri where the founder of Jainism, Mahavir, cast off his earthly body, and the Gurdwara in Patna where the last of the Sikh gurus, Govind Singh, was born. One can thus visit Nalanda and holy sites associated with three major reformation movements in one day.



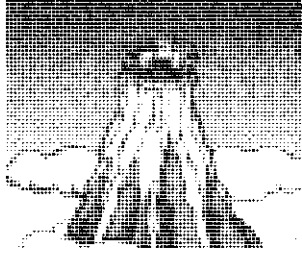
Among the fossilised rituals a Nepali Bahun (hill Brahmin) still has to engage in is the annual *shraddha* ceremony, a type of ancestor worship meant to cement hierarchic patrilineage and assigned roles in society. (This is the antipode of the Sherpa practice of not mentioning the name of the dead, which allows the living to be more egalitarian and unburdened with their past.) One of the lifetime requirements—like a Haj to Mecca—is that this ceremony be done in Gaya in Bihar and Hardwar in the UP hills. Since Nepal has no dearth of holy places, this fossilised tradition does not make much sense until one visits Nalanda and Rajgir and engages in a bit of historical speculation.

Since this ancient seat of learning produced many Buddhist scholars as well as those of the Mithila and Bengal Tantric schools before being pillaged in the 12th century, its influence on everyday life of eastern South Asia must have been significant. There is a saying reverentially accepted by the faithful that "giving *daan* (gifts) to Brahmins ensures the *samrakshyan* (protection) of Dharma"—translated today as bribed booking of prime seats in afterlife.

Given that Tantric Hinduism enjoys predominance in the hills of Nepal, could it be that the tradition of the Gaya shraddha is the antiquated remains of the practice of endowing Nalanda University with trust funds and its learned professors research grants in the names of the dear departed? Are the Nepali Bahuns merely upholding the vestiges of a glorious tradition of learning that swept the continent north and south of the Himalaya? If a South Asian renaissance is to occur, it may be necessary to pick through these dead imprints to find the few living cells of hope and clone them back to contemporary everyday life.

Ecumenical homecoming

It is difficult to think that such a vibrant and outward-looking intellectual life ever existed in what is now the territory of present-day Bihar or the eastern fringes of Afghanistan. With TV images of hijacked Indian Airlines IC 814, Kandahar today symbolises not Gandhara art but the bestial banality of evil, and Bihar no longer means a community of peaceful Buddhist ascetics but the home of political thugs. What has given birth to these low points of civilisation, however, is



the truncated consciousness of nation-centric identity building that tries to jettison from collective memory the historical experiences of the periphery. Kandahar comes out of the insecurity of Kashmir, and Laloo Prasad Yadav's kleptocracy is merely an art perfected through half a century of water resource contracts.

But even in these dens of iniquity, precocious flowering of global culture did occur, as also in other parts of South Asia. Those efforts continue to guide the beliefs and practices of South Asians today. The legend surrounding a gurdwara in northwest Kathmandu has it that Nanak himself practised austerities there. From Kshir Bhawani in Kashmir through the Shakti Peeths of Nepal to Kamakshya of Assam, millions of faithful believe that the relics of Sati Devi have been strewn across the Himalaya to provide it a legendary unity. The eastern Nepal Tarai and north Bihar are united in the Mithila *parikrama* of sacred spots that link the life of Sita and Ram.

The same applies to Buddhist places of pilgrimage, from the Indo-Gangetic plains north to Mongolia and south to the hazy history of Buddhism in the Maldives. The tales of Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura and Kandyan kingdoms, with dynasties and queens imported from the heartland of Buddhism between today's Andhra Pradesh and Bangladesh, invoke a sense of history that embraces much more than the ideologies of today's belligerents of Serendib.

Similar intermeshing threads between Hinduism and Islam could probably also be found in the lives of Chisti saints. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa had a Sufi guru and another Sufi mystic, Sai Baba of Shirdi, has so many Hindu followers today that his Islamic heritage is almost forgotten. Legends like these that abound and tie us need to be re-visited in the process of forging a larger identity.

If a South Asian personality is to be built, it has to be true to our historical heritage that is ecumenical rather than fractiously selective of only certain historical timeframes that further the interests of the ruling powers of the day. Any South Asian must be able to stand at the ruins of Taxila or Nalanda, the exquisite carvings of Ajanta, Kathmandu or Anuradhapura, or the forts of Lahore and Agra and say, "I too am part of this".

Swami Vivekananda, another globalising intellectual phenomenon of recent South Asian past, had said that what modern South Asia needs is a Vedantic mind in an Islamic body. He might have added: a Vedantic mind with a Buddhist heart in an Islamic body that is truly ecumenical. Of course, he did not say "South Asia", textual purists will claim. He said "India". But he said "India" when he meant South Asia because South Asia existed even then, when neither India nor Pakistan nor Bangladesh of today existed.

Herein lies the kernel of the problem of South Asianhood. The last ecumenical sovereigns of these lands were the Akbari Moghuls, but their rule took a wrong, regressive turn in history with the beheading of the syncretist crown prince Dara Sukhoh by his narrowly orthodox brother Aurangzeb. The failures of the Moghuls in subsequently uniting their people contributed to the successes of British rule that was ecumenical only for the practicality of housekeeping since the Europeans decided only to strike commercial, not real, roots. While departing these shores, the British left the basic civilisational problems of South Asia exactly where they had been during the fratricidal battles among the sons of Shahjahan—in a state of destructive identity wars rather than of constructive engagement.

Nation-centric insecurity

South Asian identity cannot be conceived without acknowledging its rich regional histories that cannot be contained within any of the current national boundaries. If this is an obvious problem for the Other Six of South Asia's seven SAARC members, in reality it is a bigger problem for the Indians. This is because the vivisected successor state to the Raj inherits the name but not the spirit of the Raj's commercial administrative order that has been unravelling with the likes of Lalooism over the last half a century.

Phrases like "Indian Subcontinent" or the "Indian Ocean" imply an ownership without the legitimacy and a vestige of power without the potency. They give an illusion of the whole while leading towards a shrinking of perspectives. Nothing epitomises this contradiction better than the erroneous platitude one hears during state functions, that "Nepal-India relations are age-old". Nepal-India relations are only half a century old, and a very troubled half a century at that. Before that it was Nepal-Britain relations, before that

Nepal-Moghul/Nawab relations, and before that neither Nepal nor India existed. What is age-old are people-to-people relations all over South Asia, which probably go back to the time of Ramapithecus, and to confuse that with state-to-state relations is an exercise in diplomatic deception that avoids a hard look at real problems.

The last half-century of history has left South Asia with centres nurtured on the milk of colonial insecurity, and peripheries that are always angry over where they find themselves. This is as true of Kathmandu and the rest of Nepal as it is with Dhaka and Chittagong, Colombo and Jaffna, Islamabad and Sindh as well as Delhi and south or east India. While democracy has vented some of this pent-up anger, even within the longer timeframe of Indian democracy, there has been a steady strangling of cultural creativity and South Asia-wide engagement in other metropolises due to the proximity of power enjoyed by those in Delhi.

It is not uncommon to hear writers and artists in Madras or Calcutta complain of the patronising offers to move to Delhi (and not waste their time in the fringes) since they are so good. Come to Delhi, they are told, which is where all the GO or NGO fundings are. Perhaps the rise of regional and coalition politics in India will give more space to the Indian periphery, and these in turn will find more fulfillment in creative engagement with the region's Other Six that may expand the historical consciousness of South Asia as a whole.

Even the problem of getting genuine secularism—essentially taking off from the point where Dara Sukhoh left—lies in embracing the ecumenism of South Asianhood that is built on crazy-quilt patches, each steeped in history. The current nation-state approach to identity also means an introverted polity that clips history to suit shrinking nationalism while ignoring other ethno-linguistic and religious tapestries. The average Bihari peasant does not feel South Asian simply because he has not even had a chance to feel properly Indian. Ditto for highland Dolpopas and Tarai dwellers in Nepal, Ahmediyas and Baltis in Pakistan, Tamils and Muslims in Sri Lanka, Lhotshampas and Sarchops in Bhutan or the Chakmas and Hindus in Bangladesh. Many in today's South Asian peripheries may find South Asianhood more enriching and liberating than the uncaring nationalistic straitjackets they are strapped into.

Much of the centrifugal polity in South Asian states plays out within the Westminster model of democracy where the legislature gives birth to the executive and thus degrades its own role as social auditor or watchdog. The French, Swiss or the Americans have cleaner separations between the two, but in South Asia the legislature becomes a poor cousin to the executive and fails to prevent an erosion of the sense of justice and fairness in society. This imbalance results in political competition not for legislating good governance but in exercising executive power so as to be able to afford the race the next time around. The parliaments of horse-trading "aya Rams and gaya Rams" just have not become that watchdog institution of larger values, broader vision and sagacious guidance.

SAARC is the "region-building" official project of the governments of South Asia that is now a troubled teenager. As with all adolescents, the energy till this point has been spent in feeding the body and ensuring the physical growth of its various limbs, mostly official. That done, from now on, more effort will have to be directed towards the development of its social and intellectual skills, the most important of which is the question of a common identity. This can only come about with a common sense of history and geo-climatic ecology that guide common activities, not so much of governments but of the people with their values and creativity.

Will there be joint investments and trade across the borders that innovate with efficiency? Will civil society leap across administrative and political walls to lend a hand to the oppressed on the other side? Will civil servants compete for integrity and politicians for role-model sagacity and fairness? Will intellectuals see themselves as inheritors of a long South Asian tradition, and not be bound by political boundaries? Will the current crop of South Asian leaders allow those who have begun to sense a common geography and a common historical identity the space to intermingle and work across borders as true internationalists? Will they be brave and statesmen-like enough to do so? Or will they buy time with inane gestures to placate truncated identities, petty point-scoring to export their nation-centric insecurities, and the rigmarole of escapist rituals to satisfy smug mediocrity? ▲

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Just a just *South Asia*

For reasons that are quite obscure, chronological turning points, no matter how arbitrary, mobilise and channel human aspirations. The special feature of this particular millennial moment is globalisation, an extremely powerful global trend that is both a unifying and a fragmenting force. It is a force whose claims of ever-expanding human prosperity are countered by the experience of disintegration, violence, overpowering of local realities, and diminution of the scope of human freedoms.

In human society, the glue for sustained cooperation and integration is provided by the ideal of justice. Unfortunately, this is an ideal that has been wrung out of the political society over the last century, leaving cynicism, violence and corruption in its wake. The central organising ideologies of the region during this period—sequentially, colonialism, development and globalisation—have been based on the justification of injustice. They have inevitably produced fragmentation and exclusion, not cooperation and harmony.

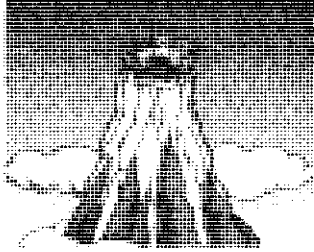
The alternative loci for the invocation of justice, meanwhile, have moved out of the mainstream political arena into such movements as environmental conservation, poverty eradication and human rights. These movements therefore offer some fundamental insights into the possibility of regional cooperation in South Asia.

Systematic injustice

South Asia is a unique region—the oldest of the world's major religious groups, Hinduism, and the youngest, Islam, met here. And indeed, the encounter of these two with an even younger religion that dares not call itself a religion yet: modernity. This is a region where the cultural synthesis of such an encounter is dominated by intense and irreconcilable fragmentation. Instead of harmony and synthesis between these overlapping sources of cultural identity, the experience is one of division between warring camps that base their self-definition on the explicit denial of at least one dime-nsion of this encounter.

The desire of the Pakistani state to deny the Hindu elements of its past is fairly well known and well-recognised, as is the ideology of the current Indian state and state-supported historiography to deny the Islamic elements of its past. Equally well known, though less often criticised, is the shared desire to place the period of colonial rule outside of history, indeed to treat it as pathology.

As a result of this intolerance, South Asia has become a region of stunning contrasts. It proclaims itself as the cradle of non-violence, yet is one of the most violent places. It takes pride in being a home to diverse cultures, religions and beliefs, yet is one of the most intolerant places. It is one of the oldest civilisations on the planet, yet increasingly uncivilised in its norms, behaviour and practices. Its culture has long been an articulate exponent of justice and fair play, and yet its society has become one of the most systematically unjust in the world. Given that the encounter with modernity came directly through colonialism, it acquired all the trappings of colonial rule,



Hope for regional cooperation springs not from the state but from the independent non-governmental sector, which seeks to protect the weak from the strong all over. What is required, above all, is a commitment to justice.

by Tariq Banuri

namely, to use Ranajit Guha's felicitous phrase: a political system based on dominance without hegemony.

Today, the ideals of justice and fair play serve to obscure and mask extreme and systematic injustice and repression. As in the colonial period, democracy has become a means of neutralising and bypassing the electorate rather than enabling it to participate effectively in collective decisions. Development provides the justification for a dual society in which extreme poverty is tolerated alongside an affluent and self-satisfied elite. Development, indeed, is the continuation of colonialism by other means. And globalisation, in the most recent phase of social experience, is the continuation of development by other means.

Colonialism, development and globalisation provide an ideology to create a self-justification among the elite for championing a process of change that sustained and exacerbated inequality, disenfranchised and expropriated local communities of their rights and assets, and helped create a centralised, corrupt, and alienated political system.

Vision-setting

South Asia has experienced 100 years of

Good news! The UN is convening another high level conference on the problem of malnutrition in South Asia

injustice. For a century, its political system responded to anxieties of the vulnerable groups with disdain, impatience, and outright repression—Muslims in pre-independence India, Bengalis in pre-1971 Pakistan, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Sikhs in the 1970s and 1980s, tribal populations always and everywhere, the list is endless. This systematisation of injustice has produced a diverse set of pathologies in the entire region—widespread and massive corruption everywhere, criminalisation of politics in Pakistan, capture of the state by intolerant, fundamentalist groups in India, polarisation and stalemate in Bangladesh, and endemic civil war in Sri Lanka. The result is a deep-rooted and growing lack of trust between the state and the citizen, between states, and between individuals.

As the world enters the phase of globalisation, South Asia is embarked on an accelerating trajectory of fragmentation that continues the patterns established before Independence. This fragmentation is the inevitable consequence of a political system rooted in injustice. During that earlier period, the ideal of justice was externally infused into the system, upheld and protected only by the strength of will of a few individuals—Gandhi, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali and Nehru. With the passing of these individuals, the ideals also disappeared from the political arena. Individuals with such ideals have almost completely abandoned the political space today, leaving it in the hands of instrumental mafias. The result is a growing alienation of the state even from a minimal commitment to justice.

Fortunately, another public space has emerged for the exercise of vision-making and ideal-setting, a space still inhabited by individuals with a fundamental commitment to justice. This is the public space commonly referred to as the 'independent sector', or non-governmental organisations. It includes activism on environmental rights, human rights, minority and women's rights, rights of the poor and the vulnerable, and the rights of the weak against the strong. This public space has also replaced academia as the font of knowledge. It has given rise to the class of the activist- academic, whom I call the A-team: Ashis Nandy, Asma Jahangir, Arif Hassan, Aly Ercelawn, Aban Kabraji, Anil Agarwal, Ashok Khosla, Atiq Rahman, F.H. Abed. And it has many individuals whose names do not begin with the first letter of the alphabet: Shoaib Sultan Khan, Zia Mian, Dipak Gyawali, Ponna Wignaraja, Praful Bidwai, Smitu Kothari, Vandana Shiva, Rehman Sobhan, Ramachandra Guha, Muhammad Yunus and many others.

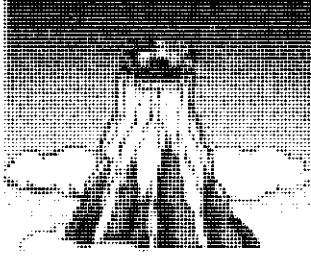
This is a distinct development in South Asian culture over the last half century, and should be noted with approval and hope. Not surprisingly, these individuals have been able to collaborate and cooperate on a large range of actions. For example, through the Ring of Sustainable Development Institutes, the IUCN membership and other networks, the poverty eradication and sustainable livelihoods networks, and research on women's rights; global advocacy on climate change, trade liberalisation, TRIPS, poverty eradication, and biodiversity; regional and national advocacy on women's rights, anti-nuclear concerns, and human rights. They have organised conferences, meetings, and workshops, including the first major India-Pakistan conference in 1989, the South Asia NGO summits, and the people's summits.

The fundamental link that binds together these seemingly disparate actions and diverse individuals is their common commitment to justice and to the protection of the rights of the weak against the strong. Such cooperation has also helped in other ways, even in the inter-governmental system. The best example is the formulation of the South Asian Biodiversity Action Plan, the only one of its kind in the region, and the report of the Poverty Commission.

Three planks

The nature of environmental action in the region is championed in virtually every country by the independent sector, and is indeed a plank in the broader struggle for justice. Broadly speaking, such action has taken three forms. The most common is the integration of environmental and poverty-related concerns. This is evident in the work of several community support organisations, which have increasingly incorporated natural resource conservation into their work with poor communities. Given that the poor rely almost exclusively on the biomass economy, the sustainability of their livelihoods depends critically on the conservation of biological diversity and natural resources.

A second plank of environmental action is what may be called the 'quality-of-life agenda'. While this is equally relevant to



urban and rural areas, it has expressed itself most forcefully in the former. It involves improvements in water supply, sewage disposal, and other forms of environmental health, with the aim of increasing life expectancy and reducing infant and maternal mortality. Even though this has been an explicit goal of social policy, progress has been quite slow. Increasingly, the independent sector has begun to get involved in this area, especially in seeking to bring the informal sector into a better partnership with the municipal agencies, and to advocate and lead programmes of community health and health education.

The third plank is aimed mainly at the large-scale industrial (and energy) sector. It involves pollution abatement and waste minimisation in industry. In South Asia, it has relied more than in other countries on cooperative and partnership programmes established with the active partnership, and often the leadership, of the independent sector.

Environmental programmes in the field are linked to other social agendas, and are not stand-alones. Even programmes of afforestation and protected area management have significant components of social mobilisation and institution of participatory practice—for example, through social forestry programmes. These programmes generally involve a considerable degree of partnership and collaboration between sectors that do not have a strong history of collaboration: in particular the independent sector, the private sector and the government.

The programmes have more than the minimal degree of transparency and participation. They have pioneered public hearings, participatory planning (e.g. on the Bangladesh Flood Control Plan), roundtables, consultative drafting of legislation and policy recommendations and others. They have involved considerable learning and exchange of ideas across geographical borders.

Environmental action in South Asia has become the arena for principled politics, politics that is driven by the desire for justice, as opposed to the more instrumental variety that prevails in the mainstream political arena. It has pioneered instruments of cooperation and participation across various domains of life and across frontiers. Environmental action has established formal and informal structures of cooperation that can provide a model for other areas of collaboration in the region.

There is much that the advocates of regional cooperation can learn from the environmental movement in South Asia. This includes the experience of cooperative work by individuals and institutions both within and between countries, the formal and informal structures established to enhance such cooperation, and the partnership between the state and civil society and between the elite and the poor.

Underlying all this, and the factor without which none of this collaboration would have been possible, is the fundamental commitment to justice and to the protection of the weak against the strong. Unless such commitment is brought back into the mainstream political arena, regional cooperation on a broader scale will remain impossible. Indeed, without such a commitment, it would be impossible to stem the current trends towards polarisation and fragmentation within and between countries of South Asia.

Were such a commitment to become manifest in the larger political domain, it can be provided the basis for cooperation and collaboration on a regional scale. This is an essential condition as well for carrying the environmental agenda into the next phase, where mutual learning, common advocacy on global issues, collaborative programmes, shared goals, and wide-ranging collaboration becomes possible. Indeed, environmental conservation and regional cooperation are not two distinct agendas. They are one, and behind it lies the need to make a civilisation committed to justice. ▲

Businessmen *without* borders

Whatever sensible economic activity you can think of, an activity that adds to the wealth of the country, there is a government rule that stifles or constrains it.

by Bibek Debroy

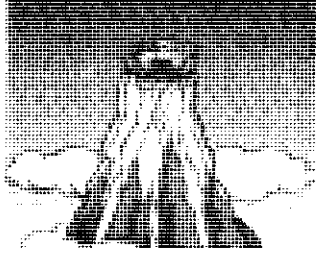
It is difficult to get any data on intra-SAARC trade flows after 1996. But from what is available we know that the share of intra-SAARC exports in total SAARC exports in 1996 was 4.25 percent, up from 3.16 percent in 1990. Similarly, intra-SAARC imports as a share of total SAARC imports was 4.06 percent in 1996, up from 1.91 percent in 1990. Our vision is to step up the share of intra-SAARC trade to 10 percent of the total SAARC trade. So, are we going to have a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 2001?

Compare the share of intra-SAARC exports in total exports from the SAARC region with figures from other free trade regimes. When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was formalised, 70 percent of Canada's trade already took place with the United States. Ditto for Mexico. Much the same is true of the European Union (EU) and the AFTA (Asean Free Trade Area). But in the case of SAARC, over a period of six years from 1990 to 1996, when all this intensive government-level activity on SAPTA was going on, this share increased by one percentage point. That amounts to 0.2 percent a year. If this figure is to touch 10 percent, it will take us 50 years at this rate. And if this figure is to reach 70 percent, it will take us 350 years. Yet, we satisfy a critical criterion for the "success" of such arrangements by geographical contiguity and in the name of "regionalism". Unfortunately, there seems to be nothing else.

A South Asian regional study on trade, manufactures and services (TMS) completed in 1991 was supposed to be the first step towards trade and economic cooperation, highlighting the wonderful potentials for trade. The Colombo SAARC Summit in 1991 sanctioned the idea of trade liberalisation and in Dhaka in 1993, we had the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA). Three rounds of trade negotiations have been held under SAPTA (with a fourth in progress) and we may even have SAFTA.

Since 1991, there have been several seminars on the promise of intra-SAARC trade. There have been numerous papers and even books identifying commodities that South Asian countries can import from within the region rather than from outside. Since imports from within the region are ostensibly cheaper, there can even be a saving of foreign exchange, although there are some doubts about whether there will be real savings.

It does not make sense to compare the prices of railway construction materials imported from outside with the prices of railway construction materials imported from within SAARC. Comparisons must be with comparables. Since trade data follows a digitary classification, the more disaggregated the digitary classification, the more the commodity is described in detail. For example, at gross levels of classification, I may be talking about edible oils. But in finer digitary classification, I may be talking about groundnut, coconut or mustard oil. Because of data limitations, these exercises are typically done at the 3-digit or 4-digit level, such as first foodstuff, then processed food, then edible oils, then others. For items like rail-



way construction materials, oilseeds, crude fertilisers and rubber tyres, prices do not mean anything. After all, there are differentiated products, and there is a phenomenon known as branding, even for agro products.

Fifteen years ago, how many of us would have expected salt or wheat flour to be branded? So some of these academic exercises are meaningless. They are good for churning out PhD theses and publishing papers. They don't determine whether the share of intra-SAARC trade in total SAARC trade will go up to 10 percent.

Banning barriers

Something like SAPTA or SAFTA is referred to as a trade bloc or a regional trading arrangement. Conceptually, these can be of four types. First, a free trade area, which eliminates trade barriers among members of the bloc, but does not adopt a common commercial policy vis-a-vis non-members. Second, a customs union, which goes beyond a free trade area in the sense that it also adopts a common commercial policy vis-a-vis non-members. Third, a common market, which removes barriers to cross-border movements of factors of production (labour and capital). Fourth, an economic union, which goes beyond a common market by coordinating and unifying macroeconomic policies (tax, interest and exchange rates) among members.

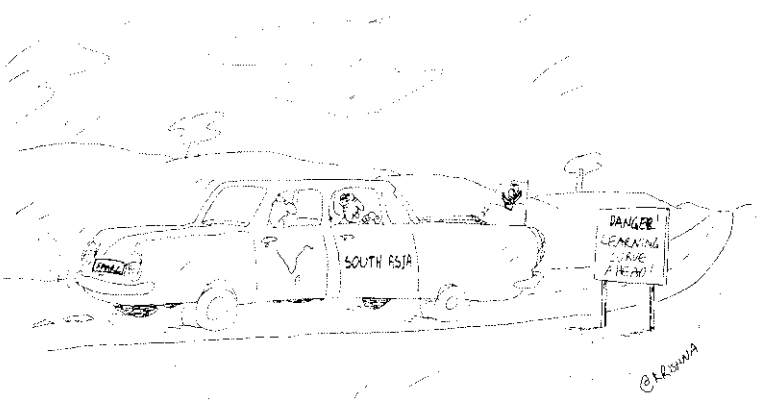
Free trade areas and customs unions have been around for a long time, much before GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) was set up in 1947. But they reflect a mindset that, I believe, has become outdated, independent of the argument that South Asian nations have inherently complementary economies and therefore, the prospects for trade expansion among these countries is limited.

Trade theory is about comparative costs. England will export cloth and import wine. Portugal will export wine and import cloth. India has relatively more of labour and relatively less of capital, as compared to the United States. Therefore, India will export relatively labour-intensive commodities to the United States (gems and jewellery, marine products) and import relatively capital intensive commodities from the United States (project goods, machinery and equipment). This simplistic notion of comparative advantage fails to appreciate the explosion in cross-border capital flows since the 1970s.

Take global trade flows today. Two-thirds of trade flows are intra-industry flows. If you leave out monoculture economies you will find the same country exporting and importing steel. You will find the same country exporting and importing cars or rice. India can export Darjeeling tea and import tea from Sri Lanka or Kenya. India can export basmati rice and import rice from Thailand. What is more, a large chunk of trade flows is in the form of intra-firm flows—trade flows between a parent company located in one country and a subsidiary located in another.

In the altered global environment, you can't boost trade without increasing and encouraging crossborder investments. If we are serious about doing something within the SAARC region, let us forget free trade areas and customs unions and head straight into a common market. Remember, this means eliminating barriers to cross-border movements of factors of production. Economists typically classify factors of production into four categories: land, labour, capital and entrepreneurship. Under normal circumstances, land does not move across borders. Labour and capital do. Entrepreneurship is probably the factor of production economists understand the least and have not paid much attention to.

However, entrepreneurship moves with labour and/or capital and we must target their free movement. In most countries within the SAARC region, there has been some unilateral liberalisation since the 1980s. (Sri Lanka started liberalisation in the mid-1970s.) In halting steps, these have involved liberalisation of cross-border capital movements, despite apprehensions and faulty understanding of what happened in South East Asia. These movements will con-



tinue. Five of the SAARC countries are members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Nepal will soon become one. Once the trade-related investment measures (TRIMs) agreement of the WTO is broadened, these countries will be forced to liberalise crossborder capital movements by the scruffs of their necks.

We don't need to do anything special for capital. Cross-border movements will be liberalised for all WTO members and thus automatically, for SAARC members. Cross-border movements of labour is a different matter—it will not happen automatically unless stimulated by policy action. Within SAARC, if we remove these barriers, you will find that intra-SAARC trade will automatically explode as investments between South Asian countries take off.

Examine the Indian case. We already have free labour movements with Nepal. If we allow it with the other countries, will we have significant labour movements from Bhutan, Maldives, Pakistan or Sri Lanka? Not very likely. We will have some from Bangladesh. But that probably happens in any case, illegally. Let's legalise it. Inevitably, arguments concerning security will be typically advanced by governments.

This argument is nonsensical and governments are part of the problem. Show me one example of a trading bloc that has worked because of government mandates. Economically or commercially, the bloc phenomenon was already happening on the ground. And the governmental announcement merely formalised and sanctioned it.

Less of government

One of the problems with SAFTA is that we have left it to governments to work it out. Will commercial transactions between two corporate entities be postponed because one's CEO has been changed? In a welfare sense, if cross-border movements of labour are allowed, it is perfectly possible that India might not gain much. Welfare gains will generally accrue to relatively smaller countries. In a way, the larger country has to subsidise the process of bloc formation. Despite opposition from domestic labour, the Americans went ahead and did it for NAFTA. If India wants a permanent seat in the Security Council or wants an Indian to be the managing director of the IMF, this is the kind of vision India should have.

Instead, Indians will prefer to haggle with the US about more H1-B visas (for skilled labour), and will be terribly upset if Americans advance a general argument (against H1-B) that unskilled labour movements have a disruptive influence on American society and American culture, whatever American culture might mean. Yet, within India, identical arguments will be forwarded about immigrant labour from Bangladesh. All geographical boundaries of nation states are meaningless from the point of view of resource allocation. We should not allow governments to impose a sanctity to them that is more than that of passports and visas.

Regardless of what is happening in the political domain, there has to be a greater economic area within the Subcontinent. Pakistan will have closer economic ties with North and West India, Sri Lanka and Maldives with South India and Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal with East India. That will automatically happen (if governments allow it) because of commercial principles. But the surest way of ensuring that it doesn't happen is to allow governments to plan for such a development, particularly when this planning is done at the level of national boundaries. For instance, how does Pakistan's economic relationships with Northeast India make any economic sense? Instead, let us remove government intervention and government-induced distortions.

In studies on constraints to intra-SAARC trade, one invariably comes across the phrase non-tariff barriers (NTBs). Scrutinise the details, and one comes across government procedures and red tape erected by petty government functionaries. In India, the British left us a bureaucracy which has been perfected by us over the years. Whatever sensible economic activity you can think of, an activity that adds to the wealth of the country, there is a governmental rule that stifles or constrains it. The information technology (IT) sector in India grew because no government policy determined its growth. (Unfortunately, there is a now a new ministry of information technology.)

The South Asian region is capable of clocking a real GNP (gross national product) growth rate of 7 percent over the next 20 years. Plug in a population growth rate of 2 percent and you have a real per capita GNP growth rate of 5 percent. This growth was never achieved in the last 50 years, and, if accomplished, it can transform the face of South Asia. ▲

SNV/Nepal Vacancy Announcement

nepal

SNV/Nepal, a Dutch non-government development organisation, has been working in Nepal since 1980. SNV/Nepal's programme focuses on local governance and social mobilisation, gender mainstreaming, economic opportunities, natural resources management and the development of a strong and well-organised women's right advocacy movement in Nepal.

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***Requirements*:** Bachelors degree in Social Science or Law or related Rural Development study with gender related specialisation. Masters degree would be an advantage. The above post requires frequent visits into remote programme areas under harsh conditions involving long walking distances.

Application package containing detailed Function Task Description and Salary & Benefit package is available for pick up from **Organisation Development Centre (ODC)** or it could be accessed through our website www.odcentre.org under the category "recruitment". Candidates unable to pick up the package personally or access our website may request for it through e-mail.

Organisation Development Centre (ODC),

GPO 8975 EPC 443, Jhamsikhel, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Phone: (977-1)-524540, Fax: (977-1)-522761, E-mail: odcentre@mos.com.np

Applications are to be sent to the above address along with a cover letter with your latest curriculum vitae. Your day-time contact number and the names of two referees along with their contact address/telephone numbers are essential for processing your applications. Applications will be accepted till 5:00 PM on Monday, February 7, 2000. Only short listed candidates will be notified.

SNV/Nepal has women friendly terms of employment. Appointment could commence as early as April 2000.

KIRTINIDHI BISTA COLLECTION

A new royal role

King Birendra of Nepal, who just turned 55, should be more actively involved in the development concerns of his long-suffering subjects. His constitutional position would allow such a role.

by ***Kanak Mani Dixit***

During Nepal's successful People's Movement of 1990 against the absolutist Panchayat system headed by the king, there were many who warned that a weakening monarchy could lead to the withering away of the Nepali nation-state itself. After all, the king was supposed to be the symbol of unity in a multi-ethno-linguistic country, the only glue binding a disparate population together.

Ten years down the road, that sentiment still prevails in some sections of Nepali society. But it has become clear that the monarchy is not indispensable for the survival of the Nepali nation. There are other elements in this decidedly fractured land that make these mountains and plains together a 'country'. Unlike many other nation states of the developing world and of South Asia, Nepal is a historically evolved entity and not one created by the departing colonist's drafting pen. Nepali kings played decisive roles in this evolution of Nepali history, and till recently it was considered axiomatic that Nepal without a king was unthinkable. We now know that it is not.

But it is important to add immediately that having a monarch is a boon for Nepal. It can even be a bonanza. Kingships and kings in

modern times can be guides and guardians. They remain above everyday politics, provide continuity and unity and actively take up social and cultural causes. Monarchies, wisely handled by the incumbent, can be a trip-wire for national stability. Few countries in the region have an institution as potentially useful as Nepal's crown.

Although the 1990 movement did not have the abolition of monarchy as its goal, some say Nepal came perilously close to losing its kingship. Indeed, given the fractious nature of Nepal's party-led politics and the rising political aspirations of various ethno-linguistic groups, it should be considered redeeming that the 1990 movement did not sweep away the generally well-regarded institution altogether. A constitutional monarch still has a role, however limited, in a democratic Nepal still fighting and struggling for social and economic progress.

Inactive years

On 29 December 1999, when King Birendra turned 55, he had been on the throne for 28 years. The first 18 years he ruled as an absolute monarch, and following the political change in 1990, he has been meek and 'constitutional'. Because he has remained an avuncular presence who shuns the political arena which he once directed, King Birendra's stock has risen. Without even trying to, the king finds himself commanding respect and genuine fondness from his people. This is partly due to King Birendra's own pleasant demeanour which the public senses (it is never allowed close enough to confirm this, though). The popularity of the king is also due to the inability of bungling political parties to provide good governance, and the public's acceptance of a king matched to the country.

So, in the last 10 years King Birendra has risen in the public's esteem, and he enjoys tremendous goodwill. The only hitch is that this goodwill is not being put to best use in a country which, even by South Asian standards, is at the bottom of the economic heap. Indeed, over the course of the last decade, King Birendra's increasing popularity has remained a latent or static resource. He could, like Thailand's King Bhumibol, become more interested in social, cultural and development efforts and focus national attention on priority areas like education, health, agriculture or tourism. This can be done only at the king's personal interest and initiative. The question is: would he want to do it given that he has not felt the need for the past 10 years?

Indeed, King Birendra has retreated behind the gates of the Narayanhiti Royal Palace, shutting himself off from all activities that could make a positive difference to the lives of Nepalis who are caught in the throes of modernisation and jolted by social and economic upheavals. And yet, the one fear of being criticised for being politically active, has made the king and his advisers averse to venturing into arenas where he may, and should, be active.

No doubt, if King Birendra were to get active in the social and cultural sphere, there would be voices raised from within political parties denouncing him for wanting to dapple in politics against the letter and spirit of the 1990 Constitution. However, such opposition can easily be disregar-ded and will be ineffectual if King Birendra acts with will and worthy motive. If and when he does that, he must be supported by the intelli-gentsia and the press, which must see in a non-political monarch's actions a uniquely Nepali resource.

Good intentions

The pace set by King Mahendra when he introduced the Panchayat system in 1960, had dissipated by the second decade of his son's reign in the 1980s. The economy was stagnant, environmental destruction had accelerated, Kathmandu Valley succumbed to uncontrolled urbanisation, the bureaucracy evolved into a clique of corrupt yes-men, and the educational system from primary schools to the university was a mess. The only area where the government was truly energetic was in moving amongst the donor countries, begging bowl in hand.

King Birendra's 18 years of rule under the Panchayat dispensation were those many years of development neglect. Most importantly, the self-esteem of the Nepali people was slowly sanded down to cynicism and apathy, which afflicts Kathmandu's elite even today. If Nepal lacks brilliance in social, economic or political spheres, it can be attributed to the intellectual stagnation fostered during that period by a regime incapable of looking beyond the security of the crown. King Birendra, who was both the fount and executor of all power in those decisive years, must be considered responsible for the lost decades, and for its legacy today.

If it is true that benevolent dictatorship is possible only with a monarchy (because the king does not have to make compromises to get to 'the top'), then King Birendra certainly had an opportunity to prove it right when he ascended the throne in 1972. He had the perfect tool of a political system in place that concentrated all powers in his hands. And, as importantly, he was someone not inclined to despotism (for it is well known that the Panchayat system may have run an authoritarian state, but it never came close to resembling the notorious police-states of Latin America).

He started out well. In the two decades as an all-powerful king, presiding over an autocratic political system bequeathed him by his father, King Birendra took steps towards reforming the polity and embellishing the system with democratic elements. Neither can King Birendra's personality (affable, by all accounts) nor his commitment to democracy (demonstrated in the manner with which he capitulated to the People's Movement before the country went into a bloody tailspin)

be faulted. Rather, it is lack of dynamism and staying-power, which were the weak elements during the period that King Birendra ruled.

Back then, good intentions were aplenty. As crown prince, the king established an anti-corruption probe body just outside the palace gates. Early on, recognising the importance of education, he tried to steer an innovative course with the New Education System Plan, and also started the much-appreciated National Development Service (NDS), which required all post-graduate students to work for 10 months in the villages as prerequisite for their degrees.

The king also divided the country into five development regions, and 'development' became the 'ideology' of the state. The king's liberal side was seen in 1980, when, following a brief period of student unrest, he declared a plebiscite asking people to choose between the incumbent Panchayat system, albeit 'suitably reformed', and multi-party democracy.

In each of these actions, King Birendra's leadership was marked by an inability to stay the course, a tendency to waver at the insistence of family members and the royal palace secretaries, and tolerating the notoriously opportunistic politicians of the Panchayat system.

Perhaps the most striking retreat was the closure of the NDS programme, which was the king's own creation and the one social project that the Panchayat system may have had to show for itself. Even as it was turning into a success, the 1980 plebiscite was announced. And the NDS was summarily discontinued in what was a well-founded fear that educated young men and women would be campaigning in the villages for democracy.

It is tragically ironic that King Birendra was not able to make an impact on education even though this was where he had shown avowed interest. It is the price of that failure that today the country suffers under the weight of mediocrity in all sectors of national life. (It is a different matter that Nepal's new elected political elite, too, have grievously neglected education.)

As for the delineation of development regions, in the end it never became clear to what end it was done. Towards the end of the Panchayat system, the annual inspection tours by the king of the development regions had degenerated into a well-enacted farce.

New persona

Nepal's political parties after the restoration of democracy may not have been able to inspire confidence in the people, but there is no alternative to the 1990 Constitution. The question of reinstating the king's direct rule does not arise for the simple reason that it was precisely because the unrepresentative Panchayat system was not providing societal advance that the public demanded change 10 years ago.

Fortunately, the king seems committed to go by the book—to reign and not to rule. From what is known, King Birendra temperamentally makes an ideal constitutional monarch. He wishes well for his people, and is not driven to distraction over the loss of his absolute power—a condition which his late father certainly suffered from when he carried out the palace coup of 1960.

However, for the Nepali public to take full advantage of this constitutional monarchy, King Birendra must become more *involved* in the everyday life of the country. If anything, this is required to make up for lost time. The decades of stagnation under Panchayat rule guaranteed today's delays in democracy delivering development.

The role of the king these past 10 years has been confined to ceremonial functions like inaugurating international conferences and broadcasting messages to the nation. Obviously with King Birendra's acquiescence, his palace functionaries work to keep him formal and aloof. The king is not allowed moments for impromptu interchange at public gatherings. At the institutional level, the palace does not seem to be interested in King Birendra being passionate about anything at all.

Keeping the Nepali monarch aloof from the Nepali people is a strategy that harks back to the authoritarian days when the aura of rarefied royalty would get tarnished if the king and queen were allowed to mingle with commoners. The new demands made of the constitutional monarch by the people and their Constitution, which require his activism in the social and economic spheres, require the development of a new persona—one which can inspire at a personal level. Instead, the royal palace secretariat seems to be made of individuals who are unimaginative and who do not take risks. An inactive king who is kept at a distance from the populace is thus robbed of his obvious humanity.

What King Birendra chooses to focus on in a more active role would, obviously, have to be based on his own personal interest. He has before him a country full of challenges, an arena like public health, education, cultural or environmental conservation would not be hard to find. Any such activism by the king would have to be supported by a competently staffed palace secretariat that knows not only how to conduct political intrigue, but to back up what should be the monarch's decidedly non-political agenda.

An active royal interest in these matters would benefit Nepalis, and it would also raise the king's own profile as a constitutional monarch, and set a precedent for the future. The political parties and civil society have to give King Birendra the space for this. But first, he has to want to do it. ▲

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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

John Collee
The London Observer.

Vajra, a serene assembly of brick buildings, grassy courtyards, ivycovered walls and Hindu statuary is a calm oasis over looking, chaotic Kathmandu.

Time.

in Kathmandu, the Vajra

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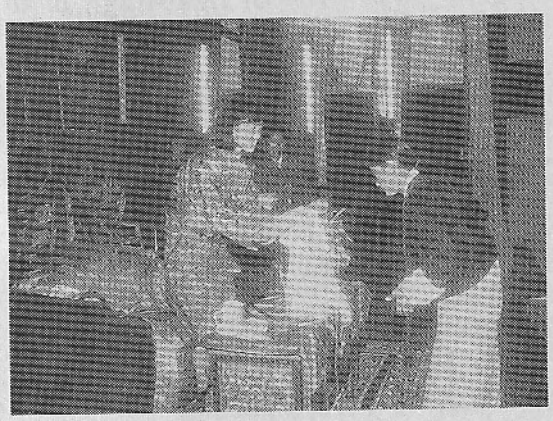


BHUTAN HAS four queens, and it has every right to have four queens. It was only when I read a recent issue of the *Kuensel* that I was alerted to the possibility of **genuine mystification** for the properly unsensitised. For, here is the lead story at the top, which starts off with, "Her Majesty the Queen, Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, became the Honorary President of Sherubtse College". Then, the second story of the week starts off with, "Addressing the 5th International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific as a keynote speaker, Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck made a strong plea to governments, communities and civil society to..." Given thus that there are two other Her Majesties not covered in that particular edition of *Kuensel*, Chhetria Patrakar is merely taking this opportunity to alert South Asia's unknowing and unprepared to the Bhutanese situation. In the meantime, let me also share what I have heard from the ASEAN grapevine, that Her Majesty Ashi Sangay Choden wowed all those gathered at the Kuala Lumpur AIDS conference in late October, including Dr. Mahathir, with her graciousness and eloquence. Great going, queen!

■

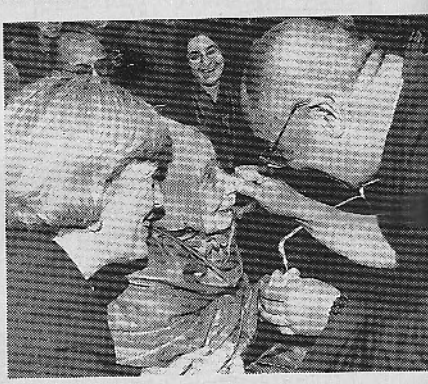
DILIP D'SOUZA is unhappy with *Time* magazine, he writes in from "Bombay" (*Time*'s spelling, not mine). They have done an India Executive Search and come up with his name as a plausible candidate to join the magazine's "global network of **professional subscribers**". What does D'Souza get in the bargain? As free gifts, a photo frame and a clock set, "uglier pieces of home décor (than) which would be hard to imagine". He is also properly miffed that *Time* thinks it can get away with promising him "free home delivery" for having subscribed.

■

I HAVE not see a film by Tanuja Chandra, one of the youngest Hindi film directors around (*Dushman* and *Sangharsh*). In an article in *Graphiti*, the magazine supplement of the Calcutta *Telegraph*, Ms Chandra gives me one quote which makes me a fan of hers for life, for here is an Indian who inadvertently reveals that she has not been bought over by the **Kargil hoopla** created by vacuous (mostly Delhi-based) media. She has apparently been prowling the lower stalls in the movie theatres to see what it is that the "masses" desire on the celluloid screen, what touches them and what does not. So, when the studiously- and the intellectually-oriented criticise the surfeit of blood, gore and violence on screen, and when the Dress Circle "yelps", as the *Graphiti* writer puts it, this is how the young filmmaker responds: "These are the same lot of people who screamed kill-kill-kill at Kargil but are taken aback with violence on screen." Hats off to you, Tanuja, for saying so much with that one-liner!

■

ONLY THE Grand Lama (check Jamyang Norbu's recent book on Sherlock Holmes before you accuse me of wrong address) is allowed to tweak an 89-year-old's nose and get away with it. That is what His Holiness **Tenzing Gyatso** did on 19 November when he affectionately greeted Elizabeth Brunner, a Hungarian-born painter who was receiving the Katha Chudamani Award. Once again, this one personal and expressive gesture indicates why the Grand Lama is really grand—it is his humanity, and a proper understanding of the real and the unreal. True karunamaya, is he.



■

CAN'T SAY that the country which 'sabotaged' the SAARC summit is helping regional matters any by maintaining a studied silence on the matter of Bangladesh's former foreign secretary Farouk Sobhan's bid to become the secretary-general of the Commonwealth. Sobhan's competition is New Zealand's former foreign minister Donald McKinnon, and India's support would be critical for the race. So why would India cold-shoulder Sobhan? Has the suave and well-connected Bangladeshi, always pleasant to those who matter, inadvertently stepped on Indian toes somewhere along the line as foreign secretary, before that as Dhaka's high commissioner to New Delhi, and before that as Dhaka's permanent representative to the United Nations

in New York? Can't think of any reason why India would not want to push for an amenable South Asian to the post, particularly with the South Asian ranks at the roundtable being severely depleted with the ouster of post-coup Pakistan. In these **matters diplomatique**, as often happens, it will be probably some long-forgotten personal slight which rears its ugly head to ruin the chances of the worthy. Perhaps Sobhan had actually accidentally stepped on Brajesh Mishra's toes, when the present Superboss of South Block was a UN functionary?

■

THE UNITED Nations can also be a source of **good news**, for here I have an *Asian Age* item which reports that the International Cricket Council and the United Nations want to bring players from India and Pakistan together in one team. The idea is also being pushed by author Sashi Tharoor, who is UN SG Kofi Annan's "director of communications and special projects". This would be a special project all right!

■

THE END of the world and Armageddon—not the overmuch touted millennium—is near when even magicians seek "**official funding**". The All India Magic Academy maintains that, among other things, the heavy equipment that magicians need to ply their trade with would be easier to transport if the government gave them railway luggage concessions, and also if subsidised halls were provided for shows. A two-day national meet of Magicians in Panaji, Goa, bemoaned this lack of funding support.

■

IF YOU missed the two-inch item in *The Bangladesh Observer*, the flag-carrier of the selfsame country, **Bangla Biman**, is being privatised. Its Managing Director Rafiqul Islam said as much at the Chartered Institute of Transport in Dhaka. Why? "For improved service and more profit." This would be the second such act, after Air Lanka (sadly now converted to Sri Lankan, for I liked the earlier moniker). Now, shall we wait for Indian Airlines, Pakistan International, Druk Air, Air Maldives, Air India, and Royal Nepal, to follow suit, so that there will be improved services and more profits all around?

■

KADER SIDDIQUI, known popularly as "Tiger Siddiqui" in his native Tangail constituency was an angry man as he went in for a by-election in Tangail-8 for the Jatiya Sangsad. He coveted the *gamchha* election symbol, that multi-use strip of cloth which hangs from many a shoulder in the Indo-Ganga-Brahmaputra plain. But he did not get the gamchha symbol, and instead was assigned the *piri*, or wooden stool. As a result, at last reading, Tiger was livid with the Returning Officer. Reports *The Bangladesh Observer:* "I would go for next step if I am denied my **desired symbol**, he warned. However, he did not disclose what step he would take."

■

NEPAL HAS just completed Visit Nepal Year 1998. Now the Assistant Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Narayan Singh Pun, has announced that the government will celebrate 2002 as Destination Nepal Year. The minister announced that the plan was to attract one million tourists to Nepal in that year, though he conceded that Nepal receives less than half that number. According to *The Kathmandu Post*, the minister said that "correspondence regarding the event would be completed by the year 2000 so that global visitors could manage their time to visit Nepal during **DNY 2002**." Oh well.

■

THE NIGHTMARE of film festival organisers is when the audience does not turn up, and invitee directors end up being the only audiences for their productions. This is what happened recently at the Colombo SAARC Film Festival, and more recently, according to *The Hindu*, at the International **Children's Film Festival** in Hyderabad. Apparently, some 30 children's films of fine quality had been gathered, but then the Children's Film Society was not able to bring an audience. It cannot be, just cannot be, that children would not be interested, so why was this festival devoid of the target audience? As often happens with good ideas badly executed, obviously, the fault lies with the organisers alone. What a waste!

■

THREE CHEERS for **Chandrika Kumaratunga**, president of Sri Lanka, for not only surviving an assassination bid, but also for handing over SLR 2.5 million worth of gifts which she received during state visits abroad to the national treasury. The president said that it was her duty to hand over those gifts, which she had received on behalf of "the Nation". The items thus depos-

ited include a gem-studded gold ring (Rs 26,250), a pendant and a gold chain (Rs 27,100), a diamond-studded ring (Rs 21,500), a gem-studded pair of earrings (Rs 10,750), a gem-studded sari clip (Rs 23,500), a pearl-studded necklace (Rs 120,000) and a Piaget ladies wristwatch (Rs 2 million). Lest you doubt the valuation, it was done by the Gem and Jewellery Authority of Sri Lanka.

–Chhetria Patrakar

The don of Khulna

The surrender of a professional murderer is bad news for several Bangladeshi police officers and politicians.

by ***Afsan Chowdhury***

He has possibly killed more people than any other professional criminal in Bangladesh. Before he surrendered in August 1999, Ershad Shikder is said to have done away with around 50 people during his 15-year career in crime. Those murders came while he practically ran Bangladesh's second largest port-town, Khulna, operating everything from ice factories to fishing trawlers, flesh trade to drugs, all the while extorting money from the town's businessmen as protection fees.

For the cops, the arrest of Shikder was the easy part, slapping charges not so. The fact that Shikder had been a member of all political parties that ruled Bangladesh, complicated matters more. Worse, his friends in the police department were so many that over two dozen police officers went into hiding following his arrest.

Buy or bump

Shikder was born into crime. His father died in prison and grandfather spent time in jail as a robber. His own initiation into crime began 15 years ago when he came to work as a day labourer at the docks, where he soon formed the "Ershad Bahini", a ruthless gang of hired hands that excelled in murder and extortion.

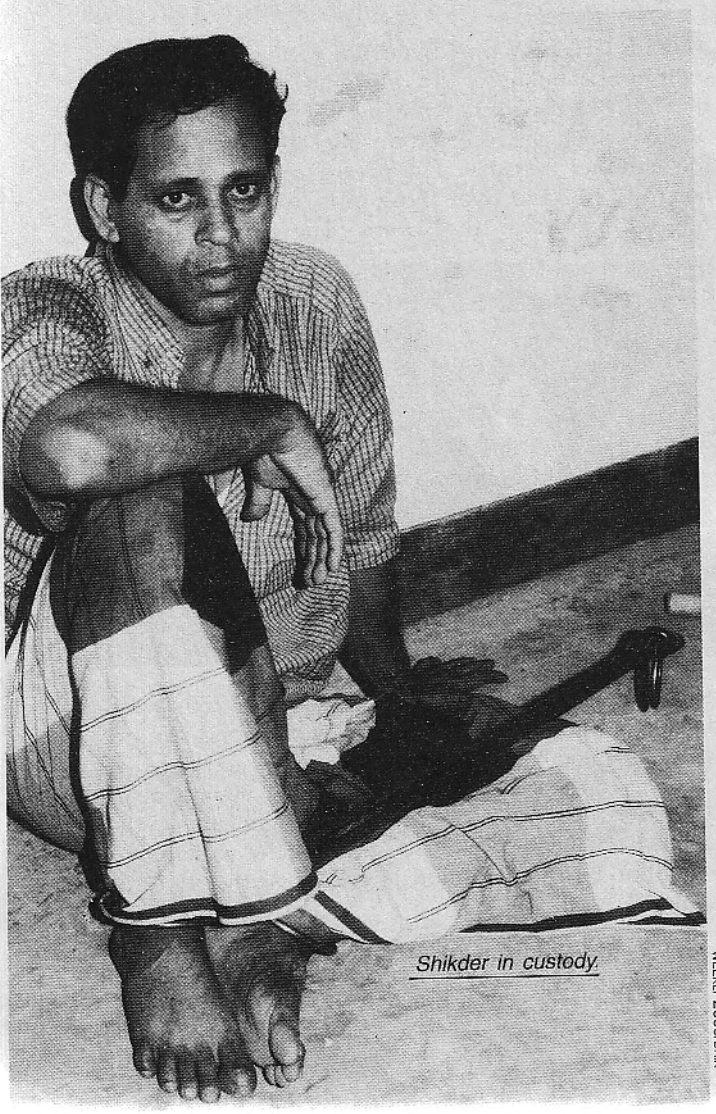
Shikder's motto was brutally simple: buy off people, and if they refused, bump them off. And as his reputation grew, he caught the attention of political quarters. It was former president Gen H.M. Ershad who gave Shikder his break into politics by bringing him into the newly formed Jatiyo Party, catapulting the common criminal into the world of big access and big money.

Shikder soon proved his mettle in the big league too by grabbing acres of railway land, on which was built two multi-storeyed markets, named after the children of Gen Ershad—Shaad and Moni (they have since been demolished as illegal constructions). This was sleaze at full speed, but the general seemed to have had no problem with it. This connection of Shikder's also sent out a message to all concerned. He had become 'untouchable'; the police his friend.

After Ershad's fall, he lay low for a while, and emerged later to join the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), which had come to power. And when the Awami League won the elections in 1996, he promptly entered the ruling party.

Ruthless

It may never be known how many



Shikder in custody.

WEEKLY 2000/DRIK

people Shikder actually killed, for he was careful not to leave behind any trail. He is reported to have finished off many of his close aides who would have been witness to most of the murders. His ruthlessness is perhaps best exemplified in the murder of his nephew Jehangir, one of his close lieutenants. Having heard that Jehangir had been boasting that his uncle was worth at least BDT 1 billion (USD 20 million dollars), Shikder realised he was not reliable. It is said that Jehangir was asked to withdraw almost a billion taka from the bank, and when he reached Shikder with the money, his uncle killed him.

It was then let out that Jehangir had slipped away with a huge amount of money to India, and Shikder pretended to be the gracious uncle, who had forgiven an errant nephew who had fled with the loot. Till eye witnesses came forward after his arrest, nobody, not even the immediate family, suspected Shikder.

The ice factory that he owned next to the dock, was Shikder's centre of operations. He had also taken over two temples and a derelict building to run torture centres and execution chambers. He killed by strangling or choking or knifing or shooting or plain beating, or all of them at one go, as he is said to have done a number of times. And to leave no trace of the murders, he would have the bodies dipped in cement and dumped into the nearby river.

There were some, however, who got away, like Abdus Salam, who ran away from Khulna 14 years ago, and dared return only after Shikder surrendered. Salam now wants the law to do what he says Shikder did to him many years ago – his hands were chopped off at the wrists. There are scores like Salam who have been crippled by Shikder, and hundreds gathered after Shikder's arrest claiming to be relatives of his victims.

Femme fatale

Women played a major role in Shikder's life (and ultimately, one of them contributed to his fall). Nobody is quite sure how many times Shikder was married. His first wife Khodeja is still in hiding with her children, and is supposed to know a lot of secrets, as she was actively involved in his business. While living with Shikder, she planned elopements and in the two attempts she made, she was caught. It was only when her lovers came face to face with the husband that they realised whose wife they were planning to run away with. Of course, by then, it was too late to contemplate on the perils of romance. They were killed, although for some reason Shikder spared his wife.

Whenever he needed a woman, he got one, and it mattered little if the women were already married or about to be, or even the wife of one his aides. Just nobody dared to stop him. This went on till he saw and fell for Shova, his last wife and at that time the wife of an Awami League (AL) leader of Khulna. "He promised me one crore [10 million] taka if I married him," Shova was to later say. Whether the payment was made or not, she left her husband and duly married Shikder.

When Shikder was asked if he had committed any mistake in his criminal life, he is reported to have despondently replied, "Shova". For, marrying her started a chain of events that broke his safety chain.

Shikder had been working out a deal with a junior minister from the area, which involved the dismissal of the many charges against him, and his surrender in one particular case for which he would be granted bail.

But that was not to be. Monzer Ali Chand, Shova's ex-husband, managed to mobilise a faction of the Khulna Awami League that was against the said minister. By that time, Shikder's reputation was becoming increasingly embarrassing to the AL, and having received support from the higher levels, Chand started a campaign to have Shikder expelled from the party. Meanwhile, the Commissioner of Police of Khulna, Anwarul Iqbal, one honest cop, who had been hounding Shikder without success for long, also went for the kill with the crucial support of the Home Minister, Mohammed Nasim.

Shikder probably did not know of the seriousness of the situation, and of the pressure on both the police and the administration, local and national. When he surrendered, he would have thought that he would soon be free. After all, this was not the first time he was on the run. When the JP fell from power in 1991, he had hidden for five months, and later re-surfaced confidently.

Facing the music

If there was one man who will sink him for real, it will be Nurul Alam, his bodyguard-in-chief. Alam had witnessed most of the killings by Shikder, and realising that he was likely to be silenced, he went into hiding. Surprisingly, Shikder did not look hard enough for him, probably confident that no one who knew his track record as well as Alam did, would dare depose against him.

Alam was arrested soon after Shikder was taken into custody and, to the surprise of everyone, sang like a bird. He told the police that he could provide evidence on the 20 murders that he had personally witnessed. The story then leaked to the press, and the media, perhaps tired of reporting on politics, turned to Shikder's exploits in a big way and made a splash of it.

Bangladesh Television came up with a special on Shikder and beamed it nationally. Bones, limbs, skeletons, cement blocks, clothes and even a car, all dredged from the river by divers, were kept in a grisly long row for all to see. There was also a deluge of accomplices hoping to get state mercy, who gave eyewitness accounts of the crimes that Shikder had committed. Shikder, his victims, their families, his house, area of operations, his wife Shova (who kept smiling all through the programme for some mysterious reason), brought the criminal and

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the crimes vividly home to millions. Home Minister Nasim, leading a rather tough drive to root out crime, something which has drawn criticism from human rights groups, was there, too, promising to do his best. His statement was simple: "We will not let Ershad get away."

The police factor

What's going to ruffle feathers is the fact that Shikder was in league with the police, the politicians and also a section of the media. He is reported to have said that he couldn't save any money, because he had to pay off practically everyone.

When the police raided Shikder's house, "Swaranakamol" (Golden Lotus)—among the many he owned—all they could find were a few hand guns, an automatic pistol (for which a licence can't be issued) and an empty secret larder. This sparse discovery may mean that Ershad was preparing to surrender, or, as likely, that his friends in the police force tipped him off before the raid.

It is alleged that Shikder had managed to manipulate eight of the 11 police commissioners who were in charge of Khulna town during his period of action. It is the acts of senior police officers, who have been named in a separate departmental enquiry dealing with the Police-Shikder connection, that are cause for particular concern. Shikder has provided real evidence about the pay-offs, and what was done with the money, leading to investigations that have vindicated his claims.

The focus is also on one particular area in Dhaka called the "Policemen's Neighbourhood", so called because of the number of policemen who have built houses, many of whom had worked in the Khulna zone. But in their defence the cops from there say that Shikder is naming people to garble the investigation, and that it is nothing more than a conspiracy hatched by a section of the police force trying to get even with another. In all this, there is one mysterious figure whom everyone is talking about—the "Godfather"—whom even Shikder fears to name, and will only privately whisper it to the police. Intriguing drama this.

At an absurd level, perhaps all that Shikder can do now is to claim a share of the 'Shikder tourism industry', as plenty of people flock from all over to see his house, his haunts, the ice factory, etc. Booklets on him have been sold in the millions. Plans are now on to make a film on him.

As for the case itself, a special tribunal has been set up just to try him. It's clear that the government will present the trial as a showcase of its efforts to curb crime. But so far, the trial has not even begun to move and the special tribunal is yet to find a judge. A few witnesses were beaten up recently, and the public are slightly jaded by the media overkill. But even as reporting on charge sheets goes on every day, there is a growing feeling that there are many Shikders out there—in another neighbourhood, another town—operating in gay abandon. Shikder simply happens to be the hatchet man from Khulna who surrendered. ▲

The confessions of a serial child killer

by ***Beena Sarwar***

It was perhaps the ghastliest news of the year. On 3 December, newspapers in Pakistan went to town about the killings of around 100 children by a sodomite. The news was broken by the killer himself, who sent out a packet to the Lahore office of the Jang group of newspapers containing photographs of his little victims and a confessional letter. A day earlier, he had sent a similar packet to the police, but the cops were not willing to believe its contents. It was only after reporters began digging, that the police began their investigation. And by 30 December, the case looked sealed as the man turned himself in, again at the Jang office.

That was a surprise as he had claimed that after the packet was sent, he would commit suicide. Before his dramatic appearance, all that the police had by way of clue were what they had found from the scene of the crime, a rented house in Lahore: two vats of acid containing the remains of at least two children, and pathetic heaps of clothes and shoes—a chilling testimony to the truth of the confession.

The 100 or so boys feared to have been killed were either runaways or homeless beggars, apparently lured by the murderer, Javed Iqbal, with promises of sweets, videos or other goodies. Iqbal's confessional letter says that after some three dozen killings, he began taking his victims' photographs (mostly smiling, unaware of the fate awaiting them) and noting their names and addresses, before committing sodomy and killing them with the help of a couple of accomplices. One such accomplice 'jumped' to his death from a police station while under interrogation.

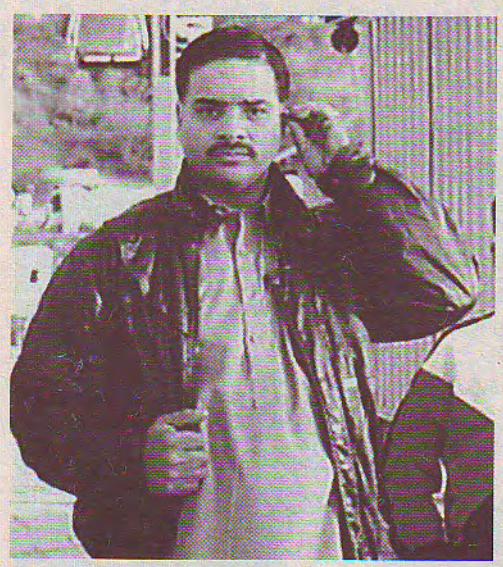
Of course, also silenced forever were the boys who endured the humiliation and torture of sodomy before being suffocated to death. Would they have spoken out had they survived? Unlikely, given that thousands of victims of child abuse in homes rich and poor, routinely bury it deep in their inner recesses, because to speak of it would expose them to further hurt and humiliation at the hands of a society that places the blame of sexual offences squarely on the victim.

Those who work with rape survivors and abused children have long been stressing that rape is not a sexual act, but an act of assertion of power; for this purpose the culprit invariably chooses a younger, weaker, more vulnerable victim. Rape, say psychologists, is a question of identity, of self-assertion.

The Pavlovian condition

"It's a wake-up call to society," says Dr Haroon Ahmed, the Karachi-based president of the Pakistan Mental Health Association. He links the murders to continual interruptions in the political system. Such interruptions contribute to what he identifies as a "classic and neurotic Pavlovian situation", producing a conditioned response to issues of right and wrong. It can also be attributed to urban-related, skewed development-related phenomena like poverty, migration, alienation, lack of social amenities, and children being exposed to all kinds of danger while forced to work on the streets.

"There are no role models, no institutions, no symbols, no norms that are safe to follow. Just as one norm is established, there is a drastic change. Feudal thinking discourages the setting up of such norms or institutions, and when the conditioned response becomes inadequate for the current generation, there is panic and search for a new norm," says the psychiatrist. "We have to address these issues on a psychological level rather than just take administrative action."



The killer (above) and some of his victims.

The question of why the killer sent photographs of his victims, and confessions to police and media, relates to that of identity, explains Dr Haroon. "He is a non-entity in his own mind and wants to prove that he is an entity. He wants power and he wants recognition, a sense of importance." Feeling like a non-entity can stem from the perpetrator himself having been abused or sodomised as a child, he adds.

In this case, all these factors appear to have combined in the mind of one man to create a sexual deviant and a power-hungry killer. "He feels sexually inadequate so he catches hold of younger, weaker prey, and rapes them to prove that he is fit enough—then eliminates them because he still feels inadequate and doesn't want his weaknesses exposed," is Dr Haroon's analysis.

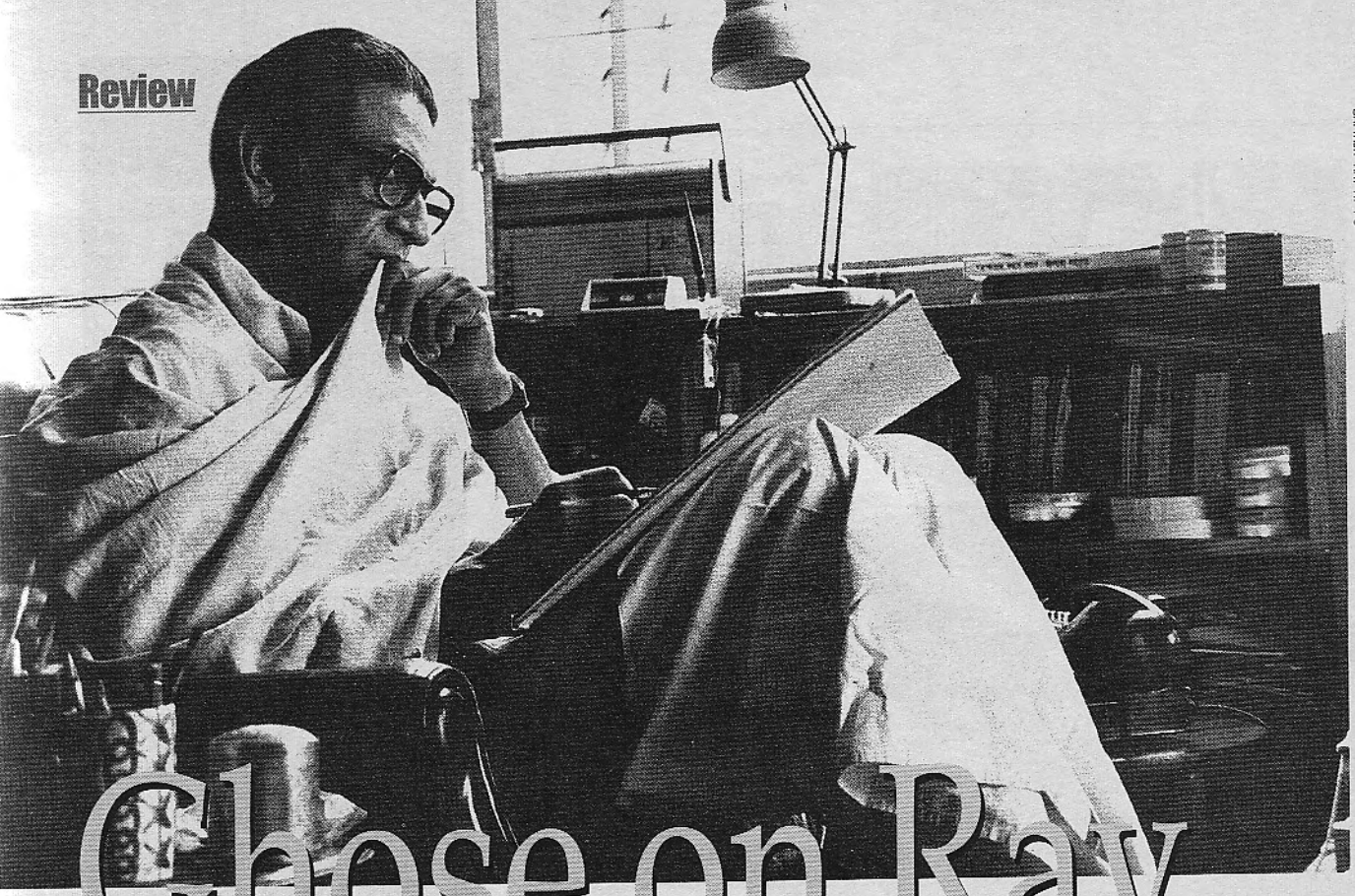
None of this in any way excuses or justifies the culprit—many abuse survivors internalise their anger rather than taking it out on others. But abuse takes a long-term emotional, psychological toll. In this case, it contributed to creating a psychopath. And it should lead to introspection about how societal indifference contributes to creating the likes of Javed Iqbal, particularly in societies in flux.

The issue of why the murders happened in the first place, is also linked to why the children were not reported missing. First, how could so many children go missing and not be noticed? It is alarming that no first information reports (FIRs) were lodged in the respective police stations about any of the victims by their over-worked, poverty-struck parents. It does not take much imagination to visualise the two different scenarios arising when two sets of parents, one rich and one poor, find their child missing.

Besides, the police have a way of dealing with the poor, which generally leave them to hope for nothing from the law. And coupled with the fact that the police have generally become desensitised to the value of human life, an officer would dismiss such a case, as he tries to avoid registering a report that will only reflect poorly on his station if the missing youngster is not found.

The government's top priority now should be to arrange for counselling service for the families, especially siblings, of the child victims who have been identified, feels Dr Haroon. "They need a tremendous amount of emotional support, if they are to grow up as normal human beings," he says Dr Haroon.

There are plenty of lessons to be learnt from this horror story. Each one equally important: the breaking of the silence and stigma attached to rape and child abuse; changing the way the police are trained and conditioned; and, of course, the addressing of inequities that push children out of the home and into the street. A beginning could be made with the immediate implementation of a universal, compulsory primary education system. ▲



SATYAJIT RAY AT 70

Ghose on Ray

by **Sujoy Dhar**

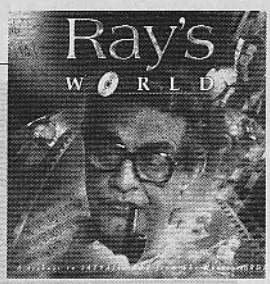
It was as a seven-year-old that film maker Goutam Ghose got a preview into what director Satyajit Ray was all about. And it moved him to tears. The young Ghose wept inside the movie hall as Durga, that caring elder sister of young Apu of Ray's trilogy, passed away in *Pather Panchali*.

Several years later, as Ghose himself became a director of international repute, *Pather Panchali* continued to be his benchmark film, and its creator, his muse. So when the Satyajit Ray Archive (in 1996) approached Ghose with the proposal to make a comprehensive biographical documentary on the maestro, he took it up as an honour, but only knowing too well the challenge it posed. Ghose was handpicked by Ray's widow, Bijoya Ray, after her son, Sandip Ray, declined to direct *Ray*. Bijoya Ray wouldn't perhaps regret that choice, as the 100-minute documentary got rave reviews when shown as a special event at the Venice Film Festival in September 1999.

"I had my doubts when I was asked to do the film, and was at a loss as how to start," recalls Ghose. "In the 60s people like James Beverage and B.D. Garg, and in the 80s Shyam Benegal had made documentaries on Ray, but no one had done anything after his death. So I was frantically looking for a spine to start the work, and be different from others. I knew that mere presentation of Ray the filmmaker would not be sufficient to capture the life and works of a person who was not just a filmmaker but a great mind as well."

Ghose found the "spine" during the six months of research at Ray's house. It came in the form of the director's famous red notebook called *Kheror Khatha* ('Accounts' Book) which gave a fascinating peep into the man's multi-faceted talents. "The book contains things like the script of a film, the initial sketch of a logo, a short story, things like that. It represents his interesting doubts and sense of wonders and I think it is the best emotional link that I could find to make this documentary," says Ghose.

Ghose believes that the rest of the world is not much aware of Ray the author of children's books, or of Ray the commercial artist. "These are the things I have tried to bring out. In fact, my first encounter with Manik-da [as Ray was affectionately known] in person was in the office of *Sandesh*, the children's magazine he inherited as editor from Sukumar Ray, his illustrious father who was a children's writer



Multimedia Man

If multi-media has arrived in a big way, would an "interactive" CD-ROM on Satyajit Ray—the 'original' multi-media man—be far away? The first-ever of its kind on the director-artist-composer-writer, was completed recently as its producer's way of paying tribute.

The CD, *Ray's World*, is almost an all-you-wanted-to-know-about-Ray. A pick of interesting materials are here, such as a behind-the-scenes account of how Ray made his first film, *Pather Panchali*, quick-time video footage of some of the movies, and a section called "Unmade Films", the movies that the director planned to make, but could not, including one on the sitarist Ravi Shankar. The list of all his 36 movies have been chronologically arranged, with story synopses, credits, etc.

There are the sections on Ray the music composer, the artist and writer. Ray in his childhood comes across as one with a keen ear for music, with a bent towards the Western classical, while he experimented with the form as he evolved. The artist Ray, not many know, used to do ad layouts, cover designs, illustrations, logos, typefaces, as well as posters for his movies. As a writer, the CD-ROM captures him as a bestselling author of whodunits and sci-fi, with some memorable characters to his credit like Feluda and Professor Shonku.

For the producers, the House of RDB, one of the premier producers and distributors of motion pictures in India, it's a maiden foray into multi-media under its new wing RDB Entertainment Pvt Ltd, but not into Ray films—RDB has produced as many as six of his films, including *Charulata* and *Mahanagar*. The company roped in some of the big names in filmmaking for putting together the CD-ROM—Sandip Ray, Goutam Ghose and Shyam Benegal. Richard Attenborough does the introduction and narration. It's priced at INR 1450 (c USD 35)—for film archives, educational and cultural institutions—and INR 1600 for others.

—Sujoy Dhar

extraordinaire penning nonsense rhymes *a la* Lewis Carol."

In his film, Ghose captures the Ray persona by employing some novel techniques, where his childhood is recreated by way of some interesting footage. One that stands out is that of the child Ray with a pinhole camera bioscope—a tell-tale statement on the future director's essential sense of wonder and curiosity. The documentary begins with the ace director being feted at the Oscars (which he watched on TV from his hospital bed), and ends with the posthumous Bharat Ratna award ceremony (the master's voice itself provides the background narrative, along with some comments from director-actress Aparna Sen, one of his finds).

Explains Ghose, "The Bharat Ratna was awarded to Ray after the Oscar and here I have tried to be a little tongue-in-cheek about our government." Ghose also pans on the major 'influences' on Ray: his family, poet Rabindranath Tagore and French filmmaker Jean Renoir, the latter with his stress on economy of expression. "Renoir had advised Ray to show bigger things through small expressive elements and the maestro had mastered that art."

More than anything else, Ray emerges from the documentary as the last giant of Bengal Renaissance. Says Ghose, "The ethos of the essentially elitist Bengal Renaissance of the 19th century had not percolated down to the common masses like in Europe, nevertheless it spawned great minds in Bengal. The family of Satyajit Ray starting from his grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray, father Sukumar Ray and lastly himself, is the product of that great movement in Bengal."

But what the documentary does not tell us, is about poor archival management. Ghose says he struggled to get good prints of Ray classics, and would not have succeeded if not for unsolicited help from some individuals with rare collections who had heard about the film he was making. "It took often more than a year and half for me to procure a good print of his films. If such is the case with preserving Ray masterpieces one can well understand the plight of other filmmakers' works."

Ray's South Asian premiere is to be held in Bombay in February. ▲

SAMAR NANDI

Ghose examining one of Ray's scipts.

Himalayan differences

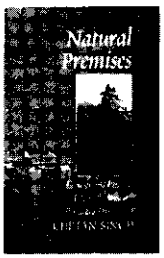
There are no universals in the problems and solutions of the mountain situation, says a compelling book on Himachal Pradesh.

Two decades ago the renowned Indologist, Agehananda Bharati, wrote an essay entitled "Actual and Ideal Himalayas: Hindu Views of the Mountains". Bharati, an Austro-Hungarian Jew who spent youthful summers in the Alps and – later in life as a sadhu – some years in a Himalayan ashram, documented the attitudes and biases that plains and peninsular Indians held about mountains and their inhabitants. Most of their accounts were coloured by their own cultural experiences. In the superb book under review, certainly the best I have read on the Himalaya in many years, the other viewpoint of the Himalaya is expressed. Chetan Singh explores Himachal Pradesh from the perspective of the people living there – locals as well as resident colonials – in the context of both the modern state and its antecedents.

Today, Himachal Pradesh is full of surprises for the outsider. It has a low poverty rate, the second lowest among the states in India, high literacy as well as a comparatively advanced level of development. Refuting all the doom and gloom accounts of the degraded status of the Himalayan environment by 'experts', is the amazing increase in forest cover from 21 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1990.

Throughout the book, the author sifts, weighs, and documents in a meticulous fashion all the evidence on the environmental history of Himachal Pradesh. The book should be read for not only what it tells us about Himachal Pradesh, but also more importantly what it implicitly tells us about the Himalaya and mountain environments in general.

Singh questions the environmental deterministic views that many maintain about mountains and their inhabitants. Much is made these days by environmental activists of the devastation wrought by colonialists on the biophysical environment. In a felicitous manner, Singh quotes these sources and points out that, gross generalisations about the South Asian



Natural Premises: Ecology and Peasant Life in the Western Himalaya 1800-1950

by Chetan Singh
Oxford, Delhi, 1998
ISBN 0 19 564276 7

reviewed by ***Nigel J.R. Allan***

environment corrupt and distort the documented evidence from Himachal Pradesh. The historian that he is, Singh has drawn upon a vast array of archival sources, travellers' accounts, settlement and agency reports, state and district gazetteers and innumerable surveys of customary land and forest rights.

Defining territory

The book opens with a discussion of state formation and territory. Aided by maps, the writer exhibits the highly varied nature of state boundaries. While these days watersheds are often seen by planners to be the ideal planning unit, this fashionable view conflicts with the princely state boundaries of yesteryear. Territorially, boundaries could be along ridgelines but as often as not, they were situated along some other topographic feature, often an unfordable river, or some 'negative' feature such as high cliffs. What was most important to the delimitation of territory was accessibility. Narrow chasms with snow- and glacier-fed rivers were boundaries. Rivers divided, not united.

Ecological conditions, too, were instrumental in defining and maintaining territory. Accessibility to high-altitude pastures provided routes of communications. Ridgelines and not only valley bottoms, came into play as routes. The overall impression is that the present-day state of Himachal Pradesh is the historic product of a mosaic of movements among plains, hills, mountains and plateaus, large states and small states knitted together by pastoralists, local folk, petty aristocracy and outside traders, all of whom occupied and exploited altitudinal and aspectual ecological niches of the Himalaya and adjacent regions.

Working within the parameters of mountain environment were the princely states, always seeking revenue even as they fended off pressure from neighbours and alien invaders. The Gorkha invasion of the late 18th and early 19th centuries forced these princedoms to enlist outside help, thereby bringing Sikh support and later British annexation. Kangra and most of Kulu today reflect the template imposed by this early British control. But the lesser principalities remained largely independent. And it is this richness of spatial autonomy, with its trappings of small-scale bureaucracy, revenue bookkeeping, and rule of customary law that may have spawned the dynamism of today.

Unlike so many contemporary chronicles of the Himalaya, with their emphasis on exceptional environmental features and 'mountain specificities', Singh's work pays close attention to the political economy of the hill states. He deftly weaves the story of all the different types of revenue gathered by the states from ghee, honey and fruits,

to the tariffs on water mills, oil presses and mining. Tying the Himachal situation to mountains elsewhere are the copious endnotes of illustrations from Alpine literature where comparisons and contrasts are made of land use, administration, and revenue.

Supreme individualism

In his chapter on settlements, Singh exhibits his control over scale and reach, by highlighting the varied nature of human habitation in the mountains. Villages existed, but no general pattern was established. Dispersed settlements and hamlets seemed to be the norm, and out of this pattern came an almost autarkic sense of the human component.

Quotations from sources verifying this situation are abundant. In the mid-19th century, Barnes, a settlement officer, remarked that "each member lives upon his own holding and is quite independent of his neighbours. There is no identity of feeling, no idea of acting in concert". About the Shimla area, another settlement officer noted that "there are no village communities". Again, in a consideration of the use of cultivable wastelands we see, a century ago, an official stating that there was "no villages community system". If there was a binding phenomenon, it came from the territory prescribed by the religious deities of the settlements. Writes Singh: "Within such a territory a 'community' of a flexible kind does seem to have existed."

The author's examination of archival sources echoes some of the settlement officers'; individual cultivators seemed paramount in moulding rural settlement and land use, and not a corporate village community. In the mountains, it appears that the individual reigned supreme. I would venture that this key feature may lie at the root of much of the success of Himachal's citizenry today.

Several salient points emerge in the detailed analysis of agriculture systems. Virtually everyone, including 'low' castes, held land, and supplementary sources of income existed, especially at higher altitude. Citing settlement reports of a century ago, Singh writes that large plots of land were common in the low altitude areas—attributable to malaria, which kept families small. Land holdings were smaller at higher altitudes but people there had access to more resources. A further entire chapter, an excellent one, is devoted to the issue of census-defined 'culturable waste', who owned that land or had rights to it and who used it and eventually what it was as a resource.

The book changes gear with the chapter on pastoralism. In agriculture, much of the activity is local. Pastoralism brings in another dimension, that of great mobility. "It was the shepherd and not the peasant who was more 'business'-oriented," says Singh. Not only did they have to cope with the seasonal vicissitudes of climate and its influence on the resource-base, they, like the Gaddis and Gujjars—quite different groups—were also attuned to the vagaries of the market.

Sheep and goats loaded with agricultural produce or other products were ideal beasts of burden to convey marketable goods around the mountain trails. Pastoralists encouraged the development of markets and money in a marginal environment. Parenthetically, I should add that no less than economist Adam Smith once remarked that mountain dwellers had a great ability to "truck and trade". In Himachal Pradesh, the pastoralists were the driving force of this type of external exchange.

Illusory similarities

In dealing with the situation of the forests, Singh is careful to include evidence of exploitation on a mass scale of forest resources (while avoiding colonial bashing). He is also fair in his analysis to include the changing perceptions of forests and conservation in time and place. Colonials actually engaged in serious debates about conservation, and by the early 20th century, the tone of exploitation and revenue enhancement had changed to one of probity and conservation.

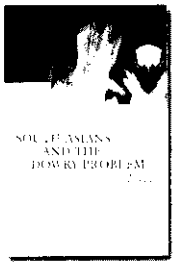
It is also true that forest exploitation ushered in an era where the regional identity of the princely states were expanded towards incorporation into a subcontinental milieu. The revenue was paid to the principality dominions from the Siwaliks to the Himalaya, even in the most inaccessible places. This era had multiplier effects; it produced goods of commercial value that were enhanced by the growth of the cash economy.

Singh's historical analysis of Himachal Pradesh brings into perspective major issues in our contemporary concern over the Himalaya. Emerging mountain-oriented NGOs like the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu or the even more international US-based The Mountain Institute (TMI), would have us believe that there are universal problems in mountain areas, which can be remedied by universal solutions from universal bureaucratic organisations like the UN or the bilateral agencies. They seek similarities in the construction of problems or universal "mountain specificities" when the lesson to be learnt from this book is that the conditions of mountain environments are firmly rooted in the context of place.

From an academic viewpoint, it is the contextual theory, the connectedness of events located in space and time that defines Himachal in contrast to the illusory similarities that the proponents of compositional theory foster among the uninformed transnational bureaucrats. Himachal Pradesh is not Kashmir, nor is it Uttarakhand, and it certainly is not Nepal. Geography and history confirm that. A geologist sees some similarity of the Himalaya in the depths of geology, but a geographer never would.

Singh's book is well worth reading. Each page has insights and revelations. One quibble though, and that is aimed at the publisher, Oxford University Press. Can the international readership please know about books published in South Asia? This book deserves to be read by an international readership. ▲

Books Received

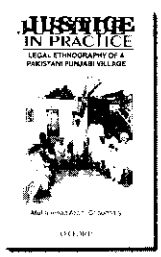


South Asians and the Dowry Problem
Edited by Werner Menski
Sage Publications, Delhi, 1999
pp xxi+262
INR 250 (cloth)

A review of the law on dowry and the problems of its enforcement in India, as well as the worrying increase in dowry deaths among the South Asian community settled in Britain. The writers go beyond treating dowry as a matter of criminal or property law, and recognise it as an immensely complicated phenomenon in South Asian societies by delving into its social, economic and historical roots. Among the issues discussed are: dowry is a middle-class phenomenon; the economic explanations of dowry; legal strategies to curb it; the geographical distribution of dowry deaths; the hurdles in the way of implementing the anti-dowry law; and the growing cases of dowry-related problems among the Gujaratis and Sikhs settled in Britain.

The Saga of Assam Oil
by P.C. Barua
Spectrum Publications, Delhi, 1999
pp 185
INR 440

A review of the petroleum industry in the Assam region from its early beginings. As a backdrop, there's an outline of the social history of Assam. It describes the socio-cultural life in the Digboi township, developed in the midst of a forest reserve where the first oil well was drilled in 1889. The book further records the development of all the units of the petroleum industry along with brief outlines of the plants under construction.

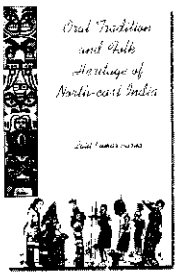


Justice in Practice
by Muhammad Azam Chaudhary
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1999
pp vi+248
PKR 350

This study discusses the highly debated issue of the official versus the traditional system of justice for Pakistani society. The focus is on minute ethnographic details of the functioning of different institutions of traditional as well as official systems of justice in a Punjabi village. The author has discussed various reasons for and types of conflict. Detailed case studies provide first-hand information about the village situation, increasing conflicts, and the combination of the two types of judicial institutions set up by the villagers. It also tries to understand the relation between the type of conflict, the village social organisation and the institution of justice a villager tries to contact.

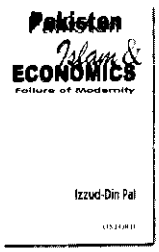
The Art of Burma, New Studies
Edited by Donald M. Stadtner
Marg Publications, Mumbai
pp 128
INR 1950

A broad, general overview of the development and nature of Burmese art, highlighting current research, discussing facets ranging from the earliest contacts with India, to pagan art and architecture, court manuscripts and jewellery from the 19th century, and modern lacquerware. Replete with photos, this is one of the rare publications on Burmese art.



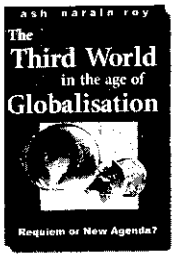
Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-east India
by Lalit Kumar Barua
Spectrum Publications, Delhi, 1999
pp 171
INR 280

A critical and comprehensive account of the folklore of North-eastern India, describing the important features of myth, folktale, legend and the long narrative poem. Also discusses the intervening aspects, such as traditional religion and ecology, and brings into focus for the first time the shared tradition of history, linguistics, demography and the social mores of the tribal folks of the hills and plains of Assam and neighbouring states. The effort is to understand the folk elements empirically, in the larger context of an evolving relationship between folklore and the life of the community. This approach also helps to understand the streams of culture that flow down the great Brahmaputra Valley.



Pakistan: Islam & Economics, Failure of Modernity
by Izzud-Din Pal
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1999
pp xxiii+195
PKR 350

A critical analysis of the Islamic economic system, as defined by the traditional *ulama* and embellished by some Islamic economists. Presents a comprehensive view of the issues involved, from *riba* to the status of women in Islam. The discussion addresses the question concerning the identity of Pakistan: was Pakistan to be an Islamic state or a Muslim state? The book combines arguments by both traditionalists and modernists.



The Third World in the Age of Globalisation: Requiem or New Agenda?
by Ash Narain Roy
Madhyam Books, Delhi, Zed Books, London & New York, 1999
pp x+138
INR 150

A dual look into the likely future face of international politics in the age of globalisation. In the first place, the author argues that the unipolar world of globalisation offers most developing countries nothing but "a race to the bottom". This leads him to analyse the Latin American experience, a region which has had a much longer experience of independence than Asia or Africa. The author believes that though Latin America has been in the margins of Third World politics and international leadership, it is well placed to help developing countries come together.

Eternal Kaveri
Edited by George Michell, Photographs by Clare Arni
Marg Publications, Mumbai, 1999
pp 124
INR 1950

A dedication to the history, culture and mythology of South India's greatest river. Along its course of 785 kilometres from the Western Ghats to the Bay of Bengal, the Kaveri passes by numerous cities and towns with ancient forts and shrines, pictures of which appear in this volume.

HOW TO BE A BIG SENDER WITHOUT BEING A BIG SPENDER

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As sure as taking it there yourself

Adolf Advani

A major American museum in Los Angeles has assigned a portrait of [Indian] Union Home Minister L.K. Advani to a rogues' gallery of extremist killers such as Idi Amin and Saddam Hussein.

The Museum of Tolerance, the educational arm of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in California, has Mr Advani's portrait prominently displayed on what is called the Demagogue Wall.

"Basically, I can tell you in summary that the individuals on that wall used demagogy to advance their agenda," says a museum official, Rabbi Abraham Cooper, who is unaware of Mr Advani's status as a veteran parliamentarian.

The Museum of Tolerance was started in 1993. It receives 1000 visitors per day and has registered nearly three million visitors since it threw open its doors.

For every one of those three million visitors Mr Advani will be bracketed with Idi Amin, who chopped off his enemies' heads and preserved them in his refrigerator, and Saddam Hussein, who gasses his opponents until they choke to death.

If the museum's logic is followed through, Mr Advani will also be answerable to a human rights or war crimes tribunal.

The insult to Mr Advani could not have come from a worse source. He is one of the proponents of stronger Indo-Israeli ties and the Simon Wiesenthal Centre promotes and protects the worldwide interests of the Jewish nation.

The existence of Mr Advani's portrait has been a running sore with members of the Indian community in Los Angeles. When the BJP's General Secretary, Mr Govindacharya, visited Los Angeles, local Indians made a point of showing him around the museum.

Despite Mr Govindacharya's protests, Mr Advani's portrait has not been moved from the Demagogue Wall. Mr Govindacharya's explanation is that politically motivated individuals have used the museum to score a political point against Mr Advani.

Asked by *Deccan Herald* to explain the inclusion of Mr Advani, Mr Cooper said: "This exhibit went up in 1993 when someone dubbed him the Hitler of Bombay."

Pressed further, Mr Cooper said the reference to the Hitler of Bombay was not correct. "We expect a clarification of Mr Advani's current political stance. We live in a time of change, perhaps we're looking at a major statesman. If we get the clarification we need, his portrait will come down."

SHYAM BHATIA IN "ADVANI IN ROGUE'S GALLERY OF US MUSEUM" FROM *DECCAN HERALD*.

Orwellian truth

On the same day the Egyptian airliner went down off Nantucket a cyclone swept through the east coast of India. The plane crash took 217 lives, the cyclone more than 3000. It also left more than a million people homeless. The plane crash was all over the front page and a half dozen pages inside. The cyclone rated a 12-inch story on Page 11.

Few would fault the news judgment of the editors. The plane crash was at least 15 times more important to readers than the cyclone. After all, natural disasters are far more common than crashes of jumbo jets. The airliner's sudden plunge out of the skies was both dramatic and mysterious, a plot for a movie. The cyclone, a force we understand, took hours to wreak its toll.

In a plane crash, we join vicariously with the investigators, searching for the cause so that we can take steps to remedy it. But we know what causes cyclones, and there is nothing we can do to prevent one from striking. Nevertheless, had a cyclone roared through the Midwest killing more than 3000 Americans, it would go down in our history books as one of the stories of the century.

One reason for this disparity is, of course, geographical. We are far more concerned with a neighbour breaking his leg than with, say, 3000 Iraqis being killed in the distant Middle East. Yet the reason is not solely geographical. Should 3000 Englishmen die as a hurricane pounded that far-away island, we would be shocked and appalled.

It is also racial and cultural. Most Indians are brown-skinned Hindus. We scarcely blinked at the deaths of 800,000 black Africans in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Had those Indians or Rwandans been Caucasian Christians like most Englishmen, we would have read of their deaths with horror.

Moreover, that cyclone swept through one of the poorest regions of India. It is difficult for us to identify with poverty-stricken Indians. We live in solid homes. We have a dozen changes of clothing. We speak the world's most widely accepted language. We have paved streets, skyscrapers and flush toilets. We drive cars, take vacations and fly in planes. How far easier it is to identify with those 217 poor souls aboard Flight 990. They might have been us.

We can envision ourselves lounging in a cushioned seat aboard an airliner, reading or watching a movie, when suddenly there is a an explosion, screams and we are hurtling to our deaths. Yet how we must strain to see ourselves in rags, huddling in a flimsy hut by a fetid stream as the winds rise to a deafening shriek, carrying away all around us. That couldn't be us.

When I was young, it was perfectly acceptable to say that life is cheap in the Far East. As the years passed, such a phrase became politically incorrect as it carried the stigma of racism and cultural and economic superiority. Those who would say such a thing were shunned by liberal-minded humanists. But the truth of the matter is that, in our eyes, life is still cheap for those with different coloured skins who live far away in poverty. We like to say that we believe all men and women are created equal. But what we really believe, to paraphrase George Orwell, is that some of us are more equal than others.

ARTHUR HOPPE IN "LIFE IS CHEAP" FROM *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*.

Crying over Madhuri

Without grudging even for a moment Madhuri Dixit's right to conjugal bliss, at least half of India must surely have greeted the news of her wedding to a Los Angeles-based NRI surgeon with disbelief, dismay, and, finally, despondency. To say that Ms Dixit has broken every male heart in the country—not to mention Pakistan and the extended South Asian diaspora—is to render prosaic an attachment so profound that it is at once real and imaginary, intimate and public. Whatever the textures of her actual persona, Madhuri on screen is the exemplar of the mythical *apsara*, a woman in whom innocence and sexuality are combined in sublime proportions. Her filmic sensuousness can be wild and abandoned but also coiled and repressed. Cineastes have compared her to Madhubala and even Marilyn Monroe, although her iconic status has surely surpassed both. Much more than other actresses, Indian or foreign, Madhuri has emerged as a metaphor for beauty that is as impossible and unattainable as it is real and of this world. And yet it would be grossly unfair to consider her as just another object of male fantasy. The characters she has played in her numerous films have helped define style and gesture for an entire generation. Though misogynist critics have often mistaken her vivaciousness for vulgarity, Madhuri has spanned so many cultural milieus and modes of representation in films from *Tezaab* to *Mrityudand* that it is not possible to define her work in monochromatic or unidimensional terms.

Had Madhuri married another actor—like Nargis, Madhubala, Sairo Bano and Hema Malini all did before her—her male fans might well have been more forgiving. But the fact that she has chosen an ornery guy will cause millions of Indians to wonder what might have happened had they too been lucky enough to know her brother, as the fortunate LA surgeon did.

THE ASIAN AGE, DELHI

Madhuri Dixit with her husband, Dr Sriram Nene.

So many men—married, single, young and old—have whiled away their hours plotting improbably serendipitous encounters with Madhuri. M.F. Husain painted innumerable portraits of the actress but his attempts to give public expression to an impossible private dream have been profane and, ultimately, banal and unsatisfying. Even an artist of his unrivalled talent has found it difficult to capture the form, colour, intelligence and aura—the "complete woman"—that is Madhuri. In truth, such a venture is best never undertaken. Greater men than Husain have been ruined by their obsessive pursuit of beauty and one suspects that news of his muse's nuptials will stay, at least for the moment, the paint brush in his hand. Husain has explained somewhere that he sees in Madhuri the mother whose memory for him is incomplete—*ma adhuri*—but there is nothing Oedipal about the longing of the majority of her fans. Even as their dreams and fantasies come crashing down, they must all be praying that marriage will not mean the end of Madhuri the actress. That, of course, is a decision Mr and Mrs Madhuri Dixit have every right to make on their own; the decision politely but firmly to tell their multitudinous fans to butt out of their lives. However, Madhuri also belongs to the great joint family formed by those who adore her. And they, in turn, are surely entitled to ask of her: *Hum aapke hain koun*?

FROM "RUNAWAY BRIDE", EDITORIAL IN *THE TIMES OF INDIA*.

Step Two: The Christians

To come to electoral power, scapegoating Muslims through a politics of communal polarisation was the best way to consolidate largescale Hindu support, especially among the upper classes and castes. The Bharatiya Janata Party having come to power, the sangh parivar feels it must now consolidate itself by a "long march through the institutions" both of the state and civil society.

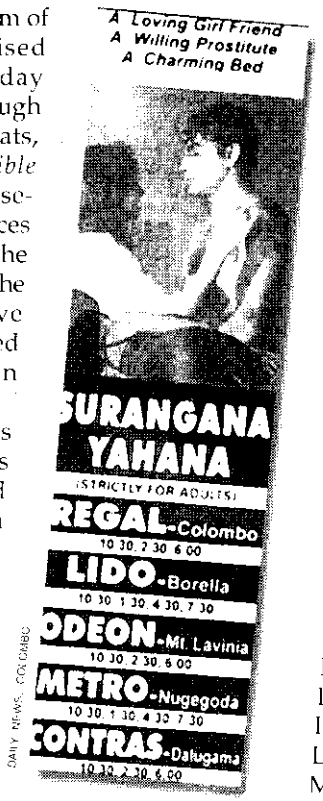
On the latter terrain, the principal barriers to the sangh parivar effort to extend its tentacles via its own network of educational-recreational-cultural-social structures are constituted by Christian-run social service, health and educational institutions, and by the best elements of what has come to be called the non-governmental sector. Although Christians comprise only 2.4 percent of the population, Christian-run networks comprise more than 20 percent of all such autonomous activities in civil society in India.

These structures are in fact powerful secularising influences because the services they provide are available to all and because for the overwhelming part they offer widespread employment to members of all religious communities although the apex remains under church or Christian control. Their objective impact is

not the extension of Christian religious influence but the consolidation of non-communal and secular influence. It is this that is anathema to the sangh parivar.

When you add to this the fact that in tribal areas, Christian bodies are direct competitors to the sangh parivar in conversion activities (only the latter calls it "reconversions") the reasons for hostility become even more obvious. As for the NGO sector, the new government has already begun its self-appointed task of selectively identifying and harassing those NGOs which it feels are either opposed to sangh parivar ideology or otherwise unamenable to its influence.

Barring exceptions, the attacks onChristians fall short of physical killings or serious maimings. It has taken not the form of communal riots but regularised and routinised forms of everyday terrorisation and humiliation through spittings, slappings, insults, threats, damage to church property, *Bible* burnings and other forms of desecration of religious beliefs, practices and icons. And through all this the leaders of the saffron family from the prime minister downwards have repeatedly called for "and justified the call for" a public debate on conversions.



The controversy over the pope's visit is only the latest in this calculated process, calculated because the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad carefully discuss, coordinate and calibrate their varying responses so as to both satisfy their own hardcore support base and avoid alienating "moderate" opinion.

Had Atal Behari Vajpayee even a minimal sensitivity to the plight of Christians he would not only have refused to raise the issue of conversions during this whole period when they feel so insecure but also publicly demanded that no one else do so at such a juncture.

If he had genuine respect for the Indian Constitution he would have pointed out that the constituent assembly debates lasted for three years during which the issue was discussed threadbare before the matter was resolved and conversion, when not fraudulent or forcible, deemed a protected democratic right. But then you are talking about a political force which has made no bones about its desire to comprehensively revise the Constitution. This is a long-term aim (how else can Hindutva be legally and constitutionally institutionalised?) but the first step is to begin a public debate on this as well!

ACHIN VANAIK IN "STEP BACK, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS" FROM *THE TELEGRAPH*.

The 325 languages spoken in India

Agaria, Ahirani, Aimol, Aiton, Anal, Andamanese, Angani, Angika, Ao, Apatani, Arabic, Armenian, Ashing, Assamese, Asuri, Awadhi, Badaga, Baghelkhandi, Bagri, Baigani, Bajania, Balti, Bangni, Banjari, Basturia, Bauria, Bawm, Bazigar Boli, Bengali, Bhanjabhumia, Bantu, Bharmauri, Bhairi, Bhili, Bhojpuri, Bhotia, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Bhunjia, Biate, Bilaspuri, Birhor, Birjia, Bishnupriya, Bodo, Bokar, Bondo, bori, Braj Bhasha, Brijlal, Bugun, Bundelkhandi, Burmese, Bushari, Chakhesang, Chakma, Chambilai, Chameali, Chang, Changpa, Chattisgarhi, Chikari, Chinali, Chiru, Chote, Churasi, Dalu, Deori, Dhanki, Dhimal, Dhodia, Dhundhari, Didayi, Dimasa, Dingal, Dogri, Dommari, Droskhat/Dokpa, Duhlian-Twang, English, French, Gadaba, Gadiali, Gallong, Gameti, Gamit, Gangte, Garasia, Garhwali, Garo, Giarahi, Gondi, Gujarati, Gujjari, Gurung, Gutob, Hajong, Halam, Halbi, Harauti, Haryanavi, Hebrew, Himachali, Hindi, Hinduri, Hindu-sthani, Hmar, Ho, Hrusso, Hualngo, Irula, Jabalpuri, Jangali, Jarawa, Jaunsari, Juang, Kabui, Kachanga, Kachari, Kachchi, Kadar, Kagati, Kakbarak, Kanashi, Kangri, Kannada, Karbi, Karen, Karko, Kashmiri, Kathiawari, Khadiboli, Khaka, Khamba, Khampa, Khampti, Khampti- shan, Kharia, Khasi, Khaskura, Khatri, Kherwari, Khiangan, Khorusti, Khotta, Kinnauri, Kiradi, Kisan, Koch, Kodagu, Koi, Koireng, Kokni, Kolami, Kom, Komkar, Konda, Konicha, Konkani, Konyak, Koracha, Koraga, Korava, Korku, Korwa, Kota, Kotwalia, Kudmali, Kui, Kuki, Kulvi, Kumaoni, Kunbi, Kurukh, Kuvi, Ladakhi, Lahauli, Laihawlh, Lakher (Mara), Lalung, Lambani, Lamgang, Laotian, Laria, Lepcha, Limbu, Lisu, Lodha, Lotha, Lushai, Mag, Magahi, Magarkura, Mahal, Maithili, Majhi, Makrani, Malankudi, Malayalam, Malhar, Malto, Malvi, Manchat, Mandiali, Mangari, Mao, Maram, Marathi, Maria, Maring, Marwari, Mavchi, Meitei, Memba, Mewari, Mewati, Milang, Minyong, Miri, Mishing, Mishmi, Mizo, Monpa, Monsang, Moyon, Muduga, Multani, Mundari, Na, Nagari, Nagpuri, Naikadi, Naiki, Nati, Nepali, Nicobarese, Nimari, Nishi, Nocte, Odki, Onge, Oriya, Padam, Pahari, Paharia, Palilibo, Paite, Panchpargania, Pang, Pangi, Pangwali, Parimu, Parji, Paschima, Pasi, Pashto, Pawri, Pengo, Persian, Phom, Pochury, Punchi, Punjabi, Rai (Raikhura), Rajasthani, Ralte, Ramo, Rathi, Rengma, Riang, Sadri, Sajalong, Sambalpuri, Sangtam, Sansi, Santali, Sadra, Saraji, Sarhodi, Saurashtri, Sema, Sentinelese, Shekhawati, Sherdukpen, Sherpa, Shimong, Shina, Shompen, Sikligar, Sindhi, Singpo, Siraji, Sirmauri, Soliga, Sulung, Surajpuri, Tagin, Tai, Tamang, Tamil, Tangam, Tangkhul, Tangsa, Tataotrong, Telugu, Thado, Thar, Tharu, Tibetan, Toda, Toto, Tulu, Urdu, Vaiphel, Varli,

Wagri, Wancho, Yereva, Yerukula, Yimchungre, Zakring (Meyer), Zeliang, Zemi, Zou.

FROM D.M. SILVEIRA'S *INDIA BOOK 1994-95* (CLASSIC PUBLISHERS, GOA).

Vajpayee's Top 10

There are several leaders who have deeply influenced me. Some of them had an impact on me when I was a student; others have shaped my thinking during my nearly five-decade long political career. Therefore, it is by no means an easy job to pick 10 names from this long list.

In my early years, as a student, then as a journalist and later as a young politician, one person whose teachings greatly motivated me was Swami Vivekananda. There is something eternal about his teachings which are deeply rooted in the civilisational and cultural consciousness of this nation. At the same time, they inspire you to look ahead and move forward.

Mahatma Gandhi, of course, has been an enduring influence and a source of immense inspiration. His contribution to the shaping of modern India as well as the Indian is incalculable.

Shahid Bhagat Singh fired the imagination of my generation. I was personally inspired by his revolutionary zeal against India's colonial rulers. Similarly, Swatantraya Veer Savarkar's patriotism and fiery nationalist fervour continues to provide me with strength in the face of adversity.

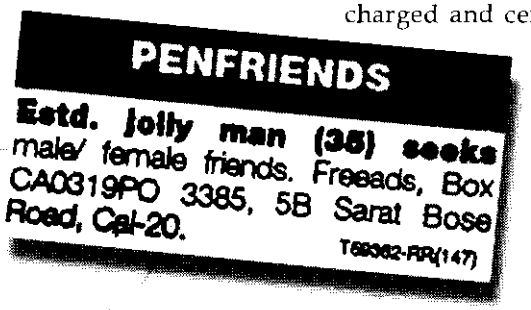
Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his rebellion against the British greatly moved me in my student days. Even today, he continues to inspire me.

In the post-Independence era, two leaders I came to admire were Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. India, as we know it today, is a result of Sardar Patel's grit and determination. Pandit Nehru was a great democrat and it is his unflinching commitment to democracy that has strengthened India's democratic tradition.

Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee's patriotism and his martyrdom in the cause of united India has left an indelible mark on my mind. In those days, one needed a permit to enter Jammu and Kashmir although it was an integral part of India. Dr Mookerjee launched a powerful agitation against that system and entered Kashmir without a permit. I accompanied him till the moment of his arrest. As he was being led away, Dr Mookerjee had turned around and said, "Go back and tell the people of India that I have entered Kashmir without a permit, albeit as a prisoner". Those words still ring in my ears.

Two other leaders who have greatly influenced me are Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King Jr. Churchill led his nation to victory in the face of adversity. His determination was truly amazing. Martin Luther King Jr I admire because of his civil rights movements. He put Gandhi's teachings into practice with great effect and showed the world that all people are truly equal, irrespective of their race, colour, gender and faith.

ATAL BEHARI VAJPAYEE IN "10 LEADERS WHOM I ADMIRE THE MOST" IN REDIFF.COM.



THE TELEGRAPH, CALCUTTA

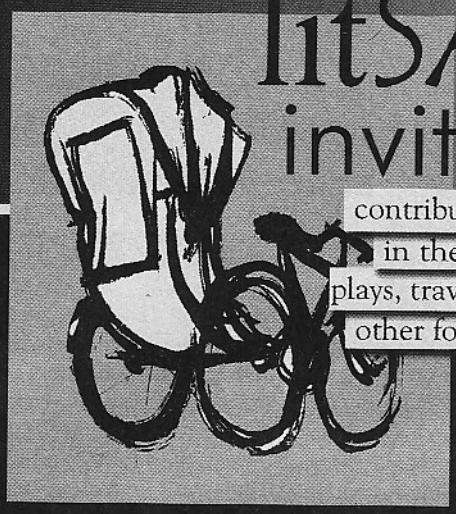
Bimbo baggage

Once is accident; twice is coincidence; thrice is enemy action. That's James Bond's theory. However familiar he may have been with beauties, it clearly doesn't apply to the winning of beauty contests. It's a good thing no one asked 007 to judge Miss World. On 4 December, Yukta Mookhey became the third *Femina* Miss India to be crowned Miss World; it's the magazine's fourth international title if you count Miss Universe. Sushmita, Aishwarya, Diana and now Yukta. Is there a talisman at work, and will all future hopefuls change their names to one ending with 'a'? Maybe, maybe not. What is established is that these are no flukes; we've cracked the code. *Yeh dil maange* Morley.

Whatever other products the lissome Ms Mookhey might promote, her victory endorses the fact that trend has crystallised into social reality. The beauty business has metamorphosed from a weapon of enslavement to a tool of empowerment. The spectacular success of *Femina* Miss India has sublimated into an astonishing self-confidence in a whole generation of middle-class young women. Those victories have been a magic wand, turning the diffident and hesitant into savvy, sassy girls. These Cinderellas don't even have to rush home at midnight; instead they step out at the stroke of that swinging hour.

Our global laurels have brokered a marriage between aspiration and reality. Anyone can dream of being Aishwarya; learn to talk the talk and walk the walk; order a smile as tailored as an evening gown; work at a waist as sculpted as a nose job; win a competition and get modelling assignments which earn an income that can be mistaken for a phone number. Even a mobile phone number. Many women have always had beauty. Some women have always used beauty as power. But never before did the exception become as much of the rule as today. No longer do Virtuous Veena and Brainy Bina huddle with Plain Priya to sneer at Delectable Diya (who had to be sexually charged and cerebrally challenged). Now looking good is not an option; it's an obligation whether you're a receptionist or a rocket scientist. As both cause and effect of this phenomenon, beauty has junked much of its traditional bimbo baggage.

BACHI KARKARIA IN "BEAUTY AND THE EAST" FROM *THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA*.



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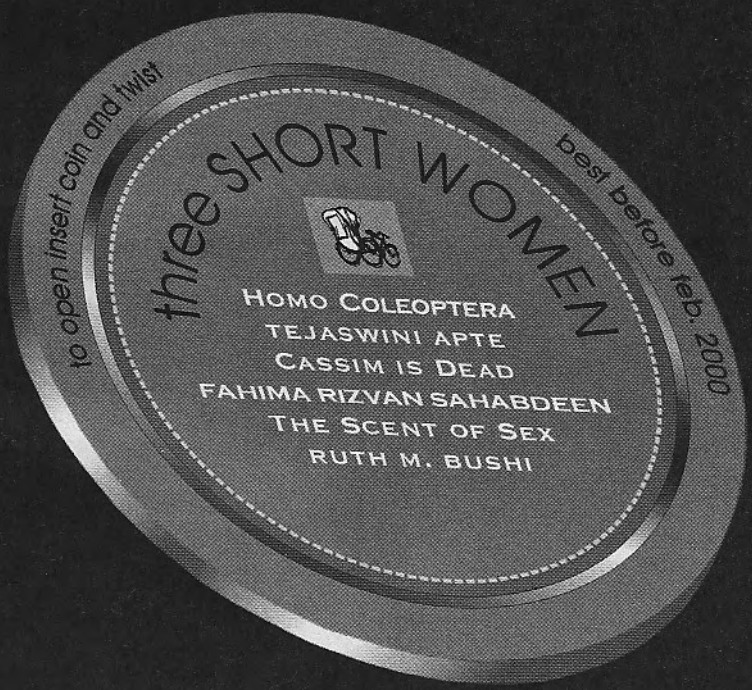
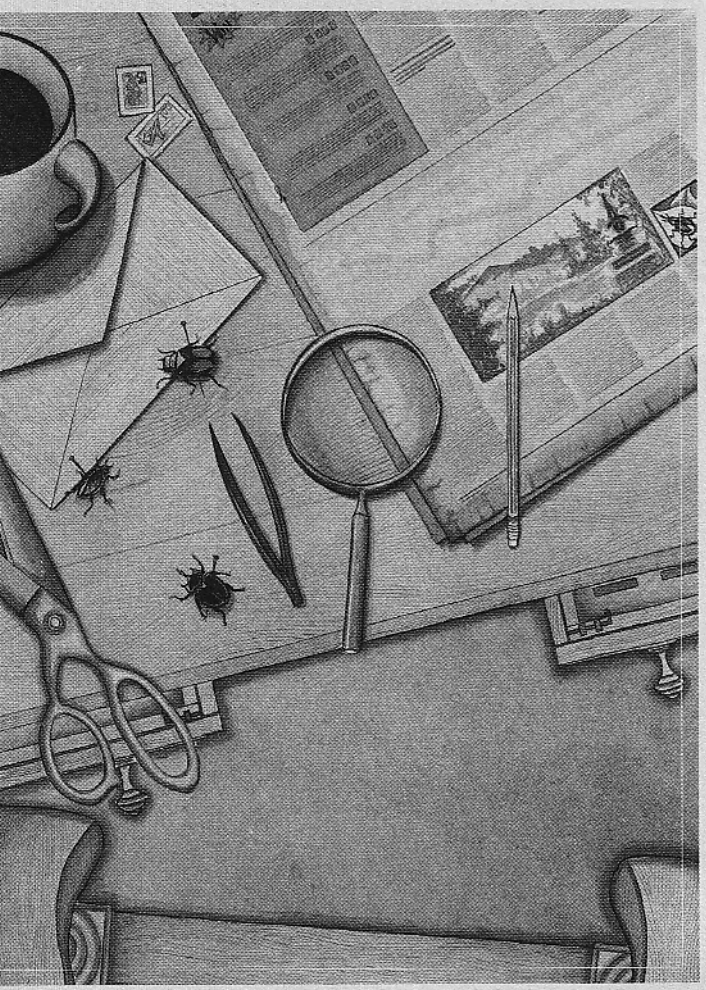


THIS ISSUE

short fiction by three women



homo COLEOPTERA

a short story by tejaswini apte

Leaving aside his beetle collection, most of Mr Ghosh's prized possessions had been won in contests. Early on in life he had realised that all he had to do, once he had filled the form and cut along the dotted line, was to send in his entry and then simply *will* the prizes his way. When it came to contests, he had the willpower of a bull. Nine times out of ten it worked. He had paid for more than half his mortgage with prize money collected and saved over the years. The bank job paid for the other half. His second car had magically arrived at his doorstep one morning, some weeks after he had filled in a multiple answer questionnaire about a new brand of milk chocolate, and completed a slogan that said, "Milky Mints are the best because milk is for health and mint is for taste." It wouldn't have mattered much had Mr Ghosh written, "Because they come in real handy when you want to throw up." He would have won the blue Esteem anyway. Simply because he had willed it to happen.

In fact, Mr Ghosh was sure, as he rubbed his clean-shaven chin with thin, artistic fingers, if most of the really good contests weren't rigged to benefit some distant relation of the Managing Director, he'd have been a millionaire by now and would have travelled the globe twice over on airline-ticket prizes. Had he travelled the globe thus, thought Mr Ghosh dreamily, ensconced in his red armchair with The Further Expanded Beetle Encyclopaedia (opened at S - Scarabaeoida) on his lap, he would have been able to obtain the predaceous Diving Beetle from North America. He would have hunted for species of Amphizoidae in Tibet. And he wouldn't have had to order the enormous, shiny, seven-inch long African Goliath from the Coleoptera Collectors' Society. What a beauty it was! He might have come upon it himself, crawling through the quiet leafy undergrowth of an African jungle. The Initial Sighting. The Stalk. The Inching Closer. A sudden, strong splutter of wings and six crawly legs frantically pawing at the still, humid air. And the giant would be his.

An unlikely persona, since Mr Ghosh, even if he had been able to afford it, had neither the pluck nor the endurance to go on any such expedition. But his years as a banker had produced in him the particular temperament (or perhaps it was the other way around) of a meticulous desktop researcher. And so Mr Ghosh's head was filled with practically everything there was to know about beetles, from their antennae ("usually 11-segmented," he would clarify to anyone who cared to listen) to their mandibles ("often triangular in shape"), from their ten-segmented abdomens ("though all ten segments are not externally visible always") to the thin little hairs ("sometimes not so thin") on their legs.

He had a formidable collection of beetles entrapped for posterity in a variety of glass-topped trays in his desk. Painstakingly gathered over the years, the various shaped and sized creatures lay spread-eagled on their stomachs with long, silver pins thinly piercing each of the six delicate, angular legs, firmly fastening the shelly carcasses to the soft green board underneath. At the tail end of each beetle was a neat white label detailing the family that particular specimen belonged to. Arranged in rows so that they all faced the same direction, they were like so many phalanxes arrayed for battle, frozen in a state of suspended animation, held as if by a magical spell which, when lifted, would send them all scuttling up the board like tanks or whirring out the window like helicopter gunships. Only the prized African Goliath was awarded a small, glass-encased tray of its very own, where it lay in armoured splendour, its crisp covering never losing its sheen.

In the silence of his curtained study where the columns of red material muffled out every sound save the steady ticking of the wall clock, Mr Ghosh would pore over his

MANOHAR RAI

tomes, then pore over his collection, various facts, histories and explanations of beetle structure (bodily and familial) turning over in his mind. Occasionally he would remove the glass casing and thoughtfully nudge some of the less rare beetles with his pen. At other times he would just bend over other, more precious specimens, with a magnifying glass.

Mr Ghosh had another prized possession: often, he would call Mrs Ghosh his ladybird (family Coccinellidae, he would remark, playfully). She was indeed beautiful. And Mr Ghosh knew that, thanks to clever matchmaking by his parents, he had indeed been lucky. Mrs Ghosh's hair was young and thick and black. When she left it loose, it cascaded about her round, shapely buttocks. Her skin was luminous and creamy, her eyes large and shapely, as expressive as a Bharat Natyam danseuse. Her bare waist, with just a hint of fat, showing through the drapes of the thin chiffon sarees she was so fond of, would make Mr Ghosh's heart flutter like a moth. Her smile was sweet and wide, displaying pearly white teeth. And she cooked as if the soul of every master chef who had died and gone to heaven, had descended on her, playing out its culinary fantasies all over again. Mrs Ghosh was perfect.

And Mr Ghosh, try as he might to stop himself, was jealous. He loved his wife. And he couldn't deny that his wife was always kind to him and never refused him anything. Except that she never seemed to understand her husband's passion for beetles. When they married, three years ago, he had taken her eagerly by the hand to his desk and brought out his trays. She had flinched and shuddered as if the whole pack of them had suddenly come alive and flitted down her bare back. But apart from an appreciation of his collection, she had never denied Mr Ghosh anything. She supported him wholeheartedly, helping him concentrate on willing the prizes to come his way. She cooked delicious meals for him day after day. She never withheld her beautiful body from him. She would give herself to him without a murmur, wrapping her shapely legs around his thin, bony hips, smiling up at him as he grunted out his pleasure. She never shied away when, looking up from his beetle collection, he felt a desire to touch a shapely breast as she bent over his desk with his evening tea-tray.

Yet, despite all this, Mr Ghosh knew that his wife was withholding her essential being from him. And that made him furious. He knew that in bed she could have wrapped her legs around him a little more tightly. He knew that her smile could have been wider and more inviting when he returned home every evening. He knew her lips could have been more yielding to his kisses. Worst of all, he had seen a special smile and sparkle in her eyes whenever she met his cousin Amolan at family gatherings. A sparkle and smile that was never directed at Mr Ghosh. After the obligatory circuit of the room was over, Amolan and Mrs Ghosh would inevitably end up in a corner together talking animatedly about God-knows-what, with Mrs Ghosh laughing at Amolan's pathetic little jokes till her sides ached. Mr Ghosh had tried joining them a couple of times, but inevitably felt excluded. Amolan and Mrs Ghosh talked about films and books he knew little about. They laughed at jokes which Mr Ghosh didn't find funny in the least. And their eyes seemed to know his smiles were half-hearted when he tried laughing with them. After a while Mr Ghosh gave up joining them, but continued to be secretly jealous and afraid. More so, because not only was Amolan young, handsome and a raconteur to boot, but he was also unemployed: his afternoons were free.

Mr Ghosh had begun to wish he had never won that second car in the Milky Mints contest. He didn't know where his wife went in the afternoons in it. Quite possibly she went out with Amolan. At first it would be an innocent shopping excursion. Then maybe a matinee. Possibly they had graduated to having lunch and coffee. And then... At this point in his imaginings, Mr Ghosh would irritably go and spend the rest of the evening in the company of his beetles. And because he tended to be a coward, he never said anything. A cold fear had begun joining palms with his heated jealousy. He began to be afraid that she might leave him. And because his cowardice made him vindictive, he would often take the keys of the second car with him when he drove to work. In the evening he would pretend he had forgotten that they were in his pocket. When Mrs Ghosh put on her best saree to go out with him, he would tell her the colour didn't suit her, and ask her to change so that she looked less attractive. At night he would give her painful love bites on her neck so that the next day she would have to leave her thick, black hair flowing down her back in order to hide the purple patches on her delicate skin. She couldn't go out like that, and if Amolan visited her, thought Mr Ghosh grimly, he would see proof of Mr Ghosh's authority. When Mrs Ghosh bent over his desk with his evening tea-tray, he would squeeze her breast brutally; he was quite sure it hurt.

She never said anything. But her large, dark eyes would look puzzled, and a thin crease would appear between the graceful sweep of her eyebrows. It was frustrating. Mr Ghosh wished she would say something, protest, so that he could tell her angrily that she was his, that her body was his. But she never did. And glowering angrily, he would spend evening after evening at his desk, his shiny bald patch bent over his shiny, spread-eagled beetles. At such times he would wish that Mrs Ghosh would shrink so that he could keep her in a bottle with airholes in the lid. Like a little live beetle. After dinner when they sat in their comfortable drawing room, their conversation was of the most mundane variety and even that began to dwindle away. While Mr Ghosh scoured various newspapers for contest opportunities, she would look silently through baby patterns in crochet magazines. Pretending, thought Mr Ghosh maliciously, that she was going to have a baby.

It was during one of those unbearable, interminable post-dinner silences when it first occurred to Mr Ghosh that he should try using his willpower to win another kind of contest. It was as if a little red switch in his brain had been casually but deftly flicked into the 'on' position. If he won, it would be the victory of his life. There could be no

real contest between the thin, angular and balding Mr Ghosh, and the handsome, youthful Amolan. This much Mr Ghosh grudgingly conceded. But he would win the contest as he had won every other. And in the same fell blow he would show Mrs Ghosh to whom she belonged. When the thought first slipped into his mind, it was as a kind of bitter fantasy. Looking over the top of his newspaper at his wife, he would imagine a tiny version of her sitting in the palm of his hand, like a mermaid stranded on a landlocked desert island. It gave him a strange pleasure to imagine her thus, and the thought almost never failed to bring a slight curl to his lip. When it first took shape as a serious idea, his heart had been jolted. Not so much by the ludicrousness of it all, as by the possibility that he was going insane. It was fantastically horrible that such a thought should occur to him and stay with him. But stay it did, like a not entirely unwelcome guest. Once it had slipped into his mind it gripped him like a pair of pincers. Like a predatory beetle it had wormed its way into his very core.

One evening, after dinner, he decided he would do it. He would bring to bear all his willpower in order to shrink his wife. She would be his in every way. In a glass bottle with airholes in the lid. Like a little live beetle. Like a stranded mermaid. When she had learned her lesson he would will her back to her original size again. Or then again, he might not. A little lump of pungent phlegm slid down Mr Ghosh's throat, making his prominent Adam's apple dip inside the sticky blackness.

In short, Mr Ghosh had reached a point in his jealous musings when it seemed more than likely to him that his fiendish, fantastic, impossible plan would work. There was no reason why it shouldn't, he thought, when his willpower had helped him win every other contest. It was just that *this* contest was a little different. And the manner of winning, a little unusual. He thought it ironic and unfair to have to try and win back what was anyway rightfully his in the first place, but he really had no choice. It never occurred to him that Mrs Ghosh might not enjoy being shrunk and made to live in a glass jar with air holes on top. It never occurred to him that anyone might quite conceivably die of shock if such a thing ever happened to them.

So it was that he stopped looking through newspapers for new contests. He wanted to concentrate all his energies on winning this Contest of Contests. He was so absorbed in this task that he found it difficult to concentrate at work. Instead he constantly focused on mentally dissecting Mrs Ghosh and then willing her individual limbs, head, fingers, torso, to shrink. This went on for several weeks. Every morning he would wake up and look at his wife to see if she had begun shrinking. But Mrs Ghosh would be lying there in her pink nightdress, fast asleep, as innocent as an angel. And definitely, most positively, the same size as she had been the day before.

And as each morning commenced thus, Mr Ghosh would burn with frustration and despair. Each day his jealousy grew larger. He started making surprise telephone calls to his house. When the reply was only a monotonous ringing, he would concentrate on the shrinking process with the fury and vigour of a madman. If Mrs Ghosh picked up the phone, he would make up some unimportant question to ask her. At other times he would simply disconnect the line quietly. Then the thought struck him that even if she was at home, it was entirely possible that Amolan was with her. He would imagine Mrs Ghosh putting down the phone receiver while Amolan teased the little folds on her bare waist. And yet, how composed, how stealthily composed she looked when her husband returned home in the evening!

Soon Mr Ghosh could bear it no longer. The more he willed his wife to shrink, the more tortured his thoughts became. In his study, among the still red curtains that stood like somnolent monoliths, his evenings with his rows of beetles grew longer. He went up to bed later and later. He woke in the mornings earlier and earlier. He was losing vast amounts of sleep and energy due to his extraordinary feat of continuous concentration. And he ate with a vigorous appetite to replenish that energy. Soon Mrs Ghosh had to buy more rice, meat and vegetables during her weekly shopping. The more she cooked, the more her husband ate. She was an excellent cook and had no trouble serving up large quantities of Mr Ghosh's favourite dishes. Potato curry. Fish curry. Biryanis of all kinds. Parathas. Samosas. Jalebis. He started carrying an abundance of food in his office tiffin. When everyone else was busy working at their desks, he would snack on high energy candy bars, surreptitiously and with enjoyment. Consequently, his chin grew thick. His shoulders forged an alliance with his head so that his neck all but disappeared. His waistline surged forward to meet his arms. His bony fingers acquired a bulbous globule of fat at each tip. His teeth grew yellow because of his nibbling chocolate in bed, too lazy to get up and brush his teeth before bedtime. In the span of a few months, Mr Ghosh flabbergasted everyone around him by going from thin and lanky, to fat and round. Only his head retained its small, bony shape so that it looked like a brown cherry perched on top of a giant chocolate fudge sundae. Compared to the rest of him, his arms seemed undergrown and thin. And, like all fat people, he started to look short. Mr Ghosh had never been a particularly sprightly man, but now he was positively sluggish. His mind, however, had never been more active. Day after day his willpower was on overdrive, forced and pushed beyond belief in the single-minded pursuit of his goal. He was driven relentlessly by the prospect of holding a stranded mermaid in the palm of his hand. And all the time, while he thought, willed and concentrated, he ate.

One morning, several months after Mr Ghosh had hatched his fiendish plan to possess his wife forever, Mrs Ghosh woke up earlier than usual. She looked at the alarm clock on her bedside table and saw that it was only five o'clock. She was surprised. She liked to sleep late in the mornings and never woke before seven when it was time to prepare Mr Ghosh's breakfast. After he had left for office she would have another snooze till about nine-

thirty, read the papers till ten, and then go into the bathroom for a hot, luxurious shower which lasted well over twenty minutes. This being Mrs Ghosh's morning temperament, she felt rather annoyed at feeling so wide-awake at this odd, early hour. She licked the stale sleep off her beautiful, pouting lips and lay on her back, trying to relax her body so that she could fall asleep again. But she couldn't sleep and she couldn't relax. There was a funny feeling inside her. Not quite nausea. But definitely an uneasy sensation. As if something was going to happen. A few minutes later, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, she turned to wake Mr Ghosh. He wasn't there. His green pajamas were there, laid out neatly like a deflated, green balloon.

Mrs Ghosh sat up in bed in wonder, and then gave a little scream. A small brown beetle was lying on Mr Ghosh's pillow, spread-eagled on its back with its little legs kicking furiously in the air.

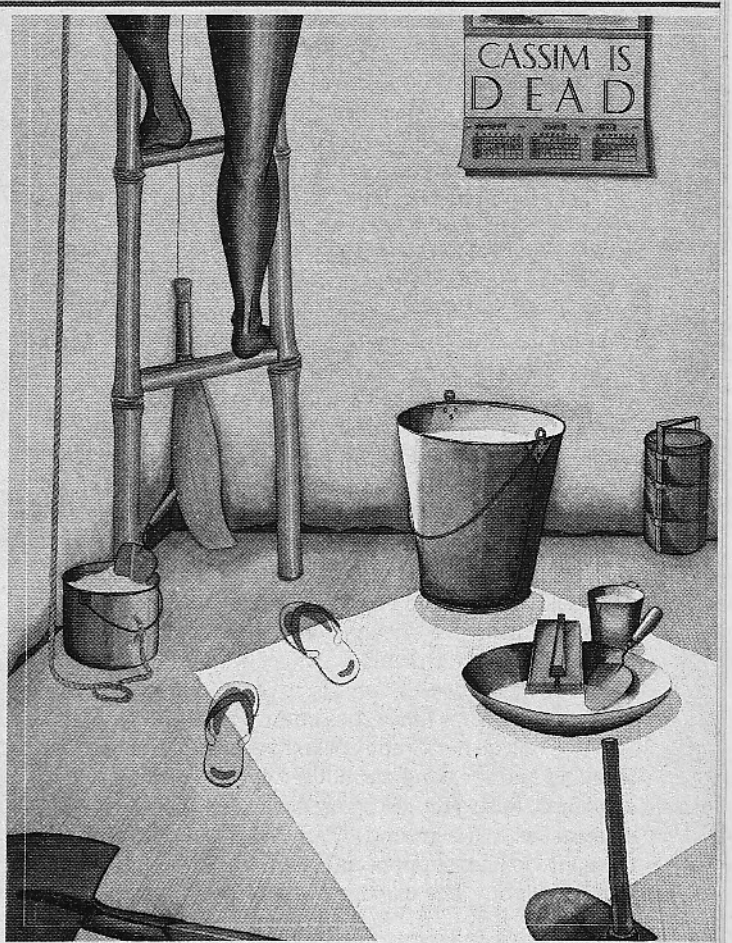
It was all over very quickly after that: she reached for the can of pesticide she always kept under her bed, and sprayed for all she was worth. At first the little legs had kicked even more frantically, but after a while they slowed down, as if they were tired. Finally, they lay quite still and a silence filled the room. That was when Mrs Ghosh, a handkerchief to her nose, realised that the small hum that had filled the air while the beetle was alive, has stopped. She looked closely at the little creature and her expression changed.

Slowly, Mrs Ghosh got out of bed. In silence she picked up yesterday's newspaper from the floor and walked across to the other side of the bed. Gently, but with a shaking hand, she scooped him up like a dead fly and stood looking down at the pudgy, naked body with the neck that had thickened into an extension of the shoulders. Fattened on her delicious curries and biryanis. The four angular limbs. Capped by the bulbous little cherry of a head.

After a while Mrs Ghosh slipped into her warm bedroom slippers and padded down the stairs. She opened the door to the still, red study and brought out the beetle-lined trays. Methodically, she arranged them all on the desk and then stepped back thoughtfully, as if she were choosing a shade of lipstick. Then she brought out four thin, silver pins from a drawer and carefully added one more item to Mr Ghosh's prized collection. "This is the best place for you," she whispered, softly. Then her beautiful lips parted to reveal a sparkling smile. Outside, the sun was just rising.

2 cassim is DEAD

a short story by fahima rizvan sahabdeen



MANOHAR RAI

The body lay in a heap on the floor. Policemen swarmed all about the room. Rasheeda sat, body slightly bowed, poker-faced, her thin silvery hair twisted into a small knot at the back of her head. Whose body? Cassim's? No, Cassim was smaller. The Baas's. He wouldn't come down. She had asked him to, repeatedly but he had ignored her. Gradually she recollected the past few hours...

It had been a nightmare: every time she lay down the sound would begin.

"What's that noise?" she complained.

"Why, it's only the Baas! " Wakila replied. "You remember, Mummy got him down to repair the roof?"

"But we have no money to pay him. I told him to go. When did you come here? Where has your Mummy gone?"

"To market, to market, to buy a fat pig!"

"Don't say that word, even for a joke!" She looked at her granddaughter warningly. Wakila lay unconcerned on the bed. She looked different somehow... her hair!

"Why have you cut your hair? And so short?"

"It's so hot Umama. And it looks nice, honestly. Even Mummy said so."

"Your mother doesn't know anything. She's a foolish woman. Who will marry you now, looking like a Maata kutti!"

Wakila laughed. "Umama, lots of girls cut their hair this way. It's the style. Besides when I get married, my husband won't drag me by the hair, that's for sure!"

"I will tell him to pinch you hard. Such a bad girl you are, a very bad girl!"

"What's wrong with short hair? Why is it bad?"

"Why? Because you must think and understand why. That's why."

Wakila irritated her needlessly with her endless questions: why should I get married? Why can't I study first? Why do you have to pray so much for Appa when he'll go to Heaven anyway. She couldn't understand that even a million prayers were too few for him. Cassim had been so good to her. She poked her round bangled hand under her pillow and groped for her prayer beads, the ones Cassim had bought for her fifteen years ago on their last trip to Mecca. Now she was eighty-two; when she had married him she had been only twelve. And he, twenty? Yes, thereabouts. She could still picture him, as he had been when they first met. Those memories were fresh. How she had to work all day for her stepmother and yet, her stepmother had grudged Rasheeda the little food she had eaten. And begun, ever since Rasheeda reached puberty, to search for a husband for her.

How terrified she had been of marrying a man she had never seen before. She had tried to run away. But the house was too full of relatives and she the centre of attraction.

"Let's have children later," Cassim had said on their wedding night, seeing her cowed by fear. From then onwards she knew her troubles were over. Cassim had been very kind. As soon as he could afford it, he had taken her to a new house, away from her stepmother. She had had little cause to disagree with him and had readily agreed to everything he suggested ever after. That was the way to live. Not like this girl who refused to marry even at eighteen. She turned towards her granddaughter and pointed at the jug of water. Wakila jumped up and fetched a glass. Her grandmother smiled her thanks.

Goody, thought Wakila, she's forgotten. "Do you ever dream of Appa, Umama," she asked innocently.

"Yes, he said to tell you to get married soon and obey your husband and pray for him," her Granny retorted. Wakila grinned. She often played this game with her Granny, a test-your-memory game and found that her Granny's memory was very sharp after an argument. It was funny that at other times she couldn't remember anything...

As if on cue her Granny asked yet again, "Who is that breaking and breaking our house?" Even as Wakila explained, Rasheeda sat up on the bed and lowered her delicate feet to the ground. Then very slowly she wriggled them into leather slippers and stood up. Although the floor whirled slightly, she managed to shuffle to the door. Wakila protested.

"Why, Umama! Come and rest. You know that it's bad for you to get up so often!"

The old woman ignored her. Disobedient girl. She and the Baas both irritated her, the Baas more so for he had the temerity to ignore her. She leaned against the doorway, her worn-out hands gripping the frame tightly. Panting slightly, she called out loudly to the mason who was leaning against the top rung of the ladder, absorbed in his work, "Come down, that's enough now. I told you I have no money."

The Baas was a swarthy, bearded young man, wearing a dirty pair of shorts and a torn tee shirt. Now he wiped the perspiration off his forehead on his sleeve. He had been warned by the lady that her mother might be difficult and called out,

"Only a little more now, Madam." He didn't stop his work. He didn't even look down. How could he be so cheeky!

"No, no! Stop now. Even if you work the whole day, I won't give you any money. I haven't got money I tell you."

Wakila held her Granny gently by the shoulders. Her Granny was so small it was easy. She seemed to have shrunk in the past four months since her grandfather had died.

"Umama, we have a lot of money," she began.

"Keep quiet!" the old woman shushed, "Do you want him to hear you? That money is for our food and drink." She turned to the Baas again. "Stop at once," she comanded vainly.

Haniya heard her mother shouting and bustled into the room. "What are you doing out of bed, Umma?"

Her mother scowled at her, then boomed in her low voice, "Who brought this fellow into our house?"

"I did," her daughter unhappily explained for the fifth time that morning. "The ceiling is falling apart and Nawaz sent us money for the house repairs. If you don't let him do his work, the roof will fall on our heads."

"It won't fall. Why should it fall? All these years it didn't fall?"

"That's a miracle, Alhamdhulillah!" Haniya retorted. It wasn't easy to be patient when there was so much work to be done. "Wappa should have repaired it long ago." She turned to her daughter. "Look after her Wakila. I have to put the beef to boil."

Rasheeda sat down carefully on a chair near the doorway between the rooms and sighed. Wakila heard her and ran to her with the newspaper.

"There's a nice article on women, Umama," she said and pointed at the article. Rasheeda read out aloud, 'Women fight for human rights.' It didn't interest Rasheeda. She was of the opinion that such women asked for trouble.

"What rights? If they look after their husbands nicely their husbands will listen to them," she commented. She turned to the headlines. 'Eighty-six Tigers killed.' "How is that? Were they poisoned?" But although she tried to focus on Wakila's explanation about terrorists, she felt her attention wander. It was not important. Death was the only reality and it had taken Cassim. And since Cassim had died... when had he died? Yesterday or was it the day before? Since he had died she was alone. When would she

join him? But it was a sin to even think of it..

"You're not listening, Umama."

"Yes, darling I'm very tired." She put down the paper, dark thoughts pursuing her. Where was she? Yes. She had to be very careful. Careful of rogues, careful with money. There were no men in the house. Haniya's husband had died when Wakila was a baby. Cassim had looked after them all. Nawaz, her only son, lived in America, or was it Australia? Well, somewhere anyway and couldn't return because of a visa problem.

"Come and lie down now Umama," Wakila was saying. "If you are tired you must sleep." She was seated on Cassim's bed looking at some photographs.

"Look, here is a photo of Hafsa's baby."

But the noise continued to nag. Didn't the fellow understand? Or was he a madman that they couldn't get rid of? She decided to talk gently to him.

"Don't, please, don't break my ceiling. Come down I tell you." The Baas mumbled back a monosyllable but didn't stop banging. Rasheeda was really angry now. Why wasn't he obeying her? She had commanded a battalion of servants when her children were small. Wasn't she still mistress of the house? A feeling of hopelessness shook her. How could she be mistress when the master was no more, the dear, dear master? But even as she mourned Cassim's loss Rasheeda grew panic-stricken. This man would never leave. He might demand money, jewellery. I must be equal to the situation, she thought, and take Cassim's place from now on. She stepped determinedly into the room, her small frame stooped slightly.

Then she shook the ladder hard saying, "You don't understand. I don't have money to pay you. Come down at once!"

All of a sudden, he tumbled down. She had killed him. She had actually killed a man. She had heard the policeman quite clearly, "The Baas has died." No, it was Cassim. If Cassim was alive, none of this would have happened.

Though she sat, poker-faced, her heart suffocated with grief and fear. "Cassim is dead!" it moaned softly, "Cassim is dead!

the scent OF SEX

a short story by Ruth M. Bushi

Tafalgar Square is a heaving mass, an undulating sea of bodies in the late afternoon sun. Above them, around them, at their feet, like flotsam, peck a dirty multitude of pigeons, feckless now that no one can swing a fistful of cheap corn their way. It's hot—stifling—and the lethargic crowds sway in the lion-clad sleepiness. The roaring breath from the mouth of the subway is hotter still, but at least it's alive; sustaining, if not reviving. I am glad to have it against my face, laden as it is with grime and hostility, and frenzied Mind the Gap-Doors Closing. Like strange, sweaty fingers, it rakes the dampening hair from my face, and teases the ruffles on my cotton blouse.

I am escaping from the National Gallery, from its cultured confines, from its confining culture. Have you ever been there? A beautiful building. Infinite halls, galleries, collections, convenient phrasings of the old masters, each one rising phoenix-like thwarting relief. Philistine! What else is there? A few paintings, but more people. A feckless, drab multitude that flits from one brass plate to another, eyes skimming cursorily if the ridged canvas doesn't extrude Rembrandt, Renoir, Renault from its fabric.

The real prize: this labyrinth, the progression of chambers, each one decadently clad in pure colour behind the framed distractions, each one drawing you to the next so that you might suddenly expect to find yourself alone,

MANOHAR RA

and scared witless, in Poe's ebony vault, a scarlet masked figure suddenly hard by your shoulder.

What else? Frosted, flowered glass ceilings; an experiment in natural illumination that causes the dim lights to shine mischievously, to dance across the boarded floor. As for me, I stand guard beside 'The Surprise', a young girl, snowy but flushed, half out of her gown. I wonder who was the more surprised? Shortly, I grow feckless myself, sick of bird-watching and of my own disconnection. I walk out, watching the rhythmic, blurred swing-swing-swing of my trainers, as I am borne by the departing hordes; they've 'done' the National Gallery: a thousand mental ticks squeak onto the slate.

I slide my ticket into its slot, and the metal arms of the stile grope me through, and then I am swallowed by the tiled gullet that leads down to the tracks. Standing on the platform's ledge, the air is sultry—or perhaps is the collective breath of a hundred strangers wedged together in silent anonymity. Wrists and hips may brush casually together, amorously perhaps, but the stares remain ever divergent. One couple is conspicuous by doing just that, and I know that mine aren't the only hopeful eyes watching them.

As usual, I don't get a seat. Instead I am ever polite in the face of an Art College Miss, all thighs, boots and attitude, who nabs one of two empty seats with her bulky portfolio. Mentally, I make an uncharitable note about her mother, all the while demurely watching the evernight in the window. The Couple have managed to jam into the remaining seat, amoeba-like. It suddenly and overwhelmingly, pisses me off. I grimly maintain eye contact with my shadowy self, doubled and displaced in the reflections in the window.

More people cram in behind me, the carriage collectively breathing in until the rapid siren signals the doors closing. I find myself wedged against a metal pole, my back against that of a tall, black suit. As the carriage jerks into motion, the suit's sleeve seems to pat my rump consolingly. I tense, but don't turn, even as the low velvety voice moves against my ear in brief apology before gliding back to its conversation.

I have a long ride ahead that follows the track spiralling away from the helly of the city. Through the interminable stops (why, but oughtn't they paint all the stations a different colour, too?) my mind lulls, and wanders more slowly, far from the worm holes through which we burrow. I think about...Tokyo, and how they have people who are paid to cram commuters onto trains, and hold them in place until the doors slide shut, the human equivalent of a helpful finger during an awkward bow. I think about that, and how I would like to be paid to squash-push the indefatigable mob that looms against my damned reserve. Art Girl swings her interminable legs in my direction, and boots me out of my reverie just as a hand brushes warmly against my wrist. The low voice, rhythmically brushing my ear in time with the train, drones on, and I think about...what it would be like to step in front of an underground train, and be whisked away from the station with utter finality: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, your next station stop will be—' What? Not Earl's Court, that's for sure. The lights in the carriage flicker in alarm, and we enter a pocket of abrupt blackness. The hand at my side nuzzles questioningly at my palm, and then insistently slides around my fingers.

I have had conversations with people who have been on board when someone has 'caught' the train in that other sense. It's funny that the aura that hangs over such reminiscences is one of annoyance, a registering of how damn inconvenient it is. The fingers of this unknown hand gently interlace with my own, and caress me in time with the deeper, inherent throb that travels along these underground lay lines.

It's damn selfish, too, apparently. The father of a friend of mine had once had to walk down a stalled line with only a flashlight, looking for the severed head of some unfortunate. I shiver. Who knows what hooded figure might be at your shoulder in the dark? I suddenly remember that I never asked if they found it; the head, I mean.

A congregational moan, and I realise we've stopped. The orange lights in the carriage grow dimmer, and dimmer, and then seem to recede into the inky tunnel outside, as if the train has disgorged us all, and goes racing on regardless. The ever-present dull roar has stopped, and instead the fervoured collective breath rises, hot and foul, and edged with panic.

The Suit edges closer, his other hand anchoring against the pole, just beneath mine. Still the hushed conversation continues in the dark; now and then it intermingles with my hair. They're talking about opera. He smells expensive. His hips ridged against mine, his caressing hand lightly up the soft inner skin at the crease of my arm, he apologises, repeatedly. The darkness, the closeness of humanity makes me light-headed. I look down the carriage and out, searching for flashlights that wave semaphore into the abyss.

I think about: how it might feel to be rammed in the artificial night by another train in that circular, underground groove. How we might hear it, the far away roar gaining until it rushes upon us, and through us, and over us, leaving us mangled and twisted in its wake, a groaning symphony of metal and flesh. I wonder what the shadows are thinking about, and how ridiculous it is that death rushes upon us while we are thinking about what to have for tea, and, did I switch the cooker off, or, I think my husband's having an affair. And then—all these unfinished lives lying on the track, these unfinished sentences hanging heavy in the air over them. Then I realise that it is still silent but for the low hum of the track, and the intermittent everyday small talk, and that there is no train rushing upon us in the dark like a malevolent angel.

The Suit is taller than I am. He bends his head, and grazes his lips against the nape of my neck, blowing my hair away from the path his lips seek out. I wonder what The Couple are doing. Is the dark a silent accomplice in their furtive union? In the dark, does she rock and strain, interminably, on his lap? I know nothing about opera, and

wonder why on earth the Armani suit is nuzzling the short, brown girl.

I think about my father instead, who died one lunch time in the Cumbrian fells, succumbing to a heart attack, wham! Just like that. Odd, how these real-life incidents impinge onto the every-day narrative of a tube ride. Death has its own circular time, which intrudes upon an otherwise linear track. Birth 'n' Death, Birth 'n' Death, Birth 'n' Death: a double act, a package deal, a composite offer, like Bed 'n' Breakfast. And then, the circles of time afterwards, for those left behind. Life then always rotates around the rhythmic re-occurrence of anniversaries, of death, would-have-been-birthdays, altered Christmases and vacations, each one a marker of absence.

A ghostly strumming echoes through the tunnel, and an impatient whinny hums and wakes the train. We're moving again, slowly, now in a sickened half-light. The window has been eased open beside my cheek, and I am fanned between a cool breeze on my burning face, and the steady, warm suspiration on my neck. His lips trail exquisitely, promisingly, to my temple, wordlessly parted, and so soothing. His communicating hand grips my waist, and steadies my hips against the nudging of his own; his arm seems to harness the electricity running from the overhead wires outside, and channels it to my quivering core. The random jolting of the train is incorporated into our nameless swaying, in time with the ever-increasing pace of the tube as it slices through the night-not-night. The lights grow brighter, and brighter, and he shifts his head reluctantly, but still rocks against me. My shirt is slick against my skin. The lights seem too bright, the faces of the crowd indefinite and blurred around the edges, far away and too close. The collective breath unites with the roar outside: in my ears, crashing through the veins in my head, palpitating in the backs of my knees. Into the melee rushes the crackles of the PA, and a stream of thick, fuzzy words. The racing train lurches to the left, something sparks and spits overhead, and then blue flames are tonguing the window languidly.

As the spent train is sliding into the bright, humming station, I disengage my hand, and weave shakily through faceless strangers, cutting a swathe through the taut electric stasis. I nearly turn around, to search out his face. I think about Job's wife, and then jump lightly onto the platform, and dissolve into the heady aroma of the herd. ▲

Man Bites Dog

BY OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

DOGMANDU (Xhihuahua)
An angry metro resident bit off a dog's ear in the wee-wee hours of the new millennium, saying that he was prevented from enjoying his sleep by its (the dog's) all night long howling.

The Golden Retriever told police that he had this sudden urge to howl at the brightest moon in 133 years when an irate human emerged out of the darkness and, without provocation, started shouting abuses at him.

"The moon just kept getting brighter, and I couldn't control myself anymore," the dog told this reporter on condition of anonymity. The two-legged naked ape then came out and allegedly wrestled the Retriever to the ground, biting off a postage stamp size chunk off his right ear in the process.

In the emergency room of a local vet, the heavily bandaged dog said: "I have heard dogs biting men, but not of men biting dogs. There should be a law against it."

The severed ear, which was retrieved by an alert passerby, arrived at the prestigious Dogmandu General Hospital soon after the patient. But it could not be reattached to the dog's head because of its mangled condition. According to unusually-reliable medical sources who declined to be named despite repeated requests, the dog will be permanently disfigured, and may also suffer a hearing impairment of sounds in the very-high frequency range.

Meanwhile, the alleged perpetrator has been remanded in custody by a Dogmandu Magistrate. Highly-placed police sources said he was in an advanced stage of intoxication with bits of fur still stuck to his front teeth when apprehended. The hair has been sent for DNA analysis.

The dog's relatives said they had already been in contact with prosecution lawyers to begin legal proceedings against the man, who will be sued for grievous bodily harm and mental strain.

The man's family said neighbourhood dogs were in the habit of enjoying loud late-night parties to commemorate the unusually bright full-moon. Last night's party was raucous even by neighbourhood standards because of the millennium, they added.

Said one neighbour: "Poor man, all that howling just got too much for him."

"You should check your e-mails more often. I fired you over three weeks ago."

And this legally correct New Millennium Greeting just in:

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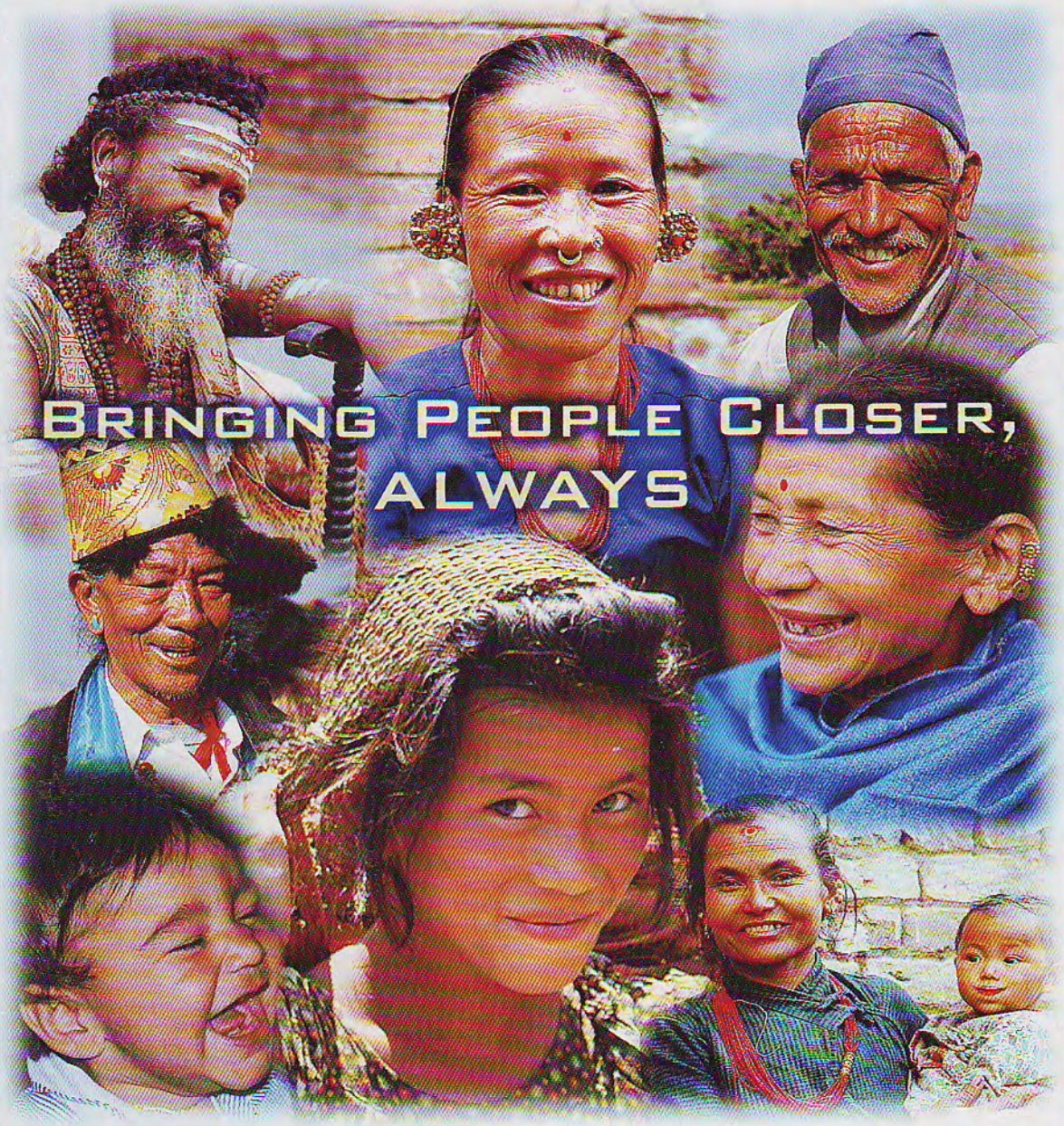

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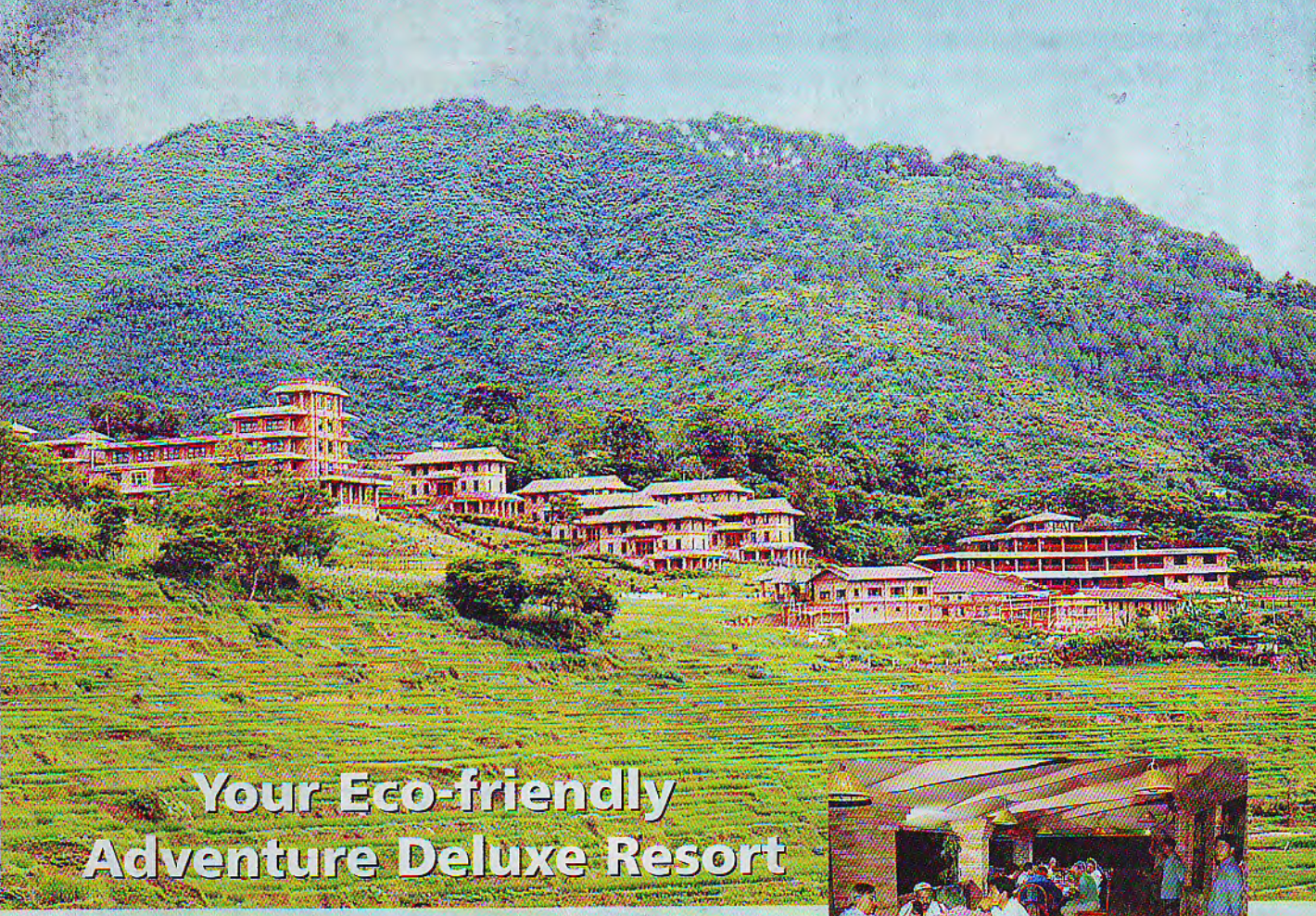

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