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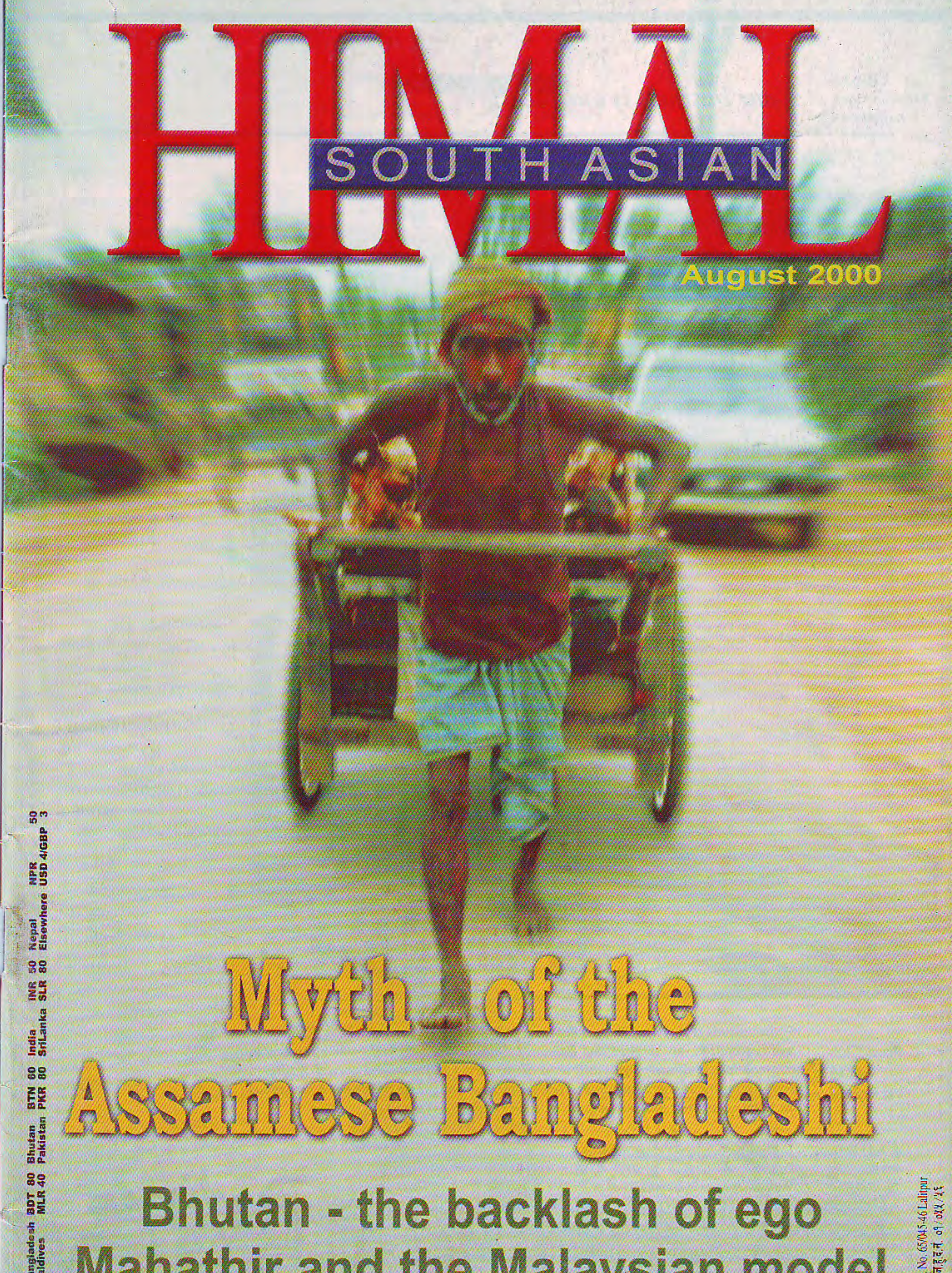
SOUTH ASIAN
August 2000



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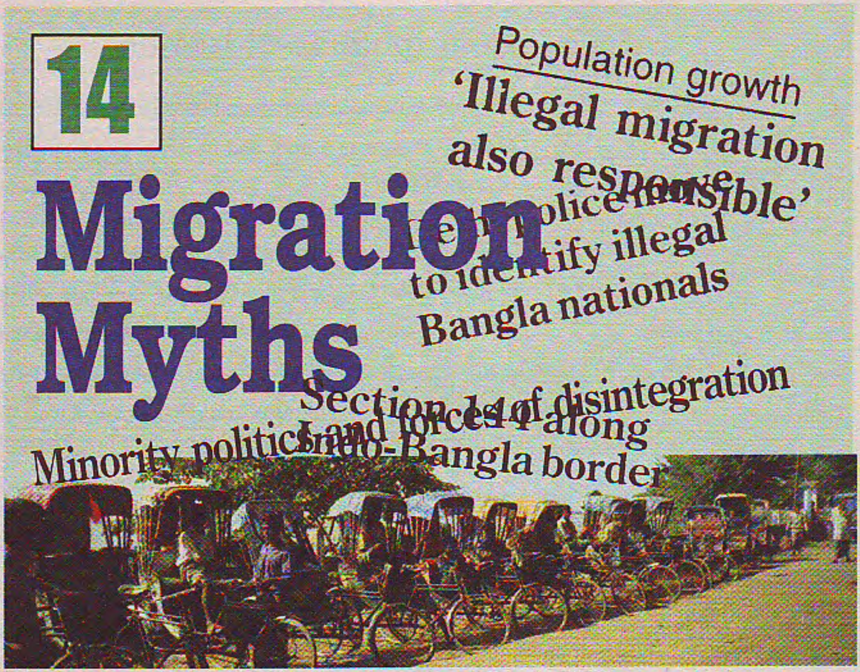

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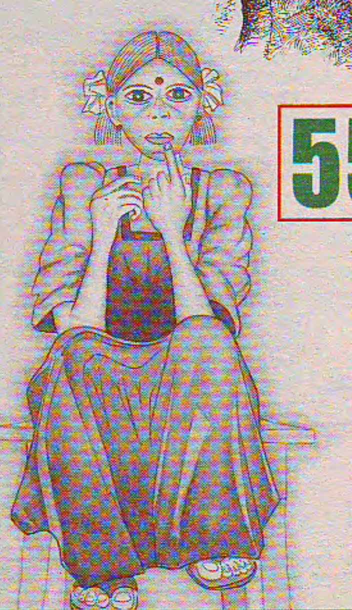

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Children of Assi

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Cover design by **Bilash Rai**. Photograph by **Shalini Raghaviah** shows an Asamiya Muslim riksawallah in Guwahati.

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Indira Gandhi and me

For us Nepali students, the state of Emergency (Himal, *July 2000*) in India put in place on 26 June 1975, came as a relief because this meant colleges would reopen. Due to the ongoing political turmoil, our Engineering College at Rourkela, India's steel city, had been closed *sine die*. The prolonged holiday in Kathmandu had begun to pall.

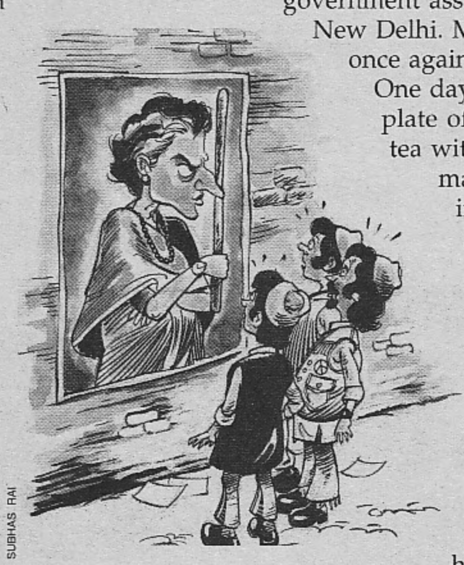
With two other college mates, I headed back to Rourkela. Our journey via the heartland of Bihar, starting at Raxaul and ending at Tatanagar, to catch the last leg of the journey to the steel city, was uneventful. We chugged into Rourkela station on the evening of 2 July 1975.

When we descended on the platform, we seemed to generate some attention, which was unusual. Before we were able to catch a taxi, a police inspector and three constables detained us. He reported on his wireless set, "Three anti-social elements with long hair, bell bottom pants and high heel shoes have been apprehended outside Rourkela Railway Station."

We protested, "We are coming from Nepal! Please let us talk to our principal." The inspector shut us up with some choice expletives. It was clear he was not going to let go of prey in hand, and we were herded into a police jeep and taken to the *thana*. There we met the "anti-social elements" arrested earlier: a doctor, a few teachers, a group of farmers, even some *dhobis* with their loads of washed clothes, and a few *chanewals*. The young doctor had his sister's marriage that evening, but the gaol in-charge would not hear of releasing him. There was nothing to do but to buy *chana chatpate* from our fellow inmate and pass the time.

For a 20-year-old engineering student, it was difficult to understand why we had been arrested. Politics was only something to be read off the day's headlines, and the sheer arbitrariness of this incarceration was baffling.

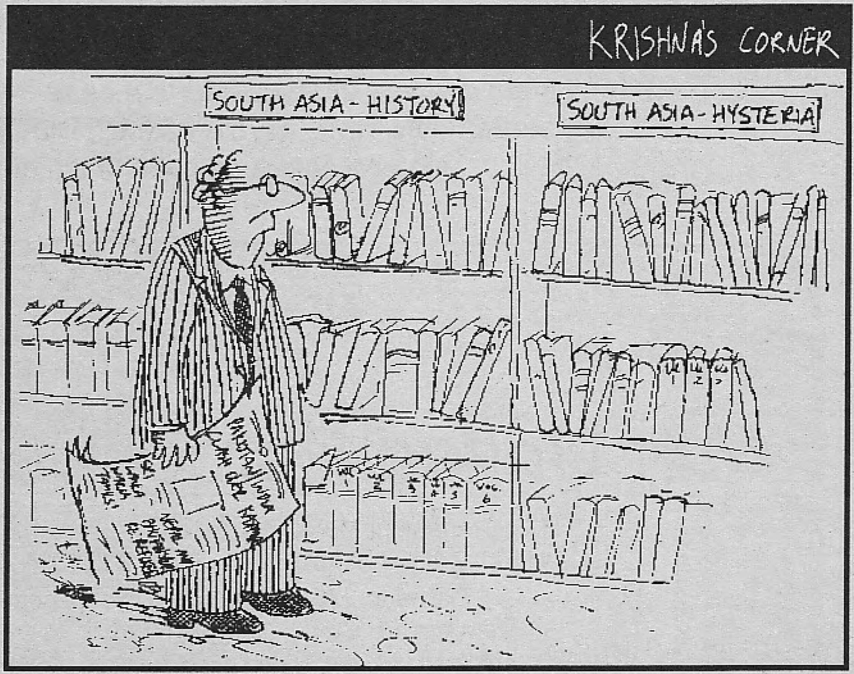
As the night became older, it became clear that we would be released, but we had to be charged with some misdemeanour to justify our time in the lockup. The sub-inspector sized us up, and decided that our hair—down to our necks in proper Kathmandu fashion—had to go. And so we were haphazardly sheared. Fortunately, the scissors stayed on the scalp and did not travel south, and we did not have to face the spectre of forcible sterilisation courtesy Sanjay Gandhi, which so many Indian brethren did.



Rather than be treated as the courageous trio which had survived a night of possible torture at the Emergency-ridden police thana, the next morning we were met with indifference in the hostel and at college. Some teachers went to the extent of putting us at total fault: "You must have misbehaved with the police."

In March 1977, the Janata government assumed power in New Delhi. My hair was once again over the ears. One day, enjoying a plate of samosa and tea with my classmates during intermission at a local cinema, the thana in-charge who had shorn us came by. Recognising us, he said he was sorry for what had happened. Incidentally, he said, he had left the police service. Before I could ask him why, he was gone.

The mild trauma me and my Nepali friends experienced at the hands of the authoritarian system was of course mundane. Looking back, I cannot imagine that those in power in Delhi had intended to treat some hapless college stu-



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dents as implacable political foes. Yet, it happened to us. What our little episode explains is the ease with which authoritarianism moves down the state ladder, and brings all and sundry within its grasp. In the end, it is human nature—whether it is the secretaries in the ministries of Delhi, or the in-charge of a thana in the moffusil, authoritarianism allows them the leeway to push their weight about. Howsoever possibly pious the intention of the person at the top, in this instance Indira Gandhi, an emergency makes dictators of petty people within reach of power everywhere. This is a South Asian proclivity, and we all, indeed, have to learn the lessons from India 1975-1977.

Ajaya Dixit
Kathmandu

Small-town sensibility

In your article on Sahayog (July 2000), the organisation which published the questionable pamphlet on sexuality among the hill people, you miserably tried to shield those who have no respect for the local people of Kumaon. When asked about the whole controversy, the Sahayog couple told *The Indian Express*: "We have become victims of small-town mentality." But the question is, who asked them to do a favour to the wretched "small-town people"? If they think small-town mentality is so inferior, why don't they open an NGO in Washington DC? The message from Almora is clear: if you cannot respect local sensibilities, if you cannot respect local traditions, and if you think that speaking high-flown English with an Oxford accent gives you the license to pass judgement on the 'lesser mortals', you will have to face the people's anger.

Rajesh Joshi
New Delhi

Himal's identity

I read the July issue of your magazine. As a reader of this magazine published from Nepal, this issue left me confused. Most of the articles, in fact all of them but two, are related to India. Your magazine goes worldwide. So, it would be appreciated if you could let people abroad know about Nepali culture, news and information. Whether or not Indira Gandhi was a good lady, how Tamil Cinema is doing, and what is the state of Ambassador cars, hardly make any difference to Nepalis. I hope you can make your magazine a little less India-oriented.

Chanda Upadhyaya
Lalitpur

Himal is a South Asian, not a Nepali, magazine. And India is a big country.
-editors

Everything you wanted to know about the two central Nepal districts of Gulmi and Arghakhanchi. This book is history, geography, enthnography and cultural studies all rolled into one. The result of a nine-year-long research by a team of French social scientists—perhaps the first study of its kind in Nepal.

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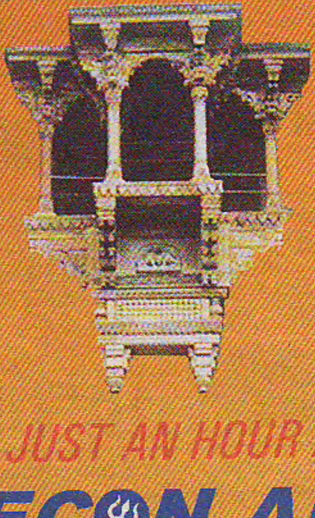

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INDIA

AZADI AND AUTONOMY

"... **THEN I** secede," declared the creator of *God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy, in her thought-provoking and celebrated essay "End of Imagination". She was merely exerting her choice to keep away from the tremors of jingoism in the wake of Pokharan nuclear blasts. But she made a much more powerful point than that with her deceptively simple statement: collective identity ceases to be of importance the moment one of its constituents feels sidelined, or worse, alienated.

The unitary form of the Indian state is a post-colonial creation. Right from the village republics of Vedic period, through the Pallavas, Mauryas, Kushans, Chalukyas, Cholas, Mughals and the British, the geographical entity called India has always been a home of many national identities. Even when some imperial powers did succeed in bringing a large part of it together under a single rule, the character of the state remained loosely federal. Apart from paying obeisance to the central authority, local governors or rulers were largely left to fend for themselves. The British did use their 'power of paramouncy' when needed, but even they were reluctant to overuse it, despite the interpretations of nationalist Indian historians to the contrary.

In *Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru used rose-tinted glasses to project the idea that nationalistic India was something that had always existed, only dormant and waiting to be 'discovered'. In the event, he ended up creating it—on the scaffolding erected by the piety of Mahatma Gandhi and the perseverance of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. Once the two went out of the scene, Nehru had to face the reality of a crumbling identity that was forged for the particular purpose of gaining independence, and was glued by the charismatic personalities of the struggle for it. But then Nehru was a pragmatic person, a liberal to the core. He rose to the challenge and applied the lessons that he had learnt from the history of Europe. He recognised the aspirations of linguistic movements and agreed to the reorganisation of states.

Identity, however, goes beyond having one's own language. It has social, cultural as well as economic dimensions. The nativist movement centred in the sons-of-the-soil concept of Shiva Sainiks in Maharashtra took off from where the linguistic movement had left local aspirations unfulfilled. Then there are the regional movement of the Akalis and the DMK, the concept of cultural pride spearheaded by Telugu Desam, and the assertion of priority rights over resources, including land, by the Asom Gana Parishad. Indira Gandhi, for all her much-vaunted astuteness, botched it all up on a grand scale. Tragically, she paid for this misreading with her life, after she sent battle tanks to silence the religious and nativist aspirations of Punjab. Nehru's India took the shocks not because his daughter had strengthened it, but because he himself had built a strong foundation.

Even the strongest of foundations can not hold forever. A realisation has slowly started to emerge that India is more than a country—it is a subcontinent in its own right within the South Asian region. Consequently, there is a need to rediscover the idea of India, a geopolitical necessity to reform the power of centralism, and a social urgency to rebuild a state that will not crumble under its own weight—and incidentally crush its neighbours in the process.

Predictably, in the latest moment, this issue has been precipitated by Jammu and Kashmir, a state whose Hindu ruler chose to hitch his wagon with the Indian Union when hordes of aggressors coming down from the Pakistani side of the newly-partitioned Subcontinent forced his hands in surrendering his inde-pendence. Even as India annexed the region, Nehru promised it the right of secession, "... if the people of Kashmir wish to part company with us, they may go their way and we shall go ours". However, it did not turn out to be as simple as that, partly because a section of Kashmir remained in Pakistan after the India-Pakistan skirmishes of 1948. Since then, India and Pakistan have fought three full-fledged wars, one all-out confrontation in Kargil, and numerous pitched battles in Siachen, Rann of Kutch, and the *Line of Control* within Kashmir itself. Meanwhile, as Vidya Subrahmaniam wrote recently in *The Times of India*, Kashmir itself is like a high-security prison.

Azadi for Kashmir is not likely to have as much repercussions in rest of India as the ultra-nationalists fear.

The whole population of a state cannot be held in imprisonment forever, and it is getting late to address the aspirations of Kashmiri people. The *azadi* that Farooq Abdullah has enunciated goes far beyond the demand of autonomy for states. What he wants is a kind

OUTLOOK

An aggressive Farooq Abdullah's demand for autonomy has opened "a window of opportunity, not a Pandora's Box".

of limited sovereignty within the Indian Union. If he succeeds in getting what he wants, Kashmiris will perhaps be more independent than they ever were under the Mughals or the British. Once Indian Kashmir achi-eves a sovereignty of that extent, it will be merely a question of time for the so-called Azad Kashmir to join the Kashmiri mainstream.

Azadi for Kashmir, however, does have its complexities. For one, it will undermine the confidence of Indian Muslims, who take pride in the fact that there is one state in the Union, like any other state, where their brethren are dominant. Secondly, once Pakistani claim over Kashmir is made redundant, the very existence of that theocratic nation-state, already badly battered by the birth of Bangladesh, will be in jeopardy. Pakistan will then probably have to reinvent itself.

Azadi for Kashmir is not likely to have as much repercussions in rest of India as the ultranationalists fear. The 'autonomy' that Prafulla Kumar Mohanta of the Asom Gana Parishad wants, the "true federal structure" that Prakash Singh Badal of the Akali Dal keeps demanding, and even the "real federation" of MDMK leader Mr. Vaiko, are mostly expressions of frustration for regional aspirations not being met by an insensitive Centre.

The Shiva Sena supremo's war cry is still *Jai Maharastra*, not *Jai Hind*; and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi is once reported to have written "Dravidian" in the column of nationality while checking into a hotel. By that simple action, Karunanidhi made the point quite eloquently that the 'nation' and the 'nation-state' aren't one and the same. That hasn't made any of them question the intentions of 'Indians' as Hurriyat leaders and most Kashmiris habitually do.

Professor Dipankar Gupta of the Jawaharlal Nehru University has a point when he says in a powerful paper on the indispensable Centre: "In many ways, areas in the North East have been forcibly subjugated into the Indian Union, and Kashmir deserves a special volume," and that "In fact Kashmir and North East are often used to whip up centripetal sentiments in the Subcontinent." The North East of India and Kashmir do require what can only be termed, for the want of a more appropriate expression, limited sovereignty. Only then can the violent uprisings for independence in those places be checked. But the issue of greater autonomy for other Indian states, North or South of the Vindhyas, is no less important. And the question of autonomy has acquired even more urgency across the border in Pakistan, a country seen to be increasingly relying on force to hold itself together, and where the tug of provincialism is much closer to the surface than in India.

What Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah has unexpectedly opened by having the autonomy resolution adopted in the Jammu and Kashmir State Legislative Assembly is a window of opportunity, not a Pandora's box. Though the time has not yet arrived to question the relevance of nation-state and advocate a world without borders, it appears certain that the Centre of India (and Pakistan) cannot hold, if it is overloaded with the stifled aspirations of various nationalities that constitute a federal nation.

The quest for autonomy has to begin with the Constitution, even by amending it if necessary. As Ram Jethmalani rightly pointed out before he quit the Indian cabinet as law minister, "The Indian Constitution has already been amended 79 times in the last half century, and it can be very well done now." If such a search is not begun through peaceful means, events in the Balkans, the former Soviet Union, or even Kashmir and the North East and Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, have shown the way things can go. Dreams are powerful forces, they keep killing people if their rationality, whether wise or otherwise, is not put through the test of reality.

In the end, the whole matter of autonomy or sovereignty is a question of identity. Is Laloo Prasad a Yadav first, a Bihari second, and an Indian last? Or is the reverse of that the correct order? There is no real answer to that, perhaps. The best is when these identities can be merged to form a composite mosaic, and that is possible only under a truly loose federal structure, not a centralist state. Napoleon Bonaparte once described himself as "Corsican by birth, French by adoption, and emperor by achievement."

It is time the myopic powerful in South Asia learn the lessons of history and created conditions which would make it possible for the South Asian to proclaim that s/he is: an Assamese, a Baluch or a Tamil by birth; an Indian, a Pakistani or a Sri Lankan by choice; and a true South Asian by voice. The sooner we see such a day, the better for the future of all of us and our children.

- C. K. Lal

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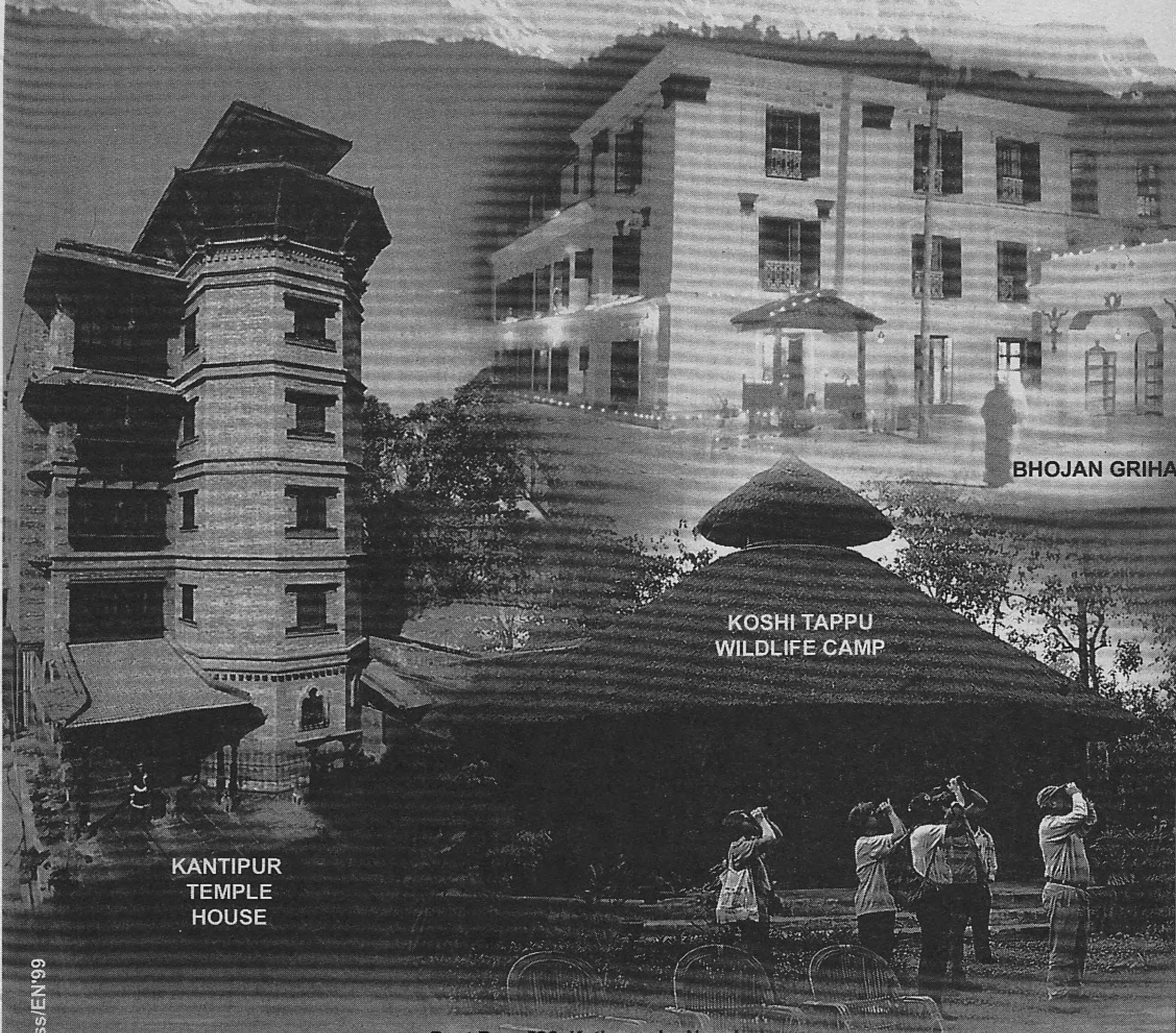

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INDIA

EPIC WAR

IT IS clear that there is a campaign of terror, not necessarily coordinated, underway against selected minorities in India. This has serious implications for the country's democratic polity, one which has taken a definitive turn towards the presumptuous right ever since the Bhara-tiya Janata Party came to power two years ago.

A few days before his death in an accident, the late Bishop of Delhi Alan Basil de Lastic had described the attacks and hate campaign as the "most serious challenge facing the [Christian] community since Independence". A crisis indeed, not only for that one beleaguered community but also for India's secular and pluralistic traditions. A few weeks later, Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray had the gall to say that India would burn if the Maharashtra government went ahead with his prosecution for alleged acts of incitement in the Bombay riots that followed the demolition of Babri Masjid. The statements, contrasted, reflect the heightened insecurity of the minority communities, most particularly Muslims and Christians.

Both civil society and the State, with its constitutional authority, have failed to adequately address the rapidly growing intolerance expressed in neo-fascist aggression. The Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief K.S. Sudarshan issued a warning earlier in the year of "an epic war between Hindus and anti-Hindu forces". The one-sided battle seems to have begun, and alarmingly, there have been far too few calls for restraint. Instead, we have a studied silence and, if at all, attempts at deliberate obfuscation of the issues. Some say that the incidents of terror are essentially retaliations for religious conversions carried out with "inducement and enticement". Some of the incidents are being written off as nothing more than "cases of robbery and assault with no religious motive".

There are two points to be made, relating to the constitutional role of the state and the out-of-control nationalistic jingoism. Some within the BJP seem to believe that the state would do better to withdraw from its role as the guarantor of rights of minorities, seen as pampered, appeased. Meanwhile, the neo-fascist rhetoric of nationalism treats the minorities as the enemies within, as subversive and anti-national. It was in this vein, for example, that the 'state convenor' of the Bajrang Dal for Uttar Pradesh announced in late July that his group would begin to keep watch on all Muslims in the state, and track the travels and phone calls they made overseas, to deter "anti-national" activities.

Readings of the Indian national press clearly indicate the trend. Step by step, the minorities are being made to feel as if they are pushed against the wall. What started off as a series of conflicts between the Hindus and the Muslims, was to culminate in the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, marking for the Sangh Parivar and its adherents, the demolition of a symbol that had for long been hyped as the foundation stone of Islamic rule and therefore a monument to the invaders' attempted des-truction of Hindu culture. Neither can more recent events be entirely divorced from the increasing anti-Muslim rhetoric in India—nuclear fulfillment, Kargil, and the recent Kashmiri demand for autonomy. The increa-sing hostility towards religious minorities cannot be divorced from the right's idea of 'nation', territorial sovereignty and the position of all minorities therein.

The expanse of India thus seems ripe and ready for Subcontinent-wide hate crimes (and one can only hope fervently that this is not true). Any and all disgruntled elements can be expected to seize the opportunity, if the State continues to make excuses for them, to give vent to simmering bigoted animosities. The animosity against the relative affluence of Kerala's minority community (over 70 percent of Kerala's expatriate workforce is Muslim and Christian), resentment against alleged accelerated conversion of tribals, and the ill-will against minority institutions of learning, are all symptomatic of this trend.

The secular and liberal forces in Indian society have been taken aback by the aggressive posturing of the right. They have not seized the initiative to counterattack in the forum of ideas. The campaign of the Sangh Parivar terming all centrist forces as "pseudo secularists" has had its desired impact, and the answer is a defensiveness which is completely unacceptable. Because its defence was not strong enough, the public began to doubt the secular and liberal principles which till just a few years ago had been the unquestioned platform of the modernising pan-Indian society. The fanatics stood vindicated, the people bore the guilt.

The squeeze on the Muslims continues (even though, incongruously, their presence makes India the second largest Islamic country in the world, after Indonesia). Strident pronouncements that are at times unbelievable for their rabid intolerance continue, but in the meantime, the religious zealots have turned their attention on the Christians. Many on the right-wing bandwagon do not even know that Christianity came to India in 52 AD, that its earliest converts were caste Hindus, and that this community of Syrian Christians is one of the world's oldest living Christian communities outside the Levant. Christian missions that were set up in the last two centuries also delivered health care and education where the state delivery mechanisms had failed or were conspicuous in their absence.

Christians in India are truly a minority: a population of 22 million (or 2.3 percent of the total Indian population), largely concentrated in a few states (the South, the North East and the Chhotanagpur plateau region account for over 85 percent of India's Christians). Their fertility rates is, together with the Jains, the lowest in India (2.6 percent) compared to the national average of 3.6. Clearly, not the growing threat that the RSS and Bajrang Dal make the Christians out to be, and hardly enough to explain the hateful aggression against a community that is marginal both in the social and political context.

It is not only the Muslims and Christians who are feeling the threat. Sikhs are protesting the growing saffronisation of Punjab and have reacted strongly to the Sangh view that the Sikhs are just the 'militant' wing of Hinduism. There have been differences with Buddhists as well, over certain shrines, and it rankles the Buddhists when the Hindu right asserts in its much-vaunted insensitivity to others that the Buddha is "just" a reincarnation of Vishnu. Meanwhile, the VHP plans to 'free' religious sites in Mathura and Benaras still stand. In this atmosphere of intolerance, with the failure of civil society obvious to all, will the proposed constitutional review tamper with the guarantees that minorities have through the Indian Constitution? The meek may inherit the earth, but the going is tough. △

- Samuel Thomas

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PAKISTAN

SUBCONTINENTAL SEMANTIC

IN THE Urdu language goes a saying something like this: A cauliflower will not smell like a rose if you call it a rose. That is clearly not where the foreign policy mandarins of Pakistan drew their inspiration from last month when they protested the use of the term "Indian Subcontinent" by Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani while on a visit to France.

"South Asia" is a neutral term for the region, and has neither historical nor political baggage.

Taking umbrage, the Foreign Office in Islamabad released an official statement: "As India is only one of the countries of South Asia, the term 'Indian Subcontinent' is entirely inappropriate as a description for the whole region. Its use betrays India's long-cherished dream of exercising hegemony in the region, a dream that India has failed to realise and it will never succeed in achieving. The Government of Pakistan there-fore hopes that the use of the term "Indian Subcontinent" to refer to South Asia will be avoided."

If there was an example of raising an issue unnecessarily—typical in what is rapidly evolving as the India-Pakistan non-relation-ship—then this was it. True, the 1947 transition has created certain problems having to do with the political meaning of words—Hindustani can no longer be used in either country to refer to mellifluous *khari boli*, and the entire history of ancient, medieval and colonial 'India' has been willingly waved away by a modern Pakistani State which regards its history as having begun in 1947.

When General Pervez Musharraf's Information Minister and chief spokesman Javed Jabbar was asked by this writer why all the fuss with "Indian Subcontinent", he responded that there were other countries in South Asia. True enough, but how come only Pakistan was miffed, and not the other countries? "They have not praised [the Advani statement] either," Jabbar replied, cautioning that "There is no such thing as the Indian Subcontinent. There is only South Asia." The minister added that the term could be properly used only in the context of the pre-1947 period.

That was perhaps a bit ingenuous, for Pakistan has itself been making liberal use of the term "Indo-Pak Subcontinent" to describe the South Asian region until recently. It started with the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and continued through the regimes of General Zia-ul Haq, Benazir Bhutto and the late lamented one of Nawaz Sharif. New Delhi did not object to the use of "Indo-Pak Subcontinent" probably because India was included, but the term has lately lost currency because none outside Islamabad's incestuous circles cared to use it.

The charge of insensitivity being showered on Advani could obviously apply to those who use or used "Indo-Pak Subcontinent", for where indeed does that leave Bangladesh and the others? Trying to be politically correct, we would ultimately end up trying to use 'Indo-Pak-Nepal-Bangla-Bhutan Subcontinent'.

Actually, the biggest problem with 'Subcontinent', and one which goes quite unremarked, is that it leaves out Sri Lanka, a much valued member of SAARC which happens to be an island *outside* the subcontinental mainland. This rankles Sri Lankans, just as the use of Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani in South Asian conclaves irritates them and other South South Asians.

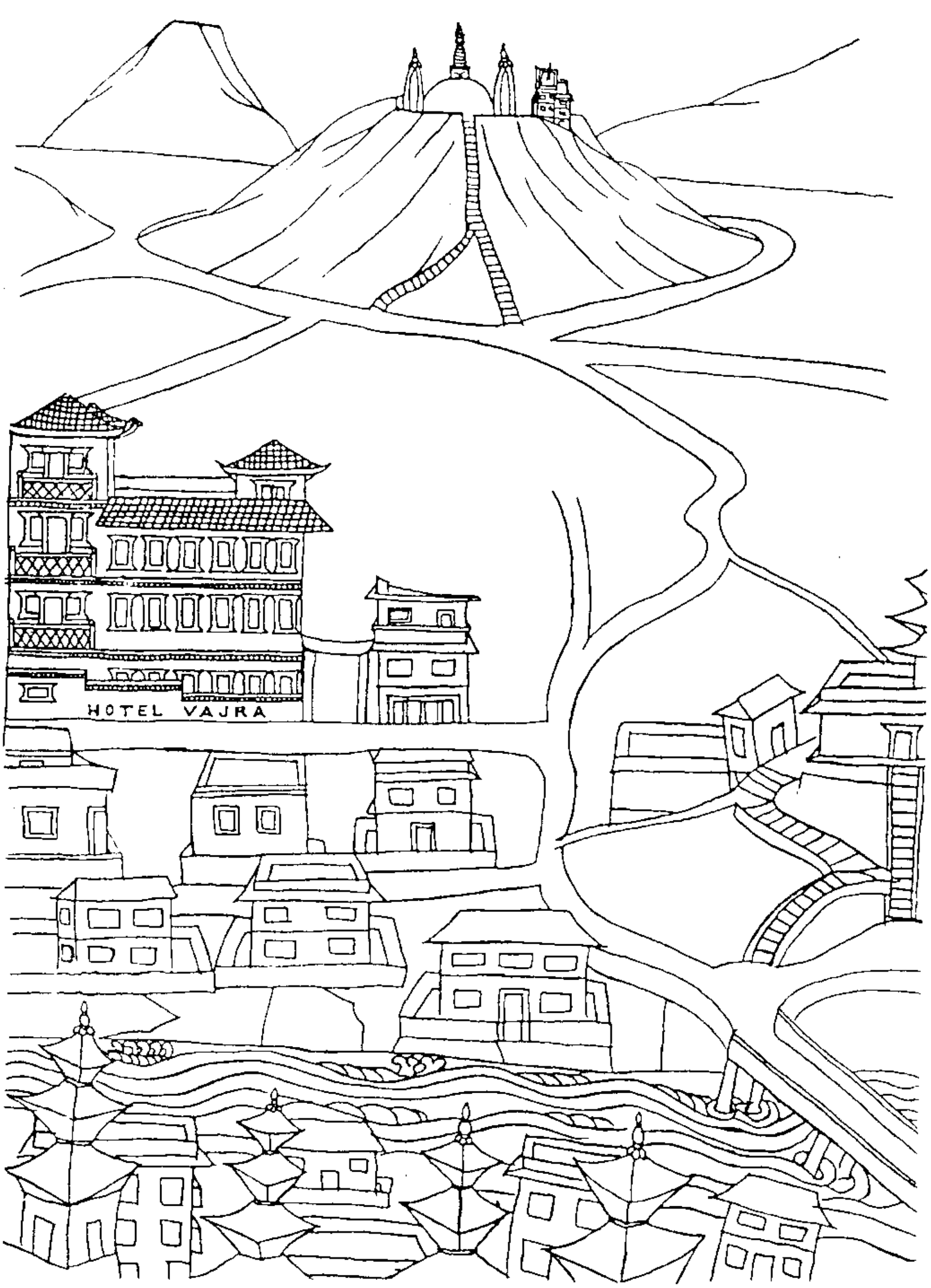
The ideal formulation for the region is of course already with us, and that is "South Asia", a term that received official sanction through the very name of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, SAARC. The term is neutral, if unexciting (but no more than "Subcontinent"), and has neither historical nor political baggage.

But that does not do away with history, and the hundreds of thousands of books and billions of references all over which refer to "Indian Subcontinent". And if one were to really decide to do something about "India" cropping up everywhere, what about "Indian Ocean" and other generic references that contain "India"?

Ignoring history does not make it go away. In fact, if an attempt is made, more often than not it only tends to repeat itself! Diplomats assigned to Islamabad, among others, say Pakistan's Foreign Office should have better things to do than make semantic mountains out of molehills. Wasting time and energy over a term that has been in use for a long time, even if it is not entirely appropriate for all present-day purposes, more than anything else reflects the insecurity that Islamabad suffers from on and off. In its endless tussle with a bigger enemy, it is the past that constantly haunts Pakistan, an the Foreign Office's tantrum to prove it.

The past is another country. It would do a world of good for Islamabad to smell the roses and get on with the future.

- Adnan Rehmat



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Political Myth-Making in Postcolonial Assam

The claim of the politicians of Assam, that their state is being overrun by a continuing flood of Bangladeshis coming north across the border seems exaggerated. And going back to a 1951 cut-off date to identify who is 'non-indigenous' would put at peril millions of Muslims who, for all purposes, are Assam's own.

by ***Anindita Dasgupta***

ANINDITA DASGUPTA

"There is no doubt, of course, that those displaced persons who have come to settle in India are bound to have their citizenship. If the law is inadequate in this respect, the law should be changed."

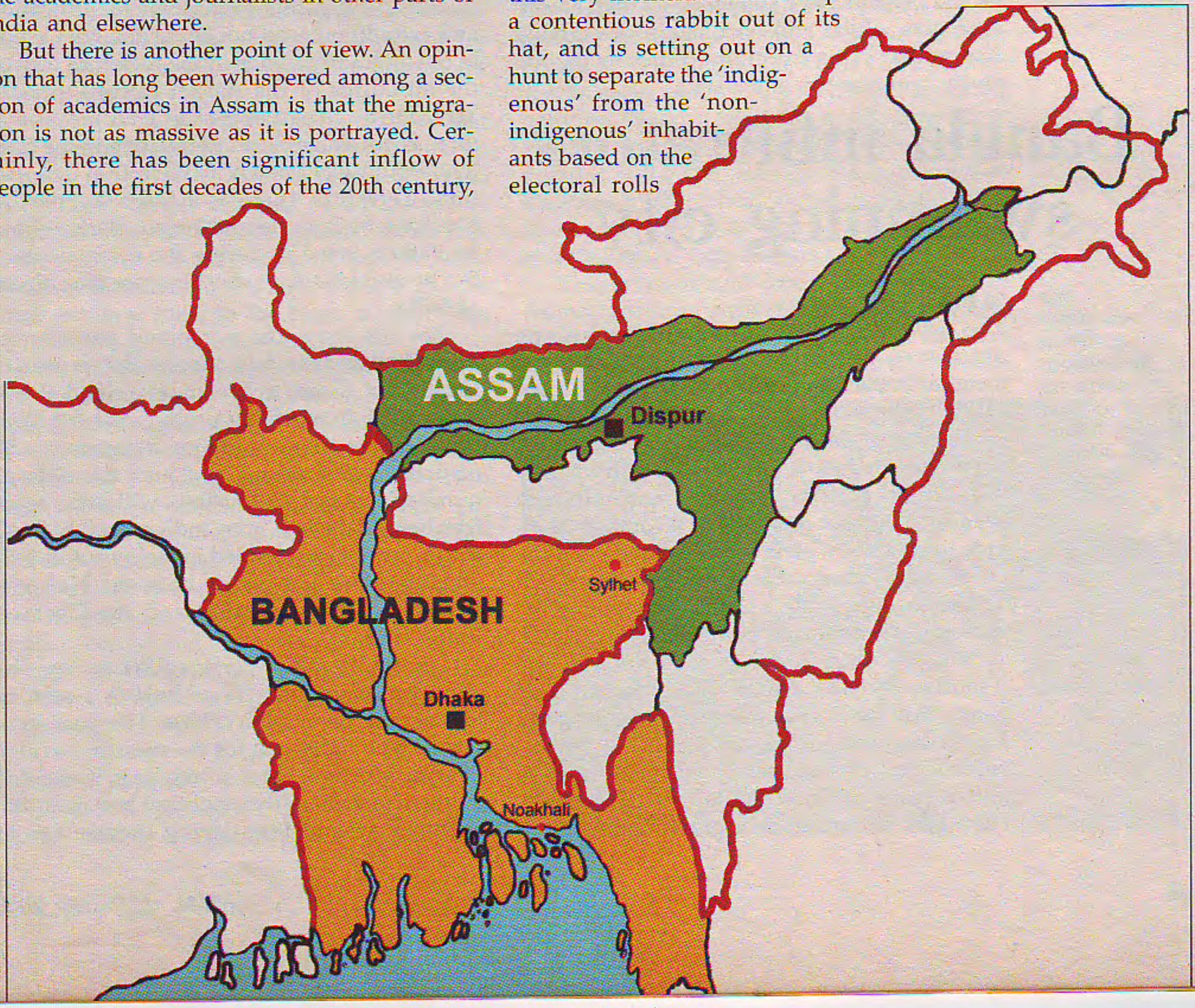
- *Jawaharlal Nehru in "Refugees and Other Problems",*
Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, *Vol:2 (New Delhi,1967)*

Ever since the time of Independence, the constant political refrain in this pivotal state of the Indian Northeast has been the 'inundation' it is said to be facing from East Bengali, later Bangladeshi, "illegal" migrants. It was this issue which fuelled the sons-of-soil Assam agitation of the late 1970s and early 1980s; and even today, no week passes without a politician making a speech, or a newspaper printing a report or editorial, about Bangladeshi in-migration. The fear of the Asamiya-speaking indigenous population is of being demographically, politically and culturally swamped by Muslims from Bangladesh.

It is a potent invitation to anxiety, and one which has been used to its fullest by the political elites of Assam. Not only has this matter of migrating Muslims from across the slack southern border been one of the defining themes of Assam politics, it is taken largely as a given by the academics and journalists in other parts of India and elsewhere.

But there is another point of view. An opinion that has long been whispered among a section of academics in Assam is that the migration is not as massive as it is portrayed. Certainly, there has been significant inflow of people in the first decades of the 20th century, but the claim of a threatening, and continuing influx since Independence, and more particularly since the all-important cut-off year of 1971, does not seem plausible. As in so many other developing societies of South Asia, in Assam too, myths and dogma take root, develop their own reality, and begin to dictate political debate unchallenged by the mainstream media, academia or larger intelligentsia. Such is also the case with what can only be called the myth of continuing Bangladeshi migration into Assam.

A small but remarkably vocal section within the Asamiya society uses this myth of Bangladeshi inundation to gain political mileage before every State Assembly election or national census. Today, preparations are underway for the Census of India 2001, and suddenly the air is once again charging up with tension. The All Assam Students Union (AASU) has at this very moment decided to pull a contentious rabbit out of its hat, and is setting out on a hunt to separate the 'indigenous' from the 'non-indigenous' inhabitants based on the electoral rolls



ANINDITA DASGUPTA

Muslim women of lower Assam.

of 1952 and the National Register of Citizens of 1951.

The first problem with the AASU demand is that it would have the Assam state and its political forces renege on an agreement arrived at in good faith, one that was meant to have exorcised the ghosts of communal disharmony and set the stage for Assam's symbiotic march to the future. Perhaps, even more importantly, the demand is based on the same old charge of continuing influx of Bangladeshis, a charge that scientific study proves to be a wild exaggeration. AASU, as the premier organisation which led the Assam agitation two decades ago, should perhaps have known better than to start a process which will once again de-stabilise Assam and bring unsettling times to the minority communities of the state.

Bangla infiltrators swamping city

The newspaper headlines appearing in this article are all from The Assam Tribune *issues of June-July 2000.*

25 March 1971

The issue of the Bangla migrant has become one that no political party seeking its electoral fortunes in the state can choose to ignore. More so, because of the spin given to it during the 'anti-outsider' (later 'anti-foreigner') movement of two decades ago which, in spite of its overtly 'Gandhian' politics, acquired anti-minority shades. This went on to create a communal divide in Assam—a state which till then had experienced a remarkable history of communal accommodation, with a slight aberration in the run-up to Partition and immediately thereafter.

Goaded thus towards xenophobia, the Asamiya dreads Islamic inundation and worry that the border districts of Assam (and Meghalaya) will, in the not-too-distant future, become part of a greater Bangladesh. There is also a sense of hurt evident in Guwahati, Dibrugarh and other cities of the Brahmaputra Valley, that the central government in New Delhi remains unconcerned about this issue. There is the suspicion that New Delhi's silence is deliberate rather than diplomatic, because the 'illegal migrants' can serve as a dependable vote bank for the 'secular' among national parties.

Giving vent to their suspicions, the Asamiyas are overwhelmingly in favour of repealing the 'failed' Illegal Migrants' Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983, and the extension of the 1946 Foreigners Act to Assam, which is applicable to the rest of the country. This would place the power to detect and push back aliens in the hands of the state police rather than the judiciary, as is the case under the IMDT.

But even if one were to accept the fact that there are Bangladeshi migrants in massive numbers in Assam, the hands of the Indian government is tied because international law would not provide for unilateral deportation without acquiescence of the receiving country. If indeed all those whom the Asamiya activists consider to be Bangladeshis were to be identified and deported, the Government of India would have to round up over three million people in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and make arrangements for their transport south.

Fortunately, this exercise of identification and extradition need not be carried out. A look at the migratory trends in the region as well as the strictures of the Assam Accord, openly agreed to by all parties back in 1985, means that there is not a significant population in the state that would legitimately have to face deportation. Certainly, there is a large number of Muslims of East Bengal origin here, whose forefathers came in during the colonial years. But by any reading, today, they are the citizens of India.

For too long, the perceived problem of Bangla migrants has forced the minority Muslims of Assam to live under a cloud of suspicion. The intensifying propaganda for identifying many migrants as 'non-indigenous' will resurrect old tensions and distrust. A large number of Assam's Muslims will once again fear being labelled 'non- indigenous' because they were not enumerated in the census of 1951 and therefore left out of both the National Register of Citizens, 1951 and the Electoral Rolls, 1952.

Ironically, this very agitation by the Asamiya leaders may also lead to a sudden loss of their own political base. The same politicians who today call for the mass removal of Bengali Muslims have, in the past, depended on them to firm up their political base in multicultural Assam. Identifying themselves as

Asamiya-speakers (as directed by the Muslim League after Partition), the Muslims have helped the 'indigenous' Asamiyas extend their hegemony over the population, both tribal and settled.

Now, however, the Muslims of East Bengal descent, tired of the long years of insecurity, may decide to report themselves in the upcoming census as Bengali-speakers rather than Asamiya-speakers—for the first time since the 1951 census. If even two-thirds of the state's Muslims were to do so, the numerical dominance of Asamiyas in Assam would take a severe beating. In their search for illegal aliens in every street corner and sandbank, the politicians appear ready to throw the baby out with the bath water.

When the Assam Accord was signed on 14 August 1985 amidst much fanfare, the Asamiya activists had believed that they had finally found the magic formula to get rid of the 'hordes' of alleged Bangladeshi infiltrators. The Accord pronounced all post-1971 migrants as "illegal" and hence subject to detection and deportation. The matter was to be settled with the IMDT Act, which the Government of India introduced to ensure that genuine Indian citizens belonging to the minority communities would not be harassed in the process of searching for aliens, and to secure a fair judicial process for those detected.

Over the years, however, the Accord lost much of its sheen for the activists, primarily because the IMDT Act proved unable to detect and deport 'illegal migrants' at a pace and in numbers that would have satisfied them. It is in response to this alleged failure that the AASU has proposed making the 1951 register and the 1952 electoral rolls, as the basis to determine who is 'indigenous' and who is not.

This proposal flies in the face of the Assam Accord, which marked 25 March 1971 as the cut-off date for identifying who is legal and who is not. Intriguingly, both the Government of Assam and the Government of India seem to have reached an understanding with the AASU on this matter, quietly complying with a demand that is both exclusionary and explosive. Thus, the lately dormant issue of immigration is now poised to return to the public agenda with a vengeance, and retard the ongoing process of cultural assimilation among the Muslims, Bengalis and Asamiyas of the state of Assam.

Balance of diversity

Through the ages, rather than a region of exclusive identity, Assam has been a melting pot of migrant cultures. This forested expanse at the base of the Eastern Himalaya, well-watered and fertile when the trees were felled, provided an ideal ground for rulers and peasantry alike to come and sink their roots. This is what provided Assam with its unique pluralism, not evident to the same extent in the rest of India. Historically, the migrant waves helped shape a shared ethos that evolved into what may be called the Asamiya nationality. The Asamiya evolved as a curious and lively concoction with the 'ingredients' consisting of Tai-Ahoms from southeast Asia, Indo-Aryans from the west, and aboriginal communities such as the Bodo-Kachari, Rabha, Mising, Deuri, Tiwa and others.

Immigration : then and now

In the end, whatever their character or itinerary, the arriving communities restored the balance of diversity in Assam, enabling it to survive and remain dynamic. On occasion, particularly in times of sudden influx, there has been stress, but the society absorbed the shocks and the migrants merged into the Asamiya fold. (In its looser meaning, "Asamiya" simply means those who profess Asamiya to be their natural or acquired mother-tongue.) Migrants, whether Hindu or Muslim, became a part of the broader Assam society, enlivening its fringes, accepting both the Asamiya language and culture. Even as the in-migration continued over the early decades of the 20th century, the numerous indigenous tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley were also comfortable to be included under the general "Asamiya" appellation.

This vibrant and interactive process of Asamiya-isation suffered its first significant blow when, earlier, the imposition of Asamiya as the official language of the postcolonial state

The Brahmaputra at Goalpara.

ANINDITA DASGUPTA

Where the parties stand

THE BHARATIYA Janata Party (BJP), which has made inroads into Assam in the recent years, is in favour of repealing the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal (IMDT) Act of 1983, supposedly to facilitate detection and deportation of all "illegal" Bangla migrants. This stance is not inconsistent with the BJP's right wing ideology, and appeals to its constituency of mostly upper-caste Hindus of Assam.

The Congress (I), which has been assiduously courting the minorities, naturally opposes the repeal of the IMDT Act as it evokes genuine fears among the minorities in Assam that such an act may make them vulnerable to harassment and renewed witch-hunts.

The ruling Asom Gana Parishad, which emerged out of the Assam Agitation as a party aspiring to fulfill 'genuine' Asamiya ethnic aspirations and which has twice made it to power with overwhelming mandates, finds itself in the most difficult position vis-a-vis this issue. After having maintained an uncomfortable silence on the issue of the repeal of the IMDT Act for some years (as it cannot ideologically oppose it, while vocal support on the other hand can alienate the minorities), it has recently articulated its position somewhat confusingly: opposing the IMDT Act does not mean opposing minorities.

The Trinamool Asom Gana Parishad (TGP), led by erstwhile stalwarts of the AGP expelled from their former party, is opposed to any moves which may make the minorities vulnerable. Their stance will be further strengthened as they may seek an alliance with the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, who (despite being in the National Democratic Alliance headed by the BJP at the Centre) too is opposed to the repeal of the act. This is because she has a sizeable minority population among her electorate.

Most other parties, like the United Minorities Front of Assam, as also the Left, are generally opposed to the repeal of the controversial act. Not surprisingly, a section of the former All Assam Students' Union (AASU) leadership has been most vociferous in its effort to rake up the issue again in election time. AASU is making a bid to enter the electoral fray, and there is an attempt to pressure the AGP to accommodate it; failing which, it still can work out an equation with the BJP, with which it has ideological affinity.

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bred alienation and ethnic assertion among the tribes which till then had had no objection to being called "Asamiya". The process suffered another grievous set-back, late in the day, when an unprecedented anti-outsider movement popularly known as the Assam Movement took off. Starting in 1979, the movement demanded the detection and deportation of all migrants, mostly East Bengalis/East Pakistanis and Nepalis entering Assam after 1951. This strident son-of-the-soil agitation sharply reversed the unobtrusive process through which the diverse peoples of Assam, tribals as well as migrants, were becoming Asamiya. The migrant Muslims with East Bengal roots, Bengali Hindus and Nepalis of Brahmaputra Valley grew apprehensive as the movement gathered steam. Labelled 'foreigners', many became soft targets of communal violence.

The 1985 Assam Accord between the Asamiya activists represented by AASU, the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), and the government of Indira Gandhi, agreed to accept all pre-1971 migrants as Indian citizens (meanwhile, disenfranchising those for 10 years who had entered India in the period 1966-71) and deport only those who had come in after that. It was after some 50 rounds of talks at various levels with the then central government of Indira Gandhi that the Asamiya activists accepted 25 March 1971 as the cut-off year for determining Indian citizenship.

One might have thought that the genie had been firmly put back in its bottle, and though Assam saw relative calm over the 1990s, it clearly has not prevailed. The renewed stridency was ultimately fuelled by the results of the 1991 census, which indicated a sharp rise in the number of Muslims in the fertile Brahmaputra Valley. This was taken to mean that the influx from across the border in Bangladesh had continued, and so the old fears of being overwhelmed numerically by 'outsiders'—and since the emergence of Bangladesh, 'foreigners'—resurfaced. This is what is reflected in AASU's willingness to revive an issue that was already resolved 15 years ago.

Na Asamiya

The 1826 colonial conquest of Assam opened up the province as a land frontier, attracting large-scale immigration of both labour and enterprise from the neighbouring provinces of the Raj, especially Bengal. The initial population inflow fed the demand for tea plantation labour, which arrived mainly from the Chotanagpur plateau to the large tracts of land that were gifted away to British planters. Since the 1890s, the British also encouraged a slow but steady migration to the uninhabited Assamese tracts of impoverished Muslim peasants from the adjacent overpopulated areas of East Bengal.

Back then, the Asamiya middle class welcomed this large-scale entry of productive labour and skills into the Brahmaputra Valley, and it even presented petitions to the British government to facilitate settlement. It was commonly understood that such migration was beneficial for the sparsely populated Valley and that no economic progress was possible otherwise. A leading Asamiya thinker of the 19th century, Gunaviram Barua, estimated that no less than a million people could be settled with ease from outside on the wide space of Assam.

Minority politics and forces of disintegration

One factor separated the Muslim settlers from the others who came to populate Assam: unlike the Hindu and the tribals from afar, the Muslim migrants were abjectly poor. Whole villages were led northward into the Brahmaputra Valley by tout-like rural Bengali Muslim strongmen called *diwanis*, who bought the land in their own names and settled the migrants as *adhiars*, agricultural labour and *ryots*. There is no question that this migration changed the demographic make-up of the Valley forever, even while providing the Assam economy with the labour to realise its productive potential.

The new farmers filled the Valley's western frontier as well as the *char* lands—low-lying, flood-prone islands in the midstream of the flow of the Brahmaputra. Energetic as migrants everywhere are, the Muslim arrivals led the way in rice-farming and multiple cropping; for the first time, jute became an important item of export. By the 1930s, the East Bengal peasants had turned their new homeland into the rice-bowl of the Indian Northeast.

In their land-abundant province, the Asamiyas were initially willing to make the most of this new and incredibly cheap supply of labour. But as row after row of little thatched huts began to appear along the riverbank, the local politicians began to demand regulation and containment of the influx in order to, as one government report of 1938 put it, "save the forests and to reserve sufficient uncultivated land for the future generations of Asamiyas". The response of the British was to enact the Line System, whereby native settlements were separated from the crowded migrant *bustee*. Small enclaves or ghettos of East Bengal Muslims emerged along the riverine districts of Assam, where no native wished to set up home. These lands, connected to the mainland only by the country-boat, hosted the speakers of various dialects of the East Bengal countryside.

It was after the Partition of India and the defeat of the Muslim League cause in Assam (the party wanted the province to join East Pakistan) that the League ordered the migrant Muslims henceforth to declare Asamiya as their mother tongue during census counts rather than Bengali. This appeal was heeded by a community that was essentially an oppressed and landless group with little dignity in society, looking for bare survival. The Muslims realised the futility of clamouring for Pakistan and recognised the need to live in Assam as Asamiyas, if they were to retain their landholdings in the Brahmaputra Valley. And so they declared themselves Asamiyas in the census of 1951, and over time seem to have genuinely become committed to their new identity. Meanwhile, the Asom Sahitya Sabha, champion of Asamiya culture and language, itself began to encourage the process of assimilation of these people into the broader fold as *Na Asamiyas*, or New Asamiyas.

This 'merger' served the Asamiya interest in three important ways: one, for the first time, the Asamiya speakers became an absolute majority within Assam. This majority status was further consolidated in subsequent decades, including through the enactment of the Official Languages Act, 1960, making Asamiya the sole official language of the state. This, in itself, was possible only because of the Muslims settlers' support to the agitation for such an enactment. Two, the electoral support of the Muslim settlers provided Asamiya leaders with a safe route to political power, which was essential for the retention and expansion of Asamiya hegemony over Assam's diverse peoples. Three, this marriage of convenience with the migrant Muslims served as a counter-weight against the powerful Hindu Bengalis of Assam, who, after Partition, became a minority in the re-constituted state.

In 1978, the American sociologist Myron Weiner (who passed away recently), wrote about an "unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims against the Bengali Hindus". However, he noted that this was "not a wholly stable coalition" since "a new major influx of Bengali Muslims into Assam" or "coalescence of Bengali Hindus and

Asamiya Muslim riksawallahs wait for work.

Bengali Muslims" could destroy this accommodation. The instability predicted by Weiner was demonstrated when a perceived dramatic rise of Muslims between the 1951-1971 period led to the Assam Movement. The Asamiya-Muslim honeymoon, it seemed, was over.

Why 1951?

The main plank of the anti-foreigner movement of the 1970s and 1980s was the issue of "illegal" migration from south of the border, and the argument was mostly based on the "abnormal" 39 percent growth of Muslims in Assam between 1951 and 1961. The contention was that these were Muslim infiltrators from East Pakistan.

Population growth

'Illegal migration also responsible'

Analysis of the census data, however, could have thrown up a vastly different conclusion. Comparison of the size of the Muslim population between the census of 1941 and that of 1951 shows that there were 18 percent fewer Muslims in Assam at the end of the decade in 1951. This was due to a large-scale exodus of migrant Muslims to East Pakistan following the post-Partition communal riots that shook Assam in 1950. Parliamentarian Hem Barua, in his widely-read *Red River and Blue Hills* (1962, Lawyers' Book Stall, Guwahati), wrote that during Partition, around "53,000 Muslim families were displaced".

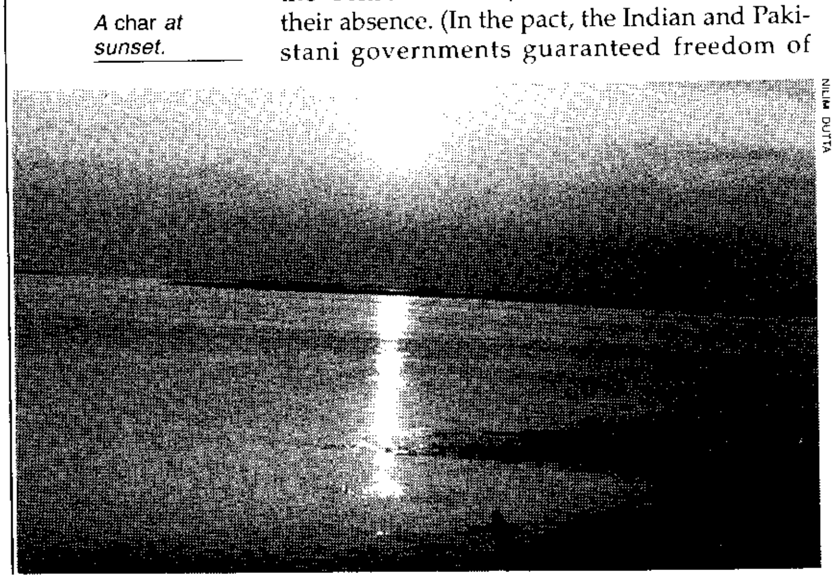
Though a considerable number of these Muslims returned to Assam a few years later, following the signing of the Nehru-Liaqat Khan Pact of 1950, they were left un-enumerated in the Census of 1951, carried out as it was in their absence. (In the pact, the Indian and Pakistani governments guaranteed freedom of movement and protection in transit for those displaced by communal disturbances of the time. Similarly, the migrants were to be given protection for their safe passage home, and rehabilitated if they returned before 31 December 1951.) This departure of a significant proportion of the population of lower Assam found categorical mention in the Census Report of 1951, which noted that there was a "clear underestimation of some 68,815 persons". A subsequent census report also stated that "there may have been some Muslims of Goalpara and Kamrup who might not have been able to come back to their homes in Assam during the 1951 census, (and) some Muslims living in the chars or sand- banks of the river Brahmaputra also might have been left out of the 1951 census". Meanwhile, at least 200,000 Hindu Bengali and Garo refugees fled from East Pakistan to Assam in the period 1951-71, and they too were left out from the census and electoral rolls.

The reason there was seen to be an abnormal hike in the number of Muslims in Assam between 1951-1961 was because the Muslims who had fled were resettled in Assam, having reclaimed their land and homesteads. They got enumerated in the 1961 census. Prominent Asamiyas, like politicians Hem Barua and Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, agreed with this explanation for the sudden increase in the Muslim population. While there exists no official data on the actual number of the Muslims who left Assam in 1950, B.P. Misra, a leading researcher, offered the following number of Muslim emigrants from Assam districts to East Pakistan in the wake of communal riots of 1950:

Goalpara	**60,000**
Kamrup	**20,000**
Darrang	**6,000**

The reason why the political elite would want 1951 as the cut-off year is thus clear—in a single stroke, a large portion of the Muslim population of lower Assam would be rendered 'non-indigenous'.

The principal argument forwarded by the activists to prove a continuous and continuing illegal migration of Bangladeshis is the 'abnormal' growth of Muslims in Assam in the period 1971-1991. For proof, most tend to point to the Muslims who have flooded the daily-wage labour sector in Assam. It is automatically assumed that these poor Muslims entering the cities as riksa-pullers and road gang members are coming from Bangladesh. Few city-dwellers pause to ponder whether these poor may not come from the destitute riverine belt of lower



A char at sunset.

NILIM DUTTA

Assam. The claim is also made that the number of Asamiya speakers has decreased alarmingly during the same period, and that the number of legislators of "doubtful citizenship" in the Assam legislature is on the rise.

These arguments put forward by the anti-foreigner leaders are at best the result of misinformation, but they are consumed unquestioningly by locals as well as those who read the newspapers outside Assam. To begin with, this mistaken perspective completely disregards the humanist-liberal heritage of the Asamiya national culture which historically did not suffer from the 'xenophobia' of the later periods. More importantly, it seeks to deny political representation—the right to stand in elections—for some of the poorest communities of India, the Na Asamiya Muslims. The anti-foreigner activists persevere in their attempts to wipe out the memory that Assam has always served as a melting-pot of a remarkably diverse population; they want to use the nativist agenda to further their own cause of hegemonism. If they succeed, the activists will have managed to render cultural differences sharper and more clear-cut than it has ever been in Assam's multicultural and syncretic history.

For centuries, large areas of grey has connected the identities of natives and migrants. The agitationists of today are denying Assam's amazing process of cultural accommodation and creating dangerous uncertainties. Without doubt, there are illegal foreign nationals residing in Assam, and a majority would be Muslim, but to write off a large Muslim community forming some 28 percent of the total population of the state as 'non-indigenous', is not only simplistic, but inflammatory. In the end, activism of this kind will only hurt Assam, as no polity can progress when the very basis of its self-perception is based on a fiction—that the Muslims of Assam are by and large 'non-indigenous'.

Demographic play

Without doubt, there was an 'unnatural' increase in the population of East Bengal Muslims, as they streamed into Assam as a result of colonial policy in the period 1911-41. Back then, of course, this was seen as "internal migration" from one province of the Raj to another. But to attribute all subsequent postcolonial increases summarily to illegal migration from Bangladesh is taking an impressionistic view of a complicated problem. To begin with, Islam has had a history of more than seven centuries in Assam, and today's population is made up of a large number of local converts as well as descendants of Mughal and Pathan migrants of long ago.

State-wise growth rate of Muslims in Census of India, 1991.

Names of select Indian states	Growth rate of Muslims (per cent)
Punjab	110.32
Rajasthan	98.29
Tripura	89.00
Haryana	88.36
Manipur	88.31
Madhya Pradesh	80.76
Maharashtra	80.15
Himachal Pradesh	77.64
Assam	77.42
West Bengal	77.32
Uttar Pradesh	76.30
Bihar	68.05
Kerala	63.07

SOURCE : CENSUS OF INDIA, 1991.

Contrary to the 'floating' wisdom doing the rounds in Guwahati, the percentage of Muslims in Assam remained steady at 25 percent for the entire period between 1941-1971 and only increased to 28 percent in the 20 years between 1971-1991. (There was no census in Assam in 1981.) It is commonly held out that the decadal growth rate of Muslims in Assam at 77 percent in 1991 is far above the all-India Muslim growth rate of 71 percent and that such growth rate is, again, 'abnormal' and points to migration. However, a look at the growth rate of Muslims in the other Indian states (*see table above*) disproves this notion outright, with eight Indian states showing a higher growth rate of Muslims and three others showing a similar growth. It is reasonable thus to suggest that Muslims, as a whole, have registered a similarly high growth rate all over India and this is not a phenomenon peculiar to Assam.

SHALINI RAGHAVIAH

East Bengal ancestry, India born.

Demographers believe that poverty, illiteracy and social backwardness are directly linked to significant population increase, and hence it is natural for the population of the East Bengal settlers to have increased at a rate faster than some adjacent communities.

It is in three Assam districts—Goalpara, Dhuburi and Barpeta—that Muslims constitute a majority. All three districts are contiguous to

Muslim legislators in the Assam Legislative Assembly, 1952-1991.

Year	Total Muslim Legislators	Total seats	% of Muslim Legislators
1952-56	12	108	11%
1957-62	14	108	13%
1962-67	14	108	13%
1967-72	20	126	16%
1972-78	21	126	20%
1978-83	26	126	21%
1983-85	29	126	23%
1985-91	22	126	17%
1991-the present	24	126	19%

SOURCE : COMPUTED FROM "PRESIDING OFFICERS AND MEMBERS OF ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY (A CHRONICLE)", 1937-1992, GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM.

the then East Bengal, attracting the largest numbers of Muslim migrants in the colonial years. Undivided Goalpara was, in fact, the very first Assam district to be settled upon by the East Bengal peasants as early as in 1901-1911. These 'coastal' areas were historically considered uninhabitable by the natives, and the Line System worked to further ghettoise the settlers on the Brahmaputra banks and chars. It should therefore come as no surprise if a hundred years later, these three districts should have a marginal majority of Muslim population—not through continuing migration but natural increase.

Section 144 along Indo-Bangla border

Meanwhile, the decrease in the growth rate of Asamiya speakers in Assam between 1971 and 1991 is heralded by the Asamiya activists as proof of cultural inundation. This decrease is actually easily explained. It is the result of the systematic Asamiya-isation policy followed by Shillong/Dispur since 1947 (Shillong was the erstwhile capital of undivided Assam). Following the linguistic re-organisation of states, the Asamiya language was looked upon as a sacred vehicle of collective self-assertion in Assam, and the first chief minister of independent Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi, was categorical when he stated, "Assam is for the Asamiya". He was using the term in its narrow interpretation.

ANINDITA DASGUPTA

Students protest 'Bangladeshi' infiltration.

When Asamiya was imposed as the official language beyond the Brahmaputra Valley, it was resented in the tribal hills and flatlands, as well as in the culturally 'different' Barak Valley with its predominantly Bengali population. Even the tribals of the Valley who had become bilingual and adjusted easily to Asamiya, resented this overt imposition. As a result, they struggled to revive their own languages from slumber, and tribal assertion was triggered, which is one reason for the latter-day rise of the Bodo agitation.

Language thus became an important tool for asserting a distinct identity and in opposing the postcolonial Asamiya hegemony within Assam. This was why the census of 1991 registered a high growth rate of the speakers of tribal languages in Assam, as much as 247 percent, 122 and 115 percent for the Rabhas, Bodos and Misings respectively. Consequently, the number reporting as speakers of Asamiya declined from 61 percent in 1971 to 58 percent in 1991.

Char to Mainland

For many years, the chars along the Brahmaputra have been facing excessive erosion, which has pushed a large number of Muslims from lower Assam to head for 'mainland Assam' for survival. This migration, and the arrival of the impoverished labouring class in the shanties of urban Assam, is seen by many as simple proof of fresh illegal migration from Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, those who stay back in the chars and the Brahmaputra banks close by the Bangladeshi border in the districts of Dhuburi and Goalpara live a hand-to-mouth existence. It is hard to imagine these poor Muslims welcoming illegal migrants from Bangladesh. Even an illiterate daily wage labourer would understand that such migration can only lead to a fall in the number of working days and salary, and further fragmentation of land. The lungi-clad, bilingual Muslim labourers are a new and unusual sight in Assam's towns and this novelty leads many to raise the bogey of the "Bangladeshi".

Neither does the data support the suggestion that there is a steady rise in the number of legislators in Assam of "doubtful" citizenship, supposedly due to the electoral support of "illegal" migrants voting as Indians. The falsity of this claim can be seen by simply studying the makeup of the Assam Legislative Assem-

bly (*facing page table*). It appears that in the postcolonial period the percentage of Muslim legislators has remained at an average 17 percent of the total membership in the State Assembly. Given their somewhat larger proportion in the population, the Muslims are actually under-represented in the state legislature.

The question of 'imbalance'

There is no question that the fear of being outnumbered would have had some basis for Asamiya worry in the colonial years. The Asamiya population, less than eight lakh around 1826 and 15 lakh in 1901, was growing very slowly both in relative and absolute terms. Likewise, there was more reason to feel culturally beleaguered under the British. The Asamiya language lay suppressed for 36 long years, from 1837-73, when Bengali was foisted as the official language of the state.

However, the situation of the Asamiyas changed rapidly after 1947. From two million in 1931 to five million in 1951, and nearly nine million in 1971, the number of Asamiya speakers in Assam has grown by leaps and bounds. Again, the share of Asamiya speakers in the total population moved from 23 percent in 1931 to 56 percent in 1951 and 61 percent in 1971, partly of course due to the reporting by the Muslims as stated above. The number of Bengali speakers in Assam, meanwhile, declined steadily, from its 30 percent share in 1931 to 21 percent in 1991.

It is easy to see that in the period 1951-1991, neither the religious nor the linguistic balance of Assam has been disturbed to the extent that any community needs to feel agitated. The problem of illegal migration obviously exists, but dispassionate study of the various census data, including the Census of 1991, shows that this amounts in the thousands rather than millions. It would surely be a sorry departure if fears unsupported by history or social scientific analysis were to be used by politicians to trigger off a fresh societal crisis in the state. If one were to go by the overconfident prophesies of the anti-foreigner leaders in the early 1980s, the Asamiyas would have been wiped out of Assam by now.

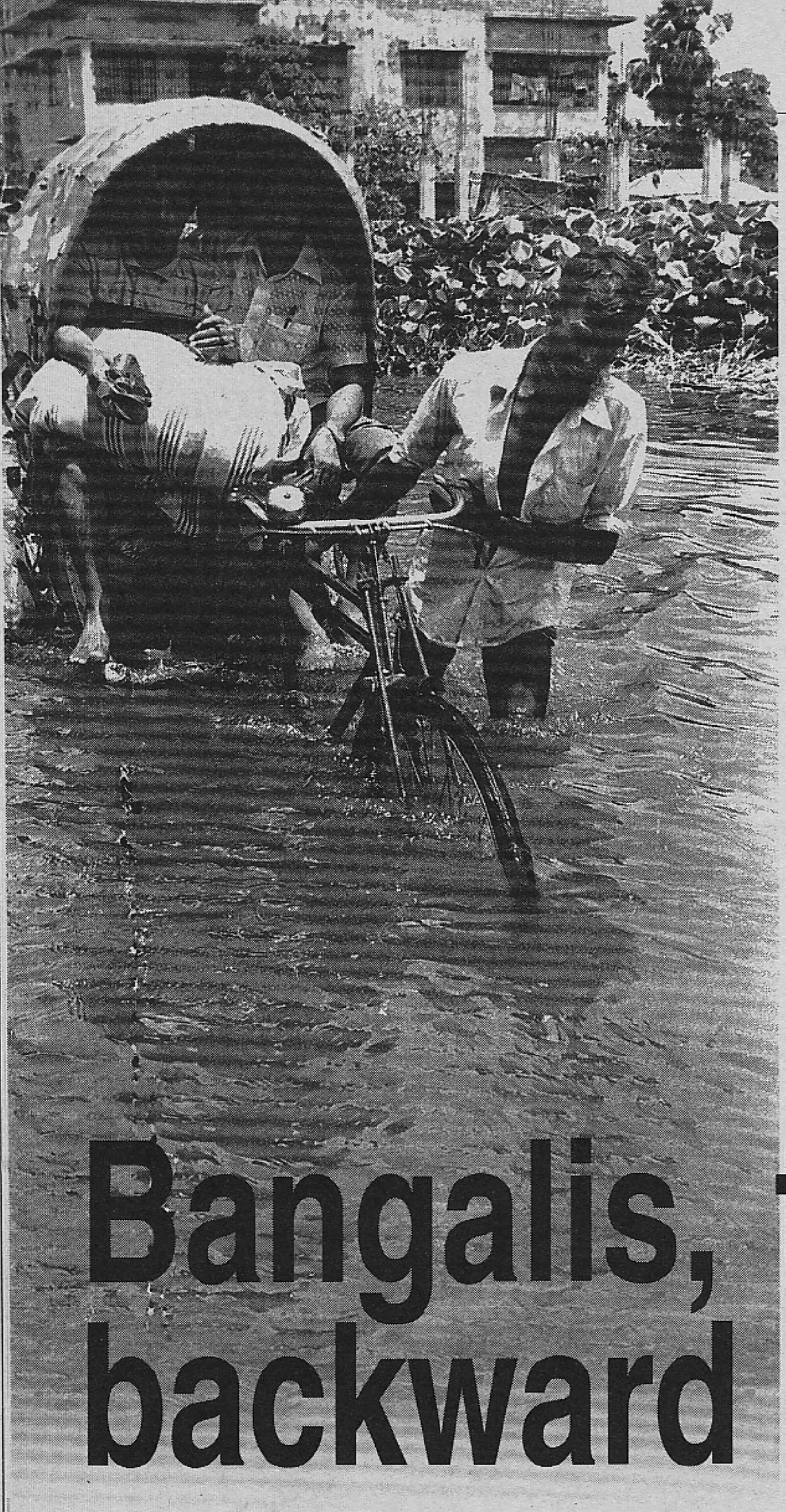
There is no confusion, however, that all post-1971 foreigners living "illegally" in Assam/India must be deported. This is what the Assam Accord demands and this should be followed to the letter. However, there is no need to generate hysteria about a culture-in-crisis in order to expel a few thousand "illegal" migrants. To clear Assam of her aliens, there must be unity among all sections of Assamese people—the Asamiyas, the Muslim and Hindu Bengalis and the various tribes. Clubbing all or most Muslims as "illegals" will not invite their cooperation, and knee-jerk responses from organisations like the AASU will only create obstacles in the path to peace, as they try to link the issue of illegal migrants with that of the linguistic and religious minorities living in Assam.

'Cong patronising foreigners'

The migrant Muslims of East Bengal descent are themselves eager to accept and adopt the Asamiya language, while most of the Bengali Hindus living in the Brahmaputra Valley are for all practical purposes bilingual. Many other communities have already passed through this bilingual phase, for example, the Tai-Ahoms, some sections of the tribals, and to some extent, the Nepalis in Assam.

There is now, more than ever, a need within Assam for inclusionary political and social projects in which the Asamiyas, the tribals and the descendants of settlers in the state can be partners in evolving a new cultural accomodation which reflect the historical legacy. What is not required is another round of debate on who is an indigene in Assam or whose father or mother was or was not counted in 1951. There cannot be two different classes of citizens in the state, those who can contest elections and those who cannot. It is quite another matter, of course, that the National Register of Citizens, 1951—the touchstone of the AASU's argument—is inadmissible in a court of law for any civil or criminal proceeding. This is what the High Court of Assam has decided, and it will be a travesty if the state- and national-level politicians were to again unearth that document to fan an epic divide in a state that had always shown the way in cultural assimilation. △

Cheap labour in Guwahati.



Bangalis, the new backward people

The middle class, the nearly poor and the very poor—Bangladeshis choose their migratory destination according to their class status and region of origin.

by **Afsan Chowdhury**

Historically, Bengal has been both a migrant-receiving and -sending zone. From the Middle Ages onwards, migrants of all races and types came to Bengal to work or rule, to this region of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta. The place was under the sway of numerous South and North Indian warrior clans before the central Asians took over. The first dynastic rulers of Bengal were the Buddhist Palas, who were succeeded by the Hindu Senas, who in turn were ousted by the Muslim Turks, Pathans and Afghans.

Among these migrant rulers, it was the Central Asians who had a profound impact on Bengal, and a considerable part of their culture and religious practices entered the social order. Later, the colonial British arrived as migrant-rulers, establishing a model of governance which continues to dominate till date.

From the earliest era, the successive 'foreign' rulers hired expatriates for the topmost jobs, which encouraged the marginalisation of Bangalis from power, and also discouraged the growth of a local commercial class. The locals sought patronage and jobs as the safest route to economic survival, and became professional 'clerks' and teachers. British rule and education thus created a Bengali middle class, one which could not survive within Bengal alone. The Bangali babus, the originals, fanned out to pro-

vide the colonial administration with manpower. The British created a new land management system, which created a demand for lawyers, which once again the Bangalis satisfied all over. It created an animosity with other members of the Indian society, which still resonates, though by now the Bangalis have become the new backward people.

While the middle-class migrated for assured jobs, more and more Bangalis were shifting homesteads for survival. Even before the land pressure really built up in the deltaic region, the peasantry had become mobile in search of something, somewhere a little better. The lesser classes mostly ended up in outlying coastal districts and the remoter areas inland. As Bengal became poorer, there were fewer coming in, and more leaving.

Assam, lying to the north of the Bangali heartland, was at the receiving end of migration for a long time, from the impoverished areas of undivided Bengal which sent forth "cultivators of the untilled lands". But the experience was not untroubled, and communal politics increased over time and stretched till the Partition of 1947, when Assam and the contiguous district of Sylhet saw serious disturbances. Assam had a referendum, and the Muslim majority Sylhet joined Pakistan, leaving a bitter legacy. It was in a sense their own partition, quite outside Bengal politics.

National threat

Migration from the regions close to Assam has been quite significant. Sylhetis, whom some scholars now describe as a separate non-Bangali (but associated) ethnic-linguistic group, are one of the more visible migrants anywhere in the world. Most Bangla migrants in Great Britain are from the one region of Sylhet, and most owners of 'Indian' restaurants there are likewise Sylhetis.

While migration to Britain has been more organised and successful—there is even a Bangali baroness in the House of Lords—most Bangalis are now crowding into the United States and Canada. Both countries have a legal annual intake system for a few thousands, but millions who can afford to apply, do so every year. The migration lottery run by the US government is an event of major significance in Bangladesh. Legally or otherwise, thousands of Bangalis do make it over to North America, to join the bottom of the totem pole of South Asian diaspora—even though the US ambassador to Fiji happens to have made good as a first generation Bangali.

For the nearly poor, the option is short-term migration to West Asia to take on menial jobs left untouched by other South Asians. Or else, work as construction and plantation workers in Malaysia; as also in Singapore and Brunei. For the very poor and desperate, however, there is only India and Pakistan. Noakhali, lying on the coast, is one example of a Bangladeshi district where the land-man ratio is quite adverse, and so the people have fanned out to many parts of South Asia and beyond. They form the bulk of the workers manning the Karachi fishing industry, and fill the ranks of domestics in Karachi homes.

In Pakistan, the Bangalis have melted into the cities and have thus far escaped being targetted as they cannot be politicised and would fit no fill or swell any vote bank. They are too poor, and all too willing to do the jobs the Pakistanis won't do. The Bangalis in Pakistan are thus the invisible lot, relatively few in number, and without any stake in political issues. But in India, the Bangla migrants constitute a political and economic threat as perceived by a large number of people, including in the administrative and political leadership.

> **The problem of migration will not go away by tightening borders. Given the existing situation within Bangladesh, for many the future will continue to lie outside Bangladesh.**

A recent Doordarshan production focussing on migration of Muslim Bangladeshis, especially to Assam, had many voices describe the impact of this process. The Governor of Assam went so far as to call this migration "a national threat". An official of the Home Ministry agreed and said that border fencing had begun to show results. The television report had the image of a bearded man in his forties as its motif, and included a call to all Indians not to hire migrants and to report them as part of patriotic duty.

A different and more realistic position was held by journalists B.G. Verghese, Kuldip Nayar and Sanjoy Hazarika, who were firm in their conviction that migration would not stop until the source of the problem—endemic poverty in Bangladesh—was tackled. The answer, they said, lay in helping Bangladesh progress economically so that it made more sense for the migrants to stay home. No amount of "border management" could stop migrants who wanted to cross over.

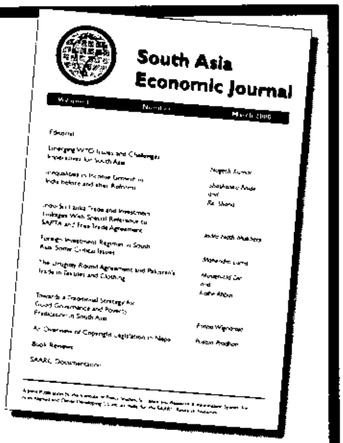
India, certainly, has the right to prevent non-Indians from coming into its territory, a basic right of any nation-state. The fact that many Bangladeshis do look like Indians coming from the eastern region makes detection difficult. But it has to be recognised that, at the end of the day, the problem of migration will not go away by tightening borders, which will be an impossible exercise. And, given the existing situation within Bangladesh, for many the future will continue to lie outside Bangladesh.

Open secret, collective denial

The Dhaka government's position on migration to India is that it does not happen. Admitting that migration exists would lead to Bangladesh being asked to take back those identified by India as illegal aliens. Since the number of such illegal migrants could be rather high, the only way out is denial. The political and economic price of accepting those pushed out by India would be very high indeed.

Because of national exigency, therefore, there has been no official policy or point-of-view on the matter of Bangladeshi migration. It is an open secret covered by a blanket of collective denial and 'let it be' attitude. Surprisingly, even scholars have not conducted studies and presented analyses on the how's and why's of the mass migration of poor Bangladeshis into neighbouring India. The focus in academia and among ngos has been on the trafficking of Bangladeshi women and children, an issue which finds a sympathetic chord in many quarters. Meanwhile, the much larger issue of poverty-pushed migration does not get the attention it deserves.

As far as the impoverished migrant to India is concerned—who doesn't remit dollars home—the only people who seem to want to bother about them are those who would like them to return. And so, India makes noise about the Bangladeshi migrants. Meanwhile, like all marginalised people, the migrants in India suffer the fate of not even being acknowledged by the state that is supposed to be their own.



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BHUTAN and the impending gush of ego

There is no need to struggle to be free; the absence of struggle is in itself freedom. This egoless state is the attainment of Buddhahood*.

by ***Vladimir Stehlik***

Where else would one expect better realisation of Buddhahood, more of the egoless state of mind, than in that last jewel in the crown of the vanishing Himalayan Buddha—Bhutan. But beware your pious expectations, for Bhutan struggles indeed.

Just about everything in Bhutan still bears the imprint of past centuries, the times of splendid spiritual isolation, subsistent economic self-reliance and secluded political autarchy. Yet, unlike in the past, the Bhutanese horizons today end no more at the crest of the next mountain ridge. After all the centuries, Bhutan is finally out in the open, exposed, and the floodgates are cracking. The gush of ego is imminent. Can it be tamed or diverted? If so, then on whose terms?

For the moment, both luck and wisdom appear to be on the side of the Bhutanese state. The country has been spared the usual Third World condition of past colonial exploitation and subsequent social decomposition. The winds of change blew elsewhere. Because Bhutan does not command the best Himalayan passes, it was saved from having to play the role of pawn in the great games of the 19th and 20th centuries. Squeezed between two Asian behemoths, Bhutan mastered realpolitik in the most recent period to create and preserve its statehood.

The country climbed unto the bandwagon of internationalisation relatively late, and even then, timidly and judiciously. The result was remarkable: by virtue of "being different", Bhutan attracted a disproportionate share of international developmental assistance. Being different: with its dzongs and lamas, Bhutan is mystical; with its mountains and subsistence villages, it is picturesque; with its King and Dashos, it is reliable and quite predictable. Besides, with its resource utilisation, Bhutan is prudent. And so, apart from an occasional, zealous champion of human rights who arrives in Thimphu, Bhutan is successful in casting a spell over its flock of willing (and rather deep-pocketed) expatriate abettors.

But the spell will not hold forever. The plethora of questions Bhutan faces today is amazing. The country seems to be replicating the model of material and economic development followed by Western societies. However, while Western societies, themselves endogenously driven by their Christian-based materialism, needed two industrial centuries to arrive at their present state of material wealth, Buddhist Bhutan gambles with an exogenous and intrinsically alien economic path. It attempts to traverse the whole distance within two generations, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the inherent starting conditions are startlingly different from the West. Buddhism has so far adequately supported the egalitarian subsistence farming and pastoralism of the high Himalayan regions. Can it do the same with the competition- and information-based industrial market economy?

Vulnerable Buddhism

With its precept of "fill the earth and subdue it", Christianity developed an economic philosophy supporting individual ownership of the means of production, and surplus production. The highly resilient system of capitalist market economy evolved as the base of Western (Christian) civilisation and its individual-oriented values. Meanwhile, non-subduing Buddhism, with its tenet of noble material sufficiency, hardly ever felt a need to develop an economic theory on its own—beyond the economic axiom of egalitarian subsistence. In the world increasingly dominated by Western/Christian individualist consumerism, Buddhism stands vulnerable against the assertive, psychological

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**Choegyam Trungpa*, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, *Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, 1973* challenge of material wealth beyond basic needs. So far, Buddhism in Bhutan or elsewhere has not been able to develop an effective response to this challenge.

History teaches us that, when economic practice and religion (embodied in its institutions) clash, economics may be expected to prevail. When this happens, folklore and superstition (besides the clerical institutions) tend to remain for some time as resilient leftovers of a religious system. The current state of Buddhism in Thailand is fairly representative of this trend. While Bhutanese Buddhism may not yet be in imminent danger, it certainly does not seem to be reading the signs of time. For, many indisputably erosive developments are irrevocably underway.

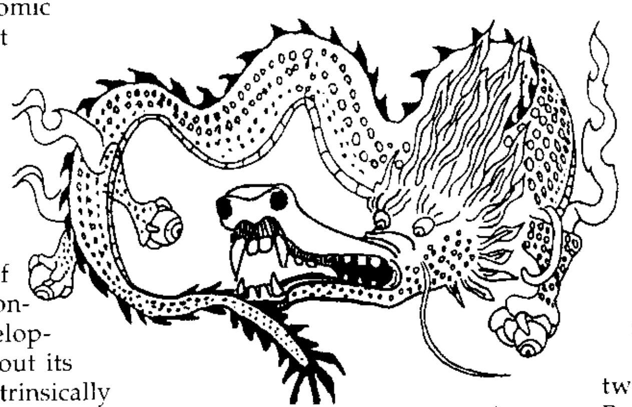
Both the traditional pattern of life and Bhutan's religious backbone are coming under pressure as the country treads the economic path of the Occident. It seems clear that Bhutanese Buddhism will receive its share of struggle in due course, and there are several pointers that it may be caught by surprise.

The Western model of capitalist-growth and consumption-oriented development has not been without its glitches. Capitalism is intrinsically and dialectically frictional. It produces winners and losers. The technological advances and productivity explosion, resulting from the progressive division of labour, led to stratification and social fault lines quite unknown in subsistence societies. Yet, over time, Western societies developed institutions for the relatively successful management of these fault lines and frictions.

With Bhutan following the Western model over the last decades, the same ethnic, religious, class, and even aristocratic and plutocratic fault lines, are emerging. But the society's institutional base to repair them is insufficient. Even though it is still deeply defined according to Buddhist values, Bhutan's society is not immune from the tantalising accoutrements of Western advancement. Indeed, any existing immunity can easily (and subconsciously) be traded for a Toyota Hilux, the popular 'off road vehicle' of Bhutan. An aspiring middle class, demanding civil society, democratic institutions, and affluence, all of the Western kind, will slowly assert their own values and redesign Bhutan's social face.

Elusive Happiness

To counter the rush to Westernisation, Bhutan proffers the concept of Gross National Happiness, GNH. Is GNH something to reckon with? Yes and no. While Bhutan is chased, like all of us, along the common path of economic and ideological globalisation (and is actually doing quite well in meeting the challenge), GNH is a wonderfully fresh, yet familiar, paradigm, one which proactively deflects attention from the sinking paradigms of the past. Unfortunately, apart from proclaiming the GNH concept, Bhutan has done too little to fill it with flesh and bones. Its core remains elusive, as elusive as happiness itself. The paucity of real debate on a concept which is being raised to the level of a national doctrine, is surprising.



The GNH doctrine attempts to pursue its goal of human well-being though four policy platforms: economic development, environmental preservation, cultural promotion and good governance. These are all regular ingredients of developmental postmodernism. Moreover, these are predominantly secular platforms, which is again surprising for a country claiming such a spiritual pedigree. While its present level of elaboration may serve the purpose for the moment, the maturing of the GNH concept will have to engage theologians and economists, academia and research, scholars and students—if it is not to remain an exotic topic for academic tractate and ceremonial toasts at Thimphu's exclusive parties. Even the best idea cannot live without its appropriate institutions.

Druk nation-state

Bhutan is a state. Is it also a nation? Can one even use the concept 'Buddhist Bhutan' which one has so injudiciously used thus far in this article? The fact is, presently a quarter to a third of Bhutan's inhabitants relish Shiva and Vishnu more than Buddha. And they, as often perceived by their Buddha-worshipping brethren, seem to stand in the way of not only Bhutan as a nation-state, but of many other developments. The fate of around 100,000 refugee camp dwellers in eastern Nepal consumes nearly all the attention reserved for the Bhutanese ethnic debate. Yet, the plight of those who stayed back is not less debatable.

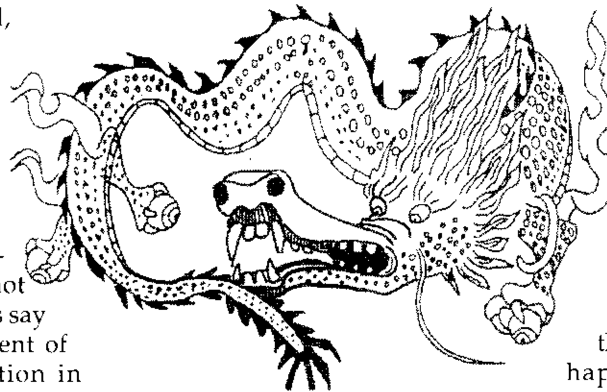
The civilisational differences between Bhutan's northern Tibeto-Burmese and southern mostly Indo-Aryan population are indeed substantial. And whatever the Bhutanese state may do, and shall do, the ethnic mistrust appears here to stay. We may hope, and believe, that it will never explode to the tragic dimensions of the Serb-Kosovar Balkanic mode, the Hutu-Tutsi Rwandan type, or the Muslim-Christian Ambon kind. However, the way in which the Bhutanese state handles the issue now will set the switch for the society's future course. Unfortunately, the key to the future has not yet been found.

At the risk of sounding provocative, the issue of the refugee camps in Nepal does not hold the powder to tear Bhutan apart. The generosity of the international community's spirit towards Bhutan and the remarkable skills and stamina of its polity shall eventually solve this particular problem, and the solution will not be too far removed from the current Bhutanese terms. The real danger for Bhutanese society, thus, lies in the volatile question of interethnic relationship within the country and the issue of long-term ethnic coexistence absent the calamities of exodus.

The rules of the ethnic game, of course, continue to be set by the Buddhist majority. Representing this majority, the state moves between the somewhat crude attempts at ethnic assimilation and the more subtle discrimination evident in the access to public amenities and opportunities. There will be few Bhutanese holding Nepali names who will not be able to tell a story or two. To repeat just one: the existence of thousands of people who would, by average criteria of Western citizenship laws, i.e. by virtue of one Bhutanese parent or their own long residence, easily qualify for Bhutanese nationality. However, the state prefers to keep them indefinitely 'in-between'. Exact figures are not available, but some estimates say that perhaps up to 30 percent of the Nepali-origin population in Bhutan is thus kept in suspense, with "special resident permits" substituting for their de facto statelessness.

The policy of resettlement of landless families from the mountainous north to the southern areas, for decades dominated by Nepali settlers, is well calculated—a realpolitik-inspired policy if there was one. The state is indeed well advised to prepare for the potential return of selected camp dwellers from eastern Nepal, and assuredly some of them will have to be eventually accepted back. Diluting the Nepali ethnic concentration in their traditional southern strongholds would therefore be logical state policy. Judging by the representation in the Tshongdu (National Assembly), the plan is working well: even some of the members representing southern traditionally Nepali-dominated constituencies are now northern settlers. Moreover, there is always the chance that many refugees may voluntarily renounce the opportunity to return because of the complications of restoration deriving from the distribution of land to the northerners.

Meanwhile, the endeavour is on to create a unified nation-state, by fostering and imposing the paraphernalia of a single nationality upon its disparate subjects. But the fact is that a nation-state is not built on cloth, as the imposition of the national (northern) dress code would suggest. It is built on feelings, based on interrelationships between the state and its subjects, based on the merit of balanced distribution of opportunities among the people. The minds of most Bhutanese Nepali dwellers appear to be a priori with the Bhutanese state—since, rationally, the state can provide them with opportunities unparalleled in the South Asian context. Nevertheless, their feelings are on hold, with the push for an ethnically uniform nation-state requiring the renouncement of their 'Nepali' cultural identity. This push by the Bhutanese state is too crude to be efficient.



What is striking is that both the state's discrimination against, and its attempts at assimilating the Nepali-speakers appear as if they are being carried out in good faith. The rather unsophisticated attempts at assimilation, based on black-white, good-bad paradigm of racial difference, could stem from the superiority complex developed by a population which mastered its destiny in splendid ethnocentric isolation. Indeed, it would be simplistic to blame the northern elite, or Ngalong, for implementing an policy of ethnic supremacy.

To look at history, there are few patterns of peaceful ethnic coexistence from which the northern Bhutanese could learn. From their point of view, with the Sikkim example ever-present, the policy of making generous investments in the southern areas has backfired. The fact that this whole corner of South Asia has seen strong migratory currents of Nepalis and other communities does not make the Bhutanese authorities breathe any easier. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, the Bhutanese state has failed to reach out to the hearts and minds of its Brahma-created subjects. Whether the Bhutanese state proves attractive and impartial enough for the Nepali-speakers remaining within the country to wholeheartedly become Bhutanese is something to be seen in the decade ahead. If this fails to happen, the very existence of Bhutan as a state might yet be gambled away.

Besides, even if the state has won the numbers game for the moment, it may not be able to do so forever. This is because the southern, mostly Hindu, population has a higher birth rate than the northern Buddhists. The time will come when the demographic balance will once again dip in favour of the southerners. If the resentments still persist, it is at that point that the powder will be potent enough to tear Bhutan apart. The model for ethnic coexistence will have to be developed long before that.

Non-nation state

The winds of change also blow over the system of governance in Bhutan. With the inevitable process of political differentiation underway, the system does evolve. Indeed, the political reforms of recent years have been sweeping, and not only by contemplative Bhutanese standards. The general feeling among the small tribe of Bhutan-watchers is that the devolution of power from the absolute monarchy to the collective leadership based on indirect democracy, is genuine. Interestingly, voices asking for more cannot be overheard.

Indirect democracy as a means of choosing representatives to the National Assembly may well be reproachable by Western standards, and the Assembly sessions do appear every so often to be carefully crafted. But the indiscriminate imposition of the modern Western human rights concept and its instruments—such as pluralistic, direct parliamentary democracy—would lead to a socio-political polarisation endangering the very survival of the Bhutanese 'non-nation' state.

An Eastern society, exposed to an alien system of governance built upon legacies of Richelieu and Bismarck, Rousseau, Adam Smith and Jefferson, would fault along different lines than societies of the West. Social polari-sation in the West develops between classes because of the capitalist, predominantly nation-state society. The pattern of polarisation in the developing world follows other fault lines such as ethnicity, colour, creed, clan or caste—for which successful institutional setups have yet to be developed. Bhutan is far from being a capitalist nation-state, and it will take some time. And if a benevolent and wisely evolving kingship stands as the only workable alternative to the institutional vacuum of a transient time—then those who call this system their own must be considered fortunate.

Bhutanese statehood is not only an internal Bhutanese affair—it is also a deeply Asian affair, largely determined by frictions and slides along the Sino-Indian fault. To spell it out more clearly, the future of Bhutanese statehood depends to a considerable extent on the evolution of bilateral relations between New Delhi and Beijing. India alone has been the single outstanding external determinant of Bhutanese affairs so far, and its influence does evolve: over time, the commercial interest has been added to the earlier geo-strategic considerations. The emphasis on the 'suzerainty' aspect of the relationship, typical for the imperious Gandhi/Congress era, has given way to a more hands-off policies. Not that the new Indian polity has lost its interest in Bhutan—surely New Delhi wants Thimphu still firmly placed in its orbit.

For India, Bhutan is useful as a reliable and predictable political ally. New Delhi has learnt its lesson from the Sikkim episode: a politically firm and economically viable ally is better left in its sovereign (or 'suzerain') status, especially if a good part of its exchequer is quite generously funded from the West. In the event of a Sikkimisation of Bhutan, India would have a two-fold problem: apart from the bilateral scrap with China which would inevitably ensue, the cost of Bhutanese upkeep would fall entirely back upon New Delhi as the Western donors would have withdrawn.

As of now, the overall terms of the Bhutan-India relationship have become more calculable and rational. Bhutan's perimeter of action has increased, even though as a result, it has had to fend for itself more than earlier. Bhutanese diplomacy has been up to the task, skillfully negotiating the terrain and expanding Bhutan's room for manoeuvre vis-a-vis India. An official visit by a Chinese high official, which happened in September 1999, would have been unthinkable back in the times of Indira or Rajiv Gandhi.

Insurgents and donors

The matter of immediate concern to Bhutan's leaders is the spillover of the ethnic and secessionist strife in the Indian Northeast, which has been spreading from Assam into the jungles of southern Bhutan over the past few years. These forested tracts have emerged as a natural safe-heaven for the Assamese secessionists and militants. The danger here goes beyond the obvious, for it may touch upon the little explored, and conceivably perilous ethnic imbalance, along Bhutan's mountainous east-west axis.

The problem with the southern Nepali-speakers may blind us to the fact that the Bhutanese north does not stand together as firmly as it may appear. Although more than three centuries have passed, the fine ethnic and religious distinctions between the two main communities of Bhutan's north have not disappeared. The original population, after all, were the Scharchop, who apparently came in from the east in early middle ages to settle in present-day Bhutan. The 'newcomers' from Tibet, the Ngalong, arrived in the early 17th century, led down through the passes by the founder of modern Bhutan, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal.

The Scharchops still stick to the original Nyingmapa teachings of the Tibeto-Himalayan founder of Buddhism, Guru Rinpoche.

The Ngalongs follow the reformed Kargyupa teachings of the great lama and statesman, Shabdrung. In the remote southeastern areas of Bhutan, populated by Scharchops, Khyens and several other smaller tribes, the appeal of the escalating agitation by the Bodos and ULFA may be too good to resist. This, then, opens an additional front in the Bhutanese struggle for maintaining its space. A possible link of this type may not be as fanciful as it may at first seem.

Ironically, the extension of Assamese insurgency into Bhutan could be a kind of blessing-in-disguise for the somewhat frail creation that is the Druk nation-state. The presence of an external enemy is the best focus for rallying support at home and forging national unity around a common cause. The debates and motions during the just concluded Tshongdu session have already moved in this direction, and have 'exploited' this opportunity presented by the Bodos. Will the traditional astuteness of Bhutanese authorities, which moves to the fore when matters of national interest come up, succeed in turning this clear and present danger into a national advantage this time as well?

The presence of Western donor assistance in Bhutan has to also be seen in this light. Though substantial, the Western material support for the country's development is not something Bhutan cannot not do without. Thimphu welcomes external funding even though the national financial institutions are awash with liquidity. Likewise, technical assistance and training abroad are welcome as a means to build the base to be part of the impending global economy. However, the usual donor leverage, as enjoyed in conventional recipient countries, is remarkably reduced in Bhutan. Because Bhutan's economy retains its strong subsistence base, it can afford a slower pace of development if for some reason Western aid were to be withdrawn.

Few development workers seem to realise that the prevailing significance of Western aid for Bhutan is not its volume, but the aid agencies' physical and political presence in Bhutan. This presence of Western donors and their coordination and liaison offices (mostly treated like small embassies) is regarded by the government and intelligentsia as a small but significant safeguard of Bhutan's sovereignty. In the last resort, this presence could make the spoil sharing between the behemoth neighbours, should they ever think of it, more difficult.

Meanwhile, the objectivity of the Western donor representative in Thimphu is a good subject for discussion. Certainly, Thimphu is a good place to live and work in, for the few selected ones. The sense of being the chosen ones, having direct access to high places in Bhutanese society and polity—keep in mind a polity that takes very good care of its donors—may lead the occasional representative to succumb to the temptation of wallowing in self-importance and losing track of societal trends. The fact is, however, even if they weep rivers of tears when leaving the country, few donor representatives leave fully blinded by the country's aura.

Indeed, there are representatives who voice critical opinions about Bhutanese affairs, and even take action. However, like so much having to do with Bhutan, these criticisms and actions are kept out of the public eye and remain a matter of bilateral dealings between the government and the bilateral agency. This is not necessarily good, more 'glasnost' would help indicate what is going well and what is not. But who is going to pioneer and risk the cosy relationship which provides such self-importance and leverage?

Finally: the paradox Bhutan has to endure is connected to its appeal. With every passing day, with every dollar of foreign donor support, and with every project and reform, Bhutan is closing the gap and becoming more like the others. A multitude of egos is gushing in, fault lines are opening up. Meanwhile, the opportunities Bhutan has, it distributes unequally. The mystic is made profane, and the generosity of spirit may begin to erode. The doors of scrutiny will open ever wider. Unless, of course, Bhutan really attains Buddhahood in a unique, gross-nationally happy way. All would warmly wish for that... △

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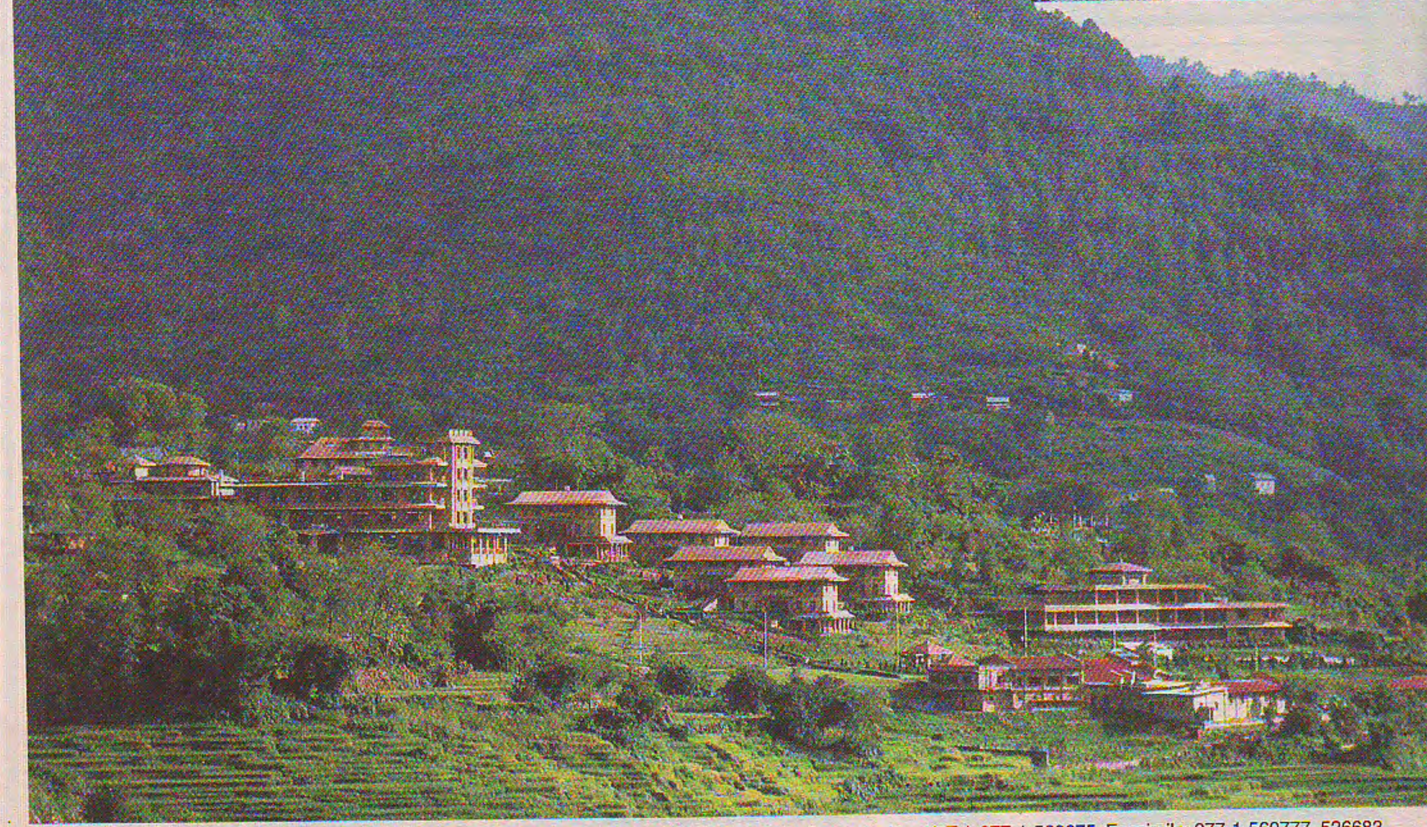

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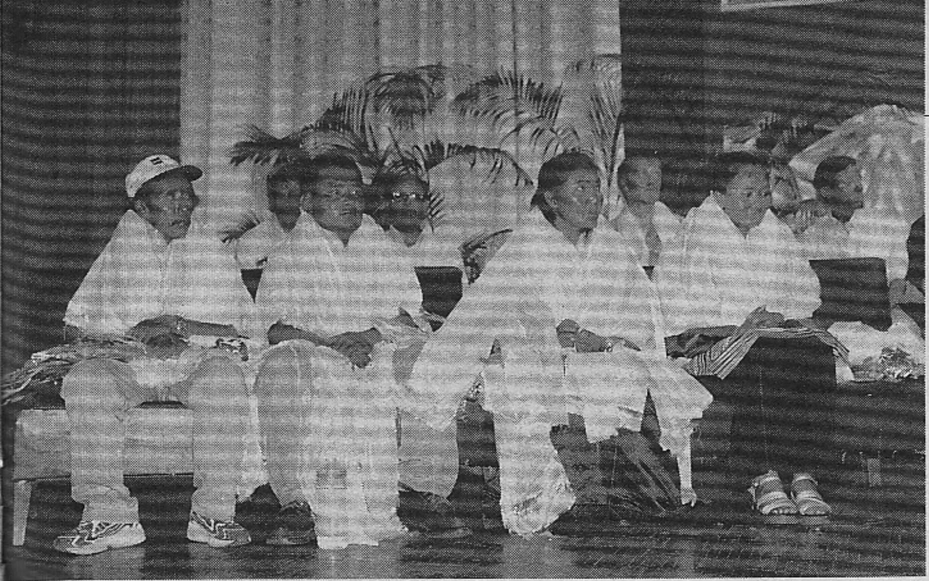


Everesters being feted in Kathmandu, and (below) Ram Krishna Shrestha sends out an ethnic greeting from a foggy summit.

The Climber is Nepali

by **Deepak Thapa**

This past mountaineering (spring) season was a full one for Nepali climbers on Mount Everest. Besides the usual dozens making it to the top as high altitude guides and porters, there were a few climbs that were noteworthy.

Appa Sherpa made his 11th ascent; Babu Chhiri Sherpa accomplished a speed climb of 16 hours 56 minutes from Base Camp (5400 m) to the 8848m summit; Lhakpa Sherpa became the second Nepali woman to make it to the top (and also the first to come back alive); and Pemba Dolma Sherpa became the third Nepali woman to climb Everest but the first to do so from the northern Tibetan side. Ram Krishna Shrestha became the second Everest summiteer from the Newar community (yes, there are a few non-Sherpa Nepalis who have taken to climbing). Then there was 15-year-old Temba Chhiri Sherpa who missed summitting by a bare 22 metres (and managed a record height by anyone so young).

As has become the norm, these individual achievements were a matter of much celebration in Nepal, where the media has finally become aware of the mountains as not only a locus of Western climbers. The Nepali mountaineers were feted by all and sundry—political parties, youth groups, cultural organisations.

For sure, Nepali (to be more exact, Sherpa) climbers have come a long way since British mountaineer Alexander Kellas 'discovered' the Sherpa climber in the first decade of the 20th century. The early British expeditions employed expatriates from Nepal's Sherpa country living in Darjeeling—Tenzing Norgay being the most notable among them. Thereafter, Sherpas evolved as an integral part of Himalayan climbing—typecast into the role of support staff helping carry loads and setting up high camps—so much so that 'Sherpa' entered the English lexicon as meaning someone who goes ahead to prepare the ground for a meeting or summit.

Eight decades and countless expeditions since it took to the mountain massif, the now-famous mountaineering community has created a reliable economic niche for itself by supporting Himalayan expeditions, and not only within Nepal. The last few years, however, has seen a shift in the way Sherpa climbers have begun to perceive mountain-climbing. The tradition has been for Sherpas from villages such as Namche, Khumjung and Thame to work their way up from porters to high-altitude porters, then *sirdars* (basically, head porter), and finally climbing team-member, before retiring into anonymity to tend yaks or grow potatoes. This is how it still largely is even today, as exemplified by the world-renowned "Snow Leopard", Ang Rita Sherpa, spending his retirement thus in his home village of Thamo.

Generational change

The newest generation of Sherpa mountaineers, however, is not content with helping the sahib get to the top and basking in the reflected glory. These younger climbers have begun to capitalise on their own achievements. The benefits are obvious and financial gain is but one consideration. More important, it seems, is the desire to leave their mark on the record books by attempting what can only be called 'extraordinary' climbs. Thus we have seen Lobsang Jangbu sporting a karate gi on the summit; Kazi attiring himself in the Nepali national dress complete with topi; and Babu Chhiri daring the medical theorists by spending 21 hours on the top; and so on.

There was a time when multiple ascents of Everest was enough to ensure a name in climbing circles. Three-timer Pertemba Sherpa and the late Sungdare Sherpa, the first with five climbs and immortalised in a postage stamp, stand as examples. But with such records being a dime a dozen among Sherpas since the 1990s, imaginative ways had to be found to attract notice, hence the stunts. This does not mean that importance is no longer attached to multiple climbs. On the contrary, the most famous climbers in Nepal at the moment are Appa, Ang Rita (the first to manage 10 times) and Babu Chhiri (with 10 ascents, apart from his other accomplishments).

Amidst all the chest-thumping of this spring's climbing season, what went quite unnoticed was that the climbs by Pemba Doma and Ram Krishna represented a different and welcome dimension to Nepali mountaineering. Neither of them had taken to climbing for a livelihood, and there was no pre-departure grandstanding when the two left for base camp. News of their success came as a bonus to a Nepali public that was being given a blow-by-blow account of what was happening up on Everest by a couple of Nepali reporters and a photographer who were at Base Camp at the invitation of one of the better-publicised expeditions.

Nepalis seem to have finally discovered their mountains. But it is yet a far cry from the amateur, 'because-it-is-there' spirit of climbing pioneered by the British. Mountain conquests that receive a high profile in Nepal are limited to Everest: it is as if climbing other peaks are of no consequence. More challenging ascents go unremarked. Take the case of Ang Rita, a household name in Nepal. Hardly anyone is aware that apart from his 10 successes on Everest, he has 14 other 8000-metre ascents to his credit.

It is not too difficult to understand why this is so. As a British sociologist who has done work among the Sherpas says, for them climbing Everest is the equivalent of striking gold. But it is also true that despite their proud assertion of Nepal being the "land of the Himalaya", Nepalis, on the whole, are hopelessly ignorant about the abode of the gods. Hardly anyone would be able to even name the different *himals* (ranges), let alone the individual peaks they have seen all their lives. On the other hand, Everest (or Sagarmatha, as it is formally known in Nepal—Chomolongma is the Sherpa/Tibetan name) is a source of great pride to Nepalis. No wonder the climbing heroes of Nepal are all connected with Everest.

The Guinness book

Nepali climbing will not come of age before the climbers realise there is more to mountaineering than the somewhat crass aspects of setting records on Everest and striving for mention in the Guinness Book of World Records. After all, the adulation over their achievements is coming from a Nepali public generally ignorant about mountaineering. These climbers are probably already aware that despite all the hullabaloo they manage to rake up at home they are not accorded much respect in the international climbing fraternity, which considers most of the Sherpa climbers who have 'graduated' from support staff as serious plodders rather than experts at technical climbing.

Things will only begin to change when Nepali climbers begin tackling unclimbed summits and faces of which there are hundreds in their country, or trying out new routes to well-worn summits. Even if it has to be Everest, they could shun the 'yak route' of up the Southeast ridge and try the more challenging routes, including the Southwest face or the West Ridge. In short, it is time Nepali climbers also took up mountaineering in the true spirit of the amateur.

The inevitable question would be: will Nepalis be able to afford the high cost of mountain-climbing? Will domestic corporate sponsorship be forthcoming the way it apparently does for Nepali Everest expeditions? For sponsors to come forward, the public will first have to become more aware of mountains and mountaineering. This will take years, but a start has to be made.

There is, however, also another way to enhance mountaineering as a truly national sport. Since Nepalis will continue to climb no matter what, they might as well train to become accomplished mountaineers and sell their skills for much more than the pittance they earn today. Rather than stand by while foreign mountain guides earn big bucks up the Nepali mountains, the Sherpas and other Nepalis could also evolve from serving as load-carrying plodders to being good climbers and true mountaineering guides. For that to happen, Nepali climbers will have to become highly specialised, technically proficient climbers. It may come as a surprise that in nearly a century of Himalayan climbing, there has not been a single Nepali certified by the UIAGM (Union Internationale des Association de Guide de Montagne), the world body of mountain guides whose imprimatur places everyone at the same level, whether you are Swiss, Canadian, Chilean or Japanese.

Admittedly, UIAGM certification is not easy. It can take up to three years and involves considerable expense. As things stand, the possibility of those already in the profession going for it is remote, not least because proficiency in a useful foreign language is of utmost importance to serve as an international standard guide. Which is why the present lot of climbers, whatever their personal best, cannot take full advantage of the potential represented by their skills.

Fortunately, the education level of the new generation of Nepali climbers is rising, and this gives hope that before long there will be many *pukka* Nepali mountain guides who will then show the way to others. Given the varied opportunities Nepal's mountains have to offer, there will be no shortage of work. But until that happens, it is the foreign guides who will lead from the front (and make most of the money), and Nepalis will continue to plod behind with their loads. △

Daily News
450 terrorists killed at Elephant Pass in last 72 hrs
The Island
Fowzie rejects demands
pledges

Competent Authority vs. The Press

Another war is being waged in Sri Lanka, this one between the press and a government which insists on its powers to censor.

by **Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena**

This is a tale of censorship. Of how a government beleaguered by war with a deadly opponent, chose to muzzle its media. Of how the media took on the government, and the way the court dealt with it. The lessons are plenty to learn from the "heightened" media censorship announced by the Sri Lankan government on 3 May.

At first impact, however, neither the press nor the public was unduly perturbed. After all, the country had been under emergency rule for the better half of the past two decades and had witnessed successive rulers summarily using emergency law to control the press for varying ends and to varying degrees. And there was nothing to indicate that this current round of censorship was going to be anything worse. Matters soon became clearer.

Towards the end of the week after the censorship regulations were announced, copies of the Sunday newspapers that were sent to the Competent Authority were coming back blotted out. As one sub-editor at *The Sunday Times* put it, "It is shock upon shock. All our copies are being sent back, slashed to senseless rubbish." This sense of horror was echoed in newspaper offices throughout Colombo—news reports, columns, cartoons, all were being dealt the same black markers.

The full glory of Competent Authority Ariya Rubesinghe's handiwork was there for all Sunday readers to see as they settled into their weekend reading. Page after page of Sunday's newspapers highlighted enormous sections which had been deleted by Rubesinghe, including political comment, satire, social comment, as well as legal analyses of the May regulations themselves. The connection of the censored items with national security or public order was hard to find. It was a censoring without parallel in the history of the country's media. Only the pages of the government-controlled *Sunday Observer* were left untouched. A collision course had been set between Rubesinghe and the Sri Lankan media, which was to reach a dramatic climax three months later.

Rubesinghe the powerful

This fresh spate of censorship was all the more surprising since Rubesinghe had always prided himself on his cordial relations with the media. Neither was he new to the office of Competent Authority. At the time of the May regulations, he was, in any event, acting in the post under previous censorship strictures imposed in 1998, essentially banning the publication or transmission of "sensitive military information". (These regulations are imposed under presidential powers specified in the Public Security Ordinance, which is a pre-Independence enactment.)

The May regulations were put in place in the immediate aftermath of the mid-April military disaster, which resulted in the Tigers capturing vital territory including the Elephant Pass Military Complex—undoubtedly one of the severest setbacks for the Chandrika Kumaratunga government since it came to power in 1994.

They empowered the Competent Authority "to take any measures and give such directions" necessary against the media to protect national security, public order, the maintenance of essential services. He could direct editors to submit documents, editorials and articles prior to publication. Sanctions for contravention of such directives could lead to banning of the newspaper and shutting down of its printing press. The Competent Authority was also empowered to act when he was of the opinion that "there is or has been or is likely to be" publication of matter in defiance of the prohibited categories. The powers vested in Rubesinghe were thus considerable and he wielded them in addition to his powers under the 1998 regulations.

This time, he used his authority with a vengeance. As protests streamed in from all corners of the world, censorship was further tightened. All live political broadcasts on radio and television were banned. Cautionary letters were sent to the newspapers opposing the injunction. Flexing his censorial muscle to the fullest, Rubesinghe commenced an editorial ban and press closure of two newspapers—the Jaffna-based *Uthayan* and the uncompromisingly anti-government *The Sunday Leader*. He said they had flouted his authority and continued to publish material infringing on national security. This was meant to serve as an effective warning to other newspapers contemplating similar rebellion.

Meanwhile, the censorship agenda was strengthened with the induction of a second Competent Authority, Sripathi Suriarachchi, an overt supporter of the government and earlier member of the government electoral media team. However, amidst all this unnecessary show of muscle-power, the Kumaratunga administration seemed to have failed to reckon with the fact that adversity can unite even the most reluctant of bedfellows. The cumulative effect of the draconian clampdown was an unusual coming together of Sri Lankan editors of mainstream and tabloid newspapers in all the three languages—Sinhala, Tamil and English—to mount legal challenges to the Competent Authority before the Supreme Court.

More bad news awaited them there, however. In an unlucky coincidence, merely a week after the fresh censorship laws came in place, the Supreme Court delivered a judgement upholding the 1999 strictures. (The petition had been filed by well-known human rights activist Sunila Abeysekera.) While acknowledging the importance of an independent press in a democratic society, the Court declared that the 1999 regulations maintained a fair balance between the free flow of information and the legitimate aim of protecting national security. This judgement was seized upon by the government media to indulge both in lampooning Abeysekera, and maintaining that the present censorship laws were right and proper.

Guild vs. Authority

Undeterred, in late May and early June, a spate of petitions was filed in the Supreme Court, challenging the new censorship both in principle and in its implementation. To begin with, *The Sunday Leader* when to the Court against the ban on its editorial offices and the sealing of its printing presses. Three days later, The Editors Guild of Sri Lanka, comprising 10 editors of national newspapers in all three languages combined as never before to file a petition against unfair and arbitrary action by the Competent Authority. Successive petitions by deputy editors, columnists, cartoonists, photographers together with a petition by a political activist and a law lecturer followed.

These petitions, in fact, marked the first time Sri Lankan journalists had come before court, challenging specific censoring of their articles as opposed to the banning of a newspaper. Their grievances focussed on discriminatory action by the Competent Authority, including one notable instance where a statement by the Editors Guild criticising the censorship had been censored in four private newspapers, but inexplicably allowed to be published in its entirety in a state newspaper. Other complaints related to the banning of cartoons and editorials analysing the censorship, columns commenting on relations between India and Sri Lanka, and the audacious alteration of phrases, such as dropping of "inadequately" from an article which carried reference to "most inadequately trained troops".

The Court granted leave to proceed in all the cases. Meanwhile, public pressure mounted against the censorship and the government began to promise a relaxation of the strictures. But the really big news was just around the corner. In late June, the Supreme Court declared that the appointment of the Competent Authority was in itself illegal. It ruled that the May Regulations, under which Rubesinghe had acted, had no specific provision for the appointment of a Competent Authority. The Sri Lankan media found cause for joy.

But the government was unperturbed by this reprimand. Hardly a week later, a new regulation was announced by the president, re-appointing Rubesinghe as the Competent Authority in accordance with the Supreme Court judgement. And it was symptomatic of the imperious insensitivity of the Kumaratunga administration that the amended July regulations now expressly forbid reports on procurement of military supplies. Earlier regulations did not have this stricture, a result of media protests that it would only inhibit reporting on corruption in the armed forces. These concerns were raised before the Supreme Court in late July when the Editors Guild petition and connected petitions came up for hearing. The Court now has ordered the Competent Authority to meet up with the editors before the end of the month to finalise workable guidelines under the new regulations.

Since then, Rubesinghe's actions have been far more circumspect, and he has confined his scissors to strictly military-related news. But the censorship continues. From a larger perspective, in a county where the northern war has debilitated the people—economically, politically and morally—restriction of military information will be sufficient to confer a political edge to a government facing a crucial parliamentary election in a few months' time. The Sri Lankan media may have won part of the battle, but it certainly has a long way to go before it can even think of winning the war against a political administration that came to power with extravagant promises of media rights, and became responsible for some of the darkest days in Sri Lankan media history. △

Missing the point

What was planned as a great meeting of minds between Indian and Pakistan media bigwigs, was far from that. They came as strangers, and left not much different.

by Rita Manchanda

The pick of Indian journalists—from the nationalist right to the liberal left, print to broadcast, and English to Hindi—all of 45 of them were there in Islamabad, warmed up and waiting to take a message back to the Indian public from General Parvez Musharraf, CEO of Pakistan. The South Asia Media Conference of 1-2 July was a coup of a public relations opportunity for a leader whose militarist image has legitimised the righteous official Indian stance of "no talks" with a man whose "hands are stained with (Kargil) blood". Here was the opportunity to make a symbolic unilateral gesture, to appeal directly to the Indian people, cutting across the bigoted bureaucracies on both sides.

But the General is not a man who values symbolic gestures. Indeed his belittling of Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee's gesture of visiting the *Minar-I-Pakistan* in Lahore in February 1999, queered the pitch of his 90 minutes exchange with the visiting media. Vajpayee's visit to the monument which stands on the plain outside Lahore Fort had been an affirmation of India's recognition of Pakistan as a sovereign independent state. It provoked a barrage of criticism against Vajpayee from ultra-nationalists at home. The General was miserly with his acknowledgement, "Vajpayee's going to the *Minar- I- Pakistan* was a symbolic gesture, but what if the real issue is not touched? It puts one's sincerity in doubt if the core issue of Kashmir is not resolved."

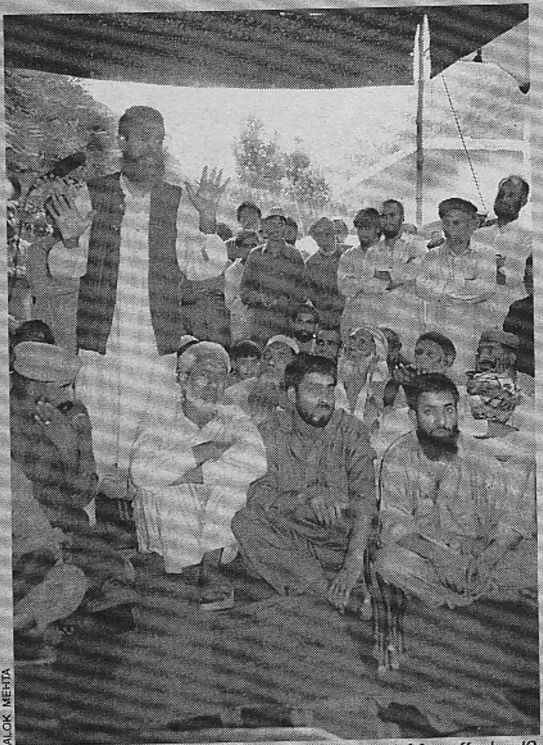
The accusatory refrain about the insincerity of the Indian leaders, whether it was Lahore or the Simla agreement, brought BJP ideologue K.R. Malkani—also present at the media meet—to his feet. Moving to the front of the room, his body angrily tense, he asked "If you believe that the Indian leaders are insincere, why do you want to talk to them?" Before the CEO of Pakistan could respond, a heckler from the back cried out, "Malkani has no right to ask a question! He's not a journalist!" At issue was not so much the locus standi of Malkani, a former editor of the RSS organ *The Organiser*, but astonishment at how and why, in the presence of General Musharraf, someone dared to be so confrontational. What happened to the bonhomie, the candid cross-border opening up of journalists, the attempt to rise above distorted perceptions, which supposedly had characterised the two days of South Asia Media Conference?

Gen. Musharraf's no-holds-barred press conference ended up as a public relations disaster. If his opening remarks invited the South Asian press to communicate that he should be taken seriously and should be talked to, the feisty question-answer session produced a hardening of antagonistic positions and the grim we-told-you-so realisation of absolute inflexibility. Surely this was not the message the Pakistanis wanted to send.

There were some like Seema Mustafa, political editor of *The Asian Age*, who was disarmed by the candid, straight-shooting style of General Musharraf and his relatively 'liberal' image, a striking contrast to the diplomatic guile associated with his predecessor, the Islamising General Zia-ul Haq. But Dilip Padgaonkar, managing editor of *The Times of India*, was not impressed: the general had invited dialogue but indicated no scope for flexibility to make talks on Kashmir, Kargil or *jehad*, anything but an empty exercises. As for Tarun Vijay, editor of *Panchajanya* (another RSS mouthpiece), Gen. Musharraf's words only made rock solid the irreconcilable divide between India and Pakistan. The pandering questions of a *Jang* reporter, sycophantically trying to warm up to an un-responding Chief Executive, was a grim reminder of the very jingoistic hysteria for which Musharraf had castigated the Indian press. The tolerance of dissenting viewpoints, which had up to a

AK/POK

THE ISLAMABAD conference participants were offered the opportunity to visit the Line of Control in Azad Kashmir/Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, and many jumped at the opportunity, even while realising that the Pakistani 'minders' would be all over. What the Indian participants had bargained without was the barrage of flak against them for visiting the 'disputed' area. Already, the ultra-nationalists had lambasted them as anti-national in an editorial in *The Pioneer*, and later at a cocktail-reception in New Delhi, a highly respected former foreign secretary accused them of having betrayed the Indian position on AK/POK and legitimising Pakistan's stand.


ALOK MEHTA

Relief camp at Muzaffarbad?

The truth was that the journalists barely set foot on AK/POK, so zealous were the 'minders'. The set-piece interaction played out at the 10-year-old Ampore refugee camp had no more reality than a grimy picture postcard. Officially, there are 20,000 refugees who have come over from the Valley, with about 16,000 residing in the camps of AK/POK. In Ampore camp, nearly 3000 families lived in abject poverty. "Pakistan will not let us go. India will not let us come over," said one young man. The reality of being victimised by both sides was clear in his recitation of atrocities, which had driven him across 10 years ago from the border district of Kupwara.

Along the 750-km LoC, are armed troops (before 1989 armed with *dandas*), standing in between mines, with searchlights glaring at night. "It is not possible that 2500 fighters are waiting to cross over," said Major General Rashid Quereshi. "Pakistan recognises the sanctity of the LoC." (Although in his press conference Chief Executive Musharraf had implied that space existed for *jehadis* fighting repression in what he emphasised was the disputed area of Kashmir.)

Gen. Rashid's briefing to the visiting journalists in Muzzafarbad, exposed the clash of two distinct and confrontational histories as they relate to Kargil. The general was then Brigadier Rashid, and the spokesman of the Pakistan Army on the raging Kargil conflict. Talking to the journalists, there was a distinct sense of him making it up as he went along, as he presented Pakistan's version of the events leading up to Kargil. Against the background of India grabbing the Siachen heights, Pakistani regulars had seized the opportunity to occupy the gaps in between Shyok-Drass-Kargil along the LoC in February-March 1999 to preempt the Indian army, he explained. When did the Pakistanis discover that the jehadis had infiltrated across the LoC? "In May, when the *mujahedeen* fired on the Indian convoy." He added, "At the time we thought it was an Indian ploy."

When asked about Azad Kashmir being a base for the operations of the Hizbul Mujahedeen, Harkat ul Mujahdeen or the Lashkar-i-Toiba, he answered: "I need to check whether they have offices here." Meanwhile outside, scrawled on the rocky hillsides, were "HM", "JKLF", "ATI" (Anjuman Talba Islami) in huge letters for all to see.

The acting prime minister of Azad Kashmir was the gracious Shahibzada Md Irshad Zafar. "No, there were no offices of the HM or Harkat. We don't want a war with India," he said. How was it then that HM leaders like Salahuddin made announcements from here, asked columnist Prem Shanker Jha. "Maybe he was visiting. I've never met him. But we won't stop him. He has a right to be here. He's a Kashmiri." The Constitution of Azad Kashmir specifically states that it will be a base camp to support the liberation of Kashmir, pointed out Zafar Mehraj, the editor of Srinagar's *Kashmir Monitor*. Despite repeated requests, the journalists could not get a copy of the Constitution.

In what appeared to be a major departure, the acting prime minister said, "If that is what the people of Kashmir want, then independence, too, cannot be ruled out." However, he quickly added that there was no support for independence in Azad Kashmir. Just outside, on the hillside, was another scrawl: "Kashmir *banega* Pakistan." ▵

point marked the Conference sessions just a few hours earlier, was cracked wide open.

Perhaps, it was naïve to think that diplomatic flexibility could have been shown by the CEO, for irrespective of his predilections as a 'social liberal', what won't go away is the power dynamics of his relationship with the corps commanders, the Islamisation of the army and the dependence on the mullahs vis-a-vis the traders. How taut is the line the general walks was highlighted by the protests of the Jamaat-e-Islami against an alleged "softening" of stance on the 1971 war, in an interview he gave to *The Hindustan Times* published on the eve of his press conference.

The 'K' Problem

All of 200 South Asian journalists were gathered in Islamabad at the initiative of *The News* of Pakistan, with support from UNDP, the Canadians and the Pakistan government (most notably by providing visas to the Indian contingent). This was meant to be an opportunity for indepth and candid exchanges, and a variety of participants was certainly at hand. The daily newspaper had pulled of quite a feat in getting together some of the most respected as well as the brightest names in subcontinental media—from Barkha Dutt of NDTV to the most syndicated columnist of South Asia, Kuldip Nayar; from Rehana Hakim of the courageous Karachi newsmagazine *Newsline* to I. A. Rehman, now of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Ajit Bhattacharjea, the chairman of the Editors Guild of India, enviously observed that back in India they felt good if they could pull in even three editors. But it was not lost on anyone that it was the availability of Pakistani visa which had lured these media luminaries to Islamabad.

Current affairs editor of *The News* and organiser of the conference, Imtiaz Alam, flagged off SAMC by specifically juxtaposing the breakdown in official India-Pakistan dialogue with the possibility of Indian and Pakistani journalists entering into a dialogue. Unfortunately, Alam had structured the conference wrong, with set presentations by scores of speakers over two days in one vast plenary. This miscalculation alone was enough to virtually stifle interaction both within the conference and outside in the corridors. A break-up into various working groups may have proved useful, and time for free-wheeling discussion on the issues may also have brought people out of their nationalist cocoons. But this did not happen, and so the Indians and Pakistanis in particular mostly walked and talked past each other.

Most of the participants came to Islamabad as strangers and left as strangers, essentially caucusing within their own country delegations. The brave words spoken at the plenary about transcending a negative mindset, turned out to be sterile. *The News*, in an editorial, celebrated SAMC as a "peace model" but if the impressionistic accounts written by Indian and Pakistani journalists about the Islamabad event are anything to go by, the report card is disappointing.

Hardly any of the reports indicate that either Indian or Pakistani journalists engaged with the 'K' problem in ways that transcended their respective nationalist orthodoxies. Seen from the Indian prism, Pakistani journalists remain locked in their distorted history of the Kashmir problem, which sees the place as rightfully belonging to Pakistan—despite their criticism of the Kargil misadventure, they legitimise interference in Kashmir. Seen from the Pakistani prism, Indian journalists turn a blind eye to the disaffection in the Valley and the atrocities being committed there, and while condemning Kargil, refuse to acknowledge India's aggressive manoeuvres in occupying Siachen. Indeed, the only issue on which there seemed a consensus, remarked a TV journalist from India, "is the common opposition to the autonomy resolution of Farooq Abdullah". While certainly, even in Islamabad, there were those who held pluralist positions and refrained from demonising the neighbour, the intellectual space to challenge the claim of an essentialist India-Pakistan hostility did not open up.

The objectives of the conference would have been all about introspection—journalists to take responsibility for what in their hands has become a medium to promote hate and hysteria, and as professionals, to commit ourselves to a free and fair media. Many of the speakers did speak candidly and with vision. But in the crush of presentations, the arguments were lost. On the autonomy issue, *Dawn* columnist M P Bhandara in his paper "The Long Journey of Peace", daringly argued that Pakistan should acquiesce in the implementation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and supported granting full autonomy for the Valley as an interim step. Let alone provoking a debate, he was cut off midway, as other presentations were in line.

All in all, it was a lost opportunity. The fact that there was no reaching out was clear in a verbal skirmish that took place between a Pakistan Television journalist and Auradha Jamwal, the journalist daughter of Ved Bhasin—founder editor of *Kashmir Times*. Her lived reality of Kashmir through these 11 years was dismissed by the PTV journalist's prejudiced notions of what he thought to be the truth in the Valley.

It should have been a unique opportunity to listen, to talk, for it is not the easiest of tasks to get together such a wide array of cross-border editors and columnists. What survived for the Indian journalists was the brief glimpse of Pakistan and the relative media openness under military rule. As *The News* editorial wrote, for many it was their first exposure to Pakistan. And, certainly, they found "no hate squads pelting stones at them, no religious fanatics demanding their expulsion..." Unfortunately, many had gone looking for something more. △

Mahathir's Mantra

Resonances beyond Malaysia

by Shastri Ramachandaran

Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad should be feeling on top of the world. His mantras have worked wonders. Less than three years after the Asian currency crisis destabilised the economies of Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines, it is only Malaysia that has bounced back with revived vigour.

The mood in the country is upbeat. It does not take the visitor long, after landing in Kuala Lumpur, to figure out that the dazzle is not only because of the tropical sunlight in which Malaysia is basking. It is also the brightness of the halo that Mahathir has acquired for pulling his country back from the brink, as it were, to remake the economic miracle. *Asiaweek*'s casting of its Dream Team—listing Mahathir as the ideal interior minister for an Asian cabinet headed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee—and Malaysia leading the Commonwealth team to resolve the crisis in Fiji, could not have come at a more opportune time to focus attention on the combative Malaysian leader.

Mahathir's strong points are economic and ethnic management. But where is Malaysia, under Mahathir, headed? Will he succeed in carving out for the country a larger role in the region and Asia? That certainly seems to be his ambition, to create a new economic community and a different financial climate. Mahathir is ready, but can Malaysia be the springboard that he sees it to be? The answers are not easy, but there are many pointers. The most stunning being the country's remarkable economic recovery and how this was accomplished. And this economic recovery is pregnant with implications for Asia and the international financial community. These, in turn, have relevance for South Asia and its dominant power, India.

While Mahathir's success in 'ethnic management' is no less celebrated than Malaysia's economic prowess, of late the former is facing challenges. There is an Islamic surge that Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation is hard put to cope with, and which in the long run may force changes and radically alter the balance of power in Malaysian politics and society.

Emerging power

To take the economy first. Since Independence from British rule in 1957, Malaysia has modernised faster than South Asian countries which won freedom a good decade earlier. It had inherited a legacy similar to that of India and Pakistan in 1947—multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, surviving kingdoms that were out of joint with the political times, backward with little or no industrialisation and infrastructure for development such as transport, communication, education, health, etc. Like South Asia, Malaysia too witnessed a communist insurgency—which was ruthlessly crushed—and ethnic conflict was contained by a series of measures, including the son-of-the-soil Bumiputra policy.

At Independence, Malaysia, with nearly 1000 islands, could boast of nothing more than being the world's largest exporter of rubber. The other export was tin. Imports drained the exchequer, and the economy was excessively dependent on foreign services for earnings in shipping, banking and insurance. Well-to-do Malaysians found that the best things were to be had abroad and they went for them—tourism, education and shopping. The immediate post-colonial condition was not different from that of the newly independent countries of South Asia, but that is now in the past.

Malaysia quickly proceeded to strengthen and diversify its economy. While sustaining rubber and tin exports, it embarked on rapid modernisation and development of industries. The emphasis on plantation shifted from rubber to oil palms. Since the second half of 1980s, Malaysia has emerged as the world's leading exporter of palmolien oil, mainly to India, Pakistan and West Asia, while rubber remains a major export. Most of the high grade oil from the South China Sea is exported to the United States while the country imports petroleum for its own use from West Asia. In recent years all these exports have been overtaken by manufactured goods—microchips, electrical and electronics—which have become the No.1 foreign exchange earner.

Alongside this were efforts, launched in 1972, to boost tourism and reverse the trend of Malaysians travelling abroad for university education, recreation, holidays and shopping. With the creation of several colleges, the ranks of those going abroad for basic university education—which was unavoidable till the 1980s—has fallen to a trickle. Now tourism brings in over eight million people, a leap over the 5.5 million tourist arrivals recorded as recently as 1998. The new Kuala Lumpur International Airport, with five storeys to facilitate hassle-free arrival and departure, is a city by itself spread over 800 acres—the master plan provides for 8000 acres—with a capacity to handle 25 million passengers annually.

Such approaches to tourism development—the conception as well as delivery through tight construction schedules—are worthy of emulation, as is the resolve behind increasing hotel rooms from 65,000 to 95,000 in less than five years. Malaysia has much to offer the tourist—its many islands, communities and cultures, sun, sand, sea and clear waters, all accessible and enjoyable because of the facilities for sport, adventure and amusement. But this was always there, what is different now is the aggressive marketing.

The Malaysian economy's strengths in key sectors which give it a competitive edge in the international market are all too evident. It has made its own Proton car a popular brand, and confidently welcomes foreign investment in all kinds of arenas. Some of the biggest electronic companies, like Sony and Matsushita, now have their factories in Malaysia. And the Malaysian consumer being highly brand conscious, domestic manufacturers have had to pull up their act to be on par with the best available elsewhere. The domestic industry has been forced to upgrade in order to compete in quality and cost to cater to all classes of people.

No hat in hand

Even as Malaysia was riding the boom, with its currency strong and free-floating, valued at ringgits 2.5 to a US dollar with billions of ringgits stashed by Malaysians in banks abroad, (particularly Singapore because of the high interest rate on savings in the city-state), it was derailed by shock effects of the currency crisis. The crisis was attributed to the mischief of the "rogue speculator", George Soros, the US-based financier whom Mahathir called a "moron". It is estimated that Malaysia lost 40 billion dollars in the crisis, and much more—the gains of 20 years of development. There was a titanic clash between Mahathir and Soros, with the latter calling for the former's removal from office and the uncompromising prime minister not only sticking to his guns but pouring scorn on international counsel for recovery and insisting that he would manage Malaysia's recovery "his way". Even as Mahathir and Soros exchanged colourful epithets, the international financial community demonised Mahathir as a "lunatic" and forecast—and perhaps even wished—a catastrophic end for Malaysia and Mahathir. Experts, economists, global crisis managers and international financial institutions, including the IMF and World Bank, came out with predictable prescriptions of tight fiscal and monetary policies, multi-billion dollar bail-out packages and conditionalities such as freer trade and capital flows. While the other crisis-hit countries—Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines—went hat in hand and head bowed to the superior wisdom being doled out from the West, Mahathir went his own way.

Even during the worst moments of the crisis, there was no severe recession in Malaysia. Nor did it witness the kind of political and social unrest that other countries such as Indonesia succumbed to. Mahathir turned conventional economic wisdom on its head and imposed a regime of strict short-term capital controls. The ringgit was made non-convertible and pegged to the dollar—from a pre-crisis high of RM 2.5 to 4.2 to a dollar. Holding of ringgits in accounts abroad—mainly in Singapore—was banned and these had to be brought into Malaysia. Government employees were forbidden to travel overseas and the facility allowing Malaysians employed abroad to bring home imported cars was scrapped. Foreign investors and industries were not allowed to repatriate profits for one year. Tough credit restrictions were imposed across the board. Three agencies—for corporate debt restructuring, for asset management and for refinance—were set up which together helped industry to recover and achieve recapitalisation; and ensure that there were no sick or collapsing industries throwing workers out of jobs for want of expertise or resources for revival. In a radical departure from the prescribed antidote of curbing money supply and spending, Mahathir's government declared 1999 as a tax-free year with

Islamic Malaysia

MALAYSIA IS one of the most liberal of Islamic countries, and credit ought to go to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's modernising vision. But this very fact and condition could work against Mahathir's ambitious bid for leadership of the Muslim international community, although his most serious rival in this race, Suharto, is no longer in the reckoning due to the changes forced in Indonesia by the economic crises and political upheaval.

Mahathir's unique selling point is that he has a global vision of the Muslim world in all its dimensions, and given his image as a modern economic miracle-maker, he can be a formidable advocate of causes he takes up.

Yet, these very strengths are being tested by developments in Malaysia, which has a secular Constitution where Islam is the official religion. People are free to practise any religion and the employees of every faith get the mandatory two and half hours off at prayer time on Fridays, which non-Muslims use for shopping or other activities. The banks pay a health interest on deposits; *tudung*—the head covering—is not compulsory and there is no Islamic form of punishment. The uniform civil code enjoys wide acceptability.

If at all there is any 'discrimination', it is against Malaysian Muslims themselves, who, for example, are not allowed entry into casinos. But, apparently, there is no bar on Muslims from other countries, as many of the faithful from India, Pakistan and other countries, enjoy an unhindered run of their luck in the highly popular playing house at Genting, the highland resort just outside Kuala Lumpur.

The country's flourishing nightlife, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, and the easy and abundant availability of alcohol in shops, restaurants, hotels, clubs, nightspots and bars, also attests to Malaysia's liberal credentials. Drug trafficking is punishable with death but narcotics, like anywhere else in the world, are not impossible to get; and there is a 'drug problem' just as prostitution too is prevalent, although it is illegal and its existence is not officially accepted.

Malaysia's conservative Islamic party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which is growing in strength and appeal—particularly after it scored stunning victories by winning in the two states of Terengganu and Kelantan and trebling its seats in Parliament in the 1999 elections—wants Malaysia to be a wholly Islamic state. It would like women to cover their hair and favours a ban on alcohol. Although it has not opposed education and employment for women, it is inclined towards initiating policies that would encourage women to stay home.

As an opposition, PAS has been giving sleepless nights to the ruling National Front and Mahathir's United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The electoral success of PAS provoked demands from UMNO members that the government should strip the word "Islam" from PAS's name on the ground that religion should not be used to win votes. PAS, which is determined to resist any government effort in this direction, has asserted repeatedly that it would not compromise on its core ideology. But in practice, the Islamic party is not only accommodating but also accepting of the liberal perceptions of Islam prevalent in Malaysia. Observers point out that its electoral successes are—contrary to surmises—making PAS more moderate so that it can enlarge its appeal and not prematurely rouse fears of liberalism being under siege. There is an Islamic surge gathering in Malaysia and as it gains in momentum it is not PAS but the other parties, including Mahathir's UMNO, which will have to acquire Islamic credentials and promote Islamic principles. The UMNO has already begun moving in this direction: the government is asking Muslims to pay Islamic-type personal taxes and Muslim government employees are being told to attend religious classes.

In the recent race for women's leadership in the UMNO, the matter of whether women should cover their hair became an issue, and the winner had to commend the practice although it was her rival's platform—an indication of which way the wind is blowing for opponents of PAS. Equally significant was the Islamic religious flavour conspicuously introduced in the setting and utterances at the recent convention of UMNO. These are seen as conscious statements indicating how the UMNO, and its chief Mahathir, are reinventing themselves to not only meet the political challenge from PAS, but ride the Islamic wave should it become necessary.

-Shastri Ramachandaran

no corporate and income tax being payable for one year. This was intended to increase spending and consumption and had its effect of staving off recession. More than that, it saw a higher offtake of home-produced goods, and forced Malaysian industries, till then dependent on loyal domestic consumers, to seek and find new export markets. What dropped was the sale of luxury, particularly imported, goods.

With more money in people's hands, the government enthused citizens to 'spend, spend and spend', one upshot of which was a boost to domestic tourism. This generated enough income to ensure that the hotel industry, including new properties, did very well, albeit less than normal, business.

Malaysia's recovery is almost as full-blooded as it is dramatic. Today the ringgit is once again stable at 3.8 to a US dollar and it would be stronger if made convertible. And Mahathir's vision is the talk of the international financial community. Meanwhile, it is his ideological foe, George Soros, who has had to eat humble pie. Not only has Soros admitted that—"I screwed up"—which should be music to Mahathir's ears—but he is the poorer and the wiser for the lessons learnt. Soros has opted out of global market speculation and many of his top executives are jumping ship to find greener pastures elsewhere. The assets of his flagship 8.5-billion-dollar Quantum Fund have crashed by five billion dollars in the NASDAQ nosedive.

Mahathir has not only worsted Soros but also discredited doomsayers, particularly the strategists and economists of the IMF-World Bank, and all others who predicted certain disaster for Malaysia because of Mahathir's go-it-alone strategy. Now the czars and Cassandras are talking about a new mindset triggered by Mahathir's accomplishment. In a startling reversal, the World Bank has given up its opposition to short-term capital controls.

His success in the Malaysian turnaround could prove to be yet another launching pad for Mahathir's ambitions, as he seems unlikely to retire from battle with a sense of triumph. There is a whole new ballgame that those presiding over the Western world's financial architecture, founded on the might of the Bretton Woods twins, will now have to contend with. And this has to do with Mahathir's larger ambitions, chiefly an Asian economic community, to which the United States has been explicitly hostile.

Mahathir has not only been inspired by the Japanese model but never fails to point to it as a beacon for others—particularly in Asia and Africa—aspiring to economic success. He has been ardently advocating the case for an Asian economic community that could acquire stability and security by delinking itself from the dollar. Instead of the dollar, Mahathir suggests, Asian currencies should be tied to the Japanese yen.

In good times, the West could simply ignore such suggestions and take comfort from the fact that conservative Japan is not inclined to break with conventional West-driven financial institutions and their practices. Japan has gone along with the tides of globalisation and swallowed theories of barrier-free trade and free capital flows as the accepted wisdom. Now with the World Bank itself retracting on short-term capital controls, Japan might be tempted to utilise this and justify its own resort to capital control measures. And should Japan opt for such a course, which it could if adequately goaded by Mahathir, it might be the axis for a new Asian economic community to begin taking shape. This will be a serious threat to the supremacy of so-called "master race economics" and the hegemony enjoyed by the international financial institutions. Mahathir has spoken enough on the subject to indicate that he has a whole series of arrangements thought out to humble the dollar and dollar-driven international capital flows.

This is a development to which South Asian countries should not only wake up to but remain cued in to, particularly when they are warming up to strengthen ties with ASEAN. Other than economic, there are security dimensions to what Mahathir is talking about, that ought to be of special interest to India and therefore to its neighbours as well.

Muslim model

Despite his somewhat blotted record on democracy at home, as exemplified by the repressive tactics he adopted to silence political critics and challengers like former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir has a lot going for him. His voice matters the most in ASEAN and Southeast Asia, and not only because of his formidable achievements on the economic front. He is also winning new friends and influencing other countries in Asia and Africa by exhorting them to look East—at models like Japan—and at the same time pressing for what he calls "smart partnerships" with Europe, arguing for cheaper transfer of technology. No South Asian country, including India which claims the mantle of regional leadership, has been able to push an economic and strategic agenda with such force and conviction in international forums in the interests of itself and its neighbours as Malaysia has been doing under Mahathir.

Mahathir has good reasons for doing what he is doing. Much of his aggressiveness, wherein he has cast himself as the spearhead of an alternative liberated from the 'dictates of the dollar' is also a shrewdly calculated bid for leadership of the Muslim community the world over. His berating of Soros as being "anti-Muslim" was intended to warm the cockles of every Islamic heart. He might well be aiming for leadership of the Islamic countries as his vision of the Muslim world, unlike that of many others, is a global one.

But in this race for global leadership, Malaysia will have to contend with Indonesia, which will certainly have no intention to play second fiddle to Mahathir. Leading the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia's new President Abdurrahman Wahid has lent new impetus to regional initiatives on cooperation to realise his own vision of an "Asian renaissance".

New Delhi has compelling reasons to look East, although it may not be the reasons for which Mahathir is persuading African countries to do so. There are enough openings for India to more than make its presence felt in the ferment caused by new visions of Asian power and influence. This was highlighted by Singapore's Foreign Minister S Jayakumar during the recent visit of India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh to the island state. In Jayakumar's perception, India will be a "part of whatever new equilibrium or security architecture or geopolitical balance" that eventually emerges in the context of the strategic shifts the region is going through now in matters both economic and security.

The question is whether India should await its "part" or take the lead for which it has enough motivation, including the fact that Singapore and Indonesia would prefer India as a counter-weight to Mahathir's growing clout and also as a strategic counterpoint to China. Moreover, there are countries in the region which are not entirely at ease with the Islamic thrust of Mahathir.

Ironically the challenge to Mahathir's Islamic battle-gear comes from within Malaysia itself. His ruling National Front, may have done a patch-up job of the crisis created by the representative of the Chinese party quitting his ministership—the minister has since returned to his job. But the cracks the episode revealed in the ethnic balance of the ruling coalition—of Malays, Chinese and Muslims—are there to be seen.

In the elections held last November under the shadow of the ouster and disgrace of his No.2, Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir and his party, UMNO, swept back to power albeit with a reduced majority. More significant than Mahathir's victory is the sweep of the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which won the mandate to rule in two states and is now growing in appeal and support to seriously disturb the equilibrium of Mahathir's UMNO as well as the National Front.

Although Islam is the state religion, Malaysia's Islamic society is very liberal in comparison. Now, as a result of the rising popularity and strength of PAS, it is UMNO which finds itself forced to appear more Islamic while the Islamic party for its part is projecting its liberal credentials to gather wider support. It is all too evident that Mahathir's drive for leadership of the international community of Muslims may well face its severest tests at home.

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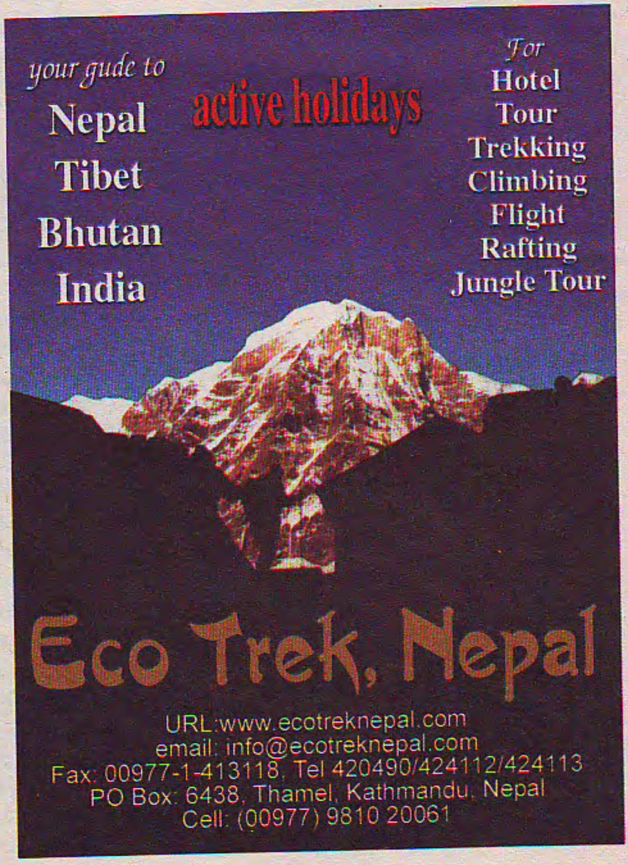
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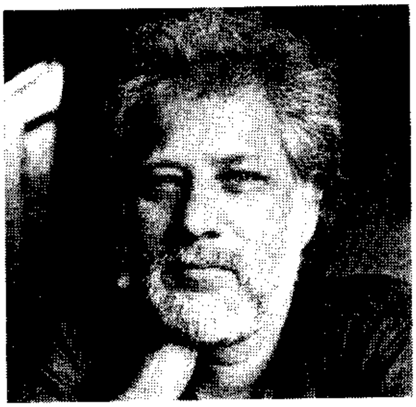

One day in June, the Toronto *Globe* and *Mail* carried a news photograph showing a man, naked to the waist, surrounded by police officers. The man's hands are handcuffed behind him. A police officer is pulling at the man's pocket with both his hands, and on the other side another policeman, of lower-rank with a submachine gun hanging from his shoulder, has his left hand inside the prisoner's other pocket. The caption reads: "Police search a man shortly after a suicide bomber killed 21 people in Sri Lanka yesterday, including a cabinet minister, during a function to raise funds for families of slain soldiers. The assassination shattered the country's first War Heroes Day."

When you look back at the photograph, you notice how the Tamil man's mouth is open. When you look into the eyes of the police officers around him, you perhaps get a sense of the silence of that open mouth and its dryness. Will they take him to a prison and break his jaw so that afterwards he can't even ask for water?

The photographer, in making the suspect the centre of attention, has not been able to hide his diminutive size. His skin is dark. The slim torso is arched because he is being pulled from two different directions. Inches above the man's left nipple, is the circular, metal mouth of the police officer's gun. He, the prisoner, could not be more than 20 or 22.

Anil's Ghost
Michael Ondaatje
(2000) Knopf, USD 25
(pp. 311)

reviewed by
Amitava Kumar

When you look at the photograph, if you have already read Ondaatje's book, you might be reminded of the line about how "the victims of 'intentional violence' had started appearing in May 1984". "They were nearly all male, in their twenties, damaged by mines, grenades, mortal shells." When you look at this photograph, of course you need not have read Ondaatje's novel to be reminded of another fact. That someone turned himself into a human bomb. The half-naked prisoner's life—rather, what I immediately think of as his impending death—makes me also wonder about all the other deaths.

This is how Ondaatje imagines the possibility of all those deaths in *Anil's Ghost*:

> *R---- wore denim shorts and a loose shirt. Underneath these was a layer of explosives and two Duracell batteries and two blue switches. One for the left hand, one for the right, linked by wires to the explosives. The first switch armed the bomb. It would stay on as long as the bomber wished. When the other switch was turned on, the bomb detonated. Both needed to be activated for the explosion to occur. You could wait as long as you wanted before turning on the second switch. Or you could turn the first switch off. R---- had more clothing on above the denim shorts. Four Velcro straps held the explosives pack to his body, and along with the dynamite there was the great weight of thousands of small ball bearings.*

And, a little later:

> *At four p.m. on National Heroes Day, more than fifty people were killed instantly, including the President. The cutting action of the explosion shredded Katugala into pieces. The central question after the bombing concerned whether the President had been spirited away, and if so whether by the police and army forces or by terrorists. Because the President could not be found.*

The devastation here is direct and graphic. Yet, what Ondaatje documents more effectively, more centrally in the novel, is the effect of the less public killings. Although that context is inevitably also broad and social, his novel is more of a record of the result of individual killings on individual psyches.

There are several individuals that Ondaatje brings into his canvas. Apart from Anil, who has returned to Sri Lanka as a human rights investigator, there is her archaeologist colleague Sarath, his doctor-brother Gamini, and an alcoholic miner, Ananda, who can recreate a human face from looking at and touching the bare bones of exhumed skulls. Ananda is the closest that Ondaatje comes to recycling his earlier character Kip, the Indian sapper from *The English Patient*, representing the tragedy and triumph of pure craft. It is precisely their ordinary mastery of a skill and their patience at it, that marks the horizon of thoughtfulness and even humanity for Ondaatje.

Ananda is the one who Anil and Sarath recruit to find out the identity of the man whose skeleton they have uncovered. The face that Ananda recovers for them, however, is peaceful. Too peaceful. This is not the portrait of the murdered man. It becomes clear that Ananda is only trying to imagine the face of his wife who was abducted by insurgents and was never heard from again. And hence, the serenity of expression on the reproduction. And yet, despite this failure or perhaps because of it, Ondaatje finds in Ananda's art the model for existence or at least survival:

> *As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation.*

There is another arresting passage in *Anil's Ghost*:

> *'American movies, English books—remember how they all end?' Gamini asked that night. 'The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.'*

As 'desi' writers based in the West, we write books about home, wherever home might be in South Asia. Whenever we do this, we, too, have our return tickets in our pocket. Some will argue that this guilt so weighs on Ondaatje that when he recreates the horror of civil war in Sri Lanka, he doesn't want to find himself capable of explaining the reasons for the brutality.

I am unable to decide whether Ondaatje wants to set himself apart from the older forms of Western cultural production or whether he recognises his own complicity and thenceforth the limits of his art. What I am clearer about is the knowledge of what follows from those two choices. We can never be just one or the other, we are always both—always setting ourselves at a distance and also, at the same time, remaining unceasingly caught in the trap of the dominant paradigm.

The Un-Understood Muslims of Nepal

Religious Minorities in Nepal

Mollica Dastider (1995) ,
irala Publication INR 185
(pp.140).

Muslims of Nepal

Shamima Siddiqa
(1993) , Gazala
Siddika NPR 150
(pp.359)

reviewed by ***Sudhindra Sharma***

An eminent Indian journalist was quoted recently in the Kathmandu press as saying that whereas Nepal used to be understood in India in terms of the Himalaya, the Pashupati temple, casinos and honeymoons, with the hijacking of IC 814 and *India Today*'s leak of the so-called "Nepal Gameplan" intelligence report, the 'Hindu kingdom' has since come to be associated more with ISI and RDX. While this is indeed true, what is even more significant and more damning is the alacrity with which large sections of the Indian television and print media have jumped to portray the entire Nepali Muslim community living in the Tarai as being anti-Indian and (hence) pro-Pakistan.

Given the sudden barrage of attention on the Muslim community of Nepal, that too in a geopolitically significant context, it is important to look for and review the scholarly works which study Nepali Muslims. Two books published during the past few years attempt to do this—Shamima Siddiqa's *Muslims of Nepal* (1993) and Mollica Dastider's *Religious Minorities in Nepal* (1995). Unfortunately, neither author does justice to the topic and in the end their works will, if anything, fan the flames of antagonism in India against the Muslims of Nepal.

These two books have several Tribhuvan University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Kathmandu, and Dastider's for the Jawaharlal Nehru University's School for International Studies in New Delhi. The books under review provide an insight not only into the individual authorships but also on the academic institutions that have produced and endorsed such inadequate works.

Shamima Siddiqa's 15-chapter book is heavy on description, including the historical link between Islam and Nepal, lists of the Muslim organisa-tions in the country, Muslim livelihood, women and legal issues. The book also provides some district-wise information on Muslims, and then presents case stu-dies. Unfortunately, because the scholar provides scant analysis, her work ends up as little more than documentation. A major weakness in *Muslims of Nepal*, is that there is little here that could be called sociological or anthropological. At best, the book is descriptive ethnography, and at worst, it is a treatise on what the author considers to be "authentic" Islam.

Siddiqa does not base her observations on the actual practice of Nepali Muslims. She relates cultural traits not according to the existing social millieu of Muslims living in Nepali hill and plain, but to the *Quran*—in the process she confuses what is practised with what should be practised. Her presentation is dominated by what may be called a scripturalist interpretation at the cost of a sociological-anthropological explanation. Additionally, her treatment of Islam tends to be unduly apologetic—ascribing all that is good in Islamic practices to the *Quran*, while what she considers as "incorrect" practices are explained away as later accretions. Claiming purdah to be a Zoroastrian institution is a case in point. In presenting her description of Muslims in Nepal, the author seems to be oblivious to the fact that she is imposing her own version of Islam—apparently orthodox Sunni Islam—on the lay Muslims of Nepal.

Rather than describe the subject people, *Religious Minorities in Nepal* looks at the relationship between a state that officially aligns itself with Hinduism and its religious minorities. Author Dastider sets for herself the ambitious task of debunking the myth of Nepal as a land of religious harmony. She writes that the Nepali state's project to present itself as a land of inter-ethnic and -religious calm has quickly unravelled after the passing of the Panchayat era. While the aspirations of the Muslim minority had remained suppressed in the past, with the advent of democracy it has begun to assert itself. The six chapters in the book, among other things, discuss the process of Sanskritisation among the non-Hindu communities of Nepal, the distribution of the Muslim population and its social structures, and the status of Muslims amidst the dominant Hindu caste society. One chapter even tries to draw a parallel between the Buddhist and Muslim self-assertions in the post-Panchayat era. Dastider concludes with a call for a new framework to bind ethnic and religious minorities to the state.

State tolerance

Though her objectives are thus laudable, Dastider's methodology lacks rigour. For example, the parallels she draws between the Buddhist and Muslim activism in Nepal are superficial. Compared to Islam, the Nepali state has had a relatively lax attitude towards Buddhism. The state has co-opted Buddhism in the project of creating a distinct Nepali ethos—one that makes Siddhartha Gautam a national icon, and another which forcibly introduces Buddhism as a denomination of Hinduism. There are, however, no common points of reference with Islam through which it could be coopted in the creation of a distinctive Nepali nationality. Realising this, leaders of the Muslim community have maintained a much lower profile than their Buddhist counterparts even in the democratic post-1990 era. In their petitions to the government, they have remained squarely within what may be called "the limits of state-tolerance".

It is the role of social science to diagnose history, but there is little evidence of this in *Religious Minorities in Nepal*. The text abounds in statements which either belabour the obvious or are simply ludicrous, and the author clearly underestimates the level of sophistication at which the discourse on religion and ethnicity is taking place in present-day Nepal. Each of Dastider's chapters evinces a definite pattern—a description of historical processes based on secondary sources followed by political commentary of more recent times in journalistic style, ending with a dash of pontification on what the state should and should not do. The occasional insightful interludes present inferences drawn from interviews with key informants, who for the most part go unacknowledged.

The reliance on secondary sources written almost exclusively in English is jarring. Out of 97 secondary sources cited in the reference, only one happens to be in Nepali while out of the total 36 articles cited, not even one is in Nepali. (Though the *Gorkhapatra* daily is listed in the reference, it has no citation in the text). Dastider's narrative is based neither on intensive field-based methods nor on historical archival material. By citing the works of political scientists and overlooking the significant contributions of other disciplinary traditions in studying religious minorities in Nepal, it is not surprising that the author's work has ended up this shallow. An additional cavil: given that Shamima Siddiqa's book was already out in 1993, it is intriguing that Dastider has not acknowledged it in her work.

The methodological and substantive weaknesses outlined above perhaps reflect the academic standards of Dastider's alma mater. Clearly, young scholars are not being guided well in what is considered one of the more influential political science faculties of India, if they are: 1. discouraged to learn the local languages of the regions or countries being studied; 2. not required to pay attention to field-based research or archival material; 3. not asked to go beyond secondary sources written in English; and 4. are not made to correct their built-in bias against disciplines other than political science and international relations.

These books go some way in introducing the Muslims of Nepal to be what they are, commonfolk like South Asian peasantry everywhere, and not gun-toting Islamic fundamentalists out to wreck and ruin. However more substantive and dispassionate studies need to be undertaken to bring to public visibility the exegesis of the Muslims of Nepal. At the same time, the weaknesses of the two books in their lack of academic rigour on the one hand and absence of intellectual humility on the other, would be something for scholars young and old to be aware of when they themselves contemplate research on people of another country or region of South Asia. ∆

Books Received

Jinnah: Speeches and Statements (1947-1948)
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2000
pp lxvii+242
ISBN 0 19 579021 9
Price not mentioned

The speeches and statements in the last year of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's life, is reflective of the image of Pakistan that he had in his mind—a modern social welfare state ensuring equal opportunities for all, regardless of religion, race and region. In all, there are some 92 speeches and statements, which should be of great value especially to students and researchers.

CBMs in South Asia:
Potential and Possibilities
Edited by Dipankar Banerjee
Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, 2000
pp 183
ISBN 955 8051 13 6
Price not mentioned

This book is an outcome of a workshop held by the RCSS in January 2000. The first section of the book examines confidence-building measures in both the South Asian and Western contexts, highlighting all its pros and cons. The second part addresses the military dimensions of the CBMs—where former and serving military officers from India, Pakistan and China, examine from a practical perspective the nature of existing measures and their effectiveness. The next two sections, written by three senior experts from the region, bring out the enormous possibilities that economic engagement can bring to each country of South Asia. The last part culls the views of the participants at the Workshop, on their impressions about the potential and possibilities of CBMs in South Asia.

Taming Global Financial Flows:
A Citizen's Guide
by Kavaljit Singh
Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong; Madhyam Books, Delhi; University Press Ltd., Dhaka; White Lotus, Bangkok; Zed Books, London and New York; 2000
pp xvii+237
ISBN 1 85649 784 4
INR 250

The global financial system, this book argues, is in turmoil. It explains and analyses the constantly changing and complex world of global financial flows, and calls for radical reforms in a system that is now more susceptible to the whims of market sentiment than the economic policies of governments. The author enunciates certain guiding principles in order to create a more stable international financial architecture and recommends a series of concrete measures. The book contributes greatly to public understanding of the intricacies of global finance and to the possibilities of effective action by peoples' movements campaigning for a more just and sound financial system.

A Testament of Time (Volume 1)
by Enayetullah Khan
Holiday Publication, Dhaka, 1999
pp 400
ISBN 984 31 0431 5
Price not mentioned

This is the first volume in a three-part publication testifying to the time that was, as recorded by the author on the pages of *Holiday* between 1965 and 1975. Consisting of select columns and editorials by perhaps the most quoted Bangladeshi journalist, it is a record of "the best of times and the worst of times", capturing all the passion and fury of an ideological era that painted nationalism in red.

Pakistan: Political Roots and Development (1947-1999)
by Safdar Mahmood
Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2000
pp x+440
ISBN 0 19 579373 0
Price not mentioned

The book offers a concise analytical statement on the major aspects of Pakistan's history, constitution-making, political parties and the democratic process and foreign policy. It analyses the working of the military governments of Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and Zia-ul Haq, as well as the working of the civil governments after Pakistan's return to civilian rule in 1985. The problems of political and economic management and the poor track record of democracy have been discussed with reference to a host of factors, including the crisis of leadership, decline and degeneration of the Muslim League, weak and disorganised political parties, domination of the political process by the feudal and other traditional elite, interference of the head of state in day-to-day political affairs and the rise of the bureaucratic-military establishment. The concluding chapter offers an overview of the changing patterns of Pakistan's foreign policy since Independence and the factors shaping these changes.

Handbook of the Media in South Asia
Edited by Shelton A Gunaratne
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This comprehensive handbook profiles the current state of the mass media in all the 25 countries that comprise Asia. The contributors provide an exhaustive discussion of the problems and issues relating to the media in each country, covering not only the print and broadcasting industries but also the "new" media associated with the information technology revolution. Containing a large amount of useful data and media-related addresses, the book is a valuable reference tool for educational and public libraries, as well as for all those involved in mass media studies, international and comparative communication, journalism, advertising, and public relations.

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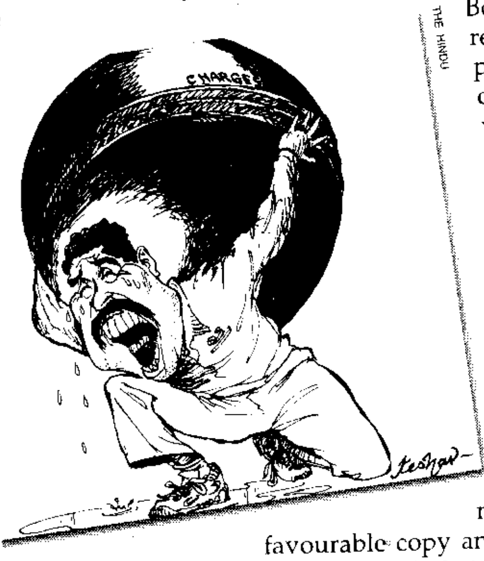
Bombay contagion

IT WAS the high incidence of venereal diseases in the 19th century among the soldiers of the British army, and the need to control their spread that led to regulation through the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Royal Commission on the Sanitary State of the Army in India had described the disease as a 'scourge'; while the report of the president, Sanitary Commission, noted in 1864 that one-third of the army was affected, the number in some stations being 50, 60 or 70 percent of the total strength of the soldiers. With the sole objective of protecting British soldiers, clauses 9 and 25 of Section 19 of Act xxii of 1864 were enacted providing that rules be made to inspect 'houses of ill fame'. A further provision was made for the extension of this Cantonment Act, beyond the limits of the cantonment, whenever necessary. The Indian Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1868, providing for the compulsory registration of brothels and prostitutes and for the medical examination and treatment of those women found to be diseased; and could be introduced in places specified by the local government, with the prior sanction of the government of India.

...There appears to have been a division of opinion among the colonial officials, here [in Bombay], about the need for this act and, once introduced, over the implementation procedures. The Bench of Justices reluctantly shared the expense with the Bombay government, in working the act for the year of 1870; and its subsequent refusal to contribute anything led to the act, being wound up in 1872. Most Western-educated Indian doctors, with private practices, found that the regulation had no effect on the incidence of the disease in the city. The authorities could not distinguish between 'kept' women and hereditary prostitutes, causing resentment. The local press condemned the act. Some of the contemporary opinions regarding the efficacy of the measure are interesting. The paper of the conservative reformer, V N Mandlik, the *Native Opinion* held that it should be applied to 'males and females equally, it is unjust to compel the latter only to subject themselves to unnatural outrages of modesty'. The *Nyayasindhu*, published from Ahmednagar, also observed that venereal disease could be controlled only if the men who frequented the houses of prostitutes were also treated. This paper while declaring it hated prostitutes, condemned the tyranny of the act and the loss of liberty.



During the next decade, while the health officer, T S Weir, noted a decline in the number of deaths from syphilis at the J J Hospital, the army recorded an increase. Consequently, the act was reintroduced in 1880, despite widespread opposition. In a petition, the bishop of Bombay and a number of prominent citizens, characterised it as 'a quasi governmental sanction of vice', while the chairman of the municipal corporation, Vishwanath Narayan Mandlik, declared it to be a 'retrograde' measure. The working of the act, the second time, saw the citizens' campaign and counter campaign over the location of sex workers on a particular Bombay street, providing an interesting insight into contemporary societal pressures. The act was suspended in 1888, not having made any difference to the incidence of venereal diseases. Facilities were made available, thereafter, on a voluntary basis, but no women came forward to be examined and treated.

Mridula Ramanna in "Control and Resistance: The Working of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Bombay City" from *Economic and Political Weekly* (April 22-28).

Gift items

THE TIME seems to have come for Indian journalists to go back to school... To learn moral science! It is time for them to intone that subject's fundamental prayer seeking god's help in never offending his holy law in thought, word or deed...As a PR man in the late Sixties, this columnist recalls uninvited journalists gatecrashing at a press conference, getting tipsy, asking inane questions and imploring for a second or third extra gift.

In the early Seventies, there was that party of journalists taken, all found, to see the burgeoning industrial scene in Maharashtra's Nashik District, asking for taxi fare to home on return to Bombay airport. Work-wise, giving readymade copy to a journalist was part of a PR man's line of duty those days. The internecine jealousy in the vocation was best reflected in a reporter's comment about a rival who wrote for a prestigious paper as its 'Shipping Correspondent'. "Next time he meets you," I was advised, "ask him to explain the plimsoll line." And as for the general professionalism those days, that kind of advice didn't need to be tested--the outcome was known!

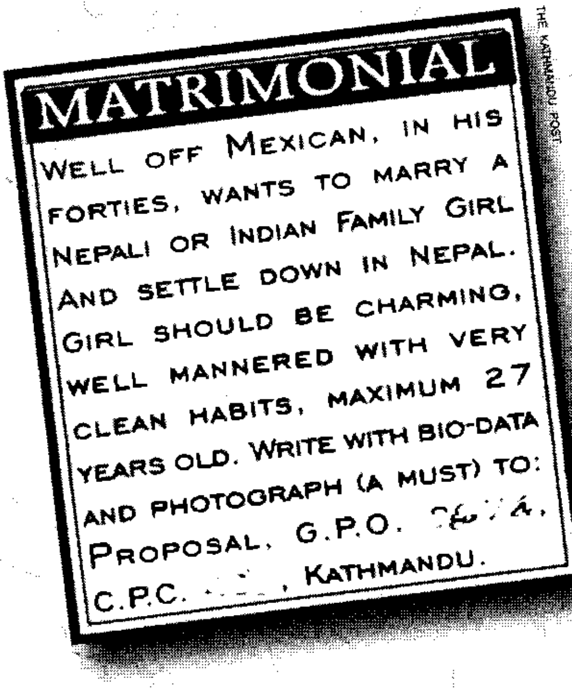
On the whole though, they were a jolly good lot, mild-mannered, fairly easily obliging with favourable copy and quick in saying "Sorry" for little devils therein--theirs or the printer's. That overall meekness came through crystal clear during the national Emergency imposed in 1975 by Mrs Indira Gandhi. Save a couple or so, all the newspapers simply caved in. As a worthy summed it later, they were merely asked to bend but they chose to crawl. It was the yellow phase of India's journalism.

An almost dramatic change came in the early Eighties with the cement scandal of Maharashtra Chief Minister A R Antulay, that first brought investigative journalism to Indian homes. Arun Shourie, given a free hand by Ramnath Goenka of The Express group, went hammer and tongs after Antulay's shady Trust.

Soon afterwards he thundered about Ambani's shenanigans with pre-dated Letters of Credit and unlicensed imports of whole manufacturing plants. V P Singh's rise to power aided the intrepid trend in our press. The Bofors guns boomed in newsprint. The helicopter and submarine deals were unleashed. His Mandal mission singed our news pages. And soon after Narasimha Rao began his liberalisation process, Sucheta Dalal's expose of Harshad Mehta's manipulation of millions of rupees in the stock market heralded a brilliant peak for our journalism, especially financial journalism.

However, the advent of crass materialism in the wake of economic liberalisation and the BJP's simultaneous strident march to centre stage with its Hindutva agenda would appear to have had a peculiar fallout on the mainstream media, especially its so-called secular intellectuals.

Earlier, specific gift items to journalists had, at the latter's initiative, been replaced by pre-paid gift vouchers of major department stores. Now these vouchers began to be discounted for hard cash from passersby at suburban railway stations; the vouchers themselves tended to be replaced by assured quotas of shares from the spate of public issues by the private sector. The freebies from the government continued: Reserved housing, plots of prime land at concessional rates, patronage of Press Clubs (alias watering holes), quick telephone and LPG connections, free trips of Bharat or world darshan and fixation of salaries not by negotiations with newspaper managements but by sympathetic government-appointed wage boards.



MATRIMONIAL

WELL OFF MEXICAN, IN HIS FORTIES, WANTS TO MARRY A NEPALI OR INDIAN FAMILY GIRL AND SETTLE DOWN IN NEPAL. GIRL SHOULD BE CHARMING, WELL MANNERED WITH VERY CLEAN HABITS, MAXIMUM 27 YEARS OLD. WRITE WITH BIO-DATA AND PHOTOGRAPH (A MUST) TO: PROPOSAL, G.P.O. [illegible], C.P.C. [illegible], KATHMANDU.

THE KATHMANDU POST

...Instead of application and attainment, aggressiveness and arrogance have become the traits. Instances of this nonchalant profile are many, but one should suffice because it represents the conclusive symptom of the affliction. That clincher came from the winsome lass with long flowing hair who anchors prime time news on Star TV. Discussing an event one cannot quite recall now, she agitatedly alluded to freedom of the press being a Fundamental Right. The gumptious woman didn't know that freedom of the press is not a Fundamental Right in the Indian Constitution; "freedom of expression" is, but subject to limitations.

ARVIND LAVAKARE IN "A STURDY PILLAR OR A DECREPIT COLUMN?" FROM <www.rediff.com>

Blend of values

IF A strikingly handsome boy desires a "tall slim, gori, only convented girl wearing no specs or even lenses", the "very pretty, fair, respecting family values" kinda girl will settle for nothing less than a "highly qualified, tall, strikingly handsome, bachelor of status boy".

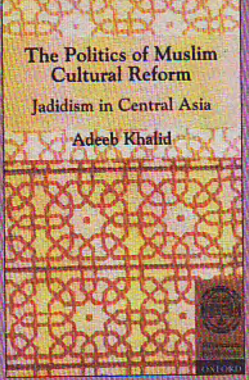
The bottomline is, families and sometimes "mixed parents" (which means the father is Punjabi while the mother may be Malyali) desire "people who should be complete with nobel (read noble) virtues". Sometimes the father of the girl calls himself "a man of modest means and thus, seeks the match on the strength of the merit and virtues of the girl". Welcome to the world of matrimonial classifieds where the wish-lists of potential brides and grooms add up to entertainment unlimited.

Girls needn't fret, for even in these immoral times they can find a 33-year-old "virgin bachelor(!)" who "therefore looks much younger". Or even a "god-fearing, sporty, intellectual man" who promises to give his "lady companion a life of love, integrity, equality" and guess what, "children". Better still are the NRIs who insist that their son, "despite living abroad is well-focussed in life and has a right blend of Indian and Western values". Then there are girls who are desirous of "transparency, a sense of balance and sparkling wit" in their mates. And there are boys who think original and promise to "walk hand in hand on silky sand" in the years to come. A widower brags and woos ladies with his "business, cars and *kothis*," but adds that "only those women who are 30 years old, slim, attractive and have a desire to lead a comfortable life should apply".

Some just can't do without giving a virtual thesis of how "lovingly they were raised by our parents and despite living in US of A came to India for better appreciation of culture". How they love "Occidental tastes in things of life, are full of zest and very romantic", and even give "everyone (their) best wishes in search for their partner".

Marriage may not be a joke, but the matrimonial ads certainly are!

ABHILASHA OJHA IN "LAUGH ALL THE WAY TO THE MANDAP" FROM *THE HINDUSTAN TIMES*.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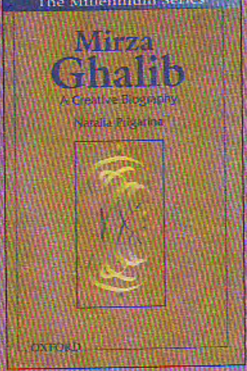
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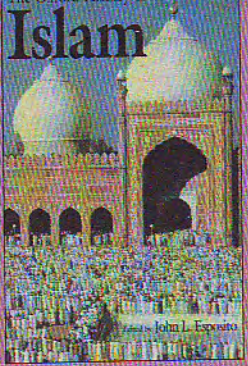
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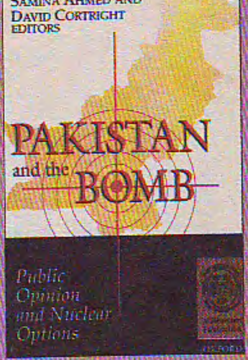
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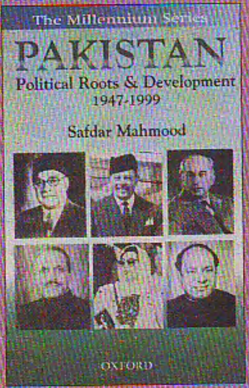
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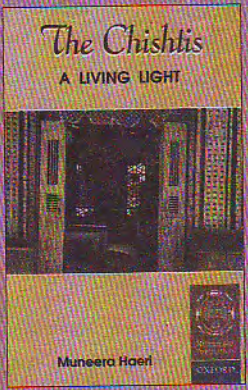
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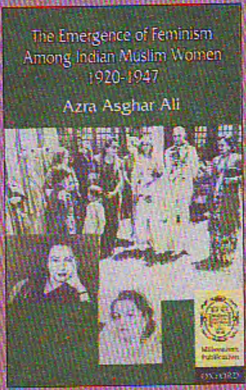
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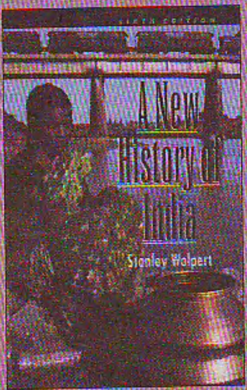
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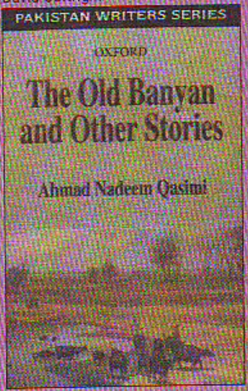
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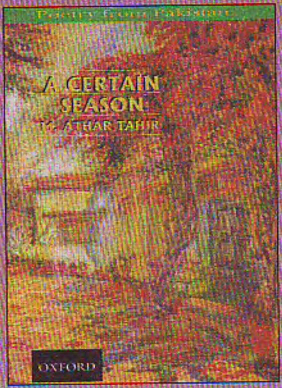
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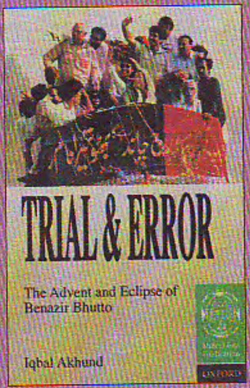
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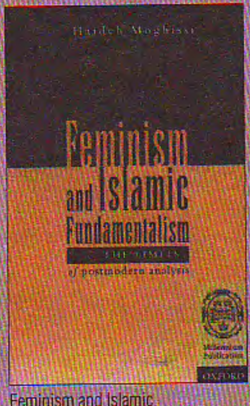
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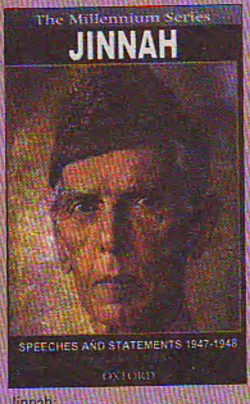
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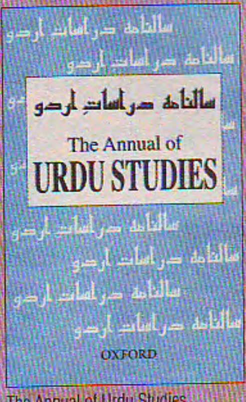
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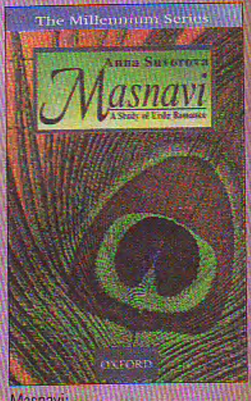
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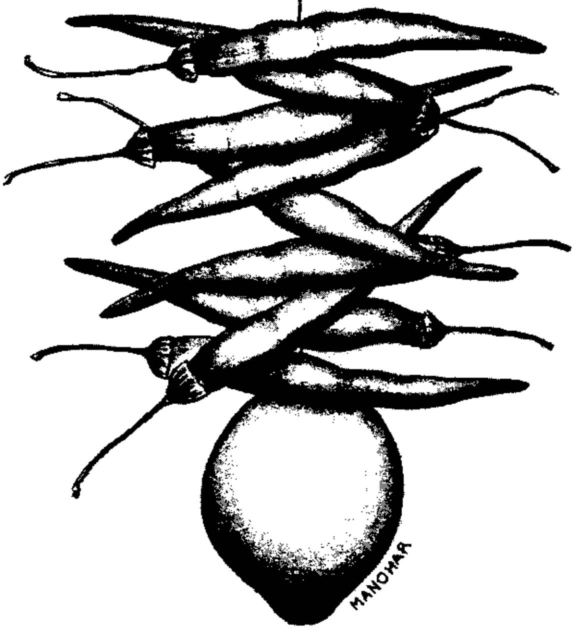
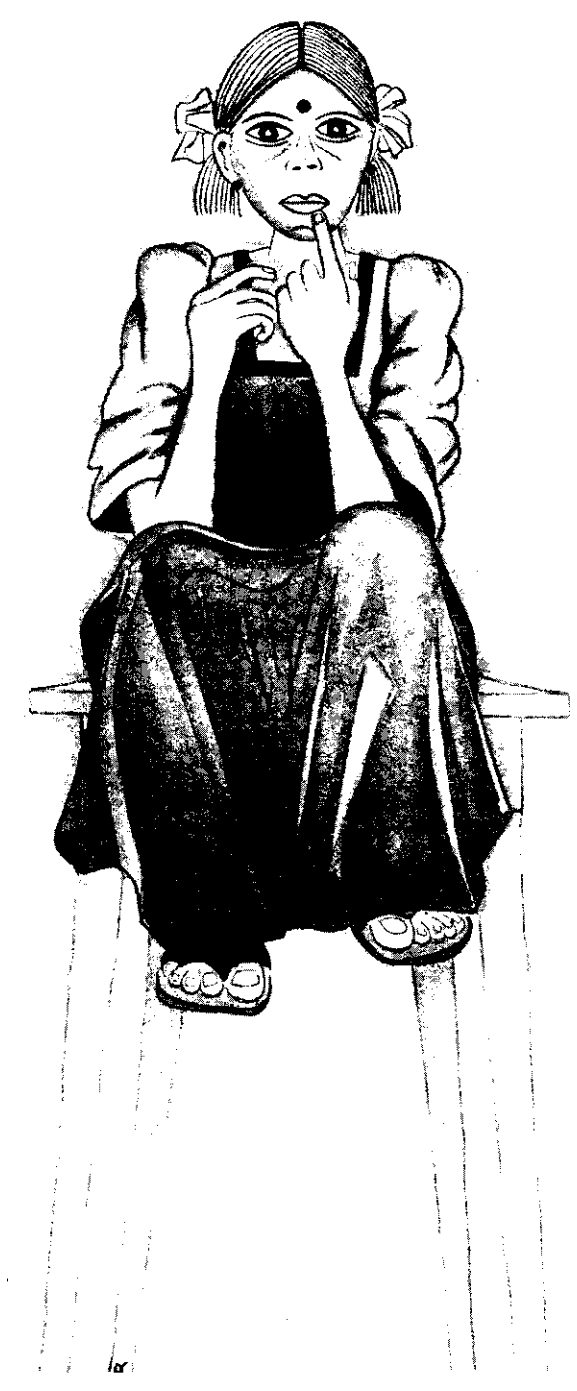


THIS ISSUE

joel isaacson-
children of assi
anjum hasan-
three poems

children of assi

a short story by joel isaacson
illustrated by manohar rai



Auntie is the best mother she can be under the circumstances; ten-year-old Gopal remembers no other. But her heart is heavy, he is too much for her. If she were a good woman with a husband it would be different.

She smiles at the boy sitting on the floor, "Ai! his smile, his eyes: so brilliant, so pure. He is more than I deserve and I feel like a thief, the way I steal trust from a child," she confides to herself, as she ducks through the curtain into the alcove that is her kitchen and Gopal's sleeping place. She speaks in a loud whisper, her eye on the stained door-curtain. "Out little imp! Eat your chapati on the ghat, and go play until it is time for school. Save one for tiffin. Here, let me comb your wild hair down. Now out! Go! before uncle wakes up; this Bengali has no patience for children and he will not keep coming if he wakes and finds you here."

Gopal, out in the winter dawn chill of the galli, jams his hands deep into the pockets of his blue school trousers. None of them like a child around. He hopes this uncle will not decide to stay with auntie. "Where could I go then? It is good in auntie's house. I am small and do not take up so much space. What has that uncle got against children? I no longer sleep in auntie's bed, as I did when I was little. I should think what to do if the fat Bengali stays. I must find Om Parvati didi, she will tell me what to do."

The sun is not yet up, but blue dawn light sifts down to the grey stone pavement, between the blind side of the Hanuman temple and the building Auntie rooms in. He steps around a child's steaming turd, and follows the narrow lane to where it opens onto the stone veranda of the Hanuman temple and he stands blinking at the sudden expanse of sky and river. He leans against a fluted column watching Buck-teeth Ram below on the ghat lighting fires for the tea stalls, where foreign tourists sit watching pilgrims strip and bathe between the wooden boats at the edge of the sacred river. Gopal knows Om Parvati is already down there somewhere in the crowd but he looks in at the tiny store room anyway—hardly more than an alcove—where they let her and Blind Hari, her father, sleep.

He peers through the stitched-together fertiliser bags that didi has made into a door-curtain. As he'd guessed, she is already gone. But this morning her father, Blind Hari, does not sit alone chanting "Ram Ram Ram" as usual. There is a stranger in the room with him. He wears green jeans, shiny with grease at the thighs and fly and a shiny black shirt with pictures, just like photos, of boats and ladies, some of them upside-down. He is a small muscular man. He looks very strong. Intense physical energy seems to radiate from his body. Coarse black hair writhes at the open collar of his shirt, and his oiled and neatly trimmed beard makes his head seem too large for his body.

His voice is quiet, but there is no softness in it. There is something alarming, not violence, not even roughness, but surely excessive energy in the way he touches and handles the old man. As though he were an object—or a goat. He is pressing rupee notes into Blind Hari's hand.

—"But it is not payment you old fool. You are selling nothing, it is just to help you. It is wrong for her to get money from the foreigners. Can you not imagine why they give it to her? She is not the child she was before you lost your sight. I have watched her doings. I can give her decent work and look after her as you can not. Each month her earnings will be sent to you. I will take out only for her food, the costume I will buy. Now take this. Four hundred rupees will keep an old man fed until next month, when more will come, and more the next month as long as you live. Take it you old blind fool—or let your child become a whore to feed you."

Gopal turns away, blinking in the strong light of the sun which has risen above the Ganges, and descends the broad steps in little leaps. It is bad luck to let your feet touch the big iron staples that tie the great stone slabs together. The picture of the old man's blank eyes filling with tears stays with him till he hears the big girl's laugh. Where is she? There, beside the bald farang in white. He has bought her tea and samosa. She sees Gopal now and looks up at the man.

— "Here's my little brother; isn't he pretty? Will you give him tea?"

The boy halts, three broad steps above them and says to the girl, in their own tongue:

— "Not now. I must talk with you right away, didi."

—"Wait little brother. I'm with this friend."

She smiles up at the man. She is tiny beside him. A dark child in an old, cheap, black European dress and oversize cracked patent-leather shoes with one-inch heels. Her age is perhaps twelve, though she could be fourteen. It is her manner rather than her physique that gives her the air of maturity beyond her years: a precocious self-confidence that to some, might pass for experience.

—"I have to take food to my friend who is sick. Do you have money for two more samosas?" She smiles and turns large eyes up at the bald man. The Italian strokes his new shaven head, smiles, and rummages in the bottom of his handloomed shoulder bag, finally producing a few coins. He takes hold of the girl's hand, opens it, and presses the money into her open palm with all of his fingers. He strokes the small hand and closes it, folding the brown fingers over the coins.

—"Go then. I see you later for your English lesson, in my room."

She pats his knee through his white cotton robe and smiles. —"See you later Rick."

Then she is skipping down the rest of the steps to the walkway, with the boy Gopal in tow, the ridiculous shoes slapping; both of them careful not to touch the iron staples with their feet.

—"What's so important, Little Sunshine, that I must stop chatting with my friend? Trouble at school?"

—" He came again and stayed all night with Auntie, the Bengali uncle, the fat one. I think he wants to stay with her every night now and soon they will make me go. The uncles never want me there. You must tell me what to do."

—"They don't stay forever. You can stay with us until he goes. You're lucky he's not from here, not a Banarasi. He'll go back. He will not stay forever."

—"But how will I go to the school if she does not wash my uniform and pay the fees?"

—"When he's gone you will go back to school. Yours is not the greatest trouble in the world."

When they stop at the samosa seller's stall, she buys three and gives one to the boy. Two, she wraps in a square of old newspaper which she carries in her hand.

—"For your father?" Gopal asks, and as he does, he remembers the scene he witnessed in her room, not ten minutes ago, which he had forgotten until then. He is about to tell her about it, to ask about the bearded man, but she breaks into a run.

—"For the circus girl. She's sick and very hungry. Come with me, you can meet her."

The small tent stands half hidden in dry thorny bush in the wasteland that passers-by use as a toilet, a few hundred metres upriver from where the stone paved embankment ends. The tent is made from white fertiliser sacks sewn together with cord. Broken bottles and dried excrement have been kicked aside in a desultory attempt to clear a narrow margin around it. They step down into the shallow pit that the tent is pitched over; for a moment it is dark, then their eyes adjust to the dim light that filters in. Among the wooden crates and loudspeakers and faded advertising banners, a girl of eight or nine lies curled in a filthy blanket. "It is my shoulders." the girl explains to Om Parvati, after licking the last oily crumb of samosa from the newspaper. "All night I am awake with the pain. I cannot sleep. Two days ago I cried when I did my trick and the crowd gave no money; they spit on the ground and cursed at Pakka Shambhu. One student from the university shouted he would make a report to the enjeeo. One drunk kicked the loudspeaker. Now Pakka Shambhu says 'No food for selfish girls who will not do their work.'"

—"Run away then. Stay with us until the circus moves on, he won't find you. I'll teach you English and the tourists will buy you food; I'll teach you *my* trick: how to make them like you."

—"He would find me. The police like him. He gives them Meena, the biggest girl, for free. And when he finds me he will make me go in the good tent with them too, like Mina does at night. That's what he did with the one before me. That's what happens to girls who run away. He punishes. It's better to wait until I can do the trick again. Perhaps he'll get medicine for the pain."

Little Gopal hunkers down just inside the entrance to the tent, a little to the side, where the roof slopes down to meet the dirt. He has been probing the semi-darkness with his eyes. He has not spoken. He wants to touch the loud speaker. To see how it makes sound. He says to the girl, "What is the trick sister? How does it hurt your shoulders?"

—"Have you never seen a circus? Don't you come when they play the music in the street?"

—"I am in class four at the school. We hear the music, but we cannot go to see."

—"I am the star. I stand upon that green stool and lock my fingers together so my arms are a ring. Then I step through the ring, over my linked hands and I bring my hands up behind my back and over my head to the front again, without ever opening the ring. It's the part where I bring the ring behind my shoulders and over my head that hurts. There's a part there, when my shoulders come out from the bones. When I was very small it did not hurt so much. They said my bones were soft and I could be trained so that it would never hurt, but now it does hurt and on the days when there are four or five shows I can't help the crying. I cannot sleep for the pain and now he doesn't feed me and I'm afraid that I will die like the one before me, Meena's little sister. Meena says she became so thin before she died."

—"Why does he not give you medicine for the pain, sister?"

—"It makes me too sleepy. I fall off the stool sometimes, but it makes me feel good. I don't get so hungry, and I don't mind the pain so much when I have the medicine. But even when Pukka Shambhu buys it for me, I have to eat it all at once, even if it is enough for three days. If Meena finds it, she takes it from me. She is fifteen and she wants the medicine all the time.

—"Does she do the trick with the ring of her arms too? Do her shoulders hurt, sister?"

—"You are a baby who knows nothing, aren't you. She is too big. All she can do is arch over backward with her hands and feet on the ground and the littlest girl, Bindu, doing the disco dance on her chest and belly. That and the work she does in the good tent, at night. The rest of the time all she does is cook and wash and pack up the show for the road."

She stops abruptly as a shadow fills the entrance to the tent. A small wiry bearded man in a shiny shirt crouches just inside, dominating the space.

—"Who is the new friend?" He smiles warmly at Om Parvati, showing strong white teeth in sensual lips, through the black of his neatly trimmed beard. "Such a pretty child. I'll bet she's a good girl too. I'll bet she doesn't shirk her work and make her people starve whenever she feels lazy. Would you like to see the circus for free, little one? Come; take tea with uncle Pukka Shambhu."

Gopal has slipped around behind the man. He hesitates for a moment, half in and half out of the tent. The man does not turn to look at him, but keeps his eyes fixed on Om Parvati. To Gopal, she seems far away now, as though seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

—"It is time for class my sisters—uncle. I must go."

He darts out of the tent, trips on a peg, catches his balance and runs back to Assi Ghat to collect his books. He does not look back. He understands that Om Parvati can not help him now, he must find another way.

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- They should have a minimum three years professional work experience with an international development organization, ideally in the areas of governance, law, or economic reform and development.
- Local supervisory experience and community development background is desirable, as is living and working experience in South Asia and/or specialized knowledge of Nepal.
- Strong interpersonal, verbal, and English-language writing skills are required.
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ANJUM HASAN

IN MY MOTHER'S CLOTHES

I walk in my mother's clothes on the street,
feel the cool sweat under my arms soak her blouse
timidly: shy, damp flowers of my sweat on her blouse.
I let the white dust with its years of spit and sweet
wrapper, its agonising lifelessness, pass over me
in my mother's clothes, her rust and bright blue
and burnt orange, my mother's colours on my skin
in the dust, as if they belonged to me. I cheat people:
men, girls in high heels who pretend not to look
and fidget and sulk, girls lovely and empty with want
who I destroy with my Look of Elsewhere.
It's so easy to break girls, spoil their carefully planned
afternoons, their elaborate ploys to sweeten the air,
tantalise. Their eyes are bright with their love
for themselves, while I walk on the street
in my mother's clothes, laughing inside, relieved
of the burden of being what one wears, since in my
mother's clothes I am neither myself nor my mother.
In her inky silks, her cool green gardens of chiffon
that once filled me with thirst, I dream of elusiveness
(which is actually the dream of all girls in high heels
on the street, who I scorn!) Is it only one woman we all
want to be? The woman who opens her eyes and looks
at the mirror into the eyes of a child. The child who drifts
like a shadow through long summer afternoons when
everyone sleeps, the spindly creature of six who slips
onto her fingers her mother's gold rings, pulls on
an old cardigan that smells of sunlight and milk,
and conducts herself, drowsy with love, through rooms
with their curtains drawn against the honeyed light of June.
Does she always begin like this—seeking love by trying
to become the person whose love she seeks? Rolling up
the sleeves of her mother's cardigan and sitting with legs
dangling from a high chair, her frail little shoulders stiff
with pride, her sisters jealous. Her mother slowly waking
to the calm evening light, laughing at the serious girl-clown
who is opening her eyes to look at the mirror into the eyes
of a woman, when all that there is of that unfathomable
grace she has taken with her and you are suddenly cold
in her cardigan.

KITCHEN

The kitchen is a laboratory, a prison,
an anti-thesis of dream. It is colour and pain:
lime juice on wounds and hard black nouns
hiding like poisonous ants beneath every upturned cup.

The kitchen is my grandmother's crinkled skin
on my fingers and one hungry voice in my ear.
Its yesterdays smell like its tomorrows and
that frightens so many women: those who are
old with the sameness of it, like the salt jar,
like the ancient frying-pan; those who are young,
like a mint leaf or a bursting tomato.

From my kitchen I can see another woman
working in hers, cocooned in the yellow light
of distance that makes her appear happy and loved.
I forget the onion's sting, water's scalding pain
on nights when it rains and I see her moving silhouette
among many reflections of steel and talking children.

The kitchen is comfort, a picture to touch,
a place of perpetual evening. It is a temple
of the naming word, the word that never
betrays, but never changes.

To stay where you are, to measure and chop,
to never harbour false hopes.
To fashion life into a thing eaten, worked,
slept away, to meet despair with tea,
to be like your mother.

My kitchen will not hold me, will not
teach me the good in repitition.
I will be an awkward woman full of horrible
doubts and an unreasonable love for shining adjectives.

SMALL TOWN HEROES

The man who runs the sports goods store
that also sells old unopened books and
board games in faded boxes, sits with his
tattooed arms folded in the sun.
He drinks a lot of beer and doesn't ask
stupid questions. His friends loiter
around small music shops all morning,
in slippers, with their shirt-tails out.

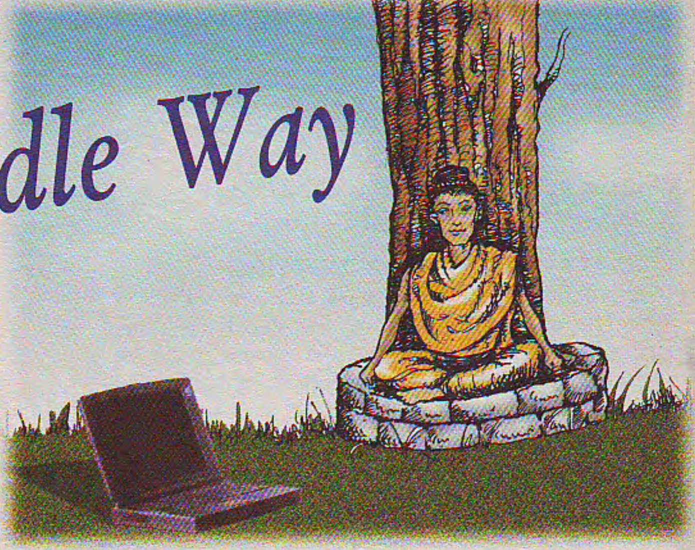
The distant air lights up the furrowed edges
of the hills. Sometimes he wants to describe
the smells of brown oaks ageing in the sun
and bakeries where boys in dirty aprons
lit their ovens in the early summer morning.
But the tattooed man dozes on when
his friends talk and the sun whitens the spines
of pale detective novels and books full of
blond-bodied girls and knitting patterns.

When a man is killed in the afternoon,
knifed and left to die with his face down
in a drain, the tattooed fellow has an opinion.
But he shuts his door and sleeps on a wooden
plank behind the counter that smells of cigarettes
and stale tea, till rain cools the streets. All the
furthest sounds of the city wake him up
slowly till he hears the rain on his own window
and thinks of the dirty water running below
the dead man's face.

In the evening when the rain lets up for a bit
his friends might return and joke about it.
He switches on the lights at five. People drift
in with damp trouser-cuffs and notice the chinese
dragons on his arms: They talk and again the cool
air outlines each noisy car and softened tree.
It's Saturday. He rest his elbows on the cracked
glass counter and watches a girl across the street
scrubbing a couple of neat stone steps till they
gleam in the clear blue evening.

Δ

The Upper-Middle Way



by **Tarik Ali Khan**

In the 1960s, a wacky Scotsman calling himself Tuesday Lobsang Rampa began marketing Tibet. Claiming to be possessed by a disembodied Tibetan lama, Rampa wrote a series of books about life in Lhasa. He described flying monks, a maze of secret passageways under the Potala Palace, and an arcane Tibetan surgical operation which involved making an incision in the forehead and removing the patient's pineal gland. This, he explained, was done in order to open up the 'third eye' which made the Tibetan lamas clairvoyant.

Completely loopy, you say? Of course he was. But his pulp fiction masterpieces like *The Third Eye* sold by the millions. And things have only moved on since. Today, the number of books on the "land of snows" and its national religion have multiplied to the point where entire bookstore sections are devoted to it. And with musicians like Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys and Hollywood luminaries Richard Gere, Whoopi Goldberg and Uma Thurman (to name a few) serving as spokespersons for Tibetan Buddhism/independence, Tibet has been hot for a while.

While one can hardly doubt the contribution that the Dalai Lama and other lamas have made to spiritualism in the 20th century, the problem is that the Rampaesque flakiness continues. Consider the following dialogue witnessed in Baudha at the heart of Kathmandu's Tibetan quarter. The setting is one of the larger monasteries where an incarnate lama or *rinpoche*, precious one, is teaching his Western disciples:

In the midst of his discourse a middle-aged American disciple arrives panting and sweating. He prostrates and offers a white silk scarf or *katag* to the lama.

Disciple: (gasping for breath) Rinpoche . . .
Rinpoche: What's wrong?
Disciple: Last night I was coming up to Kathmandu from India by bus. (Pant, gasp). And somebody stole my laptop computer which contained all my research work. And (gasp) I knew I had to see you first. I hope you can help me.
Rinpoche: Hmmmm. Did you save it on diskette?
Disciple: The diskettes were stolen too.
Rinpoche: Hmmmm. Did you inform police?
Disciple: No, not yet. I thought I should see you first. Is there anything you can do?
Rinpoche: I think you should inform police.
Disciple: Yes, yes. Thank you so much. (Bows and withdraws from the lama's chamber, hands pressed together).

What on earth did this fellow expect from precious rinpoche? That he materialises a laptop, (not to mention his entire doctoral dissertation) out of the ether? Or that he uses his bionic third eye to zero in on some forlorn Nepali thief playing Tetris on his newly acquired laptop?

Kathmandu was once the place where one could meet a *real* rinpoche. It was home to a number of accomplished lamas who had fled the Chinese occupation in 1959. Tulku Urgyen, Dudjom Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe and Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche were accomplished Buddhist masters who taught the essence of Tibet's unique Vajrayana tradition with humour and simplicity.

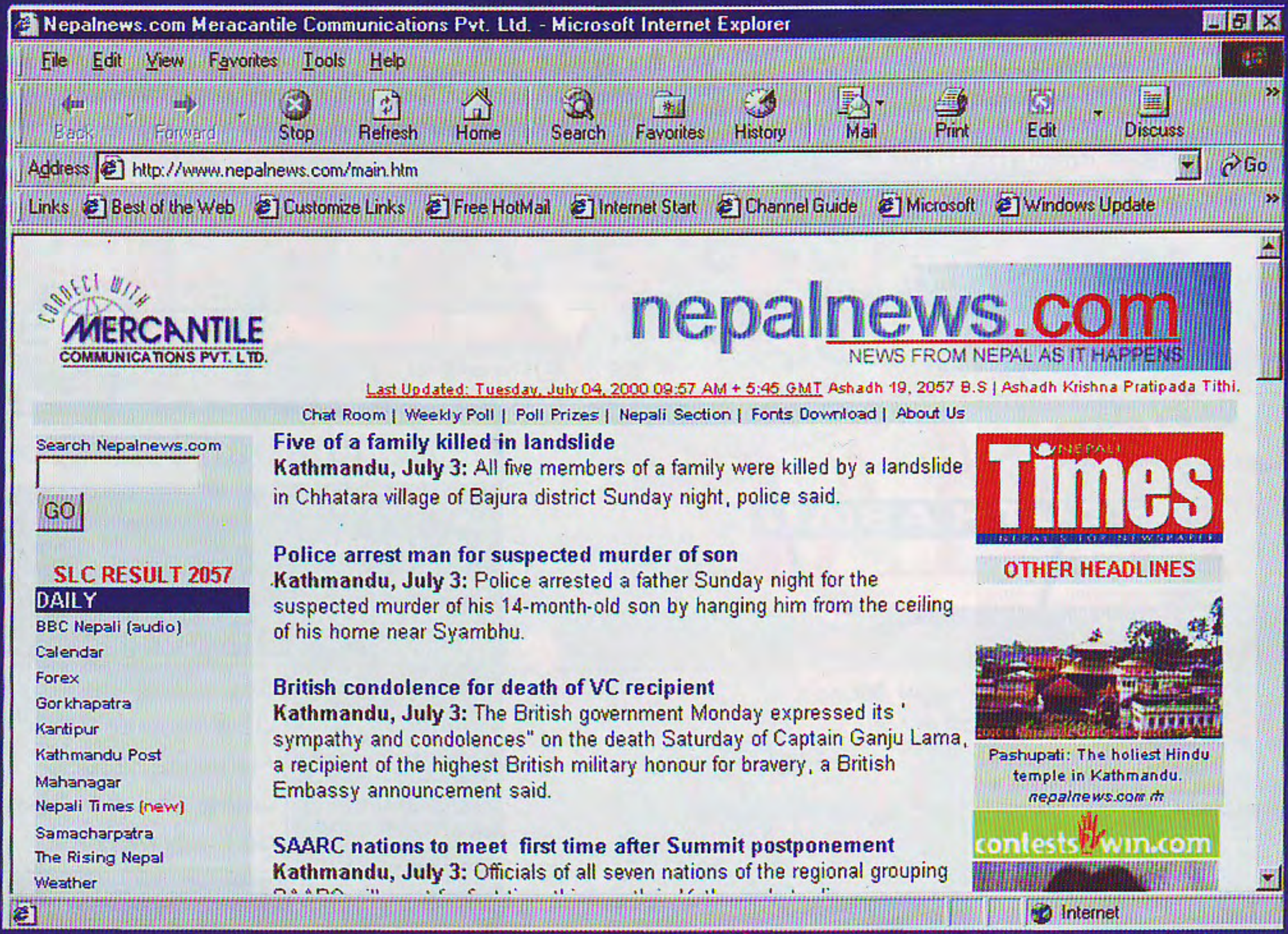
But the value of a rinpoche has crashed since then. The older generation of simple ascetic lamas has passed on, leaving a younger crop of cellphone-carrying 'Pajero Rinpoches' and 'Disco Rinpoches'. Fattened by the wealth of donations from Taiwanese and Western devotees, they are leaving many Tibetans themselves disillusioned. What is worse is that even bad actors like Stephen Seagal now carry the title. Presenting next: Van Damme Rinpoche!

One wonders how His Holiness the Dalai Lama stomachs all this reincarnation and devotion business. This summer, Richard Gere organised a Tibet fundraiser luncheon in Hollywood which raised USD 300,000 for Tibetan autonomy. Surveying the starry-eyed stars before him, H.H. took pains to de-holify himself saying: "Actually, I'm just a human being, and there are no differences between us. You should consider me one of your brothers. Don't think of me as a living Buddha"

Hats off to H.H., but Hollywood just doesn't seem to get it. It would have Tibet restored to a homogeneous magical theocracy even though H.H. has made it clear that Tibetans do not want restoration of the Shangrila, but to join the modern world. Ever the realist, the Dalai Lama, though, realises the Tibetan cause's need for a dharma scene of white, upper middle class post-Christians and post-Jews prostrating at the feet of newfound superheroes.

The moral of the story?

You who have lost faith, find your own inner peace.
You who have lost laptops, go to police.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Five of a family killed in landslide
Kathmandu, July 3: All five members of a family were killed by a landslide in Chhatara village of Bajura district Sunday night, police said.

Police arrest man for suspected murder of son
Kathmandu, July 3: Police arrested a father Sunday night for the suspected murder of his 14-month-old son by hanging him from the ceiling of his home near Syambhu.

British condolence for death of VC recipient
Kathmandu, July 3: The British government Monday expressed its ' sympathy and condolences" on the death Saturday of Captain Ganju Lama, a recipient of the highest British military honour for bravery, a British Embassy announcement said.

SAARC nations to meet first time after Summit postponement
Kathmandu, July 3: Officials of all seven nations of the regional grouping

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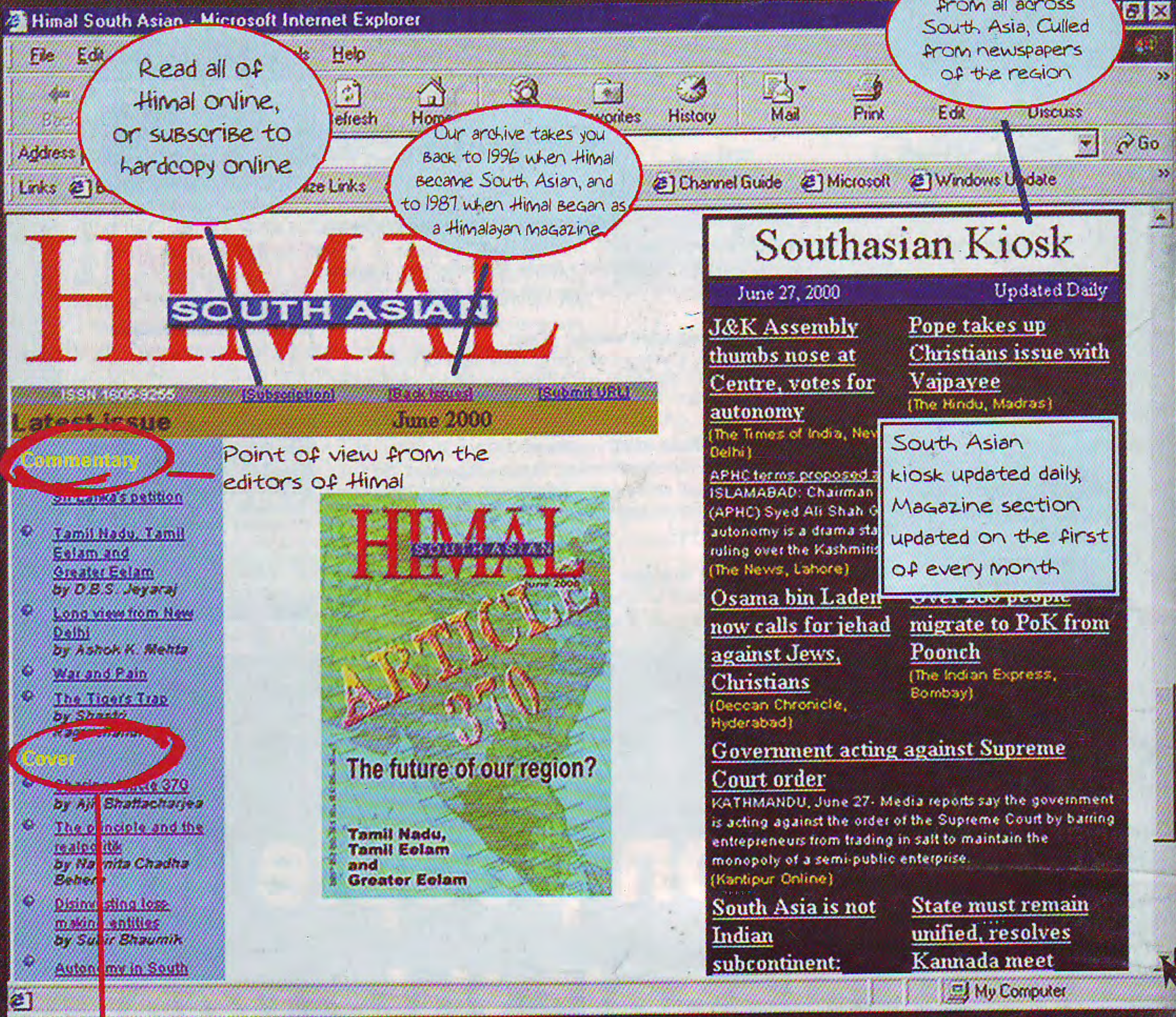
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(The Times of India, New Delhi)

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(APHC) Syed Ali Shah G
autonomy is a drama sta
ruling over the Kashmiris
(The News, Lahore)

Osama bin Laden now calls for jehad against Jews, Christians
(Deccan Chronicle, Hyderabad)

Pope takes up Christians issue with Vajpayee
(The Hindu, Madras)

Over 200 people migrate to PoK from Poonch
(The Indian Express, Bombay)

Government acting against Supreme Court order
KATHMANDU, June 27- Media reports say the government is acting against the order of the Supreme Court by barring entrepreneurs from trading in salt to maintain the monopoly of a semi-public enterprise.
(Kantipur Online)

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