

# HIMALAY

SOUTH ASIAN

November 2000



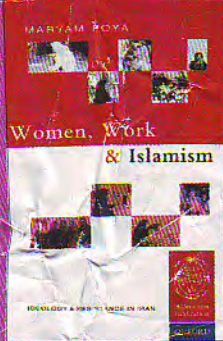
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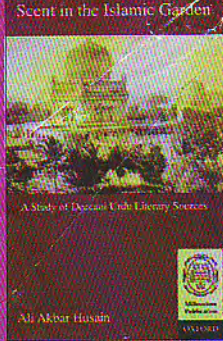
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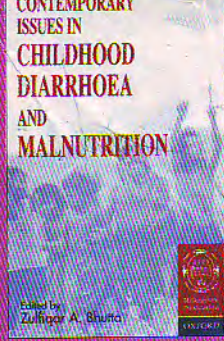
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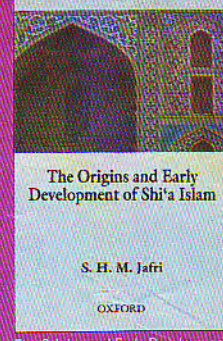
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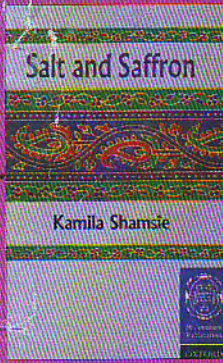
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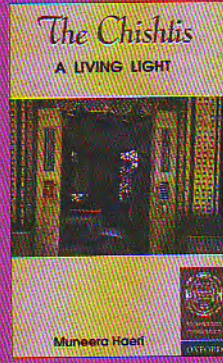
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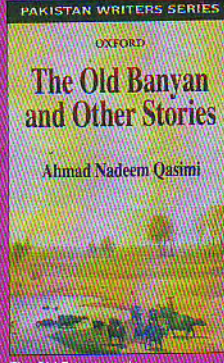
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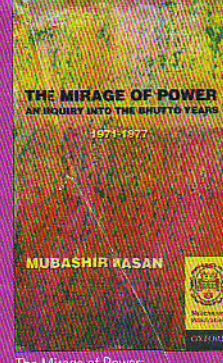
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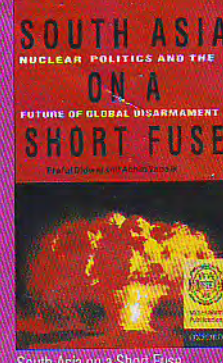
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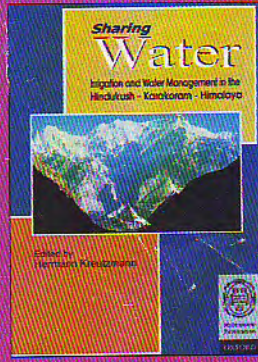
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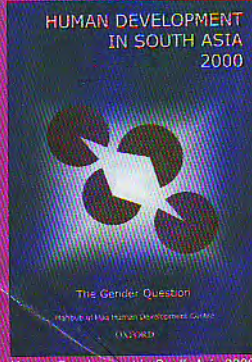
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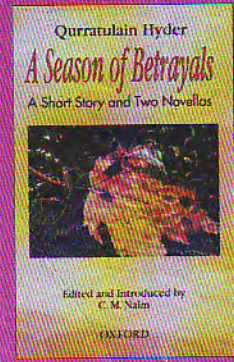


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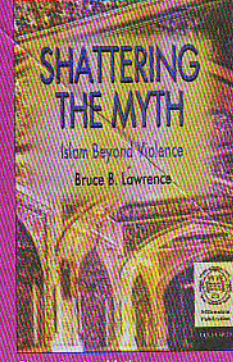
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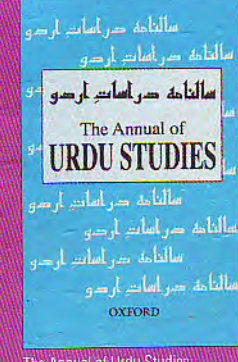
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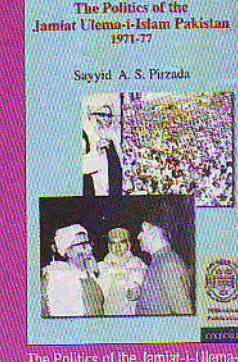
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# HIMAL

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### Rose-coloured glasses

Before "dorren nerrod" plans the next trip to Bhutan, he or she may otherwise wish to consider flying to south-eastern Nepal, via Kathmandu (Mail, August 2000). While in the Nepali capital, "dorren" could speak with various Bhutanese-in-exile and ngo representatives who have documented cases of torture against the former citizens of the Dragon Kingdom. Then "dorren" could board a plane for Jhapa and visit the camps and speak with some of the over 93,000 UNHCR-recognised refugees who have yet to see benefits from the 'high-level talks' between the royal governments of Bhutan and Nepal. "dorren nerrod" could see copies of documents which demonstrate that at one point in time, these refugees very much enjoyed the benefits of citizenship of Bhutan before having them suddenly taken away in a manner which defies all principles of international law relating to non-discrimination.

Or, more simply, "dorren" could read the concerns voiced by the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, and reports of Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, which attest to serious violations of human rights in the so-called Shangri-la. These reports are not only limited to those violations which happened in 1991, but also document the serious crackdown against civil freedoms amongst the Sarchop community in eastern Bhutan that took place in 1997, and other issues pertaining to land resettlement.

Clearly, it is not only Himal which expresses concern about the human rights situation in Bhutan, but also many of 'us' from both South Asia and the 'Western world' who appreciate receiving an objective perspective about the mountain kingdom that "dorren nerrod" defends while wearing rose-coloured glasses.

Karin Heissler  
Dhaka

### DEMOCRATIC TB

In the excellent article by Rajashri Dasgupta, "Old diseases die hard" (October 2000), she has dealt clearly with the problem of healing the health of millions. Old diseases do die hard. I would just like to add a few points.

TB's resurgence is because of chronic malnutrition, unplanned urbanisation, lack of adequate health care, rising poverty, etc, apart from lack of a proper public health strategy to combat it. But in recent years, efforts have been re-organised and some have borne fruit. For example, the Directly Observed Treatment-Short Course (DOTS), followed by all the South Asian governments has been successful where applied, with a cure rate of over 85 percent. My own field reporting shows that this is definitely one right way of going about it. But there are many areas of concern as well.

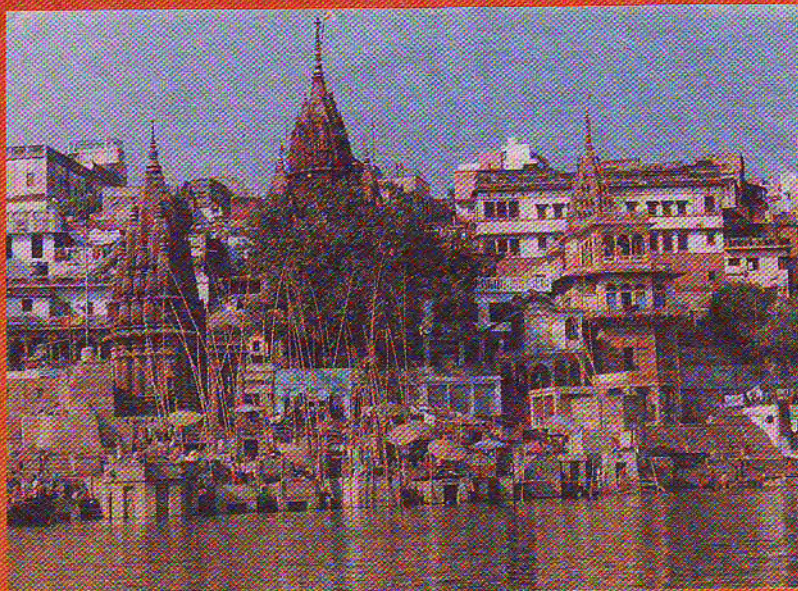
The problem is, of course, in the detection rates because there is difficulty in tracking down all the patients and there are no reliable estimates to say what percentage of patients are being reached through DOTS. In rural areas, the programme is therefore more successful as the residents are fairly well-rooted and living in extremely cramped condition—but in urban areas this is a serious problem.

Ms. Dasgupta's article says that private doctors are pushing expensive medicines, and families have been pauperised by the cost of treatment. This needs a little elaboration. The DOTS system is actually run by the governments, and the medicine is free. So if one is in touch with the health posts and receiving treatment, it shouldn't and doesn't cost the patient much. I have seen that in at least four countries of South Asia where I followed the TB scourge, many are reached by the official system.

But she is right that private doctors are a bane, and in fact many say they are the ones largely responsible for the present state of things because of not tracking patients properly, thus creating a huge load of 'untreatables', helping create an environment overwhelmed by TB germs. Even now, private doctors are not very useful as they are not into the public health approach and don't supervise the medicine



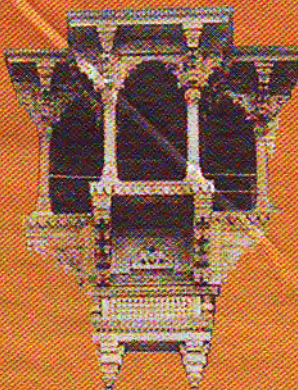
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## VARANASI

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taking which is the key to cure. That is why the treatment strategy was shifted to the government-led system. Ngos have also joined in to help and are playing a key role because of their skill in mobilising communities to detect, report and ensure regularity of treatment.

Unfortunately, the government-led system doesn't reach everyone, and not everyone knows how to get a proper test which can be done only through sputum check via microscopy and by following the right treatment regimen. But it is the social mobilisation part rather than the treatment part which seems to be the weak link in the strategy in South Asia. And this is being criminally ignored by most governments.

Ms. Dasgupta has also rightly brought out the issue of equity, which is that TB became an 'emergency' only after it hit the West. But then, isn't that how it always is? More than 95 percent of the TB patients are in the South, but 95 percent of the money for the disease is in the North. What have we done to push for a more just global public health system?

I have also noted that families are pauperised not so much by buying medicines but by losing the capacity to earn. Once out of work, the patient soon is unable to buy medicines. The work place managers sack them as soon as they hear that a man is sick with TB. But TB becomes non-infectious within a month of taking the right medicine, and a person can easily go back to work. Managers should therefore be educated to know that their role in retaining "safe TB patients" could contribute in eradicating TB.

TB patients start feeling much better within a month after taking the prescribed medicines and so they stop. This is how the epidemic spreads, as he soon becomes 'active' again and begins to infect. And then when he begins to feel bad, he goes back to the medication and again drops out—till he reaches a point when medicines don't work, and the infection continues till he dies.

Apart from the blatant disregard for global health policies, we also note that South Asian politicians have ignored TB till it has now become almost uncontrollable. If we look at the budgets within the communicable disease components, we will find that TB is low priority. When asked why, the answer is, there are other diseases like diarrhoea, ARI, etc, which are more dramatic and hence politically sensitive and that is where the monies go. Because TB kills over a period of time, the deaths happen silently, and so they go unnoticed.

Meanwhile, donors have preferred to fund what jives with their own priority and our governments have gone along believing that TB is a poor man's disease and will never be an 'elitist' disease. But the

change in lifestyle will/is making it a very middle class and even upper class disease. The extensive use of air-conditioners has dramatically altered the epidemiology of TB. A single infected person can spread the germs to everyone in a "climate controlled" room where air circulates faster. And with the proliferation of ACs, this will increase and create a "newly infected group" even when they are not living in slums or are eating well.

Air travel is another newly emerging threat. Long haul journeys need only one infected person in the plane to distribute the germ to all others, and little can be done about it. It is air-borne and very democratic in terms of the body it chooses to infect.

AIDS is also a major contributor as it creates conditions for as opportunistic a disease as TB to find anchor in the body.

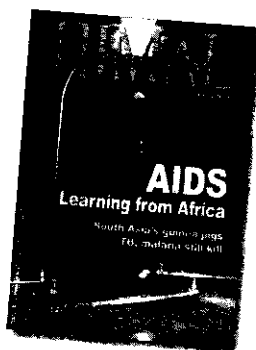
AIDS alone has increased TB mortality by 30 to 50 times. We should also mention that not everyone infected by TB becomes a positive TB patient. Only about 10 percent become active TB sufferers and this happens when the immune system is weakened by malnutrition, pregnancy, chronic ailments like uncontrolled diabetes, and other sickness.

Yet, there are a few positive sides in all this. That TB can be defeated is now a proven fact and South Asia even with its meagre resources can do that if it wants to. With higher investment and proper management, the disease can be wiped off. But it has to be fought at many levels—national and international, medical and social, through education and in service delivery. And of course supply of quality drugs.

Wherever ngos have been involved, the social changes are obvious because of the link they have with the community. Moreover, women have been enabled through their role as TB fighters. In Bangladesh, where the gender scene is dismal, it is amazing to see the respect ordinary female health workers enjoy because they have helped cure people of TB. In the hills of Nepal, women health workers supervise the medicine taking by walking miles everyday. Their position and status is enhanced much better than through any well intentioned campaign or seminar. There is a great and concrete potential to turn the battle against a disease to a war against a greater enemy, that of entrenched social mind-sets.

The spread of TB tells us that diseases have to be tackled at various levels and without that, no permanent cure is possible. That means even urban planning has got to take the threat of TB into account. Since TB is such a serious threat to the South Asian population, one hopes the politicians will get the message that time is fast running out.

Niaz Ahmed  
Dhaka



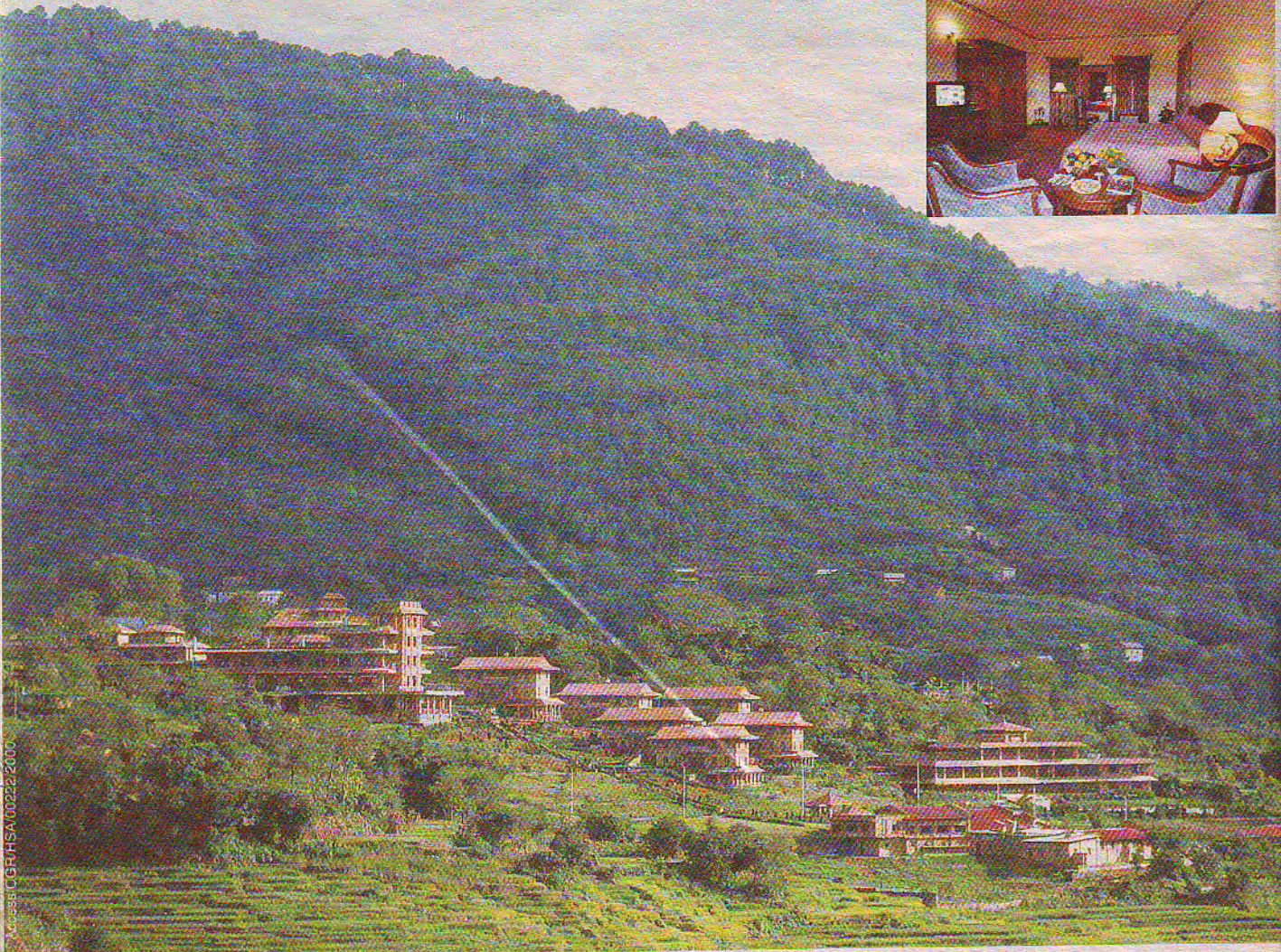
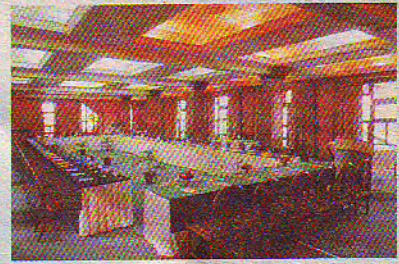
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INDIA

# MORE IS BETTER

**INDIA'S MAKE-UP** will soon start looking different. Backward Bihar will no longer be its second most populous state. That status will go to Maharashtra, India's most industrialised province. Uttar Pradesh, the largest state, will become further 'Mandalised' with the separation of Uttaranchal, which is 97 percent 'upper caste' in composition. And with Chhattisgarh's severance, sprawling Madhya Pradesh will cease being the country's single largest repository of tropical forests and minerals.

These are major changes, with more yet to come. Many new regions are already demanding statehood: from Kutch and Saurashtra in the west, to Bodoland and North Bengal in the east, from Bundelkhand and Harit Pradesh (western UP) in the north, through Malwa and Vidarbha in the centre, to Telengana and Coorg (Kodagu) in the south.

Strangely, behind this strong federalist impulse lies another reality: the extremely centralised character of India's constitutional and political structure. India's Parliament can alter the states' boundaries without so much as a pretence of consultation with them, leave alone a referendum.

Nevertheless, in the long run, it is federalism, and devolution of powers that must prevail. More and more new states are generally welcome as a necessary component of democratisation. But the real issue is of how much decision-making gets decentralised *within* them, in devolving right to the village level. Regrettably, India's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has gone about the job in a half-hearted and hasty way, and ignored this vital aspect of downward percolation of power.

Lack of thoughtfulness marks the way the centre-state relationship issue has been played out within the NDA. Part of the reason is that the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) is uneasy with the very premise of federalism. Historically, the *sangh* has always been devoted to the "One Nation, One People" idea of extreme centralism. For instance, it opposed the 1956 States Reorganisation Commission which suggested the formation of linguistic states. It contended that the creation of more states would unleash "fissiparous" tendencies and lead to India's disintegration. The *sangh* and the BJP have since made many opportunistic 'adjustments' and 'accommodations', but without reforming their

core-ideology. Hence, the BJP's awkwardness with the addition in the number of states.

Secondly, the Vajpayee government hasn't made a half-way sober calculation of the economic costs of creating new states. The new states will want to be 'compensated' and given assistance to build new capitals, with their secretariats, administrative cadres, fleets of vehicles and other paraphernalia of statehood. The 'parent' states too are demanding "compensation" for their revenue losses.

Jharkhand accounts for two-thirds of Bihar's internal resources, and for the bulk of its natural wealth and electricity generation. Bihar wants a loan waiver of INR 30,000 crores and "special assistance" of INR 179,000 crores, to prevent itself from falling prey to what RJD (Rastriya Janata Dal) President Laloo Prasad Yadav calls a future of *baadh, balu aur bhookh* (flood, sand and hunger). Similarly, Chhattisgarh contributes to more than two-thirds of Madhya Pradesh's revenue, and has been the state's mining and industrial heartland as well as its rice-bowl (besides growing 70 percent of India's production of *tendu* leaves, used in *beedis*).

This 'compensation' will have to come from the Centre, whose tax collection has fallen—thanks to its deplorable failure to tax the rich—to less than 10 percent of the GDP. It is unclear if and how the Centre can find the money.

Practical difficulties apart, the cultural-political rationale for new states remains unassailable. People in the three new entities, all feel culturally alienated from the 'parent' states, because their languages/dialects, traditions and customs have been prevented from flourishing by the preponderant linguistic-ethnic majorities. Internally, each has an identity based upon ecological, agro-climatic and historical-cultural factors, or ethnic similarities and common habits and day-to-day practices. All of them are rich in natural resources, but feel they haven't been receiving their due share of the economic cake.

Huge states such as UP are undesirable—administratively, culturally and politically. The very size of UP—the sixth most populous country in the world were it to be independent—makes it unwieldy to govern.



The magazine India Today's projection of India in 2047.

Even worse, the imposition of homogenous structures of governance and cultural uniformity, means that millions of people, for instance, Bhojpuri-speakers (perhaps 20 million), or Bundelkhandis (only a little less numerous), are forced to give up their language and learn 'standard' Hindi.

This entails the smothering of 'vernacular' languages, some of which (eg Braj-bhasha) have a rich literature going back several centuries. When an Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili or Chhattisgarhi is overpowered and replaced by Hindi, this Hindi is typically highly Sanskritised, upper caste-oriented and text-bookish. It is intolerant of idiomatic differences, 'local' accents, or colourful subaltern expressions that don't fit the sanitised *bhadralog* lexicon. This runs counter to the spirit of democracy and pluralism, and hence the need for political decentralisation. The forced integration of such disparate groups risks wiping out diversity and retarding the development of distinct cultures. The numbers involved here are huge by world standards: 25 million Maithils, 10 million Chhattisgarhis or five million Uttaranchalis, compared to nine million Swedes, five million Israelis, 7.3 million Bolivians or 5.7 million Burundians.

The lesson for all of South Asia is that we must break with the unitarist structures and practices imposed by erstwhile colonial regimes for administrative convenience. There is no reason why India shouldn't have many more states—40, 50, even more. This is perfectly in keeping with the spirit and content of Indianness. A large country like India must be richly federal, and it must accommodate multiple types of federal arrangements.

However, decentralisation does not mean merely devolving power from Lucknow to Nainital, from Bhopal to Raipur, or from Patna to Ranchi, and then leaving it upto the regional or local elites to carry on. It is pointless to have bureaucrats and commercial interests of Bhopal merely replaced by the patronage-based 'political families' of Raipur working in league with the very industrialists who got the great trade unionist Shankar Guha Niyogi murdered. Devolution means going beyond those elites, and devolving power to the broad mass. Creating more states, then, is no magic wand. By themselves, they cannot bring about healthy development; they are a necessary, not a sufficient, condition.

Many people in the UP hills believe that Uttaranchal is the poorest or most backward region of the state today. In many ways, it is not. Garhwal and Kumaon have a smaller proportion (39 percent) of people living in

poverty, compared to (supposedly prosperous) western UP's 42 percent and Bundelkhand's 62 percent. The UP Planning Department's list of the 15 most backward districts—in per capita income, literacy, roads, etc—does not include any of Uttaranchal's eight districts. But Uttaranchal is certainly an instance of mal-development, violent disruption of ecology and imposition of large dam projects where smaller ones are needed.

This holds a larger lesson. To be relevant to people, development schemes have to start from below and address people's real needs. Only then will the authentic rationale of democratic decentralisation unfold. Ultimately, people-oriented decentralisation alone can empower the wretched of the South Asian soil. ▲

—Pratul Bidwai

## SRI LANKA

# AUCTION HOUSE

SRI LANKA'S just concluded general election has proved, if any proof was necessary, that as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew once told then president J.R. Jayewardene, democracy in the island nation is "an auction of non-existent resources".

The run-up to the poll saw the incumbent Chandrika Kumaratunga administration raise the wages of members of the country's bloated public service; increase the non-contributory pensions that retired government servants enjoy; and increase the monthly *samurdhi* dole to the poor with full knowledge that the scheme is badly flawed. Those were only some of the vote-catching carrots that were tossed by Kumaratunga to the electorate, despite a cash-strapped exchequer, and a debilitating war which is gobbling resources in an ever-escalating defence expenditure.

The results was the widely predicted hung Parliament with neither the ruling People's Alliance (PA) nor the main opposition United National Party (UNP) able to manage a majority. With thousands of armed military deserters roaming the countryside, and politicians who use state-provided security squads as private armies, the election was neither free nor fair. Although Sri Lanka has no T.N. Seshan, Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake tried his best. He was to later comment that in a Third World context, the poll may be considered satisfactory. Though the leader of the 77-member team of monitors from the European Union, Irish parliamentarian John Cushnahan, said that the conclusion

Creating more states is no magic wand. By themselves, they cannot bring about healthy development; they are a necessary, not a sufficient, condition.

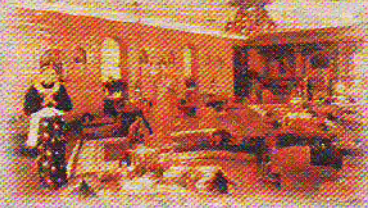
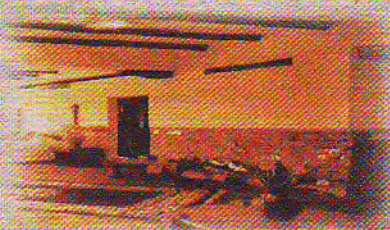
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"reasonably reflected the will of the Sri Lankan people", he also made it clear that it was not possible to issue a verdict of "free and fair" on the election given the "level of violence, intimidation and attempted electoral abuse".

The tragedy is that for the second time, President Chandrika Kumaratunga is not living up to her word that those who engaged in electoral malpractice will not be rewarded with office. (The first time was following the controversial provincial council election of last year.) Considerations of realpolitik seemed to take precedence, as was demonstrated when the president formed what the local press has described as the "world's biggest cabinet" of 44 ministers. Well-known election cheats have retained their plumes and feathers, and live politically to fight another day.

But a glimmer of hope remains, as the PA is showing signs of being open to cooperating with the UNP, whose leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, is pushing for the implementation of a so-called democratic agenda. The UNP wants four independent commissions, one each for elections, the police, the public service and the judiciary. He has also demanded a de-politicising of the dominant state media, which was flagrantly abused during the poll campaign.

There are indications that Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, who replaced the late Sirima Bandaranaike just before the Tenth Parliament was dissolved, has seen the light of the need for consensual politics. Wickramanayake, it is said, had even been prepared to forego the prime ministership to UNP's Wickremesinghe, if a national government that is widely being urged by the professional and business community, could be put in place. However, a powerful grouping within the PA with whom Kumaratunga is aligned, resisted that proposal.

A movement towards bridging differences between the PA and the UNP was made with the unanimous election of Anura Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's estranged brother, as the speaker of Parliament—the country's number three hierarchical position. Brother and sister were seen to be united in grief on the loss of their mother on election day, and the local media showed them holding hands at Sirima's funeral. Eldest sister, Sunethra who is not in politics, played peacemaker.

As for Wickremesinghe, he understands too well that without the independent commissions he sought before the last election, there is no hope of the UNP winning power. The business community who are the financiers of both the PA and the UNP, are acutely conscious of the

need for these two parties to get together if serious bipartisan negotiations with the Tamil Tigers are to begin, and the economy revived. Despite his defeat both at the presidential election last December and at the 10 October parliamentary poll, the UNP's newly elected MPs have unanimously endorsed Wickremesinghe's continued leadership of their party. In her cabinet making, Kumaratunga made some subtle changes that may, through a consensual approach, pave the way for a national government at a later stage.

But the Tigers remain the major imponderable factor in the equation. Their leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is widely believed to have favoured Wickremesinghe over Kumaratunga at the polls. What will be his reaction to a combination of the two, is anybody's guess.

—Manik de Silva

## INDIA • BURMA

# FRIENDS AND FOES

INDIA'S ONGOING attempt to establish a "working relationship" with the Burmese junta has suffered from some rather bad timing recently. The Indian home secretary was in Rangoon for the seventh round of talks on border management (a euphemism for cooperation against each other's insurgents) exactly when the world's attention was focussed on Aung San Suu Kyi's enforced incarceration in her car just outside town. In early July, General V. P. Malik, the then Indian army chief, arrived with a large entourage on a "goodwill visit", only to find General Khin Nyunt, one of two leaders of the junta, away in Pakistan with an even larger entourage.

Pakistan has for long been a secret, if modest, supplier of ammunition and spares to Burma, especially for commonly-held Chinese equipment. In fact, along with Singapore and Israel, it was one of the countries that was quick to come to the junta's assistance in the wake of pro-democracy uprisings in 1988. India, on the other hand, became a whipping boy for receiving the refugees and making pro-democracy noises. All India Radio is today lumped together with the BBC and the VOA by the Burmese media for their 'villainous' propaganda. For once, many Indians felt they were on the right side.

Relations soured even further when Suu Kyi was awarded the Nehru peace award in 1995. However, at about the same time, India changed tack, increasingly concerned about

Well-known election cheats have retained their plumes and feathers, and live politically to fight another day.

growing Chinese military support for Rangoon, and allegedly, the setting up of a Chinese signals facility on the Cocos Islands near the Andamans, to keep an eye on Indian naval movements and missile tests along the Orissa coast.

Since then, there has been an intermittent but steady growth of contacts between Rangoon and New Delhi. The pace has picked up in the last few years as the Burmese themselves have drawn back from an exclusive dependence on China. They are concerned (or at least the faction in the junta led by General Maung Aye is—Khin Nyunt is said to be more pro-Chinese) about the influx of Chinese settlers in the Mandalay area. Overland trade with China appears to have fallen off, and many of the sheds in the huge industrial estate along the northern border today wear a derelict look.

In their public statements, the leaders of the junta now make it a point to include a reference to India as their other large neighbour. The most concrete result of the new approach is the upgrading of the 170-kilometre road from the Manipur border to Kalemyo, which is connected to Mandalay. Built by the Indian Border Roads Organisation, the road reduces travel time from about eight to three hours. The road is due to be handed over to the Burmese soon, and is expected to stimulate border trade that has been going on since 1995, as well as long distance trade between the two countries.

India has been Burma's largest export destination in the 1990s, buying pulses, timber, rubber, leather and spices. Some of the other proposals that have been bandied about in press conferences after Indian visits, have a distinctly futuristic air to them. These include Indian farmers taking fertile but virgin land on lease in the Irrawaddy delta, a huge hydel project, improving the navigability of the river that runs down from the southern tip of Mizoram to the Burmese port of Sitwe (Akyab), and even a gas pipeline.

These economic possibilities, along with the desire to secure Burmese cooperation in denying Naga and Manipuri insurgents refuge across the border, and in curbing drug trafficking (and the HIV virus that comes with it), act as incentives for India to strengthen engagement with Burma. Which is a pity from the point of view of improving the prospects of a return to democracy in Burma. As long as the Burmese enjoy economic relations with China, Singapore and India, the economic sanctions that have been applied fitfully by others are unlikely to work.

Representatives from several Indian political parties met the other day along with a few

prominent human rights activists, journalists and intellectuals, to call on the rulers in Rangoon to restore democracy and human rights. No one showed up from the Congress party, or from the parties that are a member of the ruling coalition, with the exception of George Fernandes' Samta Party. But then the All Burma Students League, which co-sponsored the occasion, gave as its address in the invitation 3, Krishna Menon Marg. That has been the Indian defence minister's address, and he has been a long-term supporter of the Burmese dissident. This is a minor curiosity however, because it did not stop the minister from sending his army chief to Rangoon on a goodwill visit.

## NEPAL

# PEACE IN PIECES

**IN RETROSPECT**, it was the Maoist storming of Dunai, headquarters of the highland district of Dolpa, that precipitated the peace process. It pushed the government to limited deployment of the Royal Nepal Army against the insurgency, which seems to have pushed the rebel leaders towards the negotiations. However, the talks between the government and the Maoists came to an abrupt end before it even got off to a proper start. The government has now to start all over again if it wants to pick up the pieces of peace that lie scattered all over the negotiating table.

In a sequence of events that seemed to come straight out of pulp fiction, Deputy Prime Minister Ram Chandra Paudel went out of his way to meet Rabindra Shrestha—a central committee member of the underground Maoist party. This 'informal' (but for all one would know, official) meeting was arranged by the self-proclaimed 'independent-communist' and human-rights activist Padma Ratna Tuladhar. Reportedly, Paudel and Shrestha reminisced about their student days, munched biscuits, sipped tea and went their respective ways, literally as well as figuratively as it turned out.

The possibility of talks had raised expectations of an imminent end to violence after five years of fruitless conflict that has already consumed the lives of nearly 2000 citizens, affected the economy, and drained the national momentum. Before they would sit for talks, the Maoists were asking that the whereabouts of their comrades held captive by the government be made public, foremost being Dinesh Sharma. The second condition was that an official

negotiator be named by the government. It was a climb-down from the Maoists' earlier posturing that no talks were possible with a government under the leadership of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala. The extended deadline set by the Maoists was to expire on the afternoon of Friday, 3 November at 3:00.

Events took a dramatic turn when Dinesh Sharma appeared in public at a press conference, minutes before the deadline was to end, hosted under government auspices. There,



Dinesh Sharma  
at press  
conference.

Sharma announced that he was leaving the violent ways of Maoists and was going out to organise the masses for peaceful politics. It looked too good to be true, and so it turned out to be. As soon as Sharma was freed, he issued another statement insisting that he had been coerced into making his earlier statement by the police who had tortured him into submission.

Tuladhar, as facilitator of the peace talks, was furious, and accused the government of double dealing. Once again, the Maoist leadership was announcing that the possibility of negotiations with the Koirala government was now sharply reduced. The government, as usual, blandly requested every one to help end the violence. The peace process that had started during the Dasain festival—and the hopes thus kindled—has rapidly completed a circle, and the country is now back where it began. Nepal, it seems, is set for a long and cold winter.

But it would be premature to predict an end to the entire process. Perhaps as important as the later-retracted statement by Comrade Dinesh Sharma in the capital city, was the case of a gunman on Maoist bodyguard duty. Frustrated by the tension of an endless 'Peoples' War', he got stone-drunk and surrendered to the police. The publicised Maoist leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal (a.k.a. Comrade Prachanda) and Dr. Babu Ram Bhattarai can not sustain a war forever on the strength of rhetoric alone, nor by attacking police posts, nor with the millions looted from banks and lakhs collected from government officials and businessmen as unofficial tax. More revolutions are devoured by avarice than by anything else, and the longer the Maoists spend time out in the cold the more the possibility that their dogma will be compromised. Ideology without morality, and force without faith, do not work for long.

Most importantly, the prize of a compromise with the government would be tantalising.

Using the strengths of their underground organising, and the development of a committed youthful cadre, an above-ground Maoist organisation would be one of the more powerful political parties in the country, picking up the left spectrum abandoned by the United Marxist Leninists as they went mainstream. To be recognised as a political force in their own right, therefore, the Maoists need to keep talking to the government despite the Dinesh Sharma episode.

Meanwhile, the rebels must thank the perennial infighting within the ruling party for giving them space. Even while the whole nation was holding its breath on the likely course of talks with the Maoists, sulking Nepali Congress veteran K. P. Bhattarai wrote a letter to his party President and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala expressing his willingness to hold 'talks,' hold your breath, to bring an end to the infighting in their own party! In such a situation, it seems that, for the moment, Koirala's government will not be able to pick up the pieces of peace even if that were to be served to it on a platter. Even so, the government cannot afford not to pursue talks. An end to violence appears as unlikely at the moment as any dramatic gains for either side. Armed confrontations between organised armed rebels and the forces of government are facts of life in countries where political upheaval does not deliver a fundamental change in the balance of power at the grass-roots. Koirala and his advisors must realise that the full explanation for an insurgency as wide-spread as Maoism in Nepal lies in the failure of successive governments—and parliaments—in coming to grips with how to run a democracy.

The term 'Maoism' in this case may also be a convenient label for the aspirations of different sections of the people who know that they deserve a slice of the power cake, but are being denied a fair share by the controlling elite. Lasting peace requires a democratic and decentralised mechanism in place to address those aspirations. Assuming that the government really wants to do that—no government with democratic pretensions can afford to do anything else—it must first establish a 'workable peace'. The possibilities, for the moment, seem to have lapsed. But peace is too precious to be given up as lost just because one round has failed to take off. In the meantime, one would hope that the Maoists do not give an opportunity for the deployed Royal Nepal Army to engage in combat. That, certainly, would open up another can of worms. ▽

—C. K. Lal

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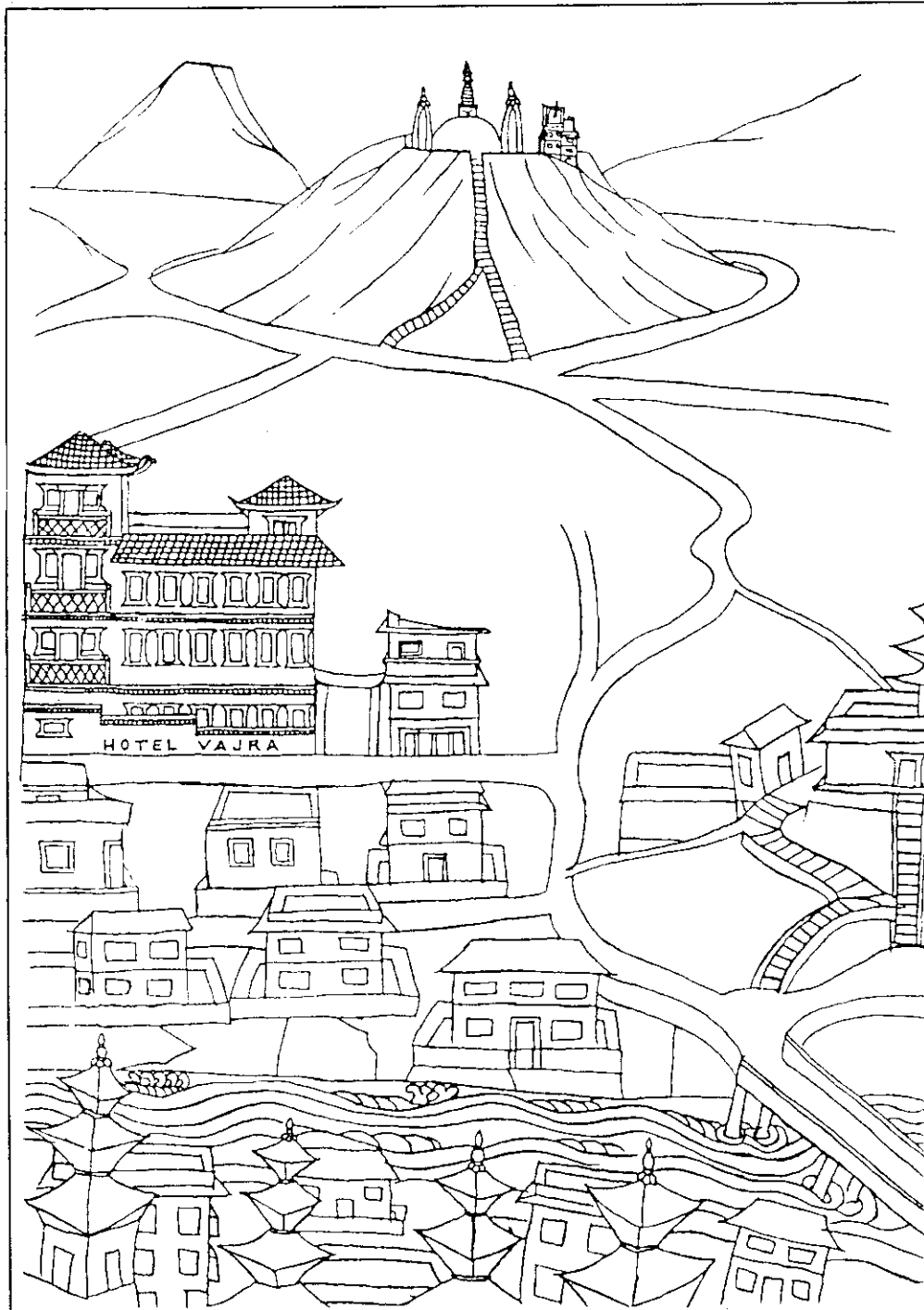
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## P A K I S T A N

# Present tense; future imperfect

The Chief Executive of Pakistan has decided to stop courting the West and focus on internal politics, but this brings him squarely up against the religious right. Meanwhile, the liberals are equivocal, and the political parties have been relegated to the political gulag. But whatever be the general's intentions, he cannot continue to rule for long in a political vacuum.

by *Adnan Rehmat*



It is not that Pakistan's powerful military is unfamiliar with the running of the country. However, unlike the times of the generals Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan or Zia-ul-Haq, there is a singularly different flavour with the present military regime of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, which completed a year in power in early October. The difference has primarily to do with the non-dictatorial mien of the Chief Executive, who comes across as a social liberal reluctantly taking charge to save the country from implosion brought on by the civilian politicians.

For the moment at least, Pakistan is run by a general who has not clamped down on the media; who seems at one with the liberals in thinking that the meddlesome mullahs should be restrained in the political and social spheres; and who professes a genuine desire to relinquish the helm the moment his presence is not required. But then times have changed since the days of the no-nonsense dictators, and Gen. Musharraf has been finding it increasingly dif-

icult to run a country as fractious and unstable as Pakistan on the basis of sheer projected goodwill.

While there seems no choice for the generals but to allow the civilian political forces to enter the arena of governance, these are fluid times in Pakistan because the powerful military seems intent on remaining politically active for years. For the long term, Gen. Musharraf and his advisors seem to be toying with a version of 'guided democracy' that has been tried before in Pakistan and in some other South Asian countries (notably Nepal's Panchayat system), one in which the benevolence and clairvoyance of the men in khaki, in this instance, would keep the country on track. (Just before he resigned from his post on 10 October, Musharraf's Information and Media Development Minister Javed Jabbar hinted that the government may amend the Constitution to create a permanent political role for the military in the country's governing structure. Jabbar argued that the traditional cleavages between ci-

vilian politicians and the military were appropriate in theory, but didn't work in practice.)

At a press conference held to mark his first year in power, Gen. Musharraf promised the people of Pakistan and the world that national and provincial elections would be held before the end of 2002, which would be three years after he toppled the popularly elected Nawaz Sharif government in a bloodless coup on 12 October 1999. These elections would follow the local-level balloting scheduled to begin on the last day of this year and protractedly run for nearly six months.

The political vacuum created nationally as a result of Musharraf's coup has precipitated an acerbic tussle between the religious right and the liberal left. While the now-on now-off

**There are many who maintain that the chaos of Pakistan's politics, riven as it is by ethnicity, class and regionalism, requires a formula linking the military to mainstream politics.**

sparring between the two sides has been going on for years, the military takeover has brought this conflict to a head. For his part, Musharraf is seen to be trying to balance the two forces, even though everyone knows that he would much rather be rid of the extremism of the clerics. And for his elaborate pyrotechnics, the general has been lauded and lampooned in equal measure.

### **Pakistani Ataturk**

A stunning ruling earlier this year by the Supreme Court not only gave legal cover to the putsch and three full years for the general to carry out reforms and hold elections, but also provided him with the authority to alter Pakistan's Constitution. Having controlled the government on three separate occasions, Pakistan's military is not ignorant of the ways of politics. However, the amendment alluded to by the former minister of information would legalise and institutionalise the military's political involvement—much like in the current government structure of Turkey. Musharraf spent seven years in Turkey during his childhood and admires Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the military hero and founder of modern Turkey who forced the feudal society unto its secular and modernising path.

Like Ataturk-era Turkey, Pakistan is today threatened by economic collapse, internal

strife and Islamic fundamentalism. But while Musharraf may not go so far as to declare a secular state—Pakistan is officially an Islamic republic—there is no doubt as to where his preference lies. Ataturk used the military as an engine of change, and the military in Turkey continues to guide government policy through a National Security Council. As a last resort, the military's direct intervention has generally been accepted by the populace, even though the measure has not been used more than four times, and that too for relatively short periods.

Political scientists believe that Musharraf's germinating formula is ambitious, but not impossible, and there are many who maintain that the chaos of Pakistan's politics, riven as it is by ethnicity, class and regionalism, requires just such a formula linking the military to mainstream politics. "The international community frowns upon the political power of Turkey's military but accepts it, so why should Pakistan be any different?" asks one professor, who says that Pakistan need not fear of being labeled a pariah state if the military decides to make itself comfortable within the polity.

Significantly, while neither Great Britain nor the United States has praised Musharraf's takeover, both have maintained dialogue with Islamabad—and Islamabad is close to securing a badly needed injection from the International Monetary Fund to prop up its beleaguered economy. According to Stratfor, a US-based intelligence research organisation, the United States and Europe aren't likely to praise Musharraf if he proceeds as expected, but they will not cut him off if he proceeds with it.

The great challenge for Musharraf if he proceeds thus will not be so much the liberal civil society as the hard-line Islamic groups, who would feel directly threatened by the legitimisation of a secular-structured military within the country's politics. Groups such as the Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI) of Fazlur Rehman—the jihad-espousing pro-Taliban leader and former chairman of Pakistan's standing committee of the National Assembly on foreign affairs during Benazir Bhutto's tenure, who has been known to call for the murder of Americans in Pakistan—not only stand to lose political power, they could very well be removed from the political equation by a military which regards Islamic radicals a threat to social stability and economic growth.

Even while the world looks at Pakistan's military as a threat to liberal democratic traditions, the most palpable tension within the country today is actually between the army brass and the religious radicals. Many members of the intelligentsia, while disliking the looming threat of dictatorship, are equivocal



about the military because of its 'Western' secular traditions. The religious conservatives, on the other hand, have begun to palpably feel the threat of a modernising military, and are predestined to react. While the military tries to reach the hearts and mind through the medium of the intelligentsia and the English-speaking media, therefore, the Islamists will try and rally popular support through the Urdu press, through the madrassas and by organising mass rallies. Even though the hardcore faithful makes up no more than five per cent of the population, as some analysts suggest, the religious right has proven its ability to get heard throughout the land.

### **Collision course**

The military has remained one of the most popular institutions of Pakistan, one that has retained the support of the people even while the others, viz. the bureaucracy, judiciary—certainly the political parties—have taken a beating. But once Musharraf took power, the military became vulnerable to the same kind of evaluation that the parties face. No polls have been conducted, but it is clear that the army's popularity has sagged over the last year. The benefit of this will go to the Islamist groups rather than the discredited political parties that are presently headless—Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) is in jail and Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in self-exile.

The longer Musharraf rules, therefore, and the more he seeks to define a secularist agenda, the more the likelihood of a fierce confrontation between the military and the religious right. While the political parties tried to co-opt or circumvent the influence of the religious groups, it is more than likely that the military will go for a head-on collision. Meanwhile, the Islamists will engage in violent protests and

mass demonstrations even as the military tries to arrest and suppress the ring-leaders.

Ataturk had more than a decade to introduce change in Turkey; Musharraf has, by court order, until 2002. It is clear that the general prefers Pakistan as a modern-day nation-state rather than a backward-looking Afghanistan, but the very methods that he may be forced to use to hamstring the religious right would be anti-democratic and go against the long-term interests of the Pakistani polity. The previous military rulers actually failed to take on the power of the conservative clergy, and Pakistan's present instability is actually the result of a military dictator—Gen Zia-ul Haq—co-opting the Islamist agenda in order to remain in power. Gen Musharraf gives the impression of being a wholly different breed from Gen Zia—he is transparent where the other was wily—which means that a confrontation with the Islamists is assured.

In fact, the confrontation has already begun. Two months ago, the authorities arrested Behram Achakzai, a leader of Fazlur Rehman's JUI. Achakzai, who was charged with embezzlement and misuse of power, had held a series of government positions in Balochistan province until last fall's military coup. He has since been convicted and sentenced to 14 years in jail, fined heavily, and disqualified from holding public office for 21 years.

This was the first time Musharraf's regime had seized a major religious figure. The fact that the challenge came at a time when his government already had its hands full with battles on several fronts suggested that the general viewed the religious right as an immediate threat. The JUI, a political party dominated by conservative Muslim scholars, runs hundreds of seminaries throughout Pakistan. It had hounded Musharraf for several months and sponsored several protests as well as a nationwide strike to protest changes that were proposed to Pakistan's retrogressive blasphemy laws.

The fierce protests from the clergy forced Musharraf to go back on the laudable attempt to make it difficult to accuse someone of blasphemy. Even after the general's embarrassing backtrack, which he tried to brush aside as a mere "procedural" reconsideration, the JUI reneged on its part of the deal and brought out further demonstrations. In late October, it again threatened to kill Americans in Pakistan if the US, seeking the mercurial Osama bin Laden, tried to bomb Afghanistan using Pakistani air space like it did two years ago.

The JUI is working with a number of other radical groups to oppose the government's plans on banking reform and local government.

*The Secretary General met the Chief Executive in New York, but the world did not applaud.*

Meanwhile, Fazlur Rehman has vowed to resist all recommendations of the Special Commission on Women, set up by Musharraf to propose reforms to make Pakistani laws more gender-sensitive. For example, the party is set blindly against a proposal to amend the controversial Hudood Law, which lays the onus of proving rape on the victim. The party says it will fight the amendment, with violence if necessary. Meanwhile, Fazlur Rehman is livid with the government for announcing that it will extend control over thousands of privately run seminaries (hundreds are run by him), many of which are bastions of fundamentalist thought.

While the government's actions against the extremist priesthood gained a measure of applause from Pakistan's liberal elite and internationally, the timing was clearly off. The military government was already consumed with a number of other issues: scattered anti-tax protests were continuing after a nationwide strike called by the business sector; and the government was in the midst of a major anti-corruption probe aimed at the top guns in politics and commerce. At the same time, Islamabad was holding delicate negotiations with the Taliban over a proposed peace plan for Afghanistan, on which Pakistan has much at stake.

So, why would Musharraf antagonise one more powerful—and belligerent—group? The best answer is that he deemed challenging the fundamentalists right away less risky than deferring a confrontation. The government has apparently acted to pre-empt an anticipated and more substantial challenge, which also

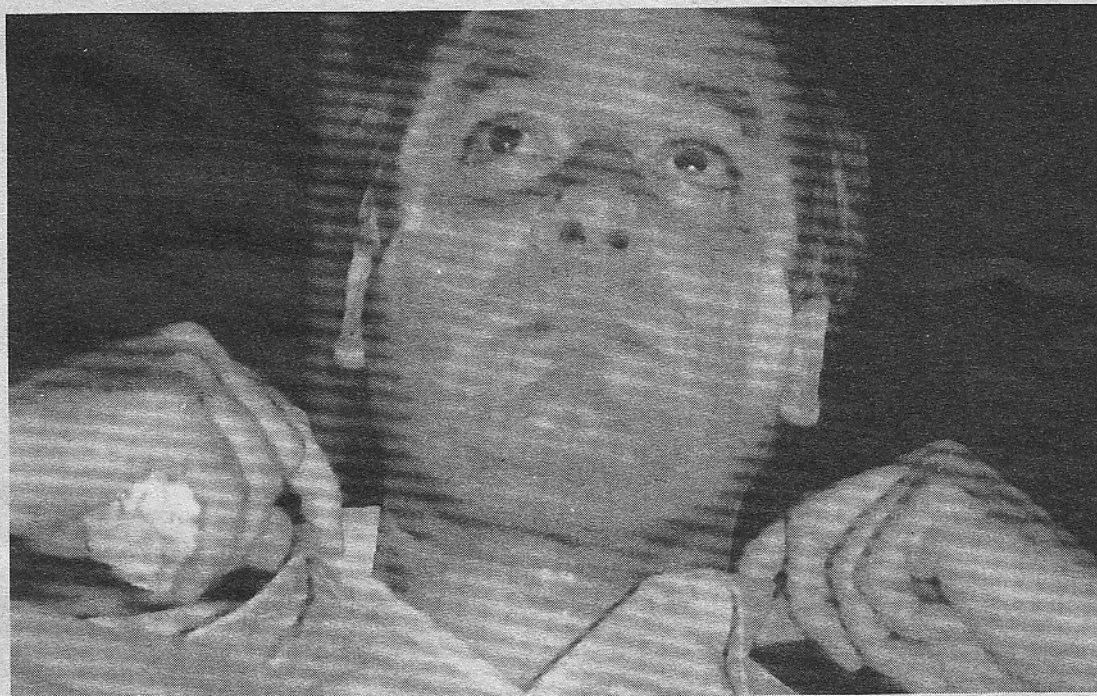
suggests that Pakistan's radical right is much stronger than expected—or at least the military believes this to be so. In which case, the authorities are unlikely to stop with one arrest; a further sweep is likely, and a confrontation between the regime and the mullahs assured.

### **The ngo-wallas**

Even while the military gears up to take on the clerics, the latter have been going after Pakistan's liberals, having forever confused them as 'godless'. Specifically, it is the non-governmental organisations which have been targeted, bearing the brunt on behalf of the rather large but silent population of Pakistani moderates. That moderates make up a majority of the population, within both the English- and Urdu-speaking mass, is clear because together they have never voted a religious party to power in the 53 years of Pakistan. The clerics have never achieved enough strength in Parliament to make a political difference in the course of six general elections in which only centrist or socialist parties have held power. The rest of the time, it is the military that has ruled.

That Musharraf feels a kindred spirit among the social liberals is clear from his appointing at least four hardcore 'ngo-ists' to the Federal cabinet after he assumed power. (They are: Information Minister Javed Jabbar, Local Government Minister Omar Asghar, Education Minister Zubaida Jalal, and Population and Women's Affairs Minister Attiya Inayatullah.) Soon thereafter, his government announced changes in the blasphemy law and launched a census of seminaries. The religious parties re-

*Mian Nawaz Sharif: Feeling the heat.*



# Vajpayee, talk to Musharraf

THE LINES between Islamabad and New Delhi, already close to freezing after the 1999 Kargil episode, chilled even further with the military coup last October which brought Pervez Musharraf to power. The general, after all, was the man India believes to be the engineer of Pakistani incursion into Kargil.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, who believes that he was betrayed in the peace overture which was his Lahore bus ride, has steadfastly refused any and every move by Musharraf for a dialogue. He has also rejected the immense pressures brought on New Delhi by an international community which considers the India-Pakistan theatre as the most proximate nuclear flashpoint in the world.

While Vajpayee's sense of injury has some foundation, the fact is that South Asia is today "the most dangerous place on earth", a point stressed knowingly or unknowingly by Bill Clinton. And to be made less dangerous, there is no other way but for Islamabad and New Delhi to sit down at the table. For two countries which speak and act so belligerently, and which have nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles at the ready, not to have talked for two whole years is a travesty. However real Vajpayee's sense of hurt, it is imperative that he get over it and signal the start of a conversation with Musharraf, through emissaries with full authority.

While he may have been a hawk—a proactive one at that—on Kargil, Pervez Musharraf the Chief Executive must perforce think and perform differently from Pervez Musharraf the COAS (Chief of Army Staff). The Indian side must appreciate the fact that the general now has to respond as a head of government with responsibility not only for defence, but also economy, regional aspirations, and community relations inside a most complicated country where forces of civil society have not been allowed free play. In short, for the good of the region's 1.4 billion people, Vajpayee must regard Musharraf as more than a general of the Pakistani Army.

This new way to look at Musharraf must also apply when it comes to Kashmir. Since Kashmir comes up as the stumbling block whenever the question of India-Pakistan talks arises, one must understand that Musharraf (the head of government) walks a tight-rope on his country's rigid Kashmir policy. Those who know Pakistan have no doubt that the general is wary of the clergy, which form the category calling most vociferously for *jihad* on Kashmir. At the same time, a continuing espousal of Pakistan's Kashmir policy is a safe refuge for a regime which sees its larger task as trying to bring some internal peace in the country.

What this means is that Musharraf cannot afford, for internal reasons, to openly speak the language on Kashmir that New Delhi would want it to. India's insistence that violence in Kashmir should cease before it will talk to Pakistan only stiffens positions in Pakistan, and it effectively locks Musharraf into his own Kashmir hardline. Does this mean, then, that South Asia will remain on knife-edge of confrontation because of Kashmir? South Asia is too big, and the interest of its mass (including a billion in the north, south, east and west of India alone) too important not to sit at the table.

General Musharraf himself admits that relations with India have deteriorated alarmingly since he took power, and conceded in a recent interview that this could be due to his background in the military. But he, at least, can say that he has offered to hold talks on several occasions and has each time been rebuffed. "I've been making formal offer of talks so many times that I'm really fed up with it," he said recently.

Vajpayee seems to want to stick to the moral high ground. But what is the use if that high ground will be blown away in the next war, which may well take place, and with a vengeance? India must try and countenance negotiations with the adversary, even if it regards it distasteful. Not meeting someone it doesn't like is not a good enough reason to remain disengaged from a neighbour that has a parity in nuclear destructive power. Finally, the two leaders ought to realise that they can still change their attitude towards each other, although Vajpayee might have gone too public in his rhetoric against Musharraf.

Fortunately, diplomatic sources in Islamabad say that there is a discernible movement on the Indian side that betrays a willingness, albeit reluctant, to initiate talks with Pakistan—first at unofficial and then official levels. A step in this direction was taken when Niaz A Naik, former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan—a rare Pakistani diplomat respected by India's foreign ministry officialdom—was in India some weeks ago to resume a stalled unofficial dialogue (called Track Two) between influential Indian and Pakistani diplomats and defence experts.

Officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Islamabad told Himat that the exercise had "broken the ice and there is a discernible shift in New Delhi's policy on dialogue with the [military] government in Pakistan". If indeed true, this is good news for South Asia as a whole. It is long past the hour that two countries, both with fingers close to the nuclear trigger, and both with insurmountable social and economic problems of their own, met to try and sort out differences. Howsoever much the leader of one dislikes the other. ☺

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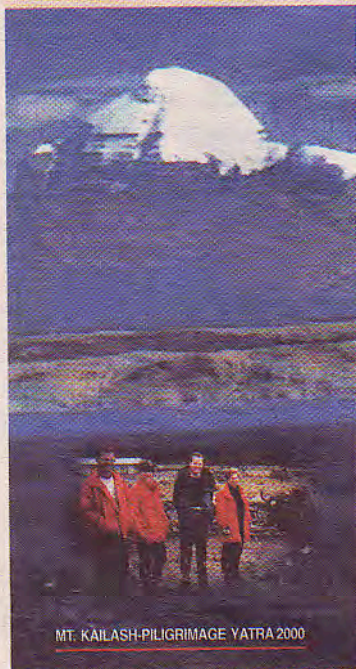


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sponded with protest campaigns against the ngos, charging that the government's policies were being drafted by the ngo-wallas. Such was the clergy's ire that in the conservative areas of northern Pakistan, some groups even issued fatwas sanctioning forcible marriages with women ngo-workers. This was accompanied by a series of protests against the secularist organisations working in social development. The sermons at Friday prayers encouraged the flock to boycott ngos and their work.

Alarmed by this targeting, and themselves not too sure of the long-term attitude of an unrepresentative military government, thousands of Pakistani ngos created an umbrella alliance to defend their position. In a strong statement, they accused the "reactionary forces" of targeting women, minorities and civil society organisations. They rejected the charge that ngos were trying to impose un-Islamic or 'Western' values on Pakistani society. They also decided to launch a concerted campaign to counter the "retrogressive and obscurantist elements" which were holding the entire society hostage. The ngos sought—and to some extent received—governmental assurances of protection against harassment by religious groups.

When Musharraf decided to withdraw the procedural amendments he had proposed to the blasphemy law, the ngo sector was furious, seeing in it the success of the rightwing's offensive. In turn, the ngo-wallas demanded Musharraf that the curriculum taught in seminaries be subjected to scrutiny. Rather than rely on the reactionary right, they demanded that progressive religious scholars and enlightened institutions of Islamic learning be brought into public dialogue to promote justice, equity, peace and tolerance, and also to project a more forward-looking image of Islam, particularly via the electronic media.

For the moment, the Musharraf government has not done badly in keeping both sides of the rightwing-liberal divide appeased while going about its non-insignificant agenda, which includes a controversial grassroots democracy plan, holding of elections, managing the economy, and following the accountability drive to ferret out corrupt power-brokers. By choosing to appear neutral but in reality going after the religious right in these extraordinary times, the military government has actually achieved more than any government or regime in the past. However, the question is how far Musharraf can go on this path, and what is his staying power.

There is no saying how Musharraf evaluates his own performance. While he is disarmingly candid in his many public appearances, it is clear that he keeps his own counsel. He

told a gathering of overseas Pakistanis in Islamabad in late October, "Yes, the popularity of the government has gone down but it has performed well." He has also said, "The perception is that we have not performed well, that the economy has not stabilised or recovered from recession, that people's welfare has not improved, that Pakistan is isolated internationally, that there is a flight of capital and an exodus of entrepreneurs from the country." Seeming almost to concede the points of his critics, however, the Chief Executive was quick to denounce such views as "malicious propaganda spread by external foes and internal vested interests".

### **Economic tightrope**

Economy is, of course, the primary yardstick by which Musharraf's performance will be judged. Ask the general, and he will say that the about-to-be-launched privatisation drive will yield USD 4 billion; that 4000 sick industries are about to be revived; that action plans for the spread of information technology are steaming ahead; and that tax revenues and exports are bang on target. It is indeed true that some sectors of the economy are looking perkier than they were under Nawaz Sharif a year ago. For one, it seems that the economic growth rate could top 5 percent in the current fiscal year,

**That moderates make up a majority of population, within both the English-speaking and Urdu-speaking mass, is clear because they have never voted a religious party to power in the 53 years of Pakistan.**

ascribed to a bumper cotton crop and a consequent boost to the textile industry, which accounts for 60 per cent of Pakistan's export earnings. The rice and wheat crops have also been excellent.

However, industrial output is down, and other economic indicators similarly point downwards. For example, the country has not received a single dollar from the international lending facilities for over a year and the Chief Executive is unlikely to attract overseas capital until his government comes up with a system for casting the tax net more widely, a move bound to prove extremely unpopular. As things stand, less than one per cent of Pakistan's population of 140 million pays any kind of tax, and when the government tried to impose a 15 percent across-the-board sales tax earlier this

year, strikes by shopkeepers forced it to back down. Unfortunately, without the badge of approval conferred by a new IMF loan, Pakistan will be unable to persuade its creditors to re-schedule its remaining debt, or to renew the existing moratorium on most of it, which is due to expire at the end of the year. If there is no rescheduling, Pakistan will have to fork out payments of up to USD 5 billion in 2001, while its available foreign-exchange reserves do not top USD 1 billion.

The high-profile drive against corruption is another performance yardstick to judge Musharraf by, and there was no more urgent expectation from the general when he took power than a crackdown on Pakistan's extremely corrupt. Here, too, the record is mixed. The much-dreaded and -maligned National Accountability Bureau—complete with its sinister English acronym NAB, and headed by a serving general—has pursued over a 100 cases, securing convictions in about half. Among those convicted of corruption, assorted irregularities and misuse of power are one former prime minister (Nawaz Sharif) and five former provincial chief ministers and former cabinet ministers. Those convicted include top leaders of almost all mainstream political parties including Bhutto's PPP, Nawaz Sharif's PML, Altaf Hussain's Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), Wali Khan's Awami National Party, Fazlur Rehman's JUI, and so on.

While convicting leaders from the whole range of political parties indicates that the accountability drive is impartial—howls of protests from the affected parties prove the point—the downside for Musharraf is that the once most unlikely of bedfellows seem to be inching towards a political alliance—Bhutto's PPP and Sharif's PML. The pitch against the military government is getting shriller by the passing day, but the newfound affection between the two rival parties does not seem to have caught the public's imagination. The irony of the situation seems to be lost on Bhutto and Sharif, but not on the people. Bhutto, who remains out of the reach of the law, dividing her time between Dubai and London, has been convicted of corruption, sentenced to five years in jail and banned from politics by a high court in a case filed by the Sharif government while he was still in power last year. Sharif, meanwhile, has been convicted of tax fraud, jailed for 14 years and banned from politics for 21 years by an accountability court set up by the military

government—but in a case originally filed by the Bhutto government in the mid-1990s.

While the generals in power no doubt take comfort from the discomfiture of the two erstwhile prime ministers, Musharraf's pursuit of the corrupt and the vain is seen to be mixed because he has so far failed to take on other power centres, such as the judiciary, the press barons, or, most importantly, men of his own ilk, i.e. the men in khaki. There are serious allegations, for example, of bribe-taking by generals and judges, which NAB has not pursued. Among other things, NAB has in its files at least ten suspect deals involving acquisition of weapons systems worth billions of dollars by the army, navy and air force. But it is keeping mum. Meanwhile, equipped as it is with awesome powers (such as being able to keep the accused in custody for three months without charge), the NAB has come under fire from human-rights organisations.

### Black and white

As may be expected, Musharraf's government does not get high marks from the politicians arrayed against him, nor from international human rights groups. Nor has he got passing grades from international media. Among others, the US-based Human Rights Watch recently produced a highly critical report to mark General Musharraf's anniversary, which concluded that in most respects human rights had deteriorated over the past year. It noted that "the administration has also greatly augmented executive powers, curtailed the independence of the judiciary, and neutralised political parties."

As for the mainstream politicians, Nawaz Sharif said from prison: "What have the people got one year after I was forcibly and unconstitutionally removed? How many of their problems have been solved? Because of the poor planning and miserable policies of the present government, the country is at the edge of a precipice." Benazir Bhutto chimed in from London: "The generals took over believing they could give the country stability and growth. This has yet to happen. The regime is lost in its quest for meaningless power and ...the common man will have to bear the burden of the follies of the regime."

The Mohajir leader, also in exile in London (for reasons somewhat different from Bhutto's), chairman of the MQM Altaf Hussain, had this to say: "We have always said that the army



Altaf Hussain:  
'Separatist'  
agenda.



generals are responsible for the dismemberment of Pakistan. They are also responsible for flourishing (sic) the culture of corruption. The involvement of army generals is no longer a secret." The head of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, blames the generals in government for "behaving like feudals" and indulging in land-grabbing while "people do not even have access to clean water drinking water".

The Pakistani intelligentsia, which was willing to give Musharraf the benefit of doubt when he staged the coup, has now begun to sour on him as he is not seen to be bold enough in tackling the country's myriad problems. As for the people, while most Pakistanis believe the Chief Executive is sincere in wanting to clean Pakistan's Aegean stables, "what is doubtful is the validity of his black-and-white recipes for the complex job at hand," as one of his own cabinet ministers said.

### Change at the top

Irrespective of whether Musharraf has been able to shore up the economy and introduce political reforms in the first year or not, the nation's attention is now focussed on what are the General's plans for the next two years. There are hints available in two recent changes in the government. Information Minister Javed Jabbar—a close friend of Musharraf's—resigned, though some say he was fired. And Lt Gen Aziz Khan has reportedly been tapped for the second-highest job in the Pakistani military, as Vice Chief of Army Staff, a new position directly under Musharraf.

What Jabbar's departure means is that Gen Musharraf has decided to look inwards to the country after the repeated failed bids for Western approval. The suave and smooth-talking Jabbar was seen as the Chief Executive's spin meister to the outside world, and he was seen to be sorely wanting when the Pakistani delegations trip to the Millennium Summit of the United Nations General Assembly in New York failed to rise up to expectations.

Jabbar's departure is perhaps more significant because he had raised a trial balloon when he publicly proclaimed that there was no harm in giving the military a permanent and constitutional role in governing the country (by perhaps making the National Security Council a constitutional super-ruling structure). Firing him indicated that the general is not keen just yet to field controversy on such an ultra-sensitive issue, especially at a time when the IMF is about to decide if Pakistan stays afloat or goes bankrupt. Both reasons for the Minister of Information's departure suggest that Musharraf is now

refocusing his efforts on internal stability.

The turn inwards may have to do with Gen Musharraf's reading that the requirements of political correctness will just not allow Western analysts, media and political leaders alike to be seen to be sympathetic to a military regime, regardless of the specificities of Pakistan's case. More likely, however, Musharraf is focussing now on internal matters because of the sudden possibility of instability. The bombings and shootings which have staged a comeback of late are proof enough.



A string of blasts in Lahore and Karachi, even in the hitherto-safe Islamabad, and a couple of explosions surprisingly targeted against military installations in Quetta, caught the regime unawares. Besides the fact that dozens were killed and hundreds injured by the blasts, the government's credibility with the public suffered since bomb blasts were supposed to be the affliction of political regimes and not of a military administration.

Also worrisome, from the general's point of view, is that the radical religious parties are raising the decibel level against the government. They want the 'ngo-ists', seen as embodiment of the godless West, removed from government and replaced by "god-fearing Muslims". The radical Islamic groups have emerged as Musharraf's most serious challenge and threat, among other things because the country's two largest national political parties, Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, have been amazingly disorganised and leaderless in the days since the military takeover.

This need to tackle the Islamists is probably what explains the entry of Lt Gen Aziz Khan—a military man but one known to be close to the hardline clergy, both inside and outside the Pakistani military. During a stint as Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence Direc-

*Bhutto emerging from Karachi jail with children after meeting husband.*



torate, Aziz was instrumental in working with the Taliban militia in Afghanistan. Before that, he commanded troops in Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir, which necessitated working with various militant factions. He is said to believe that Pakistan's soldiers must adhere to strict Islamic discipline and lifestyle. Musharraf and Khan served together in the elite commando Special Services Group (SSG) of the Pakistan Army. In 1998, the former picked Khan as Chief of General Staff, overlooking several other eligible officers. As may be expected, Khan was a key supporter of Musharraf during the October 1999 coup, and has since emerged as a member of Musharraf's core security team.

It is possible that the two personnel changes at the topmost level of government suggest an attempt by Gen. Musharraf to try to put off a confrontation with the fundamentalist groups as part of his survival strategy for his second year in power. Appointing Khan as second in command will not win friends in the West, but it will shore up the support of Islamists in the military, and serve as a link with conservative civilian leaders. Likewise, having Khan in a public position will undercut criticism that Musharraf isn't a devout Muslim—an accusation he has faced off an on. Musharraf's strategy, thus, seems to be to co-opt the Islamists for as long as possible, even as he pursues an opposite agenda. He is seeking some breathing space in his attempt to stabilise the country—and his rule.

### Using Benazir

As the military government enters its second year, the attention of the press and intelligentsia is gradually shifting to Musharraf's grassroots democracy plan, being delivered through the forthcoming local elections. The question is whether this plan will deliver a stable political system, with many political scientists convinced that stability cannot be achieved in this manner. They believe that the vacuum which has been created by the abrupt removal of Bhutto and Sharif—and consequently the PPP and PML—can only destabilise the polity in the long term.

It is to try and fill this political void that Musharraf has been working on a 'solution'. By formally disqualifying Sharif from holding public office on the one hand, and not formally pursuing any corruption case against Benazir on the other, Musharraf appears to be keeping the "Bhutto option" available in case of an emergency. One such emergency may even be at hand in the form of the raging controversy let loose by the MQM leader Altaf Hussain, leader of the Urdu-speaking migrants from the east who populate Karachi. From his self-exile



*Lt. Gen.  
Aziz Khan.*

in London, Hussain let loose what is heresy to many in Pakistan, by claiming that the very creation of the country was a "historical blunder".

The government is considering trying Hussain as well as some other politicians for making seditious statements and supposedly advocating Pakistan's break-up. While this reaction is indeed genuine, Altaf Hussain's outburst also allows Musharraf to use patriotism as a tool to keep his own critics at bay, maintaining that he is indeed engaged in the fight for Pakistan's integrity in which the interests of political parties become secondary. According to the Ministry of Interior, various actions, including trial for treason, are under consideration against Hussain and other unrestrained politicians. Ironically, Musharraf himself is by birth a Mohajir, whose cause Hussain claims to champion.

How exactly Bhutto may serve Musharraf's purpose is not certain, but officials say that because of her party's powerful base in Sindh province and in Karachi city, she can be used to counter MQM's destabilising agenda. "Bhutto's pro-federation politics are a natural weapon against something like MQM, with its emerging separatist posturing," said one senior Ministry of Interior official. "The Chief Executive has directed us to prepare a strategy to deal with serious situations where politicians such as Hussain openly speak against Pakistan and advocate geographical changes in its boundaries."

Whether things will reach a point where Musharraf will have to 'use' Benazir is something that will have to be seen, but it is clear that he is keeping the Bhutto card on hand. As for the question whether Bhutto would be amenable to be thus used, she probably would. Because she is so removed from power at present, Bhutto most likely could be made an offer she

would not refuse. (As for Nawaz Sharif, his utility at this stage is limited because his strength is in Punjab, and the army with its Punjabi base is reasonably secure there.)

**Mixed performance**

After taking power, the goals Gen Musharraf set for himself included attacking endemic corruption by conducting accountability proceedings against politicians, bureaucrats and others; creating conditions for fundamental economic reform; and preparing the country for a return to electoral democracy. No one believed that it would be easy. The people welcomed the crackdown on the corrupt and the tax-evaders. They still support Musharraf's agenda on this, but are now impatient for the guilty to be brought to book. Unfortunately for the general, the cases are enormously complicated and going by the book, they will take years to untangle. In the end, even as the anti-corruption drive proceeds, sometimes with a heavy hand, the true test of success will be if the campaign deters corruption in the future. It is not yet clear

the cotton and rice crops. As Musharraf himself admits, only sound economic policies, sustained over time, will turn the situation around.

It is in the governance arena that the general has a chance to introduce genuine reform which could turn Pakistani politics on its head, and generate a political momentum that would be hard for the political parties to reverse in later years. Less than two months remain for the local elections called by the government, and clearly Musharraf's aim is to use this grassroots approach, devolving power to local units, to break the back of the anti-democratic feudal structures and mindsets that have plagued Pakistani democracy since Independence in 1947.

But again, stamping out feudalism is easier said than done. Historically speaking, a strange paradox has characterised Pakistani politics: most elected prime ministers have been feudals as have been a majority of parliamentarians. Until landholdings are standardised, it is difficult to imagine even an increasingly urbanised Pakistan freeing itself from the as-yet iron grip of the 'feudals'. But land reform is a tough measure, and it is not sure that the general has a strong enough hand to push this through.

To give him credit, Gen Musharraf is seen to be trying to understand Pakistan's daunting problems and carry out the reforms that are necessary, but what is inescapable is that sustained reform and development require a political mandate. As one human rights activist says: "Military government is no longer, anywhere, an acceptable alternative to civilian rule. The Pakistan Army must realise that its old tricks will not work any longer. The army would do itself and Pakistan a great favour by returning to the barracks. Otherwise, all we may have left in Pakistan will be the army."

Certainly, democracy cannot develop if it is constantly uprooted before it has a chance to firmly take hold. This is what has continuously happened in Pakistan. Successful democratic government takes time and patience. General Musharraf, either as a result of planned action or otherwise, has put himself in the difficult position of trying to be a benevolent autocrat. He wants to use the military's stick, softly, to prod the country towards more manageability. Maybe the Ataturk model will work, maybe it won't.

The human rights activists will say, "The answer to flawed democracy is not to end democracy, but to improve it." If you asked Musharraf himself, he would probably reply, "But I am trying to improve it."

**“The army would do itself and Pakistan a great favour by returning to the barracks. Otherwise, all we may have left in Pakistan will be the army.”**

whether the government's drive will have this longer-term effect.

As for revamping the economy, the country continues to be dragged down by huge spending on public-sector wages, debt servicing, and defence expenditures. Reviving the economy will require shifting priorities in order to increase investment in the social sector, especially on education and health. Pakistan needs to generate and finance enough broad-based growth to make a dent in the country's poverty and begin to pay its debt. This is a tall order and the remaining two years sanctioned to Musharraf are not enough to tackle the problem, merely to try and understand it.

Meanwhile, foreign investors continue to avoid Pakistan, unsure of how safe their investments will be. The government's efforts at providing stability and credibility, while laudable in the context of Pakistani reality, has not been able to provide the comfort levels required by overseas investors. It seems unlikely that the Chief Executive can garner public support by pointing to a significant economic upturn, although the general was lucky this year with



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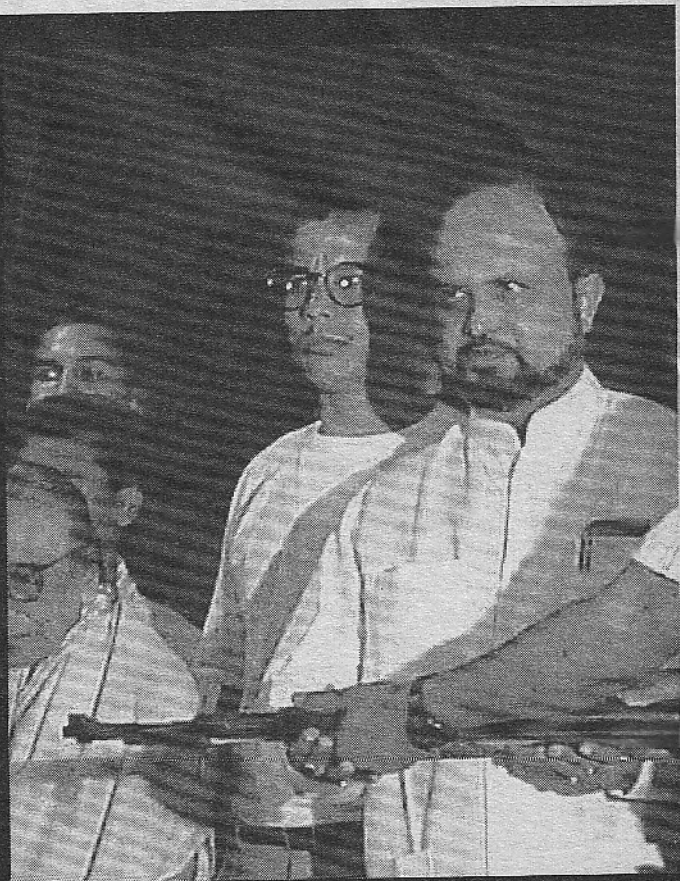
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BHOJAN GRIHA

A review of the state of the various Northeast rebellions by a noted journalist of the region reveals that the quiet on the Naga and Mizo fronts is accompanied by a suddenly sputtering Tripura, and an ULFA that seems to be receiving support from Beijing.

by *Subir Bhaumik*



# Northeast Rebel Ro

When Luit Deuri surrendered with 300 rebels on 13 August, little did anyone realise his disclosures would unsettle basic perceptions. The former "G2" of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) made three major revelations, first in an interview to this writer (that was broadcast on the BBC) and then to the Assam police. Deuri said that ULFA was receiving weapons from China on a regular basis; that many of these consignments were now coming into ULFA's bases in Bhutan from Tibet over the Himalayan passes; and that, in the past, ULFA

had picked up weapons consignments from Chittagong port in Bangladesh, where they had been landed by the Chinese, concealed in cargo vessels. Deuri's diaries are lost, but he remembers two dates when he took delivery of the weapons.

- Deuri says he first went to China in 1989 with Paresh Barua, chief of ULFA's military wing. That was when some Chinese military officials assured them of arms supply through Burma. That was the beginning of the ULFA-China nexus.
- Deuri says he personally took

delivery of one consignment of 143 rifles and 235 revolvers from China in one of four camps in Bhutan on 11 April 1999.

- On 5 February 1995, he had led a group into Chittagong to take delivery of a much larger consignment brought, he said, by the Chinese navy.

Indian intelligence officials have "fallen from the sky" over these disclosures, said one source. Meanwhile, Amiyo Samanta, a former Intelligence Bureau official who served long in north-eastern India, had this to say: "We knew for sure the Chinese armed and trained Naga, Mizo

Luit Deuri surrendering arms to Assam Chief Minister Praful Kumar Mahanta (left), and arms that he and his associates brought with them.

# undup

and Manipuri rebels in the 1960s and 1970s, but not after that. Deuri's disclosures, if true, will unsettle our perceptions and revive fears of a China hand behind the insurgencies of North-east India."

Many of Samanta's serving colleagues agree. Said one senior intelligence officer, "We have taken Deuri's statements with a pinch of salt, but if they turn out to be correct, we will have to formulate our strategies afresh." In that case, he says, India will not only have to raise its level of worry on China, it will also have to "closely monitor" Bhutan, an ally it has wholly

trusted before now.

His point is echoed by a member of the Indian Foreign Service (most officials interviewed for this article spoke only on condition of anonymity), who says, "If Bhutan can be used by China to ferry weapons to the ULFA, we will have to take a close hard look at what is going on there behind our backs. Reports of anti-Indian lobbies in Bhutan hobnobbing with China will no longer be dismissed as fiction." Indian suspicion on this regard was rightly or wrongly aroused after the People's Republic asked for opening an embassy in Thimphu, after first assur-

ing Bhutan of "totally accepting its position on the boundary question".

Unlike the China connection, Deuri's disclosures about Bangladesh and Pakistan were not entirely unexpected. About Pakistan, he reported to Indian interrogators that Islamabad had provided ULFA with almost 200 kilograms of RDX and C4 explosives. Meanwhile, he said, Bangladesh's office of the Director General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) continued to shelter senior ULFA leaders. Citing one example of the DGFI's favours, Deuri said that in July 1997, the Special Branch of the Bangladesh police was all set to ar-

rest ULFA Chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa on his return to Dhaka from a human rights conference in Geneva. "The DGFI warned Rajkhowa of the Special Branch plans and escorted him to safety once he arrived at Dhaka airport," said Deuri.

Deuri told Indian officials that a little-known group called Mukti jhujharu (Soldiers of Freedom) now maintains liaison between the DGFI and the ULFA, who are also believed to be close to some BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) leaders. Indian officials say what worries them most with regard to ULFA's backup in Bangladesh is Sheikh Hasina's inability to secure complete control over the country's military-security establishment. Indian intelligence agencies say their agents are in Bhutan, Bangladesh and Thailand trying to verify Luit Deuri's claims.

## Different kettle

Suddenly, those who have supported Defence Minister George Fernandes for describing China as "India's enemy number one" are feeling vindicated vis-a-vis those who believe Sino-Indian friendship remains on a firm footing. For some Indian security officials in the frontlines, the concern about the red dragon is palpable. Says one such official, G.M.Srivastava, Additional Director General (Operations) of Assam Police, "We knew the Chinese would play games behind our backs. We have been outflanked by their penetration in Pakistan and Burma and we will have trouble in the Northeast if they start supporting the rebels."

Says another official, with good understanding of the South Asian psyche, "At the end of the day, the Pakistanis are quite like us, as inefficient and corrupt. But the Chinese are a different kettle of fish altogether."

According to one school of thought, India must do all it can to decimate the rebel groups in the Northeast, politically and militarily, not least by exploiting tribal factionalism—for the Chinese

Communist state has a history of backing only winners. This point is supported by Li Feiyu, a professor at the College of Diplomacy in Beijing. She cites the example of how the Chinese "did everything" to prop up the Burmese Communist Party (BCP) for two decades, providing weapons, training and sanctuary. But then the tap closed abruptly in the late 1980s, when Beijing realised that the BCP could only "just hold some territory but not capture state power". That was when, in an astounding volte face, the global headquarters of proletarian revolution started cultivating a military regime in Rangoon.

However, it is not difficult to see why the Chinese would not at least want to "try out" ULFA. After the splits within the Naga and Mizo rebel groups and largescale surrenders to Indian authorities, the Chinese strategists lost faith in the tribal guerrilla armies of the Northeast. Having always valued political manoeuvrability more than military prowess, the Chinese saw the rebels as "politically inept and ideologically confused", said an intelligence officer. The ULFA is the only separatist rebel group in the Northeast which provided an "alternative post-Indian vision" for Assam and perhaps the rest of the region.

The difference was that ULFA not only focussed its guns exclusively on the Indian state, but also came up with an all-encompassing ideology that sought to harmonise the interests of the sons of the soil with those of settlers. It publicly declared that it was fighting for "all dwellers of Assam (*Asombashi*)" rather than just for the *Asamiyas* (ethnic Assamese) (see *Himal cover, August 2000*). ULFA therefore has remained a potent force, with political capacity undiminished despite the military battering it has taken and large-scale desertion from its ranks.

ULFA has managed to reconcile its differences with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB)—the strongest Bodo rebel group. The relationship had become

tense when the NDFB started receiving support from the Naga rebel group NSCN (Issac-Muivah), which led an angry ULFA leadership to forge links with Muivah's bete noire, the Burmese Naga rebel leader S.S Khaplang. It was to ensure "total revolutionary unity" in Assam and the rest of the Northeast in the face of relentless military operations by the Indian state, that the ULFA leadership moved to sort out its problems with NDFB. Before Indian Independence Day this year, the ULFA and the NDFB chairmen issued a joint call for boycotting the celebrations.

At present, the source of funds for both the ULFA and the NDFB have dried up, the Assam government having come down hard on the tea companies and the businesses for the payoffs they used to make. With the NSCN(I-M) now in the fourth year of rather tardy negotiations with New Delhi, the Indian troops have been able to concentrate on the Assam counter-insurgency theatre. Says an intelligence officer, "Delhi has managed to keep the peace with the NSCN, militarily the strongest rebels in the Northeast. That's by design, because the security forces can then totally concentrate on the Assam insurgency."

Forced to the wall by the Indian security forces, ULFA and NDFB both switched to employing urban terrorist tactics, shedding their original Maoist guerrilla style. They also began development works, such as building dykes in flood-prone areas, and roads in remote villages. This may have given the two groups some publicity mileage, but the fact is that their basic plank does not attract mass support in a state where secessionism has never really found ready acceptance.

## Into Tripura

Over to the east, military strategists used to treat Tripura as a low-intensity counter-insurgency theatre. That was until the emergence last year of the Bengali rebel group, the United Bengal Liberation Front (UBLF). The authorities would



routinely overlook the killing or abduction of scores of Bengalis by tribal guerrilla groups like the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) or the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF). It was only after the UBLF started launching counter-attacks against the tribals that New Delhi woke up to the threat of a Tripuran ethnic holocaust. Here, too, the Bangladesh factor is important.

Dhaka's security forces recently launched large-scale operations against the Tripura rebel bases in its territory, particularly in the remote Sajek ranges of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. More than 30 NLFT rebels were killed, many arrested and the rest forced to flee. The NLFT is also involved in a running battle with the Reang tribal guerilla group, the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF). The BNLF resents the imposition of Christianity on the predominantly animist Hindu Reangs—and it is upset with the NLFT's opposition to its demand for a separate Reang homeland in Mizoram. In June, the NLFT attacked the BNLF guerrillas after having invited them to an NLFT base inside Bangladesh for reconciliation talks. Sixty-nine BNLF rebels were killed, along with some NLFT guerrillas. The BNLF chief Suryamoni Reang was kidnapped and is believed to have died in NLFT custody. The BNLF hit back, killing 12 NLFT rebels at Saikarbari inside Tripura.

This eruption of tribal warfare, on the pattern of the Naga-Kuki feud that led to hundreds of deaths in the early 1990s, has further confused the situation in Tripura. The Reang groups have even said they will collaborate with the Bengali militants to fight the predominantly Tripuri and largely Christian NLFT. Add to that the relentless NLFT attacks against the ATTF, both inside Bangladesh and in Tripura, and one knows that the NLFT has far too much on its plate than what it can comfortably chew.

#### **Military overtures**

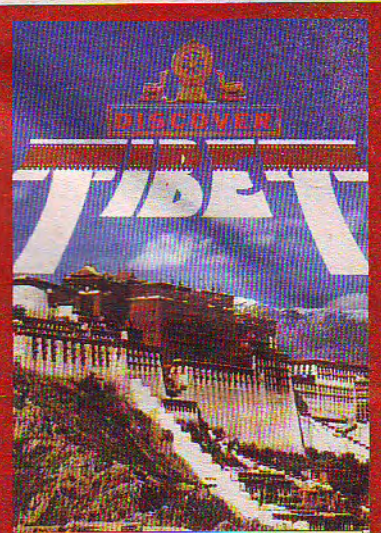
Pressed with the worsening situation in Kashmir, the Indian state has been adopting a new strategy to fight

separatist or violent autonomy movements in the northeast of the country. The earlier strategy of splitting tribal groups or rebel armies and pitting one against another has been supplemented by a coordinated effort to develop military relationships with neighbours like Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The Indian Army Chief, General Ved Prakash Malik, has visited Burma twice this year to work out a military understanding with the Burmese military junta. These visits were followed by Burmese military operations inside Burma against the ULFA and the NSCN (Khaplang faction) inside Burma, as well as Indian pushback operations targeting the Chin and the Rakhine refugees, from which the outlawed Chin National Front or the National Unity Party of Arakans have drawn recruits.

India's determination not to allow the Lhotsampa refugees from Bhutan to use its territory for marching into Bhutan has been reciprocated by a resolution in the Bhutanese Tshongdu (National Assembly) authorising Thimphu's army to start military operations against the ULFA and the NDFB bases within the Bhutanese jungles. While for the moment, the Bhutanese are trying to use diplomacy to get the rebels to leave, it may not be very long before Thimphu pulls the trigger.

General Malik's visit to Bhutan and Bangladesh in mid-2000 were followed by Bhutanese sabre rattling against ULFA/NDFB, and Bangladeshi operations against the Tripura rebels. Thus, New Delhi's efforts over the past year to start building a network of military relationship with neighbours around the Northeast seem to be yielding fruit. Except, of course, for the new calculations which have to be suddenly done after Luit Deuri made his stunning revelations of Chinese support for ULFA. For no amount of discussions and joint negotiations can be fully effective if the biggest and most threatening neighbour of all is allowed to continue to do mischief—and that is the People's Republic. Δ



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# Feel-

Fresh from his Western junket, journalist **Sujoy Dhar** gets an assignment to flood-ravaged Birbhum. He went there counting his allowance, and came back guilty.



The hangover remained. The memories of New York's Times Square and London's Leicester Square, were heady — the bright lights, the funky joints, the ritzy crowds, the music. So even as the native returned to the squalor and pollution of Calcutta, the month-long experience abroad kept me in high spirits. Writing all those feel-good stories of travel, about successful *desis*, and the NRI fashion designer in a New York ramp show.

But reality had to strike. When the chief reporter asked me to visit the flood-ravaged Birbhum district in West Bengal for an aftermath coverage, I took it up as just another assignment, and especially counted on the travelling allowance. Little did I know that I would be returning with a permanently guilty conscience.

I needed to see the helplessness of Sajahan and Nema Mondol from two villages of Birbhum, to realise where I belonged and where I did not. The ravages of the floods which visit rural folk is the reality of the larger portion of Indians — not the fashion ramps and luxury cars of the topmost demographic bubble.

In the flood-wrought Bhujung village of contaminated ponds,

razed mud houses, murky cess-pools and bloated carcasses, Sajahan greeted me on 1 October. The water had receded long ago. But for the past 10 days, he, like thousands of others, has been waiting for a tarpaulin sheet for shelter. A figure of stoic endurance, he was standing near the rubble of his house beneath which his mother and his son were found embraced in death. The flood had also consumed his wife, along with three members of neighbour Aiyazul Islam, in whose house she had taken shelter. Sajahan and his daughter had survived because he had gone to town for work, and the girl had found a branch to hold on to for three days.

Bhujung's pond water was no longer fit for basic uses. Dogs were fighting over rotten flesh of dead cows floating on the ponds. The stench was overpowering. "We have disposed of about 500 carcasses while many more are still floating in the ponds," said a panchayat member.

"Water is everywhere, but not for drinking," said Sajahan, who had gone without food or drink for nearly four days after 19 September when the waters of Brahmani river had

risen with unprecedented fury. His crops were gone, as well as his stored grains. He was surviving on the dole of *chira* (flattened rice) provided to the village. Sajahan's son and mother were buried under the shade of a tree, while his wife's body was not found.

Bhujung is under Nalhati, a block of Rampurhat sub-division. It is one of the worst hit villages, with only 10 percent of the houses having survived the flood. The village lost 36 lives. About 3500 cows, an equal number of chicken, nearly 6000 goats and sheep, and 9000 ducks also perished.

Villagers said that whatever relief they got was from organisations like Bharat Sevasram and clubs from other villages. "If the government provides us food, we can live. Otherwise it is starvation as the crop has been destroyed and all our belongings washed away," said Sajahan.

The panchayat building in Bhujung had become a relief camp. The villagers were only going back to their colonies during daytime to rummage through the debris hoping to find some valuables, or else for work. All returned to the camp

# bad story

The Narayanpur wasteland.

SUJOY DHAR



Bucolic Birbhum in Ramkinkar landscape.

by sundown. The panchayat members, irrespective of party affiliation, seemed helpless in bringing relief. Bhujung was still cut off, with large stretches of road washed away. It looked a 'model' village of devastation, despair and distress.

Over by what remained of the main road, the soil was still loose on the grave of Sajahan's mother and son. Maybe they were lucky after all, looking at the son and father's living despair. Sajahan's face showed no emotions. He only pointed me to the site. I slipped a 100-rupee note in his hand. A 100-rupee note for a man who had lost all bearings in life. He took it silently, but I dared not look him in his eyes.

Next day, I was in Narayanpur village, in another part of Birbhum, under Ilambazar block. There I saw vestiges of two lost human habitations. One was a centuries' old potential archaeological hotspot that

emerged due to force of the erosion caused by the flood waters. People from faraway, including archaeologists, were pouring into Narayanpur to see the site. The other was of a village which had pulsated with life till the night of 20 September.

I met a bare-torsoed Nemai Mondal standing over a 'sand dune' which used to be his cropland. "I now wait for the dole to feed myself, my wife and infant. I lost over three *bighas* of land, and a trunk with my life's savings," said Nemai. His village had been wiped out by the gushing waters of the river Ajay.

The villages of Birbhum, immortalised by the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and the eloquent strokes of painter Baij Ramkinkar, now resemble a barren stretch of sandy desert. "We can now never cultivate anything here," said Nemai standing under the blazing sun at a place where his mud house had stood. "I don't even have

an utensil left to serve food to my baby," said Nemai whose wife had taken shelter on a tree-top with their baby on that fateful night as water swelled. He, meanwhile, had fought futilely to save his trunk.

Fellow farmer Dulal, who lost his father and sister in an earlier year's flood, said, "Our village used to have the best yield in the entire block." For both Nemai and Dulal, the future is the worry. With no land left to cultivate, starvation stares them in their face. Relief was not adequate. Other than the efforts made by local clubs and the Ramkrishna Mission, no one was helping.

I took another look at Nemai. A man in his early 30s, moving about without a shirt because he had none. I squeezed a 100-rupee note into his hand for taking me around, for telling me about his plight, and perhaps for providing me with good copy. What lessened my guilt was that I too belonged to a West Bengal that has lost all its renaissance humanitarian sheen, led by a communist chief minister for 24 years, whose government never thought of setting up a reliable disaster management system despite floods taking their annual toll. What is left of Bengal today are mere intellectual pretensions; a celebrated just-retired chief minister who loves his holidays in London; and an opposition leader who amazes one by her loud-mouthed political immaturity.

I did get a copy that my editor liked. But I will no longer be the same. ▽

# Come and Join the Abolition Campaign!

National Convention for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace, New Delhi, November 11 to 13, 2000

The May 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan not only escalated their strategic rivalry to a new and dangerous level. They also triggered off a peace movement in the sub-continent.

Thousands of citizens and civil society organisations, morally outraged and horrified at the nuclear arms race, have since mobilised themselves against nuclear weapons. There have been protest marches, public meetings, conferences and *dharnas* in 50 cities in India. These groups encompass people's movements, trade unionists, artistes, feminists, and human rights and environmental activists, and many others. They demand global nuclear disarmament and a nuclear freeze in India.

They are getting together for the first time in a National Convention for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace to be held in New Delhi on November 11 to 13, 2000. This will provide a forum to discuss a range of issues, exchange experiences and plan future strategies.

The Convention aims to create a broad-based network or coalition of all citizens' groups opposed to nuclear weapons. About 500 delegates are expected to participate in it from different parts of India. There will also be a strong contingent from the rest of South Asia and representatives of international peace organisations.

We appeal to you to participate in the Convention and to give it generous moral, practical and financial support.

## Signed by:

Nirmala Deshpande, Medha Patkar, Ambrose Pinto, N Ram, L Ramdas, Arundhati Roy  
Vivan Sundaram, Romila Thapar  
Praful Bidwai, Kamal Mitra Chenoy, Prabir Purkayastha, Achin Vanaik

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Bandaranaike (1916-2000)

# Mrs. B's final farewell

The hand that stoked the kitchen fire, went on to rock a nation.

by John Rettie

What does she know of politics?" scornfully asked a cousin of the assassinated prime minister of Ceylon, Solomon ("Solla") Bandaranaike, when his widow Sirima announced that she was taking over his party's leadership in 1960.

"In Solla's time Sirima presided over nothing fiercer than the kitchen fire," continued Paul Pieris Deriyanagala, who was best man at the Bandaranaike's wedding. "She'll end by spoiling her personal reputation and ruining the family name."

Few forecasts have proved so mistaken. Thanks to Sirima Bandaranaike, who died of a heart attack aged 84 on 10 October, even more than to her husband, the name of Bandaranaike became a legend. She not only became the world's first woman prime minister, but went on to head the government three times. She altered the face of Ceylon, in many ways controversially, made it a republic and changed its name to Sri Lanka. More than that, Bandaranaike became one of the third world's best-known leaders, rubbing shoulders with Indira Gandhi, Chou en Lai, Marshal Tito and others in the heyday of the Non-Aligned Movement. A cauldron far, indeed, from the kitchen fire and, at home at least, much fiercer.

Yasmine Gooneratne, another cousin within the vast Bandaranaike clan who recounted "Uncle Paulie's" scathing comments in her memoirs of the family, *Relative Merits*, describes "Aunt Sirima" as "the most formidable and charismatic leader the country has ever seen". And in the words of Maureen Seneviratne, her biographer: "If Mr Bandaranaike's stature as a politician and leader was built up over decades of campaigning, Sirimavo (the suffix "-vo" denotes respect) donned hers like a cloak that had been lying in her wardrobe for years, unworn, but which had been pressed and kept ready for wearing at any given moment."

Sirima Bandaranaike was the daughter of a prominent Sinhalese family in the Kandyan hill country—a perfect match for the wealthy low-country Bandaranaike with his driving political ambition. Like many similar families, the Bandaranaikes



were thoroughly anglicised and held prominent positions in the colonial regime. But although many leading Kandyan families also served the government and adopted English first names, most remained staunchly Buddhist and preserved Sinhalese traditions. Sirima's was just such a family. Her father, Barnes Ratwatte (named, like her husband-to-be, after a British governor-general), was seen as an excellent match for her mother, daughter of a wealthy and powerful Kandyan chief headman.

Wanting the best education—which had to be English—for Sirima, the eldest of six children, her parents sent her at the age of eight to a convent boarding school in Colombo. But they ensured that she remained a devout Buddhist, and spoke Sinhala as fluently as English. After leaving school she threw herself into social welfare work, walking miles through jungles and over mountains to distribute food and medicines, organise clinics and develop village industries. She became a great favourite of the Sinhalese peasantry, acquiring a reputation that proved invaluable to both her husband and herself.

Her marriage in 1940 to Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, then a brilliant young Oxford-educated colonial government minister, was dubbed "the marriage of the century". Both were from the top Goyigama caste of landowners, and their horoscopes were "found to match perfectly". And if he did not know the rural Sinhalese as she did, Bandaranaike instinctively sensed their needs and aspirations. But neither knew anything about the Tamil minority, their language, their culture or their needs and aspirations. This often led them to ignore the Tamils or make fatal blunders.

At first, Sirima's public role was merely that of a dutiful wife. Her eldest child, Sunethra, was born in 1943, followed by Chandrika and finally a boy,

Anura. But in 1948, as the island edged towards independence, the shy, methodical wife and mother found her home invaded at all hours by her mercurial husband's friends discussing politics and demanding refreshment. Throughout their married life, according to James Manor in his biography of Bandaranaike,

*The Expedient Utopian*, "her main difficulty was her husband's male chauvinism". He cites a possibly apocryphal, but indicative, story about a delay in tea being served at one such gathering in their Colombo house, to the host's irritation. When it appeared at last and she retired to the kitchen, he shouted: "Sirima!"

A shy figure appeared at the door again. 'These gentlemen,' he explained, 'drink tea with sugar. For the sugar to get into the cup, there must be some instrument. You have not put a spoon in the sugar bowl.' "And the dutiful wife went to fetch a spoon, and Mr Bandaranaike quipped: 'We have to think for them too'." She made no complaint. No wonder the men failed to foresee what a forceful leader she would be—"perhaps too forceful", Manor adds dryly.

But she soon became Bandaranaike's valued confidante in private. It was she who persuaded him to resign from the government and the ruling United National Party (UNP) in 1951. She had long been aware of his exasperation at the social and political immobility since independence. Two months later, he formed the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) with democratic socialism and Sinhalese resurgence at its heart, setting the stage for party political battle lines for the rest of the century. General elections the

following year brought her first baptism of political fire, as she campaigned on her husband's behalf in his constituency, while he carried his new party's message to the rest of the country. Her reward was the biggest majority for him of any candidate, though the SLFP won only nine seats.

But at the next elections in 1956, Bandaranaike's SLFP won by a landslide and formed a left-wing coalition. The key factor in his victory was the promise to replace English by Sinhala as the island's sole official language—the "Sinhala only" policy, a watershed in its history. This was aimed against the dominance of the English-speaking elite, but in fact sowed the seeds of bitter conflicts with the Tamils. Bandaranaike used Sinhalese chauvinism to gain power, but found he could not control it. And though the influential Buddhist monk who planned his murder in 1959 was motivated primarily by personal grievances, this chauvinism played a part in it.

For Sirima, his death was a traumatic tragedy. She was in the garden of their house, always open to visitors, when she heard a commotion and rushed indoors to find her husband collapsing, gravely wounded, with a Buddhist monk pointing a gun at him. She courageously flung herself at the gunman, who was then felled by police fire, but Bandaranaike died in hospital the next day. Sirima was given little time to grieve in peace. The following year she succumbed to the SLFP's desperate pleas to assume the party leadership, and led it to victory on a wave of sympathy. The world's first woman prime minister took office in triumph.

In the next four years, Sirima forged ahead with the socialist reform programme her husband had initiated—and indeed went further. The island was thrust full-tilt into the emerging Non-Aligned Movement; foreign oil companies and the Bank of Ceylon were nationalised, bringing an end to US aid; Soviet aid was sought for industrialisation projects; and education was reformed in favour of the Buddhist Sinhalese. But she paid a high price. Some SLFP MPs crossed the floor and the government collapsed at the end of 1964. She lost the next year's elections, but was herself elected to parliament for the first time.

Five years on came sweet revenge. In 1970, the United Left Front led by the SLFP won a two-thirds majority in Parliament and the socialist bandwagon set off again at full speed. But not fast enough for the militant and disaffected youths of the extreme left-wing People's Liberation Front, the JVP. Having benefited from her education reforms, they found there were still no jobs for them, so in 1971 they launched an insurrection—which she swiftly crushed, though at the cost of an estimated 1,000 young lives. More than 10,000 were jailed, but most were later released, many after facing trial. Deeply shaken, the govern-

## The Bandaranaiques knew nothing about the Tamil minority, their language, their culture or their needs and aspirations.

ment pressed on hurriedly with land reform, the nationalisation of the tea estates and a new republican constitution, which changed Ceylon's name to Sri Lanka and made Buddhism the state religion—to the dismay of the mainly Hindu Tamils.

Bandaranaike also imposed rigid state control over the economy, which had the now familiar consequences. Under the impact of soaring oil prices, living standards collapsed in a welter of rationing, bureaucracy and corruption. As a result, her SLFP was routed in the 1977 elections, winning a derisory eight seats. The UNP, led by J R Jayawardene, secured a 75 percent majority, which he used ruthlessly to tighten the authoritarian regime Sirimao had imposed in her second term. He revised the 1972 Constitution and had himself elected executive president, setting up an oppressive state with mere trappings of democracy. Vindictively, in 1980 he had Sirima's civic rights suspended for seven years for abuse of power—of which he himself soon became much more guilty.

With Bandaranaike unable to play any public role, the SLFP was riven by discord. In the difficult years ahead, her main task was to hold the party together and, with very few cards to play, to counter Jayawardene's devious but masterly manoeuvres. Succession to the party leadership became a bone of contention between her son Anura, who was moving to the right, and her daughter Chandrika, who eventually broke away and, with her popular film star husband Vijaya Kumaratunga, formed their own left-wing party (one of whose main aims was to seek a rapprochement with the Tamils). But with her civic rights restored in 1985, Bandaranaike recovered her place as unchallenged leader and the SLFP's fortunes rose again. After Kumaratunga's assassination in 1988, Chandrika eventually rejoined the SLFP and, proving herself a consummate politician, secured the party leadership in 1994 at the expense of Anura, who had angrily crossed over to the UNP. But, said Bandaranaike consolingly, "He's my son and I love him."

These were years of mounting violence, more often than not initiated by the government or the ruling UNP. After the nation-wide pogrom against Tamils in 1983, they took to armed resistance with such effect that in 1987, India sent in troops to impose a peace settlement. It failed but Bandaranaike, once India's greatest ally on the island, hotly opposed the intervention in the name of the Sinhalese nationalism she had long since embraced. Without influence either in Delhi or among the Tamils, she was powerless to sway events. Nor could she prevent rising violence in the south. In 1989 the JVP, now more chauvinist than Marxist, was crushed by the UNP government with vastly greater brutality

than in 1971. Estimates of young people killed vary between 30,000 and 70,000; no prisoners were taken and no trials held—in sharp contrast to Bandaranaike's treatment of the JVP.

Her last bid for power was in the presidential elections of 1988 and the parliamentary polls of 1989. With the cards stacked so heavily against her by Jayawardene and his successor, Ranasinghe Premadasa, she could hardly win—though despite all the violence and electoral manipulation he used, Premadasa secured only 50.1 percent of the votes. However, the UNP lost its two-thirds majority in Parliament, its chief weapon in manipulating the Constitution. What finally broke the government was Premadasa's assassination in 1993. But reluctant though she was to hand over the reins, age was telling on Bandaranaike. Impressed by Chandrika's brilliant campaigning, she stepped down just before the parliamentary elections in August 1994. It may have been part of the deal that when Chandrika also won the presidential elections three months later, she appointed her mother prime minister—a symbolic act intended to extirpate Jayawardene's injustice over her civic rights. But power remained in her daughter's hands.

With a far more cosmopolitan outlook than her mother, and influenced by her late husband's ideals, Chandrika made a genuine effort to come to terms with the Tamils. But her father's miscalculations, her mother's ignorance and neglect of the Tamils, and what can only be described as Jayawardene's cynical viciousness towards them, created a legacy of Sinhalese intransigence and Tamil fanaticism which may have made the task impossible.

The Bandaranaiques, husband and widow, unquestionably broke the stifling colonial ethos of the English-speaking elite, and restored dignity and a rightful place to the Sinhalese. But it was done largely by exploiting their chauvinism and at the expense of the Tamils, not least because Bandaranaike, like most Sinhalese, had little concept of the island as a multi-ethnic whole. If a country may be judged by how it treats its minorities, the failure to treat them properly in Sri Lanka has carried a fearsome price, which even yet has not been fully paid.

**The Bandaranaiques, husband and widow, unquestionably broke the stifling colonial ethos of the English-speaking elite, and restored dignity and a rightful place to the Sinhalese.**



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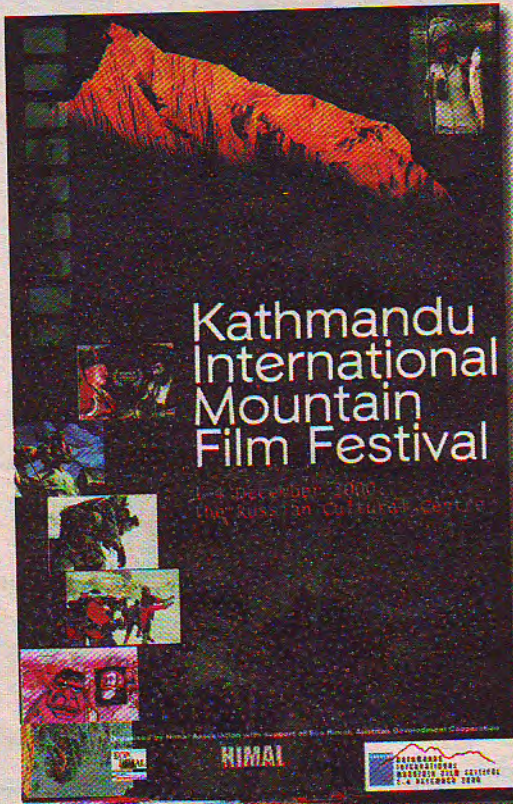


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#### For More Information, Contact:

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# Opening old wounds

Sri Lanka's side of the story on the turbulent relations between India and Sri Lanka, is now told in John Gooneratne's *A Decade of Confrontation—Sri Lanka and India in the 1980s*. Although half a decade too late, it is the most compelling and authoritative account of the confrontation to come out of Colombo. The book traces the rise of Tamil militancy, Sri Lanka's failure to contain it, India's propensity to fish in troubled waters which culminated in the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord (ISLA), the intervention by IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force), and the inevitable but tragic collapse of the accord.

Gooneratne's book was released around the time Sri Lankans and Sri Lanka was facing one of the worst politico-military crisis in the Jaffna peninsula in May 2000, nearly 10 years after forcing the IPKF to an ignominious retreat from the island. The crowning irony was that the very Buddhist clergy which had demanded the expulsion of the IPKF, was pleading now for its return.

In his book, Gooneratne has carefully opened old wounds and rubbed salt on some of them. His chronicling of facts and events, is fairly accurate though some of his analysis and interpretation may not be palatable to some Indians. That is also why the book is welcome—as it gives the view from the other side of the hill, or strait.

The chapter on the genesis and growth of militancy records that while Tamil demands upto 1972 were "rights-oriented", later, the focus shifted from autonomy to separatism. It was the Vaddukoddai resolution of 14 May 1976 that first called for Eelam. Gooneratne also points to another significant historic fact—that of TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) securing the second highest number of seats (even more than SLFP—the Bandaranaiques' Sri Lanka Freedom Party) in the 1977 general elections, and Amirthalingam becoming the

leader of the opposition in a Parliament swamped by the UNP (United Nationalist Party). The failure to secure political redressal forced the TULF to include in its manifesto the Tamil people's determination to liberate themselves from Sinhalese domination, and to establish Eelam by peaceful means or otherwise.

Some advocates of Eelam at the time had hoped that as in the case of Bangladesh's 1971, India would help in the liberation struggle. The ethnic conflict, says the author, came to India's doorstep after the



## **A Decade of Confrontation: Sri Lanka and India in the 1980s**

by John Gooneratne  
Stamford Lake Publication  
Sri Lanka, 2000  
239p.  
SLR 540

reviewed by **Ashok K. Mehta**

July 1983 riots. It triggered the chain of events that led to the intervention by India. India's vision of the Monroe Doctrine, is skillfully described. The 1980s was a time when new Delhi was indulging in the flexing of its military muscles so as to be acknowledged as a regional power. Therefore the answer to the question posed by the author, whether it was "opportunity" or "willingness" on the part of India that forced it into Sri Lanka, is, "both".

President Jayewardene sought military assistance from many countries. "We are prepared to even align ourselves with the devil to fight terrorism," he had said. The US and the UK favoured an Indian role in Sri Lanka, tacitly certifying India as the regional power. The US also set up an Israeli interest section at its embassy in Colombo, which, along with the British Keany Meany services, helped train the Sri Lankan military in counter-terrorism. The other countries that helped

Jayawardene militarily were China and Pakistan.

Events have now taken a U-turn. In the 1980s, India was all too keen to intervene, and did. What made it do so was to safeguard its national security interests relating to the VOA radio relay facility north of Colombo, to protect its oil tank farms in Trincomalee, and naval base and harbour, as also to facilitate in the transfer of autonomy to the Tamils. Exactly a decade later, in May 2000, New Delhi refused, point blank to provide military assistance to Sri Lanka. Instead, it arranged for Israel, among other countries, to do so.

The Indian Tamils' support for militancy in the island has diluted considerably, especially after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE, which is a banned organisation in India. The Tamil diaspora is now the single biggest factor that sustains the LTTE in its war in the island's north. The comparison in the book of the "spillover" effect of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka with the one in Bangladesh which led to the dismemberment of Pakistan, is well made, though in the latter case, the cost of India going to war was estimated to be less than feeding ten million refugees. There are now new dangers to Tamil Nadu from the influx of not just Tamil refugees which has for the moment been controlled to a trickle, but also because of the possible weaponisation of southern India if Jaffna peninsula were to fall into LITE hands.

The most provocative part of Gooneratne's book is the chapter, "Denouement—ISLA", with such obvious subtitles as "India Invades Sri Lanka", "Railroading the ISLA", "Do's And Don't's of ISLA", "Misadventure of IPKF", "India Lays Down for Sri Lanka The ABCs Of Foreign Policy" and so on. Gooneratne does an impressive demolition job of the accord from start to finish with persuasive arguments, culminating, however, in an overkill: India's Sikkimisation of Sri Lanka. By no stretch of imagination is Sri Lanka historically in the same league for India as Nepal and

# Chobi Mela--Asia's Biggest Photographic Event

Opening on 15 December 2000 at the National Museum in Dhaka, Chobi Mela will be the single biggest photographic event to take place in Asia. The festival is an attempt to create an understanding of the present state of photography in the region, and to deconstruct current photographic practices in terms of wider influences, particularly that of globalisation. It will bring together a wide range of photographic work and practitioners from various parts of the world, especially from the Subcontinent and the rest of Asia. Through exhibitions, discussions and dialogues, the festival shall explore the semiotics of present-day photographic practice, and bring about an understanding of the medium, its history as well as its present. Besides showing a wide range of work being produced in Bangladesh, Chobi Mela will collect bodies of work from the other SAARC countries, as well as the rest of Asia. It will also prominently feature European countries, as well as works from South American and African countries.

One of the highlights of the festival will be an exhibition titled "The War We Forgot" on one of the bloodiest wars of liberation fought in Bangladesh in 1971. This exhibition will feature images from photography legends like Don McCullin, Raymond Depardon, Marc Riboud, Mary Ellen Mark, David Burnett, Raghu Rai, Marilyn Sylvesterstone and Abbas.

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Everything you wanted to know about the two central Nepal districts of Gulmi and Arghakhanchi. This book is history, geography, ethnography 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.

*Resunga: The Mountain of the Horned Sage*  
edited by Philippe Ramirez  
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Ever wondered why Pokhara's Phewa Lake area has become such an eyesore? Or, how the opening of Upper Mustang has benefitted the locals there? This book has the answers, and more, as it looks at three other tourist destinations in the Himalaya and highlights the essential interrelationship between tourism and local progress.

*Tourism as Development: Case Studies from the Himalaya*  
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When Toni Hagen first set foot in Nepal in 1950, he came as a development expert. Over the nine years that he walked 14,000 km across the length and breadth of Nepal, conducting its first reconnaissance survey, he grew to become a valued friend of the country. This is the original book that introduced Nepal, both to Nepalis and outsiders. This fourth edition of this classic includes the original reports and photographs even as it brings the reader up-to-date with the changes Hagen has seen over the course of a half-century.

Toni Hagen's  
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*Faces of Nepal*  
by Jan Salter and Harka Gurung  
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Bhutan, not to speak of Sikkim.

The author contends that the IPKF misadventure would not have been that, had it been allowed to complete its mission, and had Premadasa not indulged in duplicity by secretly arming the LTTE. No anti-insurgency campaign can be completed in just two years, especially when operations are undermined by the host government. The list of IPKF achievements is long, not the least, in restoring sanity and

normalcy in the north-east and conducting three violence-free elections with an unprecedented turnout in four months where none had been held for two decades. The glitches in implementation of the accord were due to the failure of coercive diplomacy, and not because of the IPKF.

The author has noted that India's intervention was not totally fruitless because the ISLA did secure all of its political, military and strategic objectives. Unless one has got it wrong,

this is the most questionable assessment of all—as the accord was not allowed to blossom. For this reviewer, the last sentence in the book is the most telling: "The eighties could also be seen as a period where there were lessons to be learnt for both India and Sri Lanka." Judging by the crisis that gripped both Delhi and Colombo earlier this year, and the manner in which events are unfolding now, neither country seems to have learnt these lessons. ▲

## When China nukes India...

Styled as India's Nostradamus, the BBC recently showcased Vimal Singh predicting a Confederation of India and Pakistan by the year 2015. Practising the publishing idiom of 'future history', Humphrey Hawksley in *Dragonfire* casts a line to the year 2007 when the idea of Confederation is being mooted as a survival option. It is after a catastrophic nuclear war: Pakistan has been obliterated as a nation state; India's metropolitan centres have become contaminated graveyards of a nuclear holocaust; and China has emerged from the rites of nuclear-strike passage as a superpower. In *Dragonfire*, the Indian strategic nightmare of a Pakistan and China pincer strike becomes a reality. The flashpoint is Tibet, with Kashmir and Taiwan as sideshows.

It is an impressive spinning of expert fact and fiction, imparting the adrenaline rush of virtual reality video war gaming. *Dragonfire* is indeed a worthy successor to Hawksley & Holberton's remarkably well-researched and chillingly-insightful *Dragonstrike*, about China's war for control of the South China Sea. The defining character of the publishing idiom pioneered in the bestseller, *The Third World War*, is "authority, relevance and topicality", hinging on the possibility and probability of a catastrophic event. *Dragonfire*, too, is based on formidable interview-based research, and comfortable expertise

about a battery of weapons systems and operational strategy, enough to delight a military buff. It is a world driven by neo-realism, without any space for morality, values or ethics. The cynicism of China agreeing to a ceasefire and simultaneously nuking New Delhi, is seen as awesome; the ethical restraint of India nuking only military targets although New Delhi is about to be flattened, seems

past, of complex power balancing games among states represented as princes/presidents—generals and diplomats. In the shadow line are people, the media and business. How little people and social movements seem to matter is evident in the author blotting out the fact of popular insurgencies in Kashmir or North-east India. In his 'Briefing' note, Kashmir is only a proxy war, and the US president is left to interpret Kashmir as a territorial dispute bereft of ideological issues. The Chinese military intrudes into Arunachal Pradesh (the North-east Indian state claimed by Beijing), but Hawksley does not want his elaborate war scenario to be complicated by the fact that the North-east is a bubbling cauldron of insurgencies (earlier supported by China), which presumably might complicate India and China's military response. We do get a people's uprising in Tibet, but it is more in the realm of shadowy cut-outs. As for the array of elite security managers, presidents/prime ministers, generals and diplomats—they are caricatures. The real dramatis personae of the war game are the states.

Only the representation of the Chinese leaders comes through with any degree of complexity, reflecting Hawksley's days as a BBC correspondent in China. Clearly, the Chinese are privileged as protagonists. President Tao Jiang's strategic vision, we are told, is derived from Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and



**Dragonfire**  
by Humphrey Hawksley.  
Macmillan, London, 2000  
365p.  
£ 9.99

reviewed by **Rita Manchanda**

out of sync with the game of military hardball. This is a world where war is inevitable, 'exciting, evil...but intended for the strong and active—mainly men'—to paraphrase peace researcher Johan Galtung. This is a world where force, including nuclear power, is seen as a legitimate instrument of policy. There is awe, even admiration, of China, the lead protagonist, which "obtained power by force which would have taken it generations to obtain through peace".

As much as Hawksley claims it to be 'future history', his project also is a throwback to a Westphalian

Clausewitz. As for Indian Prime Minister Hari Dixit, you wait to be told of Brahminical duplicity and the influence of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. The Chinese had repeatedly accused Nehru of doublespeak in the run up to the 1962 border war; India's doublespeak on Tibet is the catalyst here.

Hawksley's framing of Indian leaders is bare-ribbed and uni-dimensional. It is the Chinese and largely their Foreign Minister Jamie Song who is given privileged time on the BBC and the CNN. Far from the CNN effect driving the war, here the media is used expertly by the Chinese to justify their position. India's case doesn't get presented. Hawksley doesn't give Hari Dixit media access. The author's prescience in balancing the competing pulls and pressures so brilliantly demonstrated in his earlier *Dragonstrike*, is surrendered here at the altar of military power and prestige. Floating by in this 'future history' are anachronisms like the US and the UK choosing the side of democracy. What's an insightful author trying to feed us there?

*Dragonfire's* authority rests on its impressive weapon and battle details, and its plausible war scenario. The author says that events often overtook his writing. Pakistan's General Hamid Khan is a Musharraf clone turned rabid. But plausibility gets a little stretched at what drives the general—to get Kashmir out of the way, satisfy the mullahs and remove the 'core' problem between India and Pakistan, so that Pakistan, 'a failed state', can get on with modernisation. It presumes the *jehadis* will just vanish once the safety valve of Kashmir for their bloodletting is not available or that Kashmir alone makes them tick. Hawksley even offers India a deal embracing an 'independence' option for both Kashmirs. And you have the curious situation of Prime Minister Dixit reciting the letter of UN resolutions on Kashmir.

The author wisely doesn't waste time on elaborating a consistent rational motive and Hamid Khan soon turns into a nuclear, trigger-happy general. (Though the first strike with

the Chinese-transferred neutron bomb on Pakistan's own soil against an Indian invading force is a master move). India's retaliation remains conventional, and the US chips in with a non-lethal weapon, sealing off Hamid Khan's bunker and incapacitating his nuclear trigger. No doubt the popular imagination will be seized with the chilling scenario of the dangers of nuclear India's and Pakistan's jingoism. But the more thoughtful reader will not miss that the much talked about CBMs—the hot lines (drawing upon the 1986-7 Brasstacks confrontation) do not work in a crisis.

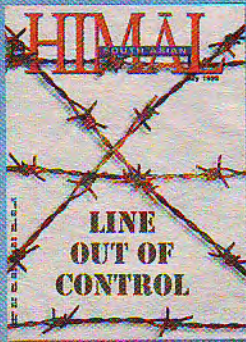
Much more sophisticated and insightful is the treatment of the China-India war dynamics. It comes as a shock to discover how insulated from popular debate is India's high risk Tibet policy. The adventurism inherent in India nurturing a Special Frontier Force (SFF), is spotlighted in the plausible armed intrusion into Tibet of a renegade unit of Tibetans trained in India, and its catalytic effect in pushing China to attack India, ultimately with nuclear weapons. In Hawksley's future, China (in league with Pakistan attacking on the western front) seizes this as an opportunity to cut India down to size. The historical fact of China having refused, both in the 1965 and 1971 wars, to threaten India is completely forgotten. Hawksley, however, has President Tao adamant that there can be no question of loss of face when its forces were cut off from the rear in Arunachal Pradesh even if nuclear weapons must be switched into use.

What makes *Dragonfire* stand apart from the nuclear doomsday books is the quality of 'authority' it derives from the mass of interviews and research which has gone into it. Nowhere is that authority and relevance more telling than in the projection of India's ambivalent policy on Tibet and its destabilising impact on Sino-Indian relations. Publicly, India recognises Tibet as a part of China, and has only extended asylum to the Dalai Lama, with the understanding that the Dalai Lama not be involved in any political activity on Indian soil. But

in Dharamsala, there sits a government-in-exile and the Tibet Bureau is active in propagating the thesis of an independent Tibet. It is well known that in the late 1950s, India yielded to foreign pressure and trained Khampas and Tibetans to ambush Chinese military convoys inside Tibet. But not well known at all is the fact that in the 1980s, the Indian government raised a highly paid special service unit, a 8000-strong commando group of Tibetans. Subramanian Swamy in his forthcoming book, *India's China Perspective*, describes how every morning their special camps would resonate with cries of "Long Live the Dalai Lama. We shall liberate Tibet". The commando group is still under the Indian intelligence agency RAW (*Frontline* 15 September 2000); the group mentioned in the book is presumably the SFF. Journalists who have accompanied Indian prime ministers and presidents to China have observed that the Chinese have repeatedly asked India to disband the force. It is this Indian ambivalence that President Tao and Foreign Minister Jamie Song castigate as duplicitous in *Dragonfire*.

But it is not a radical audit of India's Tibet policy which the book is likely to encourage in strategic circles in India. At its official release in New Delhi with several luminaries of India's strategic community present, what was picked up is the possibility of a pincer attack from Pakistan and China, and therefore the need for greater military preparedness. For Indian strategists who have been clamouring for recognising the dominant reality of China as India's enemy, the book may come in handy to whip up popular frenzy.

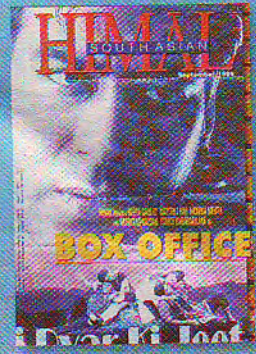
Hawksley may have meant his future history novel of a nuclear war to be a deterrent, but its very logic of military power as the determinant, predisposes one towards greater militarisation and nuclearisation. China won because it had nuclear weapons. India lost, because it did not have the guts to use its nukes regardless of the consequences. Some lesson.



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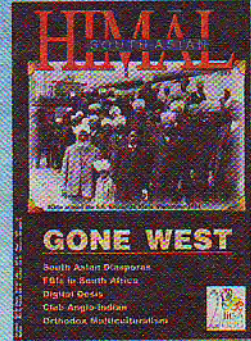
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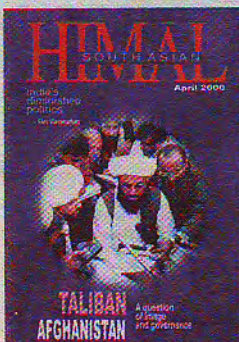
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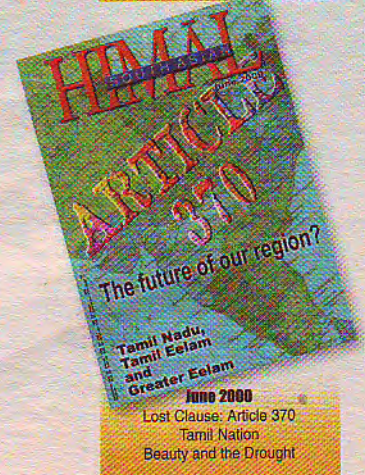
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**April 2000**  
Taliban Afghanistan  
India's Diminished Politics  
Indian Women in Pakistan



**May 2000**  
South Asia's Tourism  
Civil Society in Mizoram  
Peace Pipeline



**June 2000**  
Lost Clause: Article 370  
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Beauty and the Drought

## Crorepati democracy

EDITORIALS IN India have little or no sense of fun. In fact, fun is separated from real life and allocated to the humour column, which can be alternately earnest or silly. Culture becomes the last domain of the puritan ethic where Sunday school sermons multiply as exponentially as fast-food outlets. The recent uproar around 'Kaun Banega Crorepati' (KBC) is one such event. It has taken the media by surprise. The responses have been ferocious. Newspapers have also had quick articles on the career of the programme.

...The KBC programme has been dismissed as an open invitation to greed, a low IQ-low brow affair, an attempt by TV to summon the only muse it knows—money. It is true that Kaun Banega Crorepati is about money but if it were only about money, it wouldn't sell. There is a second story, a double to the first narrative, which needs to be teased out. A symbolic analysis reveals a different set strands:

- 1) The ritual of the quiz
- 2) The drama of globalisation and the information society.
- 3) The transformation of Amitabh Bacchan as archetype.
- 4) The nature and context of the spectator response.
- 5) The style of the middle-class participant.

Kaun Banega Crorepati is a ritual of globalisation. The keyword is not money but information. The real message is that information is money. The social world is reduced to that many bytes and the key ritual here is the quiz. The quiz today plays as important a cultural and pedagogic role as the tutorial college and guidebook did in the previous decades.

One must emphasise the difference and the reciprocity between the beauty contest and the quiz as media events. For all the training, the Herculean efforts at fashion design and dentistry, beauty is still seen as ascriptive criteria, something you are born with. One tries to add personality to the persona of a beauty queen through the general knowledge questions. But the questions usually sound stiff. The beauty contest creates a set of spectacles while the quiz has transformed itself into a spectator sport. The beauty contest is voyeuristic, even pornographic. The quiz has a sense of a panchayat. The knowledge segment of the beauty contest is cosmetic but there are moments of surprise. When a pompous male compere, at a recent Miss World contest, asked a Filipino contestant, "How many islands are there in the Philippines?" she came the reply, "At high tide or low tide?" The knowledge part sounds more like an elocution contest or a bad civics class. The women are caught between looking like Prince Diana and mouth-ing Mother Teresa. There is a different set of authenticity. When a contestant at a beauty pageant is asked what she plans to do in the future, if successful, you get the earnest clichés like serve my country, work against landmines or battle AIDS. The Kaun Banega Crorepati questions provide answers like "donate it to my wife",

"take Aishwarya Rai to a tourist paradise", "start a software company". The difference between the two events is simple. It is not the body that counts. If you have knowledge, you can also walk the world as a ramp...

...KBC is spectator and participant friendly. There is a feeling that everyone including the housewife, cloth seller, software expert and doctor could participate in it. One did not need specialised knowledge as an invidious skill. Any matric pass could enter it. You didn't need a PhD or a public school background. The citizenship of the quiz becomes for the first time open and an open-ended affair...

...The emphasis on money in the programme is secondary. It serves as a milestone... This is a lottery of a different kind. There is money, there is status, there is visibility and there is a shared community of participants and spectators...

...Knowledge is no longer a minefield but a friendly garden. It is a commons but it needs skills that anyone can acquire. What one called 'General Knowledge' is no longer an elite encyclopaedic exercise but an everyman's sport. Globalising India has found a clichéd but populist metaphor for transition—Information. But this information is not the exclusive property of experts. It is something you can find in any bazaar guidebook. The sale of Kaun Banega Crorepati guidebooks is stupendous, a book pirate's dream of a best-seller which makes Arundhati Roy or Khushwant Singh sound esoteric. Now knowledge is not presented as something generated only by IIT, Silicon Valley or Info-Sys but as available in the democracy of the bazaar or on the family friendship network. Friends and family become the commonest sources of information in the 'lifeline' ritual.

FROM "THE CROREPATI NARRATIVES" BY SHIV VISVANATHAN IN *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY*.

## Roshogolla nostalgia

LAST WEEK I came across a newspaper picture of a BJP politician stuffing a festive sweetmeat into the mouth of a colleague. The sweetmeat was a *rasgulla*, as it is pronounced in north India. In far-off Bengal where it originates, it is pronounced *roshogolla*: the consonants softened and the vowels as succulently rounded as the delicacy itself, encouraging an infusion of air into the very name of the sweet which relies largely on aeration to give it its sponge-like texture.

There was an anomaly here, and it had to do with something more than just comparative pronunciation. Like the taste of the madeleine which opened the floodgates of Proust's memory, roshogollas recollected swept me away in a remembrance of times past.

Every now and then, my father would pile the family—my mother, my elder sister, and myself aged 6—into our 1946 model Ford and drive us from our apartment on Chowringhee Road in central Calcutta to the labyrinthine northern reaches of the city. Our desti-

nation was Mehra's, a traditional Bengali eatery and my father's favourite.

As we drove northwards the Edwardian mansions and colonial bungalows gave way to Bengali baroque: the fading palaces of the erstwhile zamindars and the homes of the merchant princes, who were their successors. Interspersed among these were cavernous godowns, redolent of spices, tea, timber. We turned into a narrow lane, bouncy with cobblestones. Hand-pulled rickshaws, carts, horsedrawn hansoms eased around each other and the Ford, miraculously without mishap. We pulled up at Mehra's, its interior lit with low-watt bulbs. Old man Mehra, in dhoti and vest, greeted us with a namaskar. *Luchis* and savoury *kachoris* bobbed in simmering cauldrons of oil. We sat at a wooden trestle table. The food arrived in steel plates: *luchis*, *kachoris* and *aloo dam*.

My father saved his appetite for the sweets, particularly the *roshogollas*, the perfect diet for epicure or invalid, delicious yet easily digestible. He cut one open for me. See the tiny holes in it, where the air is; that's the secret of it, he said. I finished first, and stood by the entrance, looking at the crowded street. Perhaps I thought of the air of Calcutta and how much it seemed able to contain. As though the molecules that made it up were spaced farther apart than they were elsewhere, so that in their nimble arrangement could safely be accommodated so many different vehicles and things and people without risk of collision. Including Mehra, whom it never occurred to any of us to ask why someone with so obviously a north Indian name should chose to set up a Bengali sweet shop in Calcutta. Any more than it would occur to Mehra to ask why people called Suraiyas, Kutchis from the distant west coast, should elect to be his most regular customers. Beside me a vat of *roshogollas* steeping in syrup reflected a Bengal sky of tumbled cumulus. A ladle stirred the vat, and momentarily the round white clouds and the sweets seemed to merge.

The sky in Delhi where I now live is hard, flat and generally cloudless. The air beneath it seems denser, more compacted than the elastic air of Calcutta which allowed free play to a child's imagination. The people of the north are by and large more robust than those of Bengal, and the cows here are sleek and glossy compared with their Bengali counterparts with their clothes-hanger rumps and thin milk. The sweets of the north seem imbued with this gravitas of air and people and cows: weighty, massy *barfis* made of thickened milk; *ladus*, round and hard as saccharine cannon balls, and about as easy to digest.

I looked again at the picture of the two BJP politicians. The *roshogolla*—or even the *rasgulla*—was a solecism. It should have been a *ladoo*, or a *barfi*, its compressed atoms saturating the taste buds leaving no room for the manoeuvre of nuance, the exploration of random horizons. Yes, a *ladoo* or *barfi* would have better suited the cookie-cutter design of *Hindutva* sought to be purveyed by the BJP.

My father died before I was seven, and for one rea-

son or other the family stopped going to Mehra's. But growing up in Calcutta I began to frequent the more accessible tea and sweet shops with which the city is liberally sprinkled. Calcutta's sweet shops are the home of that archetypal Bengali institution known as the 'adda'. Much more than a mere gossip session, an adda is a talk-fest supreme, a free-flowing discussion about anything and everything under the sun. An adda wouldn't be an adda without that other unique tradition, the 'double half': a cup of tea split into two and generally served with an accompanying sweet.

Who was the greatest batsman of them all, Bradman, Gavaskar or Tendulkar? Was Ritwik Ghatak a more socially relevant film-maker than Satyajit Ray? Was Mother Teresa a saint or a counter-revolutionary enemy of the people? Was the statue of Charlie Chaplin put up by the Marxist government a tribute, or a travesty of the Little Tramp's anarchic legacy? Strangers often contributed *en passant* to addas. I recall an elegant *bhadralok* in an immaculately pleated dhoti who paused to interrupt a discussion of the relative merits of Shakespeare and Milton. Shakespeare, Milton; why don't you talk of Rabindranath Tagore? he asked accusingly. Poetry is poetry by any name, I replied. Or to put it another way, I added, quoting a popular slogan from the far-off days of protest against the American engagement in Vietnam: *Amar nam, tomar nam, Vietnam*. (My name, your name; Vietnam). The reaction was immediate. *Lal salaam*, comrade! exclaimed the *bhadralok*, gave me a clenched fist salute and, neatly furled umbrella held at port, marched off to the tune of an unheard International playing in Calcutta's teeming air.

When I tire of Delhi's sterile sky and miss the anarchy of Calcutta's clouds I occasionally make a trip to Chittaranjan Park, a migrant mini-Bengal in the heart of south Delhi. It is pleasant to be surrounded by the lilt of Bengali after the guttural brusqueness of the hybrid Punjabi and Haryanvi which is the lingua franca of Delhi. But there is something forced about Chittaranjan Park's Bengaliness, which by ghettoising itself seems to have lost the pluralist harmonies of its true timbre.

I went to Chittaranjan Park while I was writing this column. Accompanying me was a friend curious to find out why anyone should want to write about *roshogollas*. We went to Anapurna, the best known sweet shop in the area. I ordered *roshogollas*, and we each had a spoonful. The *roshogollas* were soft, creamy, unexceptionable. And utterly unmemorable. What's so great about these things? asked my friend. Nothing, I agreed. They make them better in Calcutta. How could they? The milk's much better here, my friend persisted.

I wondered how I could explain why a man called Mehra could come to Calcutta and make better Bengali sweets than Bengalis who'd come to Delhi; why Shakespeare, Milton, Tagore and Vietnam were names by any other name: what a 'double-half' was, and why people should sit for hours over one; why clouds were reflected in a mundane iron pot.

Not the milk; it's the air, just the air, I said, and walked out into the two-dimensional glare of the Delhi sun.

"AIR APPARENT" BY JUG SURAIYA IN *THE TIMES OF INDIA*.

## Two celluloid Chopras

MAINSTREAM HINDI cinema is rapidly becoming a very depressing phenomenon. The two releases this week *Mohabbatein* and *Mission Kashmir* were literally and metaphorically arduous experiences and despite the chalk and cheese difference in their themes, the reasons for this are remarkably similar. For someone sensitive to the messages being projected by the cinematic image, these films could well be considered dangerous and symptomatic of the monolithic and reactionary edifices that Indian polity and society have become.

*Mohabbatein* opens in a school/college/university (it is not clear, though the overgrown children have uniforms) with a flaming orange symbol and Hindu logo, the motto of the film is in chaste Sanskritic Hindi (*Parampara, Pratishtha, Anushaasan*), the institution also has a Hindu temple where all the students pray every morning and touch the principal's feet before the day begins. All this is part of a puritan ethic that its Principal Narayan Shankar (Hindu Gods) enforces on his students. All these students are Hindu, all their lovers are Hindu, so are all the rituals, songs, dances, festivals.

This is combined with some snazzy advertising of a variety of products (Sharmistha Roy as Art Director specialises in selling products by inserting images of them in every possible scene) and other such contradictions play themselves out at various levels of the film. For example, a heroine is chastised for not following her true (Indian?) self by wearing revealing clothes, yet throughout the film, no matter what the heroine is wearing, the cleavage is startling. The film has the distinction for having the largest amount of cleavage from the maximum amount of people within three hours. Yash Chopra is a pervert if ever there was one.

These contradictions mimic the sophisticated contradictions that mask the Indian state and its cultural discourse. Bal Thackeray can ban kissing on the screen but sponsor rock shows and fashion shows where the less you wear the better. He can scream about Pakistan being an evil foreign influence and the West being corrupting but have Michael Jackson piss in his toilet.

*Mohabbatein* is the ultimate Indian heterosexual male's wet dream. It is shot in Oxford, Geneva and wherever else but each of these landscapes is stamped with marks of Indianness. The landscapes are pristine, the women in blushes of (low-cut) pastel and the weather always controlled (it is perpetually autumn because of a laboured leit motif or it is raining because thunder is needed for the great Bachchan-Khan confrontations, which fall flat on their face, by the way). What there definitely is not any of the mess, dirt and complexity of life in India...

*Mohabbatein* is the exemplary film product of our

globalised times. It caters...to the upper middle class in India and to the affluent NRI. It tells the former that its investment in liberalisation and wealth is fine (one of the character's father's is a lowly bank accountant, but his clothes are straight off the racks of Italy and Paris and how on earth can he afford the fees of this elite institution?) and the latter that they can retain their 'Indian culture' no matter where they are and this is how.

*Mission Kashmir* is an even lowlier prostration at the feet of the new Indian state. One would think that after *Roja* (which for all its chest-thumping nationalism seems now like a multi-layered political document), a film on Kashmir would have to be somewhat complex. But no such luck. In *Mission Kashmir*, militants are mindless adolescents who can't get over their parents being shot, the Indian state is the benevolent father (if only the militant as prodigal son would return to the fold) and Kashmir is *shikaras* and roses. In all three instances, the result is a travesty of realities.

To portray militants as mindless adolescents is both to insult their intelligence and underestimate their strength. To talk of militancy as only the choice of people blinded by pain is to mock the pain of the hundreds of Kashmiris who face such loss of family and friends at the hands of the Indian state and the militants and remain just ordinary people. And as for the Indian state, it kills thousands of people in Kashmir and across the country, displaces tribals and robs them of their livelihood to build big dams and raise cash crops, supports people who murder priests and children by burning them alive, supports armies who kill Dalits in villages and I could go on. If this state is a father to which erring children should return, then being an orphan is surely preferable.

Vidhu Vinod Chopra whose message is ostensibly secularism and Kashmiriyat insults secularism as well by investing all righteousness and justice in the Indian police and army. If the militants are culpable, so is the Indian state and no syrupy forgiveness and secular wall art in a ruin can undo that. Chopra's naivete is truly appalling. Secularism is woven in the fabric of lives, not stuck on walls. The Indian state, whether Congress or BJP never upheld secularism and nor, of all institutions, did the Indian police and army!!!

It was and is upheld by ordinary people. But there are no ordinary people in Chopra's film (or, for that matter, in Yash Chopra's film). Only ciphers in *shikaras* and ghosts with guns, not to forget mindlessly self-regarding men in uniforms. There is, for example, an interesting moment between a Sikh (talking of Delhi—1984) and a Kashmiri pandit (talking about the 1990 evacuation) watered down in an absolutely ridiculous way with both standing by the values of the Indian state...

What is truly reprehensible is that the film feeds us with the most conservative endorsement of the Indian state and some very shallow secular rhetoric. The former is unbelievable, the latter might have worked if the secularism was inscribed in the texture of the film which it is not, except in the most superficial ways, like Sanjay



Dutt's and Sonali Kulkarni's Muslim-Hindu marriage.

Both movies end with inscriptions. *Mohabbatein* with 'Some love stories... live forever,' forget the ignorant dots), *Mission Kashmir* with some nonsense of Kashmir being a paradise and a call for a return to Kashmiriyat/secularism. Both Chopras are beneficiaries of the Indian state as part of the unthinking and consumerist upper middle class. They know nothing about Kashmir or love and there is no reason why any of us should take them seriously. Kashmir is a paradise to Vidhu Vinod Chopra because he clearly knows nothing of the ground realities there. This is why he can reduce the entire fraught state's politics to elementary psychoanalytic babble about good and bad dreams. Why on earth should a Kashmiri boy whose parents and entire family have been killed by a uniformed man love that man as a father?

Love is all to Yash Chopra because he is a patriarchal and reactionary man whose idea of women is that they are subservient ornaments and his love comprises all the elements of the new Hindu fascist globalised state. Why on earth should a young woman in the late twentieth century jump to her death because her father won't let her marry the man she loves? Why would the father oppose it without any reason, none offered, none asked?

...Behind all the gloss (and both films are technically slick, great to look at and perfect products of our technologically advanced times) and sheen, lie some very old-fashioned and new fangled ideas, both very dangerous to our well-being as a society.

FROM "THE NEW CONSERVATIVES" BY ASHLEY TELLIS IN  
<WWW.THELKA.COM>

## Equivocal monarch

THE KING rose from his seat and advanced to shake my hand. He was dressed in white, the loose shirting and tight cotton trousers or *suruwal* worn by most Nepalese men. On his head was a typical Nepali topi, again mainly with a muted grey-and-pink pattern. His heavy, dark-rimmed spectacles were as in all the official photographs I had seen, but his face was thinner than it had once been and his moustache was trimmed to a shadow of its former, more luxuriant self. I wondered whether the weight loss was connected with the king's recent heart problems. I was asked to sit on an upright, white upholstered chair, while King Birendra returned to his black leather armchair opposite me. The room was large and rather impersonal, its furnishings dating from the 1960s or 70s when Narayanhiti Palace had been refurbished. A leopard skin half-hidden beneath a glass-topped table and a pair of elephant tusks above the book case were the only hints of oriental exoticism. Otherwise, all was plain and functional. The king put his hands together in front of him, forming a bridge with his fingers.

"So what do [sic] want to ask me?" He smiled.

And so began a long and broad-ranging conversation, the main theme of which—whether one liked it or

not—was the limitations of what King Birendra can speak out on in his role as constitutional monarch. We touched on many topics: the changing role of monarchy; Nepal's delicate position wedged in between India and China, which the king's ancestor Prithvi Narayan Shah bluntly described as being like "a yam between two boulders"; Birendra's own proposals that Nepal and the Himalayan region generally be declared a 'Zone of Peace'. But every time we seemed to be getting somewhere the trail went cold and we entered an indeterminate region of possibilities and options, with the king proposing any number of alternative ways of looking at the question without coming up with any clear opinions of his own.

To begin with I found all this rather baffling. The whole conversation had an Alice in Wonderland quality to it. For just as it seemed that the king was on the point of reaching a firm conclusion, he would introduce two other points of view; and, like Alice, I was left wondering which hole the White Rabbit had run down.

On the other hand, I was left in no doubt that Nepal's ruling monarch has an agile mind with a strongly analytical bent—an approach which, like the slightest trace of an American accent, may well go back to the time he spent at Harvard. As he worked his way around a subject his whole body shifted from side to side, as though this would facilitate his acquiring a fresh viewpoint on the matter at hand. The large square glasses which he always wears swivelled like TV monitors that seemed to focus upon some midpoint in the air where he could best conceptualise his latest argument. In his mannerisms he reminded me more of an academic than a power-broker. And yet I was very much aware that for nearly two decades King Birendra had exercised close to absolute power over his twenty million subjects.

I must confess to experiencing real difficulties in following some of the king's arguments. Maybe this is because I am not sufficiently quick-witted to appreciate all the subtle nuances. Or maybe it is because he has adopted a new rhetoric to fit in with his new position as constitutional monarch within a multi-party democracy. One of the cardinal rules of this 'palace-speak' is the avoidance of any statement that might be construed as an official line on policy, since this could be taken as infringing on the domain of the duly elected government. And given how recently the Palace was effectively running the country, locking up pro-democracy leaders and shutting down opposition newspapers, it is only natural that the current generation of politicians remains highly sensitive to anything that smacks of royal intervention in policy-making. The end result is that King Birendra is unable—or unwilling—to make an unequivocal statement on just about anything. For if he were to do so, he would almost certainly be criticised for acting unconstitutionally.

FROM *KINGDOMS BEYOND THE CLOUDS: JOURNEYS IN SEARCH OF THE HIMALAYAN KINGS* BY JONATHAN GREGSON  
(MACMILLAN, LONDON, 2000, USD 14.99)

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# CHOICES

short fiction by Nafisa Thahirally  
illustrated by anmole prasad

When I was young I thought Ammi was very lucky. In fact I was a little jealous of her. I say a little because of course she was my mother and I loved her but she got to have all the fun. She got to go with daddy everywhere.

She went with him to parties and dinners. She went for plays and watched actresses dressed in glamorous costumes saying their lines. She listened to recitals by accomplished musicians, all of which she did with daddy. Daddy said he liked to take her because she was very pretty and looked very nice standing there next to him in her pretty, plain sarees. Yes she always wore sober colored sarees.

"Mummy why won't you wear that bright blue saree daddy gave you for your birthday? It suits you so well." I asked, but she just shook her head, rather sadly, and stared

out at nothing. Even though Ammi was very pretty she had sad eyes.

I thought she was very lucky because when they came back from these outings they went straight into their room and closed the door. On some days Daddy used to come and kiss me good night before they went to sleep. Sometime he used to read me a story as well. Of course, Ammi too used to read me stories every night except on the days she had to go out with daddy, but I liked the sound of daddy's voice. It went hoom, boom when he read the bears part in Goldilocks and soft and creepy when he became the big bad wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

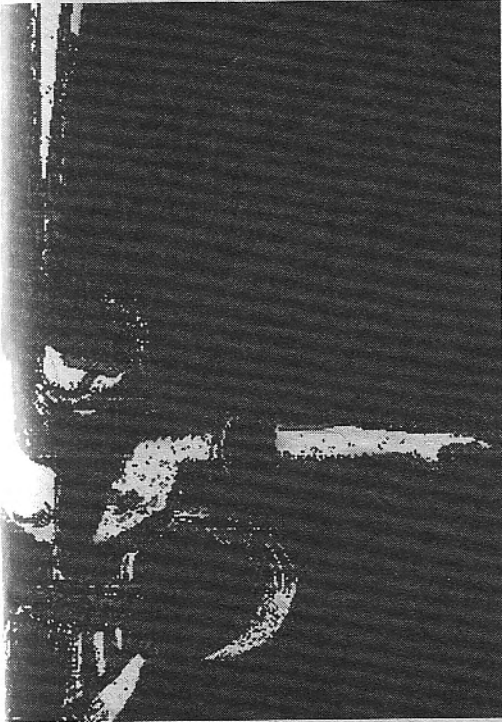
Ammi's face used to be all red and swollen the next morning just like mine after playing in the park. This made me angrier and I used to pinch it making her wince in pain. But I did not care, wanting to hurt her some more. I thought Ammi was lucky because she got to play with daddy. Daddy never had much time to play with me. Sometimes when we went on holidays to the beach then we would swim in the water for hours. Ammi used to not come because she said she was scared of the water and did not like to wear a swimsuit. But I knew this was not true. I had seen pictures of her in the photo album posing by the pool in a lovely multi-colored bikini. But I did not say this because I wanted to spend all the time with daddy, so I let her sit there under a tree her face shaded by a wide straw hat and sunglasses reading a book.

Now I am grown up and go to cocktail parties, office dinners, concerts, product launches and what not. I stand next to Nimal and keep smiling and shaking hands with people I don't know.

I hate it. I suppose if I knew them it would not be so bad but I just look down and don't catch anybody's eye in case he/she starts talking to me. Because if they do, then it will be a provocation and Nimal hates that. He will then say that I'm attracting attention, which is not good for his position. He must not have his name tarnished by frivolous behaviour at any cost, he says.

Standing next to him wearing all the pretty clothes he buys from expensive boutiques when he goes abroad is not my idea of fun. Especially when I don't get to talk to any one except some director's frumpy wife but I know that's safe. I try to blend into Nimal's smart effervescent personality for it saves a lot of trouble. Looking





insignificant does not bother me now but it makes me think a lot. Then my eyes get sad too, like Ammi's. Nimal likes order. He gets mad when things don't go his way or big deals do not work out. Most times he says it is my fault. Like what I was wearing was not right or that I got too familiar with whomever. He gets jealous if anyone talks to me; he wants me all for himself. It was very romantic in the beginning—to be loved so much.

Even at traffic lights when we stop I look

straight ahead so as not to catch the eye of the adjacent motorist. Nimal says that's provocative. He would then get down and start a fight with some innocent stranger. Looking ahead saves us all the embarrassment. I remember now how insignificant Ammi had tried to look. I remember her not using any makeup and tying her hair up in a bun at the back of her neck and daddy used to pull it down and tell her to keep it loose. I go to the salon every month and get my hair styled in the latest fashion because Nimal likes that. He wants me to wear clothes of his choice, all designer-labeled ones. If I don't, he says I'm criticising his taste. The accusations are exhausting. They can go on and on, well into the wee hours with my every word of protest either twisted or misconstrued.

Once early in the relationship I had innocently substituted his choice of saree with some thing more convenient. Meeting up with him, I was left to wonder most of the evening, why I was in the dog house. My excuses got me nowhere and I was greeted by a blank silence instead.

Now what had I done wrong?

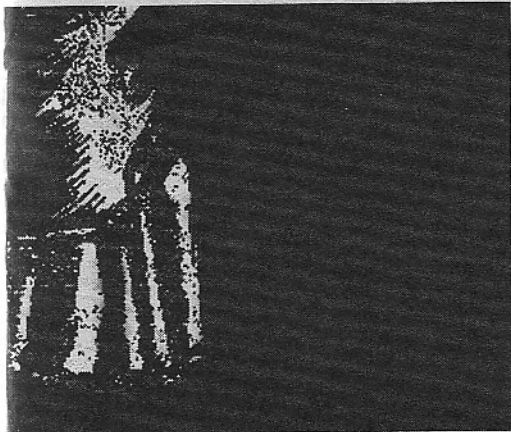
Hope everything went well with that important deal, I ventured, playing with the food on my plate, meeting a cold stare for a reply. What could it be, I wondered. Hurrying in and out of 'the ladies' to check if the lipstick had smudged or the mascara had run.

What was the matter? Had someone dared take a pot shot at him? Scrabbling around my head for reasons, I found myself gripped in the steel vice of his fingers as we hastily made good-byes. I remember putting up a fair bit of fight. I had a right to choices as well.

The saree was not what I wanted to wear that day but to Nimal it was an infliction on his ego. I had defied him. But I was determined: I remember stubbornly not giving in. He was just being a spoilt child. I sulked too but not for long — eventually he won. The cold spells during the day coupled with the physical pain at night broke me.

He could be caring and sympathetic afterwards. Gently treating all the bruised places on my arms, legs, face and breasts. He cried like a baby, kissing my feet and asking my forgiveness over and over again; begging me not to ever leave him. Telling me how empty his life would be and where would I go. What would I do without him and how much he needed me.

Bending my head down in reverence I offer the pink lotus flowers at the Buddha's feet. Closing my eyes, but the prayers don't reach my lips. I still think Ammi is very lucky. She is past all this. She cannot feel it any more. She is free of choices.





## bitter chocolate



**T**he first response while reading Pinky Virani's *Bitter Chocolate* is: revolting!

reviewed by **Pallavi Ghosh**

**B**ut then truth seldom is palatable. And it is unlikely that Virani wants to sugar coat reality. The reality as it stands is that child sexual abuse does exist in India and—as the book reveals—about 20 percent of boys and girls under the age of sixteen are being regularly sexually abused in their own homes. The perpetrators of the crime are usually people who have the child's trust, uncles, neighbours and sometimes parents too. And shockingly, it occurs in the "it can't happen to us" families: the crimes take place in middle and upper class families

VIRANI GIVES HARD-HITTING EXAMPLES TO DISPEL THE MISCONCEPTION: IN A DELHI COURT A CHILD HAS BEEN CROSS-QUESTIONED BY A BATTERY OF LAWYERS HIRED BY HER BUREACRAT FATHER. "WHICH FINGER DID YOUR PAPA PUT INTO YOU? THIS ONE, OR THIS ONE?"

who not only sexually abuse their children but also browbeat them into submission and silence.

Pinky Virani, a journalist, shot to fame with

her debut *Aruna's Story*, the true story of a young nurse comatose for fifty years, reduced to a human vegetable after being raped by her colleague at the hospital she worked in. The book created a storm and plumbed the depths of the torture a woman raped may have to go through. Virani continues her tryst with truth. And the truth begins at home; the book opens with an account of the author's own experience.

She writes: I had, and still have, to deal with my—I hate the use of the personal pronoun in this context—abuser. And it is only now, after the detailing for this book, that I realise and recollect why I have so many marks on my legs, between the knees and calves, where they could be seen when I wore dresses and skirts. ...I have no compulsion to tell the world about the sexual abuse in my childhood. I refuse to be a victim.

Brave revelation, and totally devoid of self pity. But Virani thinks that she has no reason to be so; it is the doer rather than the sufferer who should undergo the trauma of defilement of body and soul. And this is the cause the author champions in her book.

The book is thoroughly researched. Virani has travelled extensively throughout the country, interviewing child psychologists, mental health professionals, social workers, lawyers, doctors and victims themselves. In fact, some of the children and adults she interviewed who had such horrifying tales to tell that Virani had to expunge much of these portions in order to avoid falling foul of India's obscenity laws! But what amazes is the fact that laws often are either too flaccid or inadequate to punish the culprit. But more than laws, it is society and usually also parents who refuse to stand up against the accuser for fear of upsetting the family cart. And Virani takes issue with this. Her book makes us aware of the fact that a child has to be watched all the time and any change in his/her

behaviour must be dealt with and immediately.

*Bitter Chocolate* gives some valuable pointers on how to watch for warning signs of sexual abuse. Sudden interest in a child by a person close to a family, seemingly inexplicable fear in a child

towards a person, sudden change in behavioural traits. If any of your children displays even one of the above the symptoms, it is time to watch out. There could be possible sexual abuse there. And yes, your child could be a victim. The fulcrum on which this first-of-its-kind book on sexual abuse rests

## bitter chocolate

CHILD

SEXUAL

ABUSE

IN INDIA

P I N K Y



is the fact that sexual abuse transcends all classes. The point which the book drives hard repeatedly is that it is a fallacy to think that sexual abusers come only from the lower strata of society like drivers, mailmen, delivery men, servants and the like.

Virani gives hard-hitting examples to dispel the misconception: in a Delhi court a child has been cross-questioned by a battery of lawyers hired by her bureaucrat father. "Which finger did your papa put into you? This one, or this one?" The court dismissed the case on the grounds that a person holding a responsible and respectable position could not do such thing. The aftermath? Today this girl not only hates Papa, but all men. It makes for disturbing reading and it is hard not to put the book down.

The book is divided into three notebooks. The first notebook explains what child sexual abuse is about and the devastating and often lasting effect it has on the victims. The second part describes these effects through true accounts of women who were violated as children by the men of the household and how they are still trying to grapple with its consequences. The third offers practical solutions on fighting sexual abuse of children. It gives in detail what the legal system has to offer and how both the parent and child can use it to their benefit. It comes as a bit of surprise that there are already several laws which can help in taking action against child sexual abuse.

They are the Indian Penal Code, The Immoral Traffic in Women (Prevention) Act, the Juvenile Justice Act, and even the Indian Post Office Act (invoked in a case when pornographic material was being sent to a child by his neighbour!) apart from other international conventions.

For the people confronted with sexual abuse there is a useful section on help-line. Virani's book ends with some help-lines based in several cities which a person in need can approach. Providing a help-line is being optimistic—Virani hopes that her book will be successful in making parents and guardians more aware to sexual abuse.

But more than mere awareness it is the courage to fight back which is required. Often parents or guardians do notice what is happening but are too scared to point a finger at the perpetrator, either because of financial dependence or due to social pressures. Or simply because they consider it implausible. She (Razia) insists she is being continuously sexually molested by her male cousin when he visits their home. Her ammee says, "He is my very own

sister's son. You should be ashamed of yourself for saying this." Keep quiet or I shall tell your abba who will beat you up for talking such rubbish, then he will stop you from going to your painting classes on Sundays.' A few months later Razia commits suicide and the postmortem reveals a three-month-old foetus in her broken body. Razia's is an extreme case but also a frightening reality. It makes the point that every child must be heard and taken seriously.

It would have been so easy for a book with theme such as Virani's to become sensational or titillating. It goes to her credit that she avoids that. The real life examples serve to underscore the point she makes throughout the book. It also makes the other point that the Indian child's experience of abuse was no different than that elsewhere aside from one important aspect: "Because ours is a patriarchal society we can't talk about it. In the case of child sexual abuse we hoped it would go away. India's no different in that respect, except that it has never been brought out into the open."

**RAZIA'S IS AN EXTREME CASE BUT ALSO A FRIGHTENING REALITY. IT MAKES THE POINT THAT EVERY CHILD MUST BE HEARD AND TAKEN SERIOUSLY.**

Virani's book does precisely that. Brings an issue out of the closet which the close knit, patriarchal Indian family often masks. Her book also makes it very obvious that not all chocolate growing up years need be sweet. Some of them can be very bitter.

*Bitter Chocolate* by Pinky Virani  
Penguin Books, 2000

245p  
INR 295

# A Beedi at the

# Line of Control



**NEVER LET** unmarried and/or macho men rule your country. Shoo the poet away from the prose of governance, and never let the military man cut the inaugural ribbon, he's better off unpinning grenades.

But that's what we have in two bizarre countries called Bharat and Pakistan. Atal Boohoo Vajpayee is palpably peevish, writes passable poetry that everyone is required to rave about, and even did military in the RSS army. General Pervez (Coupmaster) Musharraf, too, is remarkably childish when it comes to Toy Kashmir, but thank god he doesn't write poetry good or bad. Well, if he does, he does not shove it on the hapless public.

So what have you when you get such types at the top—the prime minister's health bulletin becomes the stuff of headline news and panel discussions (knee surgery, for crying out loud!), and the general's dogs hog the limelight. Meanwhile, all we are waiting for is the two worthies to start talking to each other across the barbed wire. Why is talkative Vajpayee refusing to speak to the voluble general, who calls lengthy press conferences at the drop of a baton? Has RAW reported that Musharraf has bad breath? Does the ISI dossier on Vajpayee say something similar? If South Korea can talk to King Jong Il, why does the bachelor boy continue to give the khaki pants the cold shoulder? And why does aforementioned khaki pants insist on chanting the Kashmir mantra from every rooftop?

Apologies for bringing up Kashmir yet again. What the media should do, actually, is to take a clean break from the Vale—it will burn either way, reported or unreported. Please let us not fill our front pages with Kashmirspeak from criminally apathetic loudmouth leaders. And, could it just possibly perhaps be, that where there is no army, there are no militants? Ponder that. Blasphemy, some of you will say, but nothing is more blasphemous than a poet who writes anti-nuke poetry and

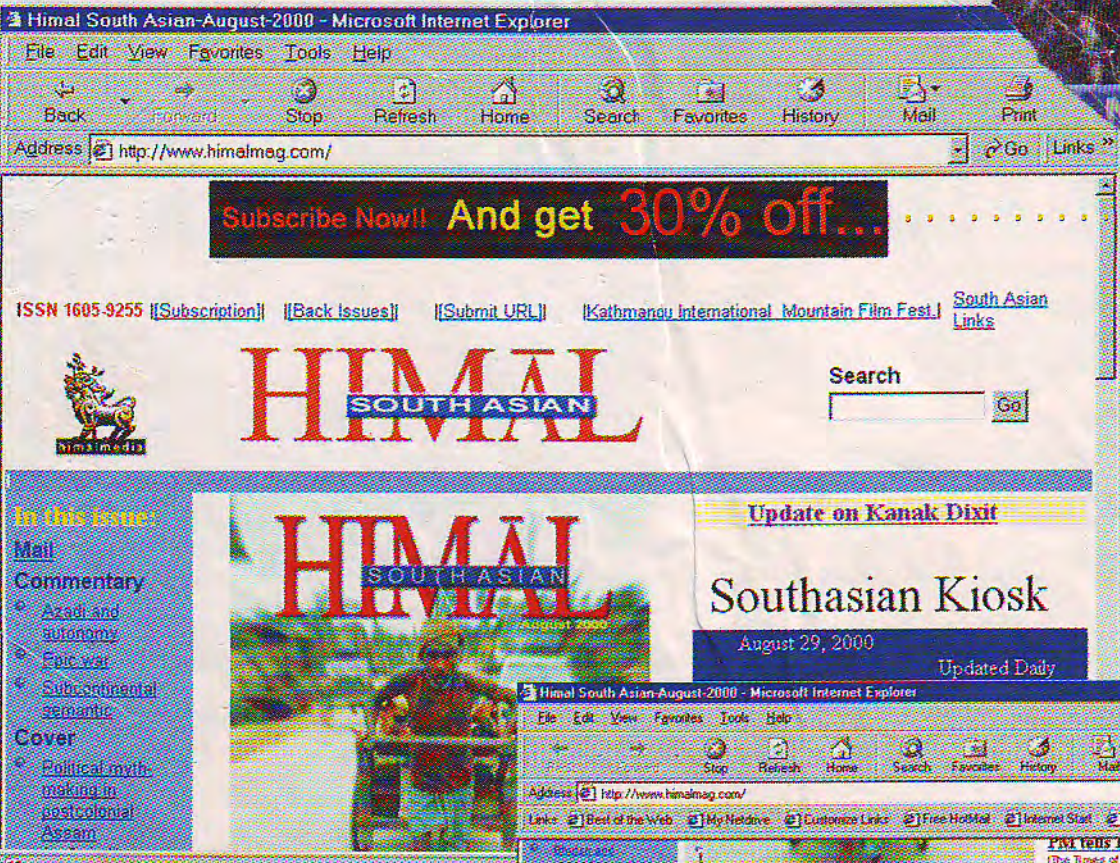
presides over the nuclearisation of the World's Largest Democracy (WLD), *jai ramjiki*.

The career media loves Kashmir, loves the Bomb, loved Kargil. It is the stuff of giddy masquerading, where one can wax eloquent about lovely valleys torn by militancy, where one can be almost at par with all those American analysts who soberly calibrate throw-weights and speak of mutually assured destruction, where one can lay claim to being a war correspondent for being helicoptered around courtesy the army. Of course, our editors and columnists are honourable men, all of them. But the *rojiroti* is just too important to challenge the sacrosanct positions spelt out by the respective foreign ministries. And so the cue is—sound innovative, look courageous, but don't bite the hand. It is no fun being relegated to a editorship of a 'regional' edition, or to be sent as the Sibi Valley correspondent.

In these intelligent times, when the spread of information technology (we are told) has us leap-frogging to the head of the line (well, India anyway), the hallmark of stupidity lies in stating the obvious. So when our country heads talk nonsense, we can't call it that in the name of responsible journalism. How responsible, will be decided when diggers and archaeologists sift through the remains of a devastated Delhi, a charred Lahore, and analyse the content of the newspapers at turn-of-century. And they will be shocked to find that when two countries were virtually at war, when two sides had nuclear arsenals at the ready, and when bellicose leaders on each side had said that they would nuke the other—that there was no groundswell demand that the weak-kneed prime minister and the dog-loving general sit down and talk their differences over a *chaat* and *lassi*. Why can't Vajpayee and Musharraf squat across the line of control, share a beedi, speak the common Hindustani, and flush the Kashmir problem away, and talk about those bombs? That is the way South Asians have always welcomed a new dawn.

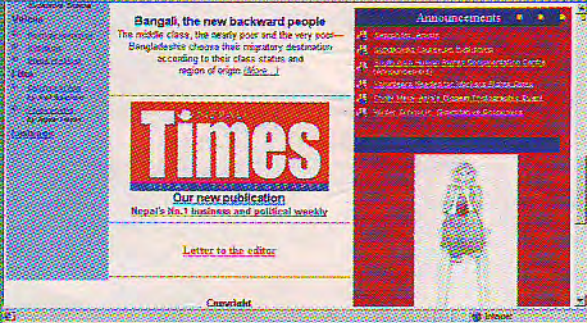
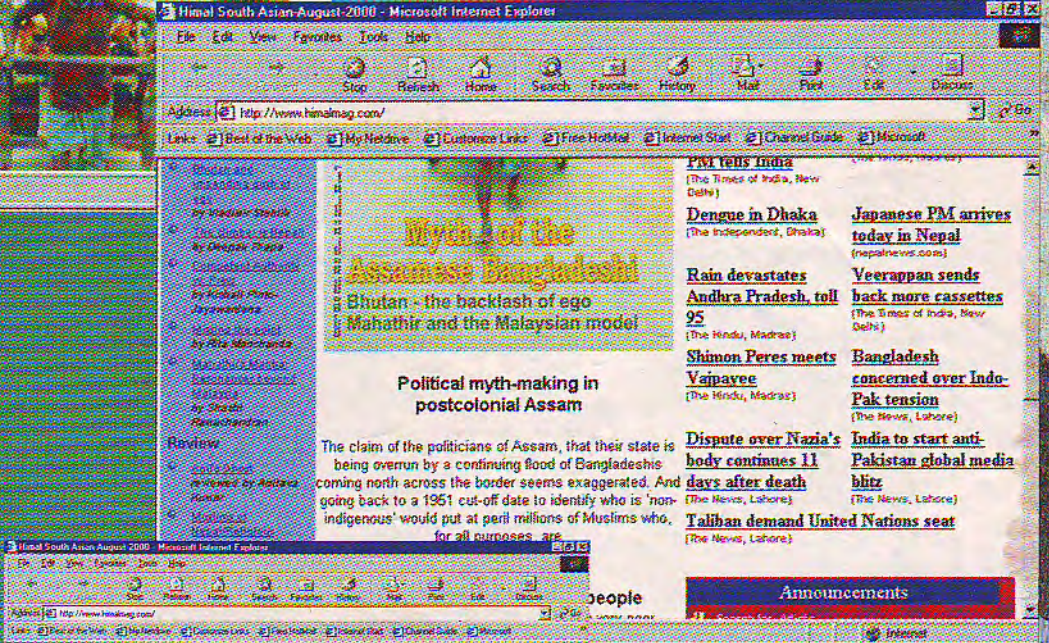
—Shanuj V.C.



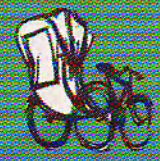


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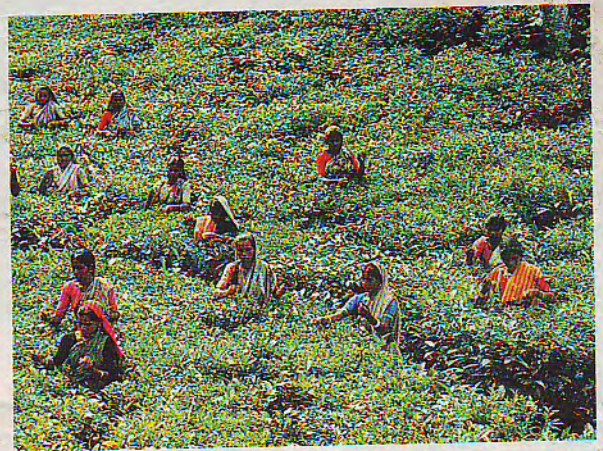
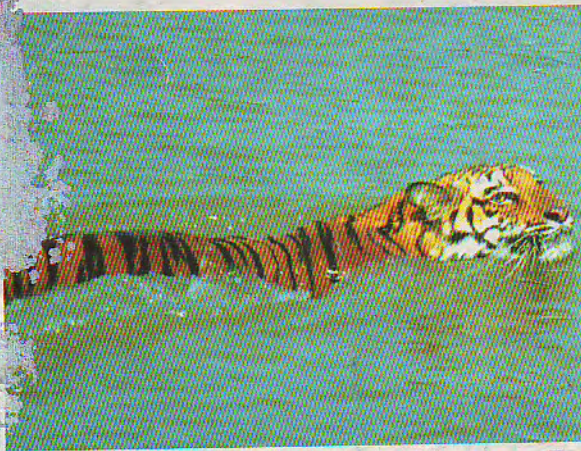
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have not been to South Asia  
if you have not seen

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