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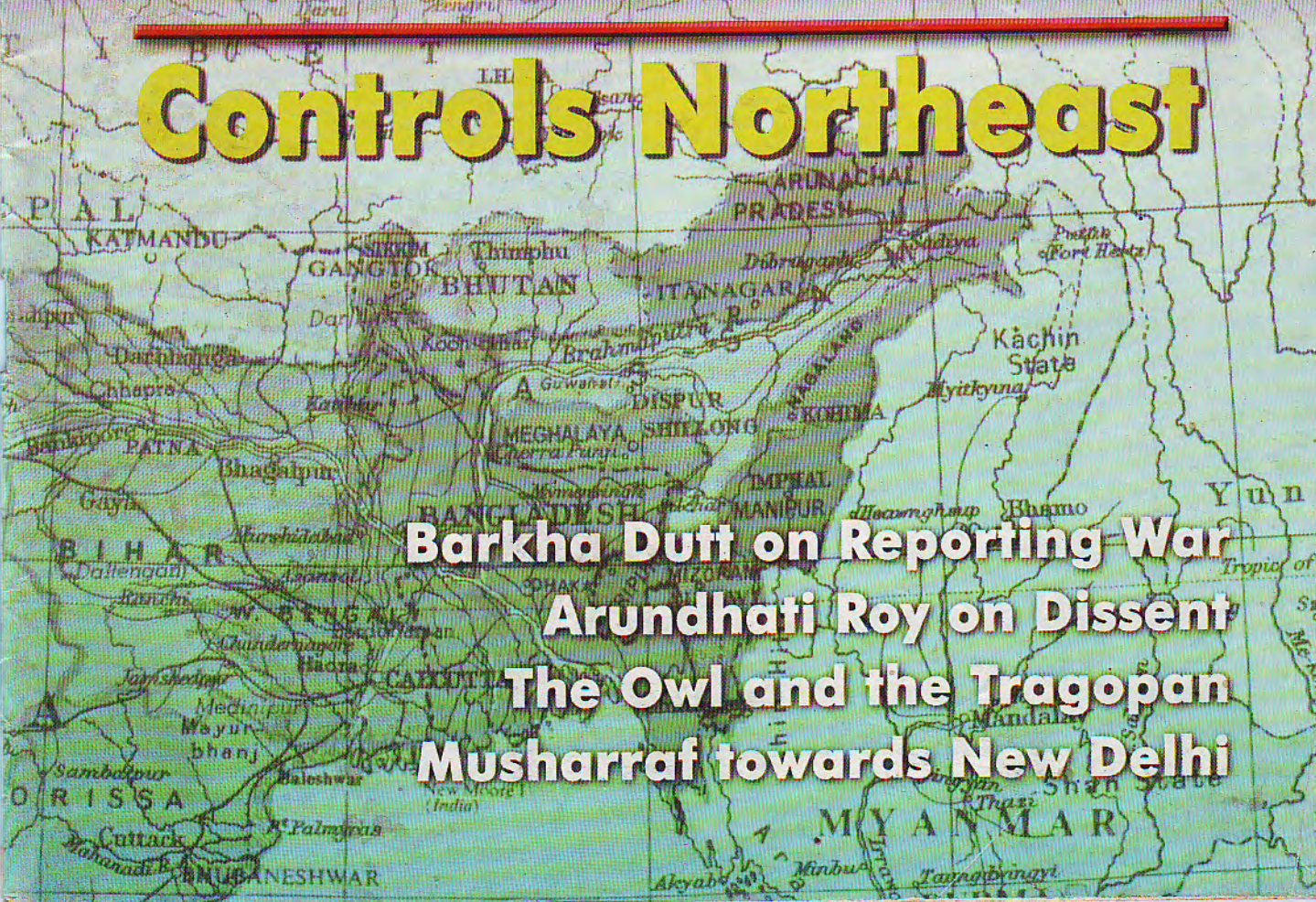
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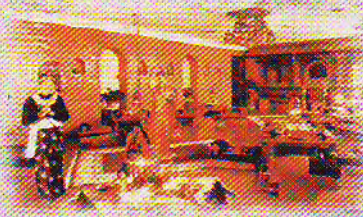
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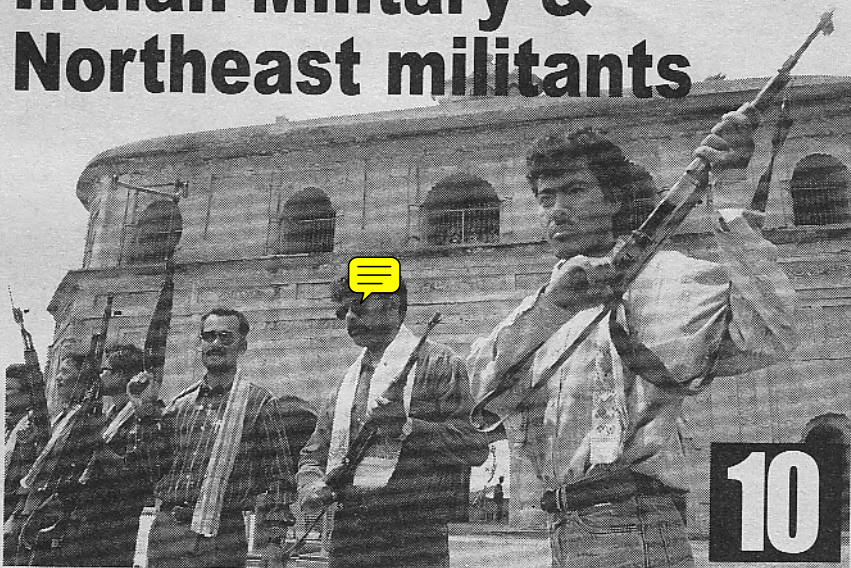
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COMMENTARY 5

Roadmap to the South Asian century
A not-so-discreet Operation Sanskrit

ESSAY 10

Generals as Governors
by Sanjib Baruah

PERSPECTIVE 22

Confessions of a war reporter
by Barkha Dutt

MEDIAFILE 28

INTERVIEW 30

Arundhati Roy

OPINION 35

The predicaments of conservation
by Ashwini Chhatre and Vasant Saberwal

RESPONSE 40

Delay and drift on the Mahakali
by Ramaswamy R. Iyer
Surmise of a conspiracy
by Irfan Ahmed

VOICES 46

FILM REVIEW 50

From Nowhere to the Middle of Nowhere
reviewed by Samuel Thomas

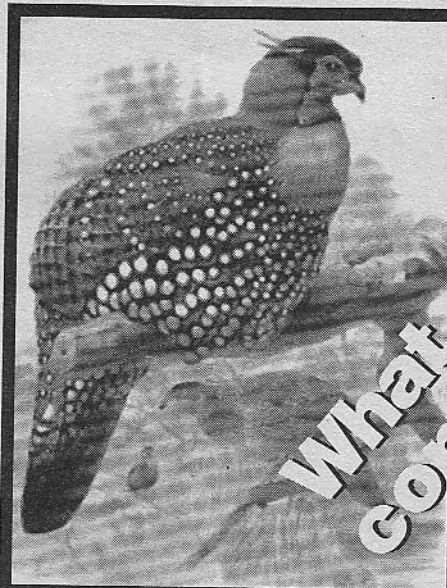
REVIEW 52

War at the Top of the World
reviewed by Harish Kapadia
The Politics of Cultural Practice
reviewed by Sudhanva Deshpande
Trans-Himalayan Caravans
reviewed by Sanjoy Bagchi

LASTPAGE 60

Reporting the Kargil War

22



What ails conservation?

35

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Cover picture shows view of Raisina Hill from India Gate, New Delhi, and the map of Northeast India. Design by Bilash Rai.

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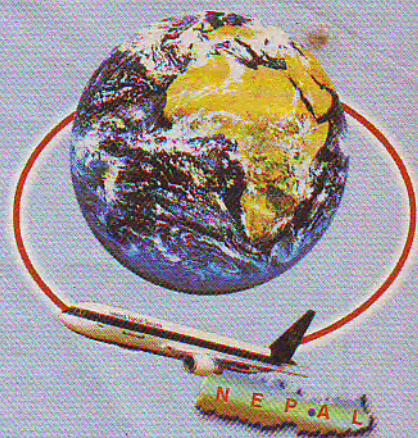
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Film South Asia '01 is organised by *Himal South Asian* and Himal Association.

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INDIA • PAKISTAN

A dramatic turn of events in Subcontinental geopolitics has had Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee extending an invitation to Pakistan's Chief Executive Pervez Musharraf to visit New Delhi, and the general has accepted it. It was overdue for the two nuclear powers of the most unstable place on earth to meet in summit, and now it is happening. It was understandable that Vajpayee felt cheated after 'Lahore', for it was Musharraf himself who had masterminded the Kargil mini-war that followed the peace bus ride. But when you are at cliff-edge, responsible leaders know to let bygones be bygones, which must be part of the reason why Delhi decided to extend its invitation. Despite his Kargil history, Musharraf is probably the best person in Pakistan to talk peace. As a military man, even though he is not totally free from political pressure, he has more leeway to take initiatives as well as risks than his political party predecessors, Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif, both currently in ingnomious exile. India may be a democracy but for this very reason its leaders have less margin to function, given the concretised mindset about Pakistan and Kashmir,

especially among the middle classes all worked up in the nationalist hype which followed both Pokharan II and Kargil. But the fact is that the populace on both sides of Wagah/Atari is ripe and ready for some movement, and we predict that a little bit of risk-taking by the prime minister and the chief executive would actually deliver unexpected dividends.

So, what should be the roadmap for the two, the politician and the general, should they decide to take the leap together into the South Asian future that beckons? One was provided five years ago in the pages of *Himal* by the scholar and activist, and true 'South Asian', Eqbal Ahmed. We reproduce sections from his article, "A Kashmiri solution for Kashmir" (November/December 1996). Eqbal Ahmed died on 10 May 1999 in Islamabad.

If Mr. Vajpayee and Gen Musharraf are able to put the Kashmir problem behind them and their respective people, they will have opened up possibilities for an incredible social and economic advance in which 1.4 billion individuals can participate. People have got the Nobel Peace Prize for less. —Editors.

ROADMAP TO THE SOUTH ASIAN CENTURY

—Eqbal Ahmed



THERE IS a conflict in South Asia, which has outlasted most post-World War II disputes. This long-festering dispute is the one in Kashmir, and it is the primary cause of hostility between India and Pakistan and a source for endless misery for the people of Kashmir.

As far as the Kashmiri is concerned, the Delhi and Islamabad governments share one key characteristic: both perceive Kashmir's realities and interests as subservient to their own. This affinity between the Pakistani and Indian positions is ironic in view of the fundamental contrast between the two in relation to Kashmir. India is, in the language of political science, a "status quo power". That is, it actually holds the area it covets, and its policies are intended to preserve the existing territorial situation. Pakistan's position, on the other hand, is that of a "revolutionary power" one which seeks to change that status quo.

The reality is that New Delhi's moral isolation from the Kashmiri people is total and irreversible. It might be reversible if India were to envisage a qualitatively different relationship with Kashmir, but so far New Delhi has evinced no inclination in this direction. But can India's loss translate into Pakistan's gain?

The answer is it cannot. Policy makers in

Islamabad like to believe otherwise, and this is not unusual. Although Pakistani decision-makers know the problem to be fundamentally political, since 1948 they have approached it in military terms. While officially invoking the Kashmiri right to self-determination, Pakistan's governments and politicians have pursued policies which have all but disregarded the history, culture, and aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

The first step towards a solution to the Kashmir tangle is to comprehend the ambitions and fears of the three parties—India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris. India's ambition is territorial; its aim, to exercise sovereignty over the Valley, Jammu and Ladakh. Its strategic concerns vis-a-vis China reinforce the territorial imperative. Delhi feels it cannot let pro-China Pakistan take over its strategic underbelly.

There are other reinforcements: India is politically polarised, and this polarisation will undoubtedly escalate if a centrist government accepts a formula to partition Kashmir. Also, India is a multi-religious state with a Muslim population as large as Pakistan's. Delhi cannot afford another partition along religious lines without risking massacres and riots led by the strident Hindu nationalists.

Pakistan's ambition is also territorial. It is reinforced by a deeply-held sense of injustice. After all, Mountbatten and his judicial minions did conspire to give India access to Jammu and Kashmir. Strategically, India's military presence in Kashmir stretches Pakistan's dangerously large defence parameters, and cuts it off from the source of its lifeline of rivers. To acquiesce in India's illegal occupation is to submit to the bullying of a big neighbour. Furthermore, Kashmiri protests and rebellions against India will not allow Pakistan to forego its advocacy of the Kashmiri right to self-determination.

As for the Kashmiri-speaking majority, the driving force among them is a well-founded sense of victimhood, a feeling historically rooted but greatly nourished by Delhi's brutal repression, the excesses of its security forces, and the collapse of Kashmir's economy. Their aspirations, however, are largely for freedom.



PM Vajpayee.

The notion of sovereignty has changed in the last half century, and is about to transform some more whereby divided sovereignties are not synonymous with divided frontiers.



CE Musharraf

This quest is not defined in terms of the "two-nation" theory. The Valley is a classic environment for nurturing nationalism, home of *Kashmiriyat*. India cannot suppress it. Pakistan cannot absorb it. It must be accommodated.

All three sides are in a blind alley, back to back. India and Pakistan have the capacity, and apparently the inclination, to stay this course indefinitely. The Kashmiris, being the weakest and most vulnerable party, face a Hobson's choice: either give in to India and settle for what symbolic concession they can get from the tormenting giant, or continue with resistance, however sporadically. History is replete with examples of oppressed peoples who have done just that, and their sacrifices have always been awesome. The shame and moral burden was always on the oppressors.

If one views as important the distinction between governing a society and coercing a multitude, India has ceased to govern Kashmir. Its options then are three-fold; one, keep its coercive presence in Kashmir and hope that some day Kashmiris will tire and throw in the towel. Two, negotiate with Kashmiri leaders

on terms the latter could live with. Three negotiate seriously with Pakistan and Kashmiri insurgents who are grouped in the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC). There is also a fourth option, another India-Pakistan war, which is unrealistic as far as settling the question of Kashmir is concerned.

Neither India nor Pakistan have tried the option of negotiated settlement. It requires the two adversaries to abandon their fixed positions, put in place half a century ago, and acknowledge three fundamental realities. The first is that Kashmir's future is a matter of dispute among Pakistan, India and the Kashmir people. Its settlement must involve and satisfy all three parties. Second, no matter how forcefully it is promoted, unilateral solutions will not work because Kashmir is too large, populous, and strategic a place. Third, that in this instance the benefits of a historic compromise are much greater than the profits or pride of territorial acquisition.

Peace, however gradual must be based on a common commitment to principles. One basic principle is that the ultimate arbiters of the Kashmir dispute are the people of Kashmir. It has to be acknowledged, too, that the notion of sovereignty has changed in the last half century, and is about to transform some more whereby divided sovereignties are not synonymous with divided frontiers.

If these principles are understood, diplomacy may be aimed at reaching an agreement to be implemented in three stages: autonomy, open borders, and "unification with divided sovereignty" over historic Kashmir. Under an arrangement whereby Jammu and Ladakh exercise a great measure of autonomy, India may claim sovereignty over them. Similarly, Azad Kashmir may be assured fuller autonomy and freedom from the federal government in Islamabad while Pakistan continues to remain the sovereign power. Upon the Valley—the historical and geographical heart of Kashmir and home of *Kashmiriyat*—may be invested the attributes of sovereignty.

This last needs to be accomplished in a manner that readies the Valley to serve three related purposes: as the repository and beacon of *Kashmiriyat*, as the insurer and facilitator of Kashmir's unity, and as a bridge between India and Pakistan. To diminish the risk of civil strife and demographic instability, and also to allow time for this new arrangement to become workable, the Valley could be guided through a period of transition under a United Nations trusteeship.

It is a difficult challenge but the time is ripe.

To become prosperous and normal peoples, we must make peace where there is hostility, build bridges where there are chasms, heal where there are wounds, feed where there is hunger, prosper where there is poverty. Kashmir is the finest place to start, and not merely because it is the core of the India-Pakistan conflict. Our histories, cultures and religions have converged in Kashmir. Our rivers begin there, mountains meet there, and our dreams rest there.

INDIA

A NOT-SO-DIS-CREET OPERATION SANSKRIT

ONE OF the first things that the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance government embarked on when it came to power was to 'rectify' the various institutional anomalies that had allegedly crept into the sphere of education and research during the tenures of previous governments in India. Pursuing this agenda zealously is the RSS loyalist and Hindutva hardliner, Murli Manohar Joshi, heading the union Human Resource Development (HRD) Ministry which controls education in India. Joshi also has additional charge of Science and Technology.

The 'rectification' programme that was started had two aspects to it. One involved the reconstitution of various committees and the replacement of heads of research, educational and scientific institutions. The other was changing the very content and intent of broad educational objectives. Therefore, committees were reconstituted and heads changed in the case of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (GNCA), the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the University Grants Commission (UGC).

There were other bodies as well that had to bear the impact of the ideological preference of the BJP. Committees of the Council for Advancement of People's Action in Rural Technology (CAPART) were reconstituted, and the prestigious Indian Institute of Advanced Studies at Shimla given a new director regarded as a sympathiser of the BJP and its ideology. Those institutions which resisted changes were victimised with denial of regular funds. The

Gandhian Institute of Studies (GIS) in Varanasi is a ready example. The ICSSR, which channels government funds to institutes under its control, has been instructed not to give funds even for salaries of employees with the GIS. This vendetta was apparently prompted by the government's inability to install a nominee of the HRD minister as the institute's director.

Regarding the content of education, despite opposition from several teachers' bodies and reputed scientists, the HRD Ministry has gone ahead with the plan for introducing vedic astrology at the university level. Together with this, the popularisation of Sanskrit at various fora has been taken up with a missionary zeal. Teachers' bodies have been critical of this chauvinistic support for a language which the Sangh calls a "world language". At the same time, because the government has reduced funds to universities, departments of modern Indian languages all over are dying from lack of financial support.

The most glaring changes, however, have been made in the area of school education. The NCERT which designs the curriculum and recommends changes in almost every aspect of school education in the country, has been at the centre of controversy ever since the BJP came to power in 1998. Curriculum revision was long overdue. The last time it was done was in 1988. This was just the opportunity for the government to take advantage of. A draft curriculum document was circulated, which was criticised by educationists for its undue stress on 'value education' or religion. "Values and their emotional dimension", whatever it was supposed to mean, had to be considered, asserted the draft document. Indeed, the draft is peppered with alternatively meaningless or value-laden statements like: "Values are powerful emotional commitments", and "Along with globalisation, localisation is also going to have a tremendous impact on the future society."

The draft also suggested an integrated social science course at the secondary level (classes 6 to 10) which could be done by "reducing the content load discreetly in the concerned subject areas..." The overall thrust of the document is to 'indigenise' education and to emphasise India's greatness in relation to the rest of the world. According to the draft, revision of syllabus is necessary because "while our children know about Newton, they do not know about our own Aryabhat... they do know about the computer but do not know about the concept of zero". This document on education also goes to the extent of erasing the distinction between verified knowledge and

superstitious belief. The section discussing the curriculum content on Science, Technology and Values for the Elementary and Secondary stages, says: "Science education will also have to impact to the students the spirit of enquiry and experimentation even in the areas where scientific evidence is not so far available to sustain some popular traditional faith and which have been rejected outright because of impatient rationality and motivated cynicism." Thankfully, its eccentric proposals for correcting the "definition of secularism" were finally dropped from the revised curriculum document after objections were raised.

The new document was released on 14 November 2000 by the HRD minister himself. Simultaneously, a *Journal of Value Education* was also released. It was perceived to be the brain-

"While our children know about Newton, they do not know about our own Aryabhat. They do know about the computer but do not know about the concept of zero."

child of the union Education Secretary, M K Kaw, who used the platform provided to air his obscurantist views in the journal. As a senior bureaucrat, it was especially improper on his part to claim that the greatest damage to intellectual freedom in India has been caused by traditional religions, especially by those which have a single holy book from which they derive their authority. When his musings became public, the National Commission on Minorities took notice and compelled Kaw to issue an apology. However, those passages and other equally damaging statements are yet to be expunged from the journal. Neither has the NCERT, which publishes the journal, dissociated itself from the contents.

Never before had the question of religion, spirituality and its relevance in school education been taken up so seriously. Moral science as a subject had existed in Indian school syllabi for long but this emphasis on value and spiritual education, is fraught with problems since it would exclude anything other than Hindu ideals. Moreover, various departments in the NCERT were not taken into confidence before the draft curriculum was finalised. The draft itself did not have the approval of the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), which is the supreme body on all such matters.

The meeting of the CABE was never called. Senior officials in NCERT also claim that all state councils had passed the draft. But nobody seems to know much about how the proposals and amendments were effected.

After the criticism poured in, some of the suggestions pertaining to correcting the "definition of secularism", and science to be used to "sustain traditional faiths" did not feature in the new document. The satraps at NCERT were not to be held back, however. They had, after all, promised to have a course of integrated social science for the secondary level of education with history, geography or economics/civics forming separate components. This was what was meant by reducing the "content load discreetly".

History was specially targeted. Works by well-known historians like R S Sharma, Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra and Satish Chandra, which have been around for nearly 30 years, had become an eyesore for the ruling dispensation. So history was seen to be the best place to start in correcting the "imbalances". There were voices within NCERT which insisted that these books had been updated and revised since their inception, and the only thing that was objectionable was, if anything, the ideological opposition of these historians to the BJP and its Hindutva agenda. But those voices were drowned. Some of these historians had been part of an expert committee group on text books, but now they were removed to make room for what was officially termed as "younger faces". However, as it turned out, the reconstituted committee was peopled by octogenarians, as well as individuals with very average credentials. Not only has history as a separate subject been done away with, gone are the established names associated with it. The new integrated social science will most likely come into effect from next year.

These and other moves to "saffronise" education have been raised time and again both in the media as well as Parliament. Left members of Parliament and a section of the Congress(I), especially the Rajya Sabha MP Eduardo Faleiro, have been consistent in their criticism. But to little effect. The latest move of the legislators opposing Murli Manohar Joshi's agenda, has been to form a Parliamentary Forum on Education and Culture, and the first thing it has taken up is the goings-on at NCERT. Whether this builds up enough pressure will have to be seen, but as of now, the Indian government is bulldozing its way through in the area of education—a saffron bull in the chinashop of secular learning.



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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

John Collee
The London Observer.

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

Time.



in Kathmandu, the Vajra

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GENERALS AS

The parallel political sys



Army men guarding a railway track in Northeast, but how much of it can they protect?

Isn't there a brigadier in Shillong?" This was how Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's deputy prime minister responded in 1949 to reports that the "native state" of Manipur might be reluctant to merge fully with the Indian Union. In September of that year, the governor of Assam, Sri Prakasa, accompanied by his adviser for Tribal Areas, Nari Rustomji, flew to Bombay to apprise Patel of the situation. The fate of Manipur and other indirectly ruled "native states" presented a significant constitutional problem when British rule of India ended in 1947. Indeed, the decision of the Kashmiri Maharaja to accede to India was the

beginning of the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. Patel and other senior Indian officials might perhaps have pondered more on the potential difficulties that could arise from decisions by major "native states" like Kashmir and Hyderabad on the postcolonial dispensation in the Subcontinent. But the thought that tiny and remote Manipur on India's border with Burma, might hesitate about fully joining India had probably never crossed their minds. The meeting of Sri Prakasa, Rustomji and Patel was brief. As Rustomji recalls in his memoir, *Enchanted Frontier*, apart from asking whether there was a brigadier stationed in the region, Patel said



S GOVERNORS

Systems of Northeast India

In the militancy-affected Indian Northeast, New Delhi's containment policy of the last four decades has produced a peculiar equilibrium, one in which democracy and authoritarian governance coexist with disturbing ease. The paternalistic carrot-and-stick approach—routine use of military force with development money spread about in the 'backward' region—assumes an imperious "foreknowledge of the destiny" of the Northeast. Indian policy must respond with constitutional reforms that respond to the region's history which animates the insurgencies. It must conduct a democratic dialogue involving the peoples of the Northeast and not rely on secret negotiations between bureaucrats and insurgents. But then will that be allowed by a system that appoints generals as governors?

by Sanjib Baruah

little else. It was clear from his voice what he meant, wrote Rustomji, and the conversation did not go any further.

Within days the Maharaja of Manipur, on a visit to Shillong, found himself virtually imprisoned in his residence. The house was surrounded by soldiers and under the pressure of considerable misinformation and intimidation, the Maharaja—isolated from his advisers, council of ministers and Manipuri public opinion—was made to sign an agreement fully merging his state with India. When the ceremony to mark the transfer of power and the end of this ancient kingdom took place

in Imphal on 15 October 1949, a battalion of the Indian army was in place to guard against possible trouble.

The circumstances attending Manipur's merger with India haunts the politics of the state to this day. A number of insurgent groups regard the merger as illegal and unconstitutional, and many among the Manipuri intelligentsia are bitter about the way it was effected. While Manipur today has an elected chief minister and an elected state legislature—like other states in the Indian Union—there is also a de facto parallel structure of governance directly controlled from Delhi that manages counter-insurgency operations. Visitors to



ULFA men surrendering before Assam Governor, Lt. Gen. (retired) S.K. Sinha.

Manipur cannot but notice the strong military presence. Even historic monuments such as the Kangla Fort of the old Manipuri kings, and parts of the complex in Moirang that commemorates the rebel Indian National Army, are occupied by Indian security forces.

It is not hard to see why there is such a massive security presence in the state. Manipur, today, has numerous insurgent groups with ethnically-based support among Meities, Nagas and Kukis. In recent years, smaller ethnic groups such as Paites, Vaipheis and Hmars too have formed their own armed organisations. The official count of lives annually lost in insurgency-related incidents in Manipur in recent years is in the hundreds. And somewhat independent of the activities of these insurgent organisations is the ethnic conflict between Nagas and Kukis and, more recently, between Kukis and Paites. Many of these conflicts appear intractable and some of them are attributable to the profound social transformation that these societies are undergoing. Yet unless one believes that a coercive state is a necessary instrument to manage change, it is hard to avoid the question: were the symbols and practices of the traditional Manipuri state—despite the significant erosion of its authority and power under British colonial rule—better-equipped to achieve social cohesion? Was Patel's readiness to use force—just as the rest of India was setting off on a path of democratic rights and liberties—an early acknowledgement that Indian democracy in the Northeast would necessarily have an authoritarian accent?

Manipur is not unique. Except for Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram, five of the seven states of Northeast India today—Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Tripura—have insurgent movements of varying levels of activity and intensity. Some of them, such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Nagaland's National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN), now divided into two factions, and the Manipur People's Liberation Front (MPLF), which consists of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the People's

Liberation Army (PLA) and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kanglaipak (PREPAK), have separatist agendas. Other ethnically based groups are typically dressed up as national fronts defending this or that minority ethnic group.

As a response to those insurgencies and to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence's (ISI) inclination to fish in these troubled waters, there are many more brigadiers in Northeast India today than Patel could have imagined. Military formations much larger than brigades—corps headed by lieutenant generals and divisions headed by major generals—are now stationed in this part of the country. In Vairengte, a Mizoram village, there is even a Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School for training officers to fight the militants. And the Indian Army is only one of the security forces deployed in the region. Other paramilitary units controlled by the central government, such as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF) the Assam Rifles, various intelligence bureaus and the police forces of each state, are also involved in counter-insurgency operations. And overseeing these operations is a parallel political structure that works outside the rules and norms that govern India's democratic political institutions.

Political violence—murders, bombings, kidnappings, extortion by militants, and killing of militants by security forces in actual or staged encounters—has become a routine part of news from the Northeast. True, there is also news of elections, cease-fires and talks—or prospects of talks—with insurgents. But the two kinds of news and images co-exist with disturbing ease. No one finds the image of democratic elections being conducted under massive military presence anomalous. Nor does anyone expect talks with insurgents to bring about sustained peace. Indeed in some ways, insurgencies themselves have become incorporated into the democratic political process. Good political reporters of the Northeast know the precise role that insurgent factions play in elections or the ties that these factions have with particular mainstream politicians.

For politicians, the use of the army to fight insurgencies has now become something of a habit. For instance, in the spring of 2000, after attacks on Bengalis by tribal militants in Tripura, political parties belonging to the state's Left Front government observed a 12-hour bandh to pressurise the central government to send in the army to deal with the situation. Chief Minister Manik Sarkar complained that even though 27 police station areas in the state had been declared "disturbed", the Indian army had not yet arrived. One would hardly guess from such statements that the law that these democratic politicians were relying on—the law that permits army deployment in "disturbed" areas—is a law that contravenes all conceivable human rights standards.

According to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), in an area that is proclaimed as "disturbed",



an officer of the armed forces has powers to: (a) fire upon or use other kinds of force even if it causes death; (b) to arrest without a warrant and with the use of "necessary" force anyone who has committed certain offences or is suspected of having done so; and (c) to enter and search any premise in order to make such arrests. Army officers have legal immunity for their actions. There can be no prosecution, suit or any other legal proceeding against anyone acting under that law. Nor is the government's judgment on why an area is found to be disturbed subject to judicial review.

As Ravi Nair of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre in New Delhi has pointed out, the AFSPA violates the Indian Constitution's right to life, the right against arbitrary arrest and detention, the rules of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code relating to arrests, searches and seizures, and almost all relevant international human rights principles. There was a time when reports of human rights violations in the Northeast were taken seriously. But most Indians now regard human rights organisations as being at best naïve, or at worst, sympathisers of insurgents masquerading under the flag of human rights. The violation of human rights in the Northeast is seen as the necessary cost of keeping the nation safe from its enemies inside and outside.

Thus in 1991, when the United Nations Human Rights Committee asked the Attorney General of India to explain the constitutionality of the AFSPA in terms of Indian law and to justify it in terms of international human rights law, he defended it on the sole ground that it was necessary in order to prevent the secession of the northeastern states. The Indian government, he argued, had a duty to protect the states from internal disturbances and that there was no duty under international law to allow secession.

State within a state

In the insurgency-hardened Northeast, democratic India has developed a de facto political system, somewhat autonomous of the formal democratically-elected governmental structure. This parallel system is an intricate, multi-tiered reticulate, with crucial decision-making, facilitating and operational nodes that span the region and connects New Delhi with the theatre of action.

The apex decision-making node is the Home Ministry in New Delhi housed in North Block on Raisina Hill. The operational node which implements the decisions consists of the Indian Army, and other military, police and intelligence units controlled by the central and state governments, and involves complex coordination. This apparatus also involves the limited participation of the political functionaries of insurgency-affected states. Elected state

governments, under India's weak federal structure, can always be constitutionally dismissed in certain situations of instability. But New Delhi has generally preferred to have them in place while conducting counter-insurgency operations. Since the insurgencies have some popular sympathy—albeit not stable or stubborn—the perception that the operations have the tacit support of elected state governments is useful for their legitimacy.

Consequently, the command structure may include some state-level politicians and senior civil servants. This is perceived to be the weakest link in the chain because of the fear that the presence of these 'locals' might potentially subvert the counter-insurgency operations. Consider the following news reports:

1. In December 2000, the central government asked the Manipur government to investigate links between at least five ministers and insurgent groups. The Home Ministry forwarded a report to the state authorities that included evidence of such a nexus between the ministers and insurgents. Manipur's caretaker chief minister Radhabinod Kojam, just before the fall of his government last month, dropped six ministers from his cabinet. Kojam was in the middle of a political battle for survival, and there were other reasons for their removal. But he defended his action saying that their names appeared in the Home Ministry's list of "tainted" politicians.
2. In January 2001, the Union Home Ministry proposed the setting up of a judicial enquiry commission to probe into the allegations and counter-allegations of the insurgent-politician nexus in the northeastern states.
3. In the May 2001 elections just concluded, former chief minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta repeatedly accused the Congress party of having a nexus with ULFA. The Congress party dismissed the charge as election propaganda and claimed that its victory proved that the electorate did not believe the





accusation. In the elections of 1996, the roles were reversed: the Congress had made similar charges against Mahanta's party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP).

There are, of course, many reasons why democratically-elected politicians of a region, where insurgent groups and mainstream political parties may share the same social, political, and cultural space, would sometimes know and have ties with each other. Pervasive corruption also leads politicians to cultivate ties with insurgent groups. They, like others with a reputation for making illegal money, consider it prudent to try to keep the insurgent groups happy by sharing parts of their illicit income with them. Rather than a hard boundary separating insurgents and mainstream politicians, in these circumstances, a nexus between some of them becomes inevitable, despite the fact that such ties may cost these politicians in terms of their credibility as far as New Delhi is concerned.

A former home minister of Nagaland, Dalle Namo, who had been part of the Naga 'underground', once movingly acknowledged his debt to the pioneers of the movement for Naga independence. He told journalist Nirmal Nibedon that he is conscious of the fact that he lives "in this big bungalow because men like Phizo and Imkongmeren and many others once lived in caves. All these chandeliers and lights [are there] because for them the stars were their only light; [I have] these expensive wall-to-wall carpets because they walked on moss and grass." Nibedon recalls this conversation in a foreword to Namo's autobiography, *The Prisoner from Nagaland*.

Of course, such sentiments connecting insurgents with mainstream politicians are far from universal. It is unlikely, for instance, that Prafulla Kumar Mahanta of

Assam or Nagaland's present Chief Minister, S.C. Jamir, whom militants have tried to kill more than once, would share similar idealised views about leaders of the Assamese or the Naga 'underground'. However, even these leaders have not always been free of ties with militants. The Khaplang-led faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim, for instance, is reputed to enjoy the patronage of Jamir.

This is the paradox of counter-insurgency. On the one hand, it must draw on the legitimacy of the elected establishment. On the other, it must protect itself from this establishment's susceptibilities. Namo's account

and the repeated charges of a link between north-eastern politicians and insurgents underscore why India's security establishment would want a parallel structure of governance that is as autonomous as possible from the democratic politics of the state in question. For instance, in the case of the Indian government's allegation of a nexus between the five Manipuri politicians and insurgents, if the Home Ministry had provided evidence of such a nexus to the "authorities" in Manipur, it is unlikely, that this report would go to the elected members of the state government—some of whom were themselves the object of suspicion. The most likely person to have received that report from New Delhi, one can reasonably speculate, was the Governor of Manipur.

Bending the rules of constitutional democracy, and building and maintaining a parallel structure however, is not always easy. Not all elected state governments have been willing to give up their constitutional prerogatives. For instance, in Assam, thanks to the consent of former chief minister Mahanta, counter-insurgency operations since 1997 has been conducted by a Unified Command under which all forces including the state police come under the operational command of the Army. Tarun Gogoi, in one of his first statements as Assam's chief minister, following the Congress' election victory this May, said that he would like to see the Assam police play more of a role in the Unified Command because of its superior knowledge of local conditions. It is unlikely that Gogoi will seek to end the use of Uniform Command structure in Assam. On the other hand, elected politicians in Manipur have so far resisted pressures from the Indian Home Ministry and the Indian Army to have a Unified Command structure. Former chief minister of Manipur,



W. Nipamacha, for instance, had maintained that since legally speaking, the army was deployed in the state only to assist the civil administration, it should remain under the command of the state government.

Such potential conflicts between the compulsions of the civil dispensation and the concerns of the security establishment make the governors of these states crucial nodes in the counter-insurgency network. The management of this difficult equation, in fact, confers on the governor's office a role that far exceeds the more ceremonial functions it is constitutionally restricted to elsewhere and in normal circumstances. The career profiles of the incumbents in the Northeast provide an index of the importance of the gubernatorial office to the parallel political system. All the seven governors of the northeastern states today have either occupied high and sensitive positions in India's security establishment or have had close ties to it.

Arunachal Pradesh: Arvind Dave, former chief, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW)

Assam: Lieutenant General (retired) S.K. Sinha

Manipur: Ved Prakash Marwah, retired Indian Police Service officer

Meghalaya: M.M. Jacob, former central minister and deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha

Mizoram: A.R. Kohli, former businessman with political ties

Nagaland: O.P. Sharma, retired Indian Police Service Officer

Tripura: Lieutenant General (retired) K.M. Seth

Two are retired military men, two are retired police officers, and one is the former head of India's espionage agency, RAW, engaged in clandestine operations abroad and at home. Of the two without any ostensible ties with the security establishment, M. M. Jacob, governor of Meghalaya, was once Minister of State for Home Affairs in New Delhi; and A.R. Kohli, recently appointed governor of relatively peaceful Mizoram, who had a career in business, has strong ties with the RSS, suggesting proximity to Home Minister L.K. Advani. The fact that all the appointees have had fairly intimate connections with the security establishment cannot be mere coincidence. As appointees of the central government and as facilitating agents in the counter-insurgency regime, such antecedents serve very practical ends, particularly in ensuring that the demands of security override the rules of democracy in the event of a conflict between the two.

Governor as judge

Instances of gubernatorial interventions point to the role they play in insulating counter-insurgency operations from democratic processes and scrutiny. Governors often act in ways that not only stretch constitutional propriety but also sacrifice democratic procedures at that altar of security expediencies. A case of what can be called counter-insurgent constitutionalism took place in Assam in 1998 when the Governor, Lt. Gen Sinha, intervened to stop the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) from prosecuting then chief minister Mahanta on a serious corruption charge. Mahanta's acquiescence in the Unified Command structure was clearly important to the security establishment. At the same time, the legal pursuit of a credible corruption charge against an elected chief minister could have significantly raised the legitimacy of India's democratic governmental institutions in the public eye. There was a choice between two sets of values: the perceived political requirements of counter-insurgency versus an opportunity to raise the public esteem of India's democratic institutions in a region where those institutions lack legitimacy.

The corruption charge against Mahanta went back to what is commonly referred to as the "Letters of Credit scam", involving at least INR 200 crores between 1986 and 1993. Mahanta was not chief minister at that time. Fake letters of credit were issued by the state's animal husbandry and veterinary departments to draw money from the treasury, and a number of politicians of both the then ruling Congress and the opposition AGP, were implicated. It was also suspected that a part of the



Surrender ceremony: ULFA becoming SULFA in front of the historic Rong-Ghar (Ahom palace) at Sibsagar district in Assam. The first batch of ULFA was raised at the same site on 7 April 1979.

money found its way to the ULFA.

The CBI investigated a number of politicians. The case against Mahanta was that the kingpin of the scam, Rajendra Prasad Borah, had paid him INR 40 lakhs during the 1991 elections, and that Mahanta's air travels during the campaign had been financed by Borah. According to the CBI, in that election, Borah had distributed house-building material to purchase votes in Mahanta's electoral constituency. Bank drafts distributed by Mahanta, in his electoral district, according to the CBI, were paid for by Borah.

For a governor—a former military general—to make a legal judgment on whether a chief minister should be prosecuted pushes the limits of constitutional propriety. To be sure, this power of Indian governors is not limited to the Northeast and as the Delhi-based magazine *India Today* pointed out in an editorial, “there is something profoundly undemocratic about a mechanism which requires the governor's permission to even begin legal proceeding against a chief minister seen as corrupt”. In the Northeast, given parallel power structure in place, the potential for abuse of that power—or, perhaps its use—as a means of securing support for the security regime from a corrupt chief minister is enormous.

The governor's reasons for disallowing the CBI's prosecution of Mahanta, involved a number of legal rationalisations. Sinha pointed to the lack of evidence, and questioned the reliability of the witnesses who formed the basis of the CBI's case. The CBI, according to the governor, had not established Mahanta's “criminal culpability”. The governor rejected the charge that Mahanta had entered into a criminal conspiracy with Borah to defraud the state claiming that “no evidence of such conspiracy has been provided”.

Obviously, governors enjoy extraordinary powers to influence chief ministers in the interests of the parallel regime. In this particular case, it is difficult to avoid speculating on a very obvious connection. In Assam since 1997, the Unified Command structure has been possible because of the consent given by Mahanta. That was a year before the governor was called upon to make this crucial judgment in the corruption case. Was there a quid pro quo in the governor's decision to protect Mahanta from legal prosecution so as to ensure his continued support for the Unified Command structure? Did the perceived needs of counter-insurgency trump the value of achieving greater transparency in government? More importantly, what has this entire edifice and its strategies achieved by way of ending insurgency and restoring peace?

Why is peace so elusive?

This counter-insurgency apparatus and its modus operandi are geared fundamentally, and more or less exclusively, to containment. So long as insurgencies are only contained, and no sustainable peace processes are in place, democracy in the Northeast is likely to continue to co-exist with the use of authoritarian modes

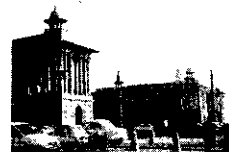
of governance. With the significant exception of the Mizo movement, most insurgencies in the Northeast have been transformed, or are currently transforming, into long-term, low-intensity conflicts. The perceived need for counter-insurgency operations never seems to go away. Even in Mizoram, at least if one goes by military presence in that state, the end of the insurgency has not meant that the state within the state has been dismantled.

There are three reasons why most northeastern insurgencies turn into protracted conflicts of attrition: (a) the goal of counter-insurgency is limited to creating conditions under which particular insurgent groups or factions surrender weapons, come to the negotiation table on the government's terms and make compromises in exchange for personal gain; (b) counter-insurgency operations do not dramatically change the conditions on the ground that breed and sustain the insurgent political culture and lifestyle; and (c) the political initiative that accompany and supplement counter-insurgency operations try to utilise former militants in the war against insurgents, thus creating a climate of mistrust and a cycle of violence and counter-violence between anti-government and pro-government insurgents.

The need for a powerful security presence can hardly disappear under these conditions. Assam's growing violence—which includes a large number of secret killings by death squads—exemplifies the results of a counter-insurgency strategy which in fact transformed an insurgency into a wider and long drawn-out conflict. The bloody elections of May 2001 in which scores of people lost their lives is at odds with Lt. Gen Sinha's euphoric claim of the “ballot having won against the bullet”.

The Mizoram exception, of course, is important. In 1986, Laldenga, the leader of the Mizo National Front, signed an accord with prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, and this remains the only instance of an accord successfully bringing about an end to insurgency in northeast India. Laldenga became the chief minister of Mizoram and when he lost elections two years later, there was no call for a return to insurgency. Among the factors that accounted for the successful end of the Mizo insurgency were the following: the undisputed leadership of the insurgency in the hands of a single individual who was willing to compromise and who could deliver his part of the deal; the feasibility of offering Laldenga the chief ministership of Mizoram in exchange for ending the insurgency; the existence of large and organised church-related civil society institutions that were actively involved in creating and supporting the consensus for peace; and a political climate in New Delhi during the Rajiv Gandhi years that was relatively open to making significant political compromises with insurgents.

But to date, the Mizo case has been the only exception, and insurgency refuses to die down despite



the sophistication and resources of the counter-insurgency establishment and the leeway given it to use the governor as political administrator. In seeking to understand why peace continues to elude Northeast India, it is important to study how insurgencies are able to sustain themselves in the face of such enormous military action. It is important to keep in mind the fact that while the security establishment runs parallel administrations that circumscribe civil administrations politically, insurgent movements run similar parallel fiscal administrations at the ground level through illegal tax collection and extortion.

One perspective on the longevity of armed civil conflicts focuses attention not so much on the grievances that are articulated by insurgent groups but to the ability of these groups to finance their activities. For example, economist Paul Collier in an article, in a recent volume, *Managing Global Chaos*, looking at the global patterns of armed civil conflicts, concluded that the most significant factor of civil conflicts is the ability of rebel organisations to be financially viable. He also found a strong correlation with a specific set of economic conditions such as a region's dependence on exports of primary commodity and low national income.

It is not that poverty breeds armed civil conflicts, Collier surmises, but that certain economic conditions are conducive to the mobilisation of revenue by armed insurgent groups. Primary commodities are highly lootable, primary production centres located in conflict-zones are easily accessible, and production cannot be moved elsewhere. Unlike a manufacturing unit, which is not worth much once production ceases, owners and managers of such centres continue to be dependent on existing production sites, making them vulnerable to extortion. Low national income, Collier argues, is correlated with armed civil conflicts not because the objective condition of poverty sustains rebellion, but because in a context of poverty and unemployment, an insurgent group that is able to raise enough money can recruit new members quite inexpensively.

The Collier thesis is useful to explain the resilience of the Northeast insurgencies. It draws attention to the conditions that permit illegal tax collection. For instance, in those areas of large countries where the state's presence is weak, it is easier for rebel organisations to establish illegal taxation structures that resemble official ones. The availability of foreign material support also becomes an important factor in explaining the persistence of armed civil conflicts. The civil war in Sierra Leone perhaps most dramatically supports the Collier thesis: the control over diamond mining and international diamond smuggling is clearly what has allowed the armed rebels to continue the fight.

While northeastern India is no Sierra Leone, it is nevertheless striking that the region is both poor and a primary commodity-producing region—factors that, according to Collier, make an area conducive to illegal tax-collection and to the persistence of armed civil

conflicts. Indeed, the production and transportation of primary commodities that Northeast India produces and exports—tea, timber, coal and so on—have been a major source of legal taxation by governments, a source of extortion by officials, and the favourite source of illegal taxation by insurgent groups, and increasingly by pro-government insurgent groups that collaborate in counter-insurgency operations, like Assam's SULFA (former members of ULFA who have "surrendered", and hence the 'S').

Indian taka, Naga taka

During 1994-95, Sanjoy Ghose, the social activist who was kidnapped and killed by ULFA in 1997, travelled extensively in the Northeast. His travel diaries have been published posthumously as *Sanjoy's Assam*. In his travels through Nagaland, Ghose found a formalised system of tax-collection imposed by the NSCN. 'Everybody' paid, and in the case of the state government's Public Works Department (PWD)—perceived as highly corrupt—Ghose found that there was a progressive system of illegal taxation in place. Those of the rank of executive engineers and above paid one-third of their net salary. This percentage may seem high to someone unfamiliar with the culture of corruption in the region, but the fact is that the formal, departmental salary is only a small part of the actual income of an engineer. A senior police officer of Nagaland confided to Ghose that even though he himself was not paying, most of his colleagues did "contribute". Such stories about systems of illegal taxation—perhaps not equally formalised everywhere—are heard all through the Northeast. Indeed it is not merely insurgent organisations, but mainstream political parties, student organisations, corrupt officials, all resort to coercive and illegal modes of "tax collection" from businesses—big and small.

Pervasive corruption and the preponderance of 'outsiders' in the economy of the region make the climate especially illegal taxation-friendly. Indeed, as Sanjoy Ghose found in the case of PWD engineers in Nagaland, unlike government tax collectors who could target only what is officially declared as income, insurgents—drawing on popular perceptions and credible rumour—can impose higher taxes based on more realistic assessments of income. It is in no one's interest to report extortion demands and payments that involve mostly illegal income to law enforcement officials.

Krishnan Saigal, a former Indian civil servant who was Assam's Planning and Development Commissioner and who is familiar with the process of development finance in the Northeast, has written about the way development funds allocated to the region are a bonanza for a group of contractors and license holders—mostly from outside the region—whose "main ambition is to make a fast buck and get out of the area as quickly as possible". As the Indian state has increased development expenditures in response to the voices of

discontent in the Northeast, he writes, there has been an even "quicker siphoning off of funds to the heartland with the few benefits accruing to those in power through the usual corrupt forces". Saigal believes this has led to increasingly corrupt regimes in the northeastern states. And the people of the region, he believes, even see them as representing central power in order to keep their state underdeveloped.

The perception that New Delhi is throwing money away in order to buy peace gives an aura of legitimacy to tax collection by insurgents. The manifesto of the NSCN is a case in point: "The pouring in of Indian capital in our country for political reasons has shattered the Naga people into a society of wild money," creating a parasitic, exploiting class of "reactionary traitors, bureaucrats, a handful of rich men and the Indian vermin". Such a view of the politics underlying New Delhi's development expenditures allows Naga insurgents to take the moral high ground: it is only fair that such ill-gotten wealth be shared with an organisation that works for the greater good of the Nagas. To give another example of the consequence of this perception, in Nagaland it is said that during elections when political parties distribute money to buy votes, acceptance of that money is seen as legitimate since it involves only "Indian *taka*" (Indian money), not "Naga *taka*" (Naga money).

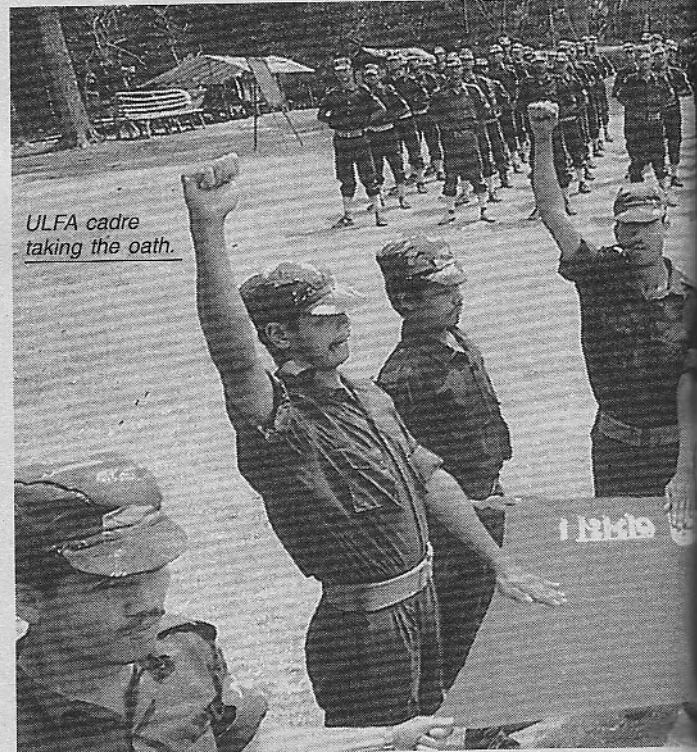
In order to discredit militants in the eyes of their supporters, military and intelligence officials have in recent years started speaking about the luxurious lifestyles of insurgent leaders or of the insurgents being nothing more than bandits seeking "easy money". While all this is not news to anyone living in the Northeast, whether such statements from security officials involved in counter-insurgency operations increases the legitimacy of governmental institutions vis-à-vis the rebels, is a different matter. Despite some highly publicised successes such as unearthing evidence that one of India's major business houses—the Tatas—were providing support to Assamese rebels, it is doubtful that the focus on the expropriative aspect of insurgencies has so far led to any systematic change affecting the illegal tax-collection capacity of insurgent groups.

Here are two recent newspaper reports that illustrate how routine the taxation systems of insurgent organisations are and how impervious they have been to decades of counterinsurgency operations:

In February 2001, the NSCN (Issac-Muivah) announced, and Indian newspapers routinely published the news of, a "tax break" for industries. According to *The Times of India*, the NSCN (I-M) announced an exemption of "loyalty taxes" for two years on certain categories of businesses—some of them even state-owned businesses. Quoting the organisation's Information and Publication Secretary, V. Horam, the news report said that the tax break was given in order to boost economic activities in the Naga areas of the Northeast. The "tax

exemption", said the notification, applied to enterprises that were less than two years' old. However, the taxes on other businesses and the income tax on salaried people would continue.

In March 2001, militant groups demanded INR 40 lakhs from eight Christian missionary schools in Manipur's capital city, Imphal. When the schools expressed their inability to pay, the militants imposed a fine of INR 2 crores and ordered them to close down. The matter was raised in the Manipur State Assembly. The press reported that security in and around the missionary schools was increased. The chief minister of Manipur told the state legislature that cases were registered with the police in connection with the extortion demands and were being investigated. But



no one expected such investigations to go very far. Last month, three Christian missionaries were murdered by militants apparently because of non-payment of those levies.

There seems to be little evidence that in these two states, years of counter-insurgency has had any significant impact on the conditions that have bred and sustained insurgency, i.e. the relative incapacity of civil administration to provide protection (despite its strong military presence) and the continued ability of insurgent organisations to collect illegal taxes. It appears that insurgent groups can guarantee security and collect tax better than the state can. It is hardly surprising then that many people—politicians, traders, government officials and even major corporations—make their uneasy peace with insurgent groups, just as they learn



to live with counter-insurgency operations without high expectations of an end to the fighting.

What then accounts for this fundamental failure? It must be that New Delhi's Northeast policy has yet to come to grips with the dense social networks of northeastern societies and the ideas and values that animate the insurgencies.

Passionate about history

How can the Northeast ever hope to get out of this quagmire, in which a larger democracy lives comfortably with the most arbitrary of powers in "disturbed" areas? There might be occasional doubts in India about what counter-insurgency itself can achieve. But one idea that enjoys widespread acceptance is that once the



problem of the region's economic backwardness is taken care of, the main source of political turmoil will go away. Indeed it would probably be hard to find a more diehard group of economic determinists than Indian bureaucrats and politicians engaged with the Northeast.

This faith in economic development contrasts sharply with the vision of insurgent groups in the Northeast. While those who try to solve the "insurgency problem" mainly talk about economic development and modernisation, the insurgents hark back to history. Thus ULFA speaks of Assam's lost independence when the Yandabo Treaty was signed between the British and the Burmese kings in 1826, Manipuri rebels raise questions about the constitutionality of the merger agreement of 1949, and Naga rebels query "how these long stretches of frontiers which were neither Burmese

nor Indian territories could simply disappear into India and Burma after 1947?" (Kaka D. Iralu, *Nagaland and India: The Blood and the Tears*, 2000).

True, militant groups, political parties and public opinion in northeastern states do complain about the region's economic underdevelopment but their primary grouse appears to be perceived injustices grounded in the history of how the Indian postcolonial constitutional order came into being. But what is striking is that the bureaucrats, politicians and military officers who make Northeast policy are either oblivious of the historical issues that insurgencies raise, or consider them too trivial to merit substantive engagement. Thus, exploring different ways of granting greater constitutional autonomy as a response to these historical claims, is not at all part of the Indian policy-maker's basket of solutions.

In the history of ideas there are numerous examples of the authoritarian consequences of dealing with places and people only in terms of their supposed future—framed in terms of ideas about backwardness and progress—without taking into account their past. After all, that is how an entire generation of liberal and progressive English thinkers—e.g. Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Thomas B. Macaulay—managed to endorse empire as a legitimate form of government, and even justify its undemocratic and unrepresentative structure. The key to understanding this paradox of the liberal defence of empire, writes Uday Singh Mehta in his book *Liberalism and Empire*, lies in the reforms proposed by the liberals. Developmentalism, according to Mehta, had been an integral feature of liberalism. Liberal thought identified India's backwardness, so imperial rule could be justified by the initiation of endless projects for economic development, social reforms, etc.

By contrast, the conservative Edmund Burke had a harder time accepting British rule of India. Of course Burke did not oppose empire; he argued for good government, not Indian self-government. Yet his was a sharper critique of empire because he saw India in terms of its existing established communities, and he did not want to see them threatened. And unlike liberals who worried about whether India was to be regarded as a nation or just a conglomeration of innumerable castes and tribes, Burke assumed that peoples living in one place for generations had to be regarded as political communities. Most importantly, unlike liberals, Burke, in Mehta's words, never presumed a "foreknowledge of other people's destiny". Indian bureaucrats would do well to take more seriously the histories of the peoples of the Northeast, and give up the assumption of foreknowledge of their destinies that is implied in the talk about bringing development and modernisation to remote tribal societies.

Recognising the Northeast as a region where the people have histories, of course, does not mean that the region's history will have ready answers to its



contemporary problems. But taking history seriously can have important implications. There is the example of the recent negotiations between Naga leaders and the Government of India where both sides have failed to arrive at a common ground—the Naga idea of a Nagalim or greater Nagaland, is a source of anxiety to a number of neighbouring northeastern states, especially Manipur.

It is tempting to think of the issue entirely in terms of ethnic anxieties. But the history of the political formations of the region, suggests otherwise. The political history of the region has more interconnections and continuities than the idea of bounded and demarcated ethnic homelands might suggest. In the 19th century, Sir James Johnstone, a colonial official, described political rituals of the Manipuri kings which were remarkably inclusive. The investiture ceremony of the Manipuri kings required the queen to appear in Naga costume; the royal palace always had a house built in Naga style; and when the king travelled he was attended on by two or three Manipuris with Naga arms, dress and ornaments.

The interconnections between Nagas and Manipuris suggested by the practices and rituals of the Manipuri court may not provide ready answers to resolve the Nagalim issue today. But one thing is clear: rather than secretive deals between Indian bureaucrats and leaders of one or the other insurgent organisations, these questions are best addressed by debates that take seriously the passionate interest in history that animates the northeastern insurgencies, and by taking into confidence the people of the region.

Rather than trying to contain insurgencies, India needs to raise its expectations of what is possible. Even the most protracted of armed civil conflicts in the world—Northern Ireland—is today closer to resolution

than ever before. Establishing a blue-ribbon committee to examine the accomplishments and failures of the last five decades of India's strategy and tactics of counter-insurgency in the Northeast, may be a good place to start from. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act is almost as old as the Indian Constitution. It was introduced to deal with the Naga insurgency. Four and a half decades later, not only has peace remained elusive in Nagaland, insurgencies have enveloped formerly peaceful parts of the Northeast. The extension of this law to the entire region has compromised Indian democracy in the Northeast in unacceptable ways.

Surely half a century is a long enough period for honest stock-taking and reassessment of goals and achievements. Until such rethinking takes place, withdrawing the AFSPA, appointing as governors those whose accomplishments are in fields other than national security, and removing the military presence from historical monuments such as the Kangla Fort and the INA memorial, will be powerful symbols to indicate the desire for a new beginning that would shape a fully democratic Northeast in the 21st century.

But these are civil measures substantially at variance with the 'military-economic' solution that currently finds favour. The question that remains is whether an honest review of options is at all possible given the extraordinary influence of the security establishment and the interests it has acquired in the "disturbed" Northeast. The appointment of 'military governors' to oversee the dilution of civil political authority seems to suggest that democratic alternatives will not merit even passing consideration. After all, if a lasting peace is restored in the region, generals will no longer be governors. And there will be no need for so many brigadiers. ▽



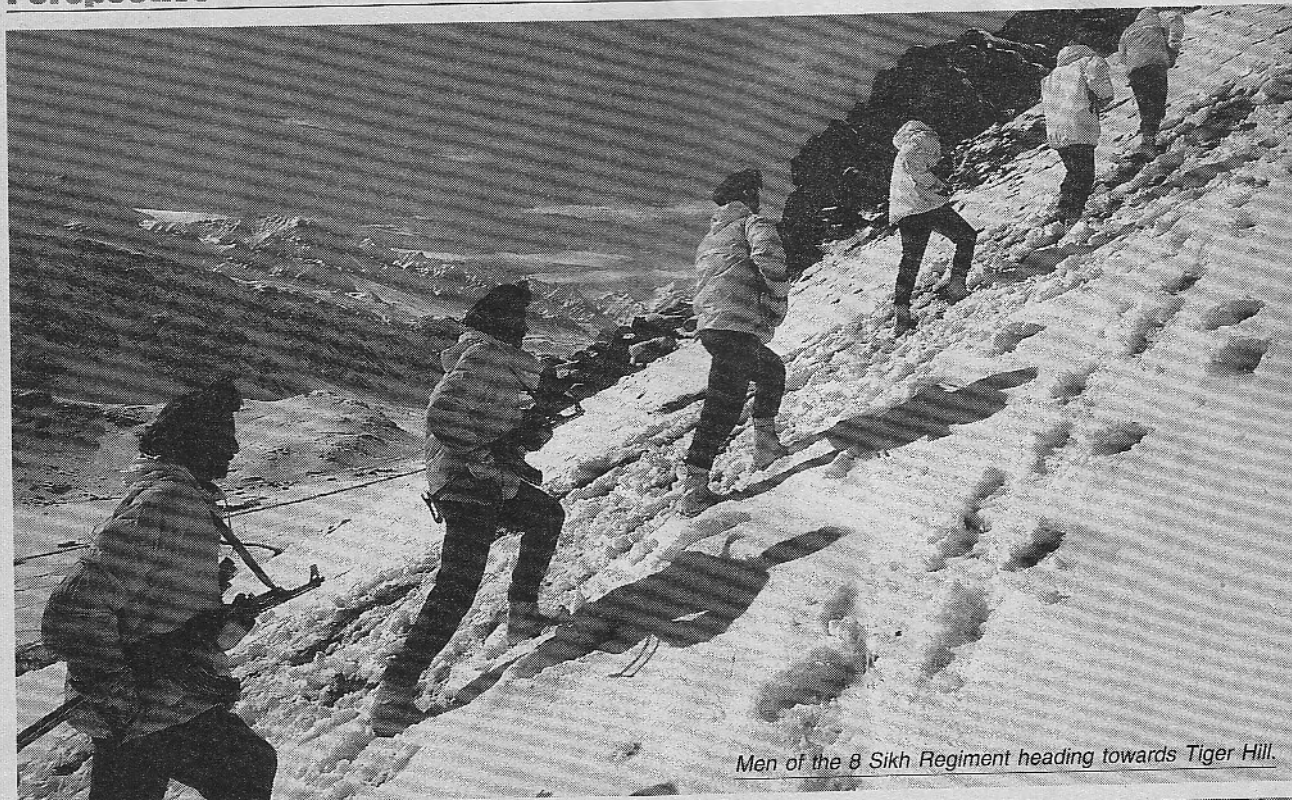
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Men of the 8 Sikh Regiment heading towards Tiger Hill.

Confessions of a war reporter



During the Kargil War, **Barkha Dutt's** was a familiar face on the television screen, bringing live action on the *Star News* channel. But she was not telling us the complete story. Now she does.

I had to look three times to make sure I was seeing right. Balanced on one knee, in a tiny alley behind the army's administrative offices, I was peering through a hole in a corrugated tin sheet. At first glance, all I could see were some leaves. I looked harder and amidst all the green, there was a hint of black—it looked like a moustache. "Look again," said the army colonel, in a tone that betrayed suppressed excitement. This time, I finally saw.

It was a head, the disembodied

face of a slain soldier nailed onto a tree. "The boys got it as a gift for the brigade," said the colonel, softly, but proudly. Before I could react, the show was over. A faded gunny bag appeared from nowhere, shrouded the soldier's face, the brown of the bag now merging indistinguishably with the green of the leaves. Minutes later, we walked past the same tree where the three soldiers who had earlier unveiled the victory trophy were standing. From the corner of his eye, the colonel exchanged a look of shared achievement, and we

moved on. We were firmly in the war zone.

It's been two years since Kargil, but even as some of the other details become fuzzy, this episode refuses to fade from either memory or conscience. A few months ago, I sat across a table with journalists from Pakistan and elsewhere in the region, and confessed I hadn't reported that story, at least not while the war was still on. It had been no easy decision, but at that stage the outcome of the war was still uncertain. The country seemed gripped by a

collective sense of tension and dread, and let's face it—most of us were covering a war for the first time in our careers. Many of the decisions we would take over the next few weeks were tormented and uncertain. I asked my friend from Pakistan, listening to my anguish with empathy, what he would have done in my place? He replied, "Honestly, I don't know."

This then, is the truth of reporting conflict and wars. Often we just don't know. And even more often, whether we like ourselves for it or not, our emotional perceptions of these conflicts are shaped by how our histories have been handed down to us. Whatever textbook journalism may preach, I think the time has come to accept that every story we do is shaped by our own set of perceptions, and thus prejudices as well. National identity is one of the many factors that add up to make the sum total of who we are and what we write or report. It sneaks up on us and weaves its way into our subconscious, often mangled and confused, but still there, determining what we see and how we see it. And, when I speak of national identity I do not mean chest-thumping, flag-waving nationalism. I mean years of accumulated baggage, what we read in school, the villains and heroes in our popular cinema—in fact the entire process of socialisation.

The media may not be reduced to being a crude tool of the nation state, but it will always have to fight with itself to find a space that is honest. And sometimes we will make mistakes. At other times, we may never know whether we made a mistake or chose right. But so long as we hide behind the theoretical notion of objective journalism, as long as we believe that journalists are innately more enlightened than others of the human species, the search for that truthful professional space will be a dishonest one. The war taught me that—just how complex and ridden with contradictions this search can be.

Many days after I had been shown the "brigade's gift", hunkered down in a bunker, my mind

just could not erase the image of that Pakistani soldier. The lifeless, frozen face simply made the most definitive statement on the hopelessness of it all. "How then are we different from the Pakistanis?" I asked. The media headlines for days had played up tales of mutilation and horror by Pakistan: Indian soldiers whose eyes had been gouged out, their skin blistered by burning cigarette butts, their dignity in shreds. As far as I could understand, a mutilated head displayed as a morale booster fell into the same category. The answer to my question was the blazing anger in the eyes of the soldiers around me. "If that's how you think Ma'am, you don't understand anything, you don't understand war," said one, his eyes red with lack of sleep, and now rage. The soldiers really believed that our war was somehow more gracious than "theirs"; that we

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That was only one of the near schizophrenic responses that we would see over the next few weeks. Proud tales of how many of the enemy had been downed laced the sundown whisky. "Arrey yaar, this time we'll get them." Machismo invariably wove its way into the bunker-room chatter. But the bluster and bombast always had an edge to it, the self-congratulation giving way in minutes to contemplative and nervous silence. One such night, an army major who, typically, looked much older than his 27 years, gulped down his drink and looked at me with a cynical sharpness in his eyes that I hadn't seen before. "You want to know how I feel," he asked scornfully, "I think it's a cra-

zy fucking war, that's what it is. Whose half-baked war are we fighting anyway?" The man who just hours ago had vowed to "get them" was looking at me now with a helplessness that only underscored my own.

This then was the Kargil War (and it was a "war" despite the fact that official government files may never call it one, preferring the more sanitised 'conflict')—a war fought by young men who did not always understand what it was all about, and covered by reporters who did not always know which principles of journalism applied. It was for long a theatre of contradiction that embraced courage and fear, head and heart. The very men who scoffed at your suggestion that the neurosis in the India-Pakistan love-hate relationship may yet subside, would in the next breath regale you with stories of bonding sessions with the "enemy" across the border. A burly Sardar who had earlier been posted as a commander at the Punjab border left me disbelieving and wonderstruck by his little secret: his counterpart across the fence had smuggled him across the border one evening, whisked him away in a car with tinted windows and given him the grand tour of Lahore. In return, the Pakistani had wondered if his wife might one day be smuggled across in the same way and be taken shopping to the saree boutiques of Amritsar. "I couldn't return the favour," the Sardar said regretfully. Others piped in with similar anecdotes of cigarettes and books shared at posts where there was no human contact but with the man across the border.

And we reporters were sucked in by this roller coaster of contradictory emotions that plunged and rose, again and again, alternating between anguish and euphoria. We could not help but empathise with these boys-who-would-be-men, their utter helplessness at being landed in the centre of a senseless war and yet their absolute determination to win it.

"Even the Gulf War didn't allow the media to come this close," said the Indian Army Chief to me, days

after the war was 'over'. He sounded like he hadn't yet decided whether this was a good thing. But access was neither automatic nor willingly provided; information had to be cajoled and coerced out of the top brass, and even after this you were left struggling to make sense of the dribbles. The army did offer escorted tours: a bus that plied from Srinagar to Drass and Kargil, twice a week. If you took the bus, you would meet grave looking army officials dressed in crisp olive greens and red berets who spoke to you in quiet, genteel tones that hid more than they revealed. Even good news, such as a recaptured peak, was treated as classified information. To ride the bus was, incongruously, to travel to the world of officialdom. Soon enough, the fraternity was firmly divided into two—the bus-wallahs and the roadrunners, or the "tourists and the journalists" as one person described it.

For those of us who depended on the motor power of young Kargili boys, some of whom ran phone-booths by day and doubled up as drivers by night, covering the war meant, first getting used to living on the road—the road in this case being a bumpy stretch of sharp curves and steep drops, patches of grey breaking the endless expanse of the mountains. Every few kilometres was what the army called a gun position—the huge Bofors and its country cousin, the 105mm light field gun, sitting shoulder to shoulder amidst the rocks and boulders, looking searchingly at the skyline. For us, each such 'position' unfolded a new story. Huddled in tents over cups of *chai*, generously supplied by men whose job it was to pull the trigger, we'd listen in grim silence to which body had made its way down from the icy-cold, sub-human environs of the heights above.

One of the many ironies of this war was that hundreds of miles away, the cities of India were debating notions of nationalism—an entire section of people were convinced that Kargil had given birth to a monstrous chest-thumping brand of patriotism. But up there in the mountains, the motivation to

keep going was not born from loyalty to the nation-state. Battling tears at the news that he had lost one of his "boys, a commanding officer told me, "I am not doing this for the country, Ma'am, I am doing it for my *paltan*." Allegiance to their unit, platoon, was usually the closest it got. That, and the belief that this was somehow a life test and the world was looking over their shoulders to see if they would make it through. "If we fail," said a 23-year-old Nepali soldier from Dehradun, his eyes misty with sadness, "then our entire existence cannot be justified. Anyone can turn around and say, you are not fit to join the army."

The outpouring of solidarity that accompanied the Kargil war was not something that any of these soldiers expected or were even aware of. Cut off from their homes, miles away from newspapers, with one telephone line that barely worked and shared by hundreds, this was a lonely planet. Our "hack-pack" was welcomed with an almost bizarre level of warmth, not merely because these men were scared that their stories would slip into anonymity but more because they were just glad to have someone to talk to.

And so, four to a car, everyday we would drive from Kargil to Drass everyday, sometimes twice or thrice on the same day, the 50-kilometre distance stretched out over regular roadside halts. The journey was its own story; to navigate these roads needed an astonishing skill and a certain willingness to abandon life to chance. Much has already been written about the road that came to be known as "the highway of terror"—the sound of falling shells, the clouds of smoke, the ducked heads, learning when to step on the accelerator and when to slip in unobtrusively behind the snail-like army convoy. What was perhaps far more interesting is how we internalised the surreal-ness of it all. Looking back, there were moments that seem deeply unreal, even comic. Like the time the sound of shells sent us leaping for the comforting shelter of an army truck's sizeable tyre. There we were—five journalists, lying flat on our stomachs, only 100 metres

away from a burning oil tanker that had received a direct hit. With one hand, I held onto the helmet a soldier had generously slapped on my head; with the other I was furiously working my satellite phone, my mind searching for the right adjectives to use for my phone report. Were the flames orange or orangish-grey; was the fire dying or simmering; were we 30 kilometres from Kargil or 35? In those split seconds, these were the details that raced through my head; the constant tension of communicating the right words and the representative images somehow overtook every other fear. It was not that we were brave; it was more that right till the very end, these tensions kept us somehow oblivious from the reality of the risk.

And in perhaps yet another of the many ironies of this war, one of the lingering images of my drive down those roads was the sheer beauty of the surroundings. Yes, Beauty. Not even the thunderous, sharp and ugly roar of the Bofors or the sudden proliferation of metal and guns could take away from the grandeur and overwhelming power of the mountains. Many days after we returned from Kargil, we all agreed that the experience had somehow left us feeling much smaller, somewhat irrelevant. The mountains, I think, played their part in humbling us. As always, one of the soldiers described it better than I ever could. A field major, he had 'been up' nine times, seen friends die, bodies collapse and grown men weep on those jagged peaks. Back at base, he would now spend hours staring up at the skies in silence. "I feel the mountains are mocking me," he said trying to explain to us the frenzied restlessness building up inside him. "They are looking down at me and laughing. They are saying, come and get me, come and get me."

One way of trying to "get them" was to mark the landscape through the oldest and best-tested tool of all conquerors. Maps. Almost as if in their very naming they would become more accessible, every little bump and ridge now had an identity. Point 4875, Point 5353, Saddle,

Three Pimple Hump—this was the strange new language an entire nation came to speak for those two months. Some, of course, caught the public imagination far more than others—Tiger Hill was to become as much of a household name as Surf washing powder. This amazed even the general who led the operations in Drass and Kargil. “I am convinced if I had named it Rabbit Hill instead, no one would have cared,” he joked many days after the Indian army had taken it. But till it was recaptured, Tiger Hill was the central symbol of the war. If I needed proof of this, I uncovered it in Bihar while reporting on the elections nearly two months after the war had been declared over. In the narrow muddy bylanes of Nalanda (coincidentally, then defence minister George Fernandes’ constituency) hundreds of miles away from Kashmir, a bus was blocking my car. I leaned out of the window, preparing for an argument with the driver, when the bus’ windshield caught my eye. Splattered across the width of it, in big blue letters was a banner that said “Tiger Hill, Kargil”.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Tiger Hill managed to engender a strange sense of familiarity was its proximity to the Srinagar-Leh highway. This was of course what made it strategically crucial to recapture, but also what allowed us more access than any other mountain peak. Stand anywhere on the road running through Drass, and you could see it—barely five kilometres away, its sharp conical peak defiantly towering over the rest of the landscape. Even if the army wanted us nowhere near the place—which was mostly the case—the road was public property and often we would park our car at the foothills of Tiger Hill and wait.

By the end of June, it was the only remaining peak in Drass still held by at least 30 Pakistani soldiers; how and when it would be taken back would determine how much longer the war would drag on. We knew that any day now, the army was to push forward with its meticulously planned assault on Tiger Hill, and the only way to be there when it

happened was to obsessively patrol the area. Not everyone was ready to do this, and one night when four of us readied ourselves for the two-hour journey from Kargil to Drass our “recklessness” was attributed to the arrogance and folly of youth.

Looking back, perhaps it was exactly that. No one drove on the highway at night. Driving with the headlights on made you a ready target for those guarding on the other side of the mountain; to travel with lights off meant negotiating treacherous curves in absolute darkness. We were lucky that particular night because the light of a full moon bathed the road and lit up at least a part of our path. But in the stillness of the night, the silence in Drass was

It was a war fought by young men who did not always understand what it was all about, and covered by reporters who did not always know which principles of journalism applied.

almost audible—a little bit like the quiet that descends over a house at night, when even the fridge has stopped its gentle hum. An inadequate analogy, I know. But as we huddled closer together in our car, not sure what to do next, we all felt utterly dislocated by the surreal quality of that moment. It was almost poetic, except that we were in the middle of a grim and bloody war. From where we stood, we could see gentle bursts of light over Tiger Hill, squirts of orange and pale pink, rather like Diwali firecrackers, but nowhere as noisy at this distance.

By now, we had been in Kargil long enough to know that these pretty looking lights that broke the darkness of the night were in fact the lights of flare guns being used by the ‘intruders’ atop Tiger Hill. The

lights were used to help spot the movement of the Indian troops, who had already begun their silent journey up, in preparation for the final assault.

The actual assault came only two nights later, on the 3rd of July, and nothing that we had experienced thus far could have prepared us for it. It was the first time in all these days that we could smell the war in the air—the tension, the air of anticipation, the hurried and purposeful stride in the walks of the officers, the edge to their voice. An artillery officer whom we knew well by now motioned us to hop into his jeep, which we did, camera on shoulder and microphone wires wound around the wrist. Within minutes of speeding through the deserted streets of Drass, we were standing next to a Bofors gun. The gun was pointed skywards, directly at Tiger Hill, which seemed almost within hugging distance. “Stand there and get ready to speak,” yelled my cameraman Ajmal Jami shoving the microphone into my hands and pushing me closer to the gun. It was about five in the evening, when the guns fired the first round, and for the next 13 hours, we would be witness to a battle unfolding before our eyes and recorded on our cameras, bewildered, tense, nervous, and struggling to keep pace with the twists and turns of a story that could have ended either way.

Within seconds, huge mushroom clouds of smoke were dancing over the entire area, as if to the beat of an invisible orchestra that made its presence known through deafening and staccato sounds. “Run from here, get out quickly,” yelled the commanding officer, as his own men looked for corners to hide in, “they’re going to hit back now”. Swimming in dust and smoke, we fled the spot, searching frantically for the next point, right at the foothills of Tiger Hill where we were told a rocket launcher was getting ready to begin the second phase of the attack.

Rocket launcher—what a strange, cold, feeble term to describe what happened next. Streaks of blazing,

orange light dashed across the entire length of the horizon at what seemed like the speed of light. The skies crackled with the sharp piercing electrical sound of rockets taking off, one after the other, hundreds of them in a matter of seconds. In the midst of this, I was trying to say something suitably coherent into my microphone, knowing that here there would be no Take2s. No one had any idea what would come next. And although I nearly jumped out of my skin the first time a rocket went whizzing past my head, once again the tension of keeping pace with events blocked out the sense of danger. Within minutes there were only four of us left standing on the road. The rockets had invited immediate retaliation—it was raining shells on Drass—not the intermittent, sporadic shelling that we had witnessed on the highway, but direct, concentrated and ceaseless bombing. Chaos broke out, as hordes of people, journalists and army men, were jostling, pushing, tripping over each other to somehow get out of there. In front of us, bodies collapsed into small heaps on the ground, enveloped by orange flames rising from the road because of the impact of the shells. Miraculously, as we waded through this burning maze, Jami never stopped rolling his camera, prodding me to keep on recording my observations. There are those who saw these images on television and accused us of glamorising the war, of giving it a “larger than life” image. But the truth is that in those hours we were mere chroniclers and the story unfolding before us *was* larger than any reality most of us had ever known.

By now, the road was deserted and we were just running with no idea of where we were headed, when an arm shot out to catch me. It was an officer I had never met before, a young major with a bunker just off the road-head. We were all shepherded inside, only to discover that we were sharing that tiny space with dozens of others. There we sat, one atop the other, someone’s leg atop another’s back, waiting for further news. Outside, Drass was enveloped in darkness and the war raged on,

seeming to get louder and louder. Inside, and I will never forget how stunned I was at the juxtaposition, a decrepit little tape recorder was belting out a Hindi pop song. Guns. Shells. Film Songs. At that moment, for all the power of the camera, I felt I would never be able to convey the strangeness of this war, how moments like this pulled you in and left you completely confused and inarticulate. Humming along with the music, the soldiers seemed unperturbed and it would have been easy to confuse that calmness with a gung-ho endorsement of the war. But to understand these boys, was to know that the outward calmness was merely their painstakingly learnt formula for dealing with a situation they had no space to question. The army was a cold taskmaster, an effective indoctrinator, cultivating in its followers the art of fatalistic acceptance. Time and again, we’d heard officers pleading with their brigades that they were not ready to “go up” at a given time—either for military reasons, or just because they were sapped of strength. But when the orders came, they threw their packs of cigarettes into their rucksacks and started the trudge up with this suppressed pain. That would come bursting out if you scratched the surface just a bit.

There was this one officer in the bunker the night of the Tiger Hill assault, whose eyes were half-crazed, but filled with sadness, the eyes of a man who wanted desperately for this war to end, for his “boys” never to have to climb another mountain. Ever. Sensing the intensity of his rage, his junior officer, who was only 21, would constantly crack cavalier jokes about life and death. But when word came that their unit had to go up again, he turned around and said quietly, “I can feel my whole life passing in front of my eyes, like a short film. I can see all my loves and my fears. But I know I can’t afford to think about it, can I?”

Thirteen hours on, at the crack of dawn, we toasted the ‘victory’ at Tiger Hill by passing around a casket of gin. An entire lifetime had been lived in that one night. Later, still crouched in one corner of the bun-

ker, I watched as the euphoria crumbled and collapsed, when the orders for the next assault came in. The unit was to move up that very evening. Would they survive to tell the tale this time around? The Hindi pop song had been replaced by a Kenny Rogers cassette. Country music in the hills was our flimsy veil, our wall to hide behind. It was time to return to the moth-ridden, no-electricity, no-water Hotel Siachen in Kargil. If I hadn’t been so conscious of being a woman reporter, whom everyone expected to be fragile, I would have cried openly and loudly, instead of burying my head in my shirtsleeves. And if someone had asked me why I was crying, I am not sure I would have known the answer.

I know that in the eyes of some, my reportage from Kargil made me a bigoted agent of the Indian nation-state. Ultimately, as long as we do not question the nation-state, as long as we map borders and then learn our geography in different schools, we as journalists cannot escape the stamp of our citizenship surfacing in our reportage. All we can do is be honest to ourselves, and know that there is a truth that exists with as much validity outside the one we choose to pen. One man’s *mujahideen* is always another man’s terrorist. And moreover, certain situations *are* larger than life itself—they are in the end, human stories, stories of people, which draw you in emotionally.

I have no doubt that were I reporting from the frontline on the other side of the divide, it would have evoked as varied and intense a set of emotional responses in me. Our only choice as journalists is to be emotionally honest; to have the courage to give voice to more than one truth. The irony is that, since Kargil, most of my energies have been spent reporting from the ravaged lands of Jammu and Kashmir, trying to bring to life the stories of the human beings trapped between the battle lines. It is re-assuring that the label I have been branded with this season is “anti-national”. A friend of mine likes to say, if every side hates you, it must mean you are doing something right. △

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A NEW MILLENNIUM, A NEW SPIRIT, A NEW BIMAN

CHOKILA IYER is India's first woman foreign secretary, and her first visit in that capacity was to Bhutan, which in her own words, is "India's closest neighbour and development partner." When she met King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, it was a meeting of neighbours in all its real sense: A Sikkimese in dialogue with a Bhutanese. Ahem.



OFFICIALS OF the Indian Foreign Ministry are now the official caretakers of Hinduism, and so they were quick to call in the newsmen and bash the Taliban leadership of Afghanistan when the latter issued a diktat to Hindus to identify themselves by wearing yellow. (The Taliban knows not the finer points of distinction, so Sikhs too were put in the same bag.) The alacrity with which South Block acted was in marked contrast to the 'Hindu Kingdom' amongst us. So busy were the politicians in the fight to oust Girija Prasad Koirala, that they were all too willing it seems to let others—South Block—do the reacting.



IF YOU thought the job of the Norwegian peacemaker in Sri Lanka was easy, you thought wrong. Erik Solheim's is a tough balancing act. He gets verbal chappals both from the Sinhalese and Tamils. He cannot afford to hurt either's sensibilities. Even in the matter of cuisine, Solheim has to be politically correct; he

has to profess love for both the fiery curry of the Sinhalese and the Tamil *masala thosai*. When asked about his favourite Sri Lankan food, the peacemaker gave what the *Island* daily called a "peace meal" answer: "I am a great lover of nearly all types of South Asian food, as long as it is hot and spicy. A combination of the different food traditions will serve me well..." Spoken like a true peace negotiator. Now pass the *uttapam*...

TALKING OF which, how much longer will Nepal remain 'Hindu', and how will it affect its geopolitical standing for the fact is that presently so many Indian Hindus take pride on this so-called 'Hinduness'. You see, there is a census on, and the activist leadership of hill ethnicities who make up 25 percent of the population (according to the 1991 census) are canvassing their flock so that they do not register as 'Hindus' when the enumerators come by. To make it easy, they want all to

register as 'Buddhist', even though of course Nepal's hill ethnicities make up a complex smorgasbord of inter-twining identities and faiths, the latter including animism, nature worship, and different kinds of Buddhism, most importantly Vajrayan. Whatever, 'Buddhist' will probably capture more closely the identity of many of the hill ethnicities, and, besides, it is the self-ascription that is more important than what the (Hindu, Brahmin, most likely) enumerator says you are.

THE BANGLADESH Rifles vs. Border Security Force incident on the Indo-Bangla border was barely off the front pages when *The Indian Express* reported on 22 May, "100 Bangladeshis infiltrate". With a Shillong dateline, Tilak Rai reported that the Bangladeshi villagers entered Shella in East Khasi Hills in Meghalaya, where they were stopped by the Indian BSF men who fired in the air. But then further down, we learn that, according to a BSF officer, that the villagers had been invited by Khasi landowners to till their land. That slight distinction between 'infiltration' and 'invitation' seems to have been missed by the headline-writer, as well as the reporter himself who illuminates this point only towards the bottom of his report. With reporters like these, who needs enemies?

YOU PROBABLY thought that Tehelka.com was all about muck-raking reporters doggedly pursuing—well, muck. But long before Mr. Bangaru Laxman took those wads of cash, Chhetria Patrakar was already hooked on to Tehelka's Erotic Reader channel, the high point of which was the average Indian woman talking 'candidly' about her sexual experiences and preferences. You could also read salacious excerpts of porno-as-high-art fiction. But the erotica channel was quietly switched off when the dotcom caught the ire of the Indian officialdom. But now, with just a bit of extra cover, the feature is back in a new avatar titled "Lifestyle...of the senses". And first-person bedroom accounts by Indian ladies is once more available, and the Indian defence establishment should breathe easy. With Tehelka concentrating on the ladies, ungentlemanly officers will obviously get to live another day.

THIS IS a sandal to beat all sandals, all of 9-foot size displayed at the residence of Meerut Commissioner, Deepak Singhal. Even if there are no feet with that improbable size, it should still come more than handy for some necks in that peculiar South Asian abuse-ritual of chappal garlands.





REMEMBER VEERAPPAN, and how they said they were ready for the final assault to nab the tusk master? But we hardly hear of him these days. Could someone enlighten Chhetria Patrakar on what the latest situation is? Has El Moustacho surrendered, is he still on the loose, or has he become chief minister? What's up? Why media all quiet?

"EVE-TEASERS harassing girls in Patuakhali", headlined the *The Independent* of Dhaka. Well, that is what eve-teasers are supposed to do, right? A little redundancy there? *Thik hai*, the paper goes on to report: "Sometimes the hoodlums make peculiar gestures at girls...They smoke cigarettes and ganjas openly on the roads and behave with the girls in a peculiar way... Sometimes they work as activists of political parties and play the roles of terrorists in the locality on hire... Elite of the town informed that several times the matter was brought to the notice of the local administration but to no effect. Some people of the town disclosed that the unruly youths also disturb their girls over telephone. The peace-loving people opined that there should be an end to the nuisance soon." I would opine that these hoodlums who make peculiar gestures should have peculiar things done to them, with telephone sets.

HERE ARE two pictures of women power in our region: Karachi women protesting against water shortage; and a Kathmandu left activist going martial at a cycle



during a *bandh* call by the Left. Gender-niks please take note.

IN THESE times of globalisation, all the world becomes Plaza Land. A letter-writer in *The News* informs us that Pakistan's oldest sugar mill, Rahwali Sugar Mills in Gujranwala, has been closed down, and its land is to be developed into a plaza site. He pleads to the authorities, "to save this important part of sugar history in Pakistan", and to convert it into a National Sugar Museum or a Sugar Technology Training Centre. Thanks for the idea. I can think of a National Jute Museum and a Jute Technology Training Centre in Bangladesh. A National Carpets and Pashmina Museum and a Carpets and Pashmina Technology Training Centre in Nepal, a National Calico Museum and Calico Technology Training Centre in Bombay. The possibilities are endless. But I get carried away...

NOW WHAT could the English translation of Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) be? National Volunteers Corps, according to the Associated Press. Wow, what an image boost. If that is the case, perhaps it is time the Indians allowed the American Peace Corps back in *apna* Bharat.

NEVER KNEW that media barons would stoop so low in self-same *apna* Bharat. *The Indian Express* publishes an advertisement showing *The Times of India* as a roll of toilet paper. TOI retaliated with its own ad claiming that it sold more than all its rivals, adding cheekily that, "There's nothing left to express". Now the two worthies will be fighting it out in court. An expression of the times, shall we say?

IT'S A MAD, mad, mad world. Bhopal recently played host to "Miss Eunuch Miss World" contest. Another one for the gender-niks to mull over—is this part of GAD, WID or WAD?



OH, WHAT to do with the Amazing Terrible Amma of Tamil Nadu? Her girth firmly enconced cape-and-all in the chief ministerial throne, Jayalalitha Amma, cares nary a hoot about court orders. And when you have followers like she does, there's no short supply of superlative support. "Mother of Tamil Nadu", says one advertisement, "You are Mahatma Gandhi when it comes to selfless service to the society..." Amma, I will lie at your feet, stop this megalomania. Internalise what the Mahatma would have done. (By the way, I know that's a tall order.)

WHEN THE mercury makes it past the low 40s, that is when people go belligerent in New Delhi, or quite mad. This silly season, the Indian capital had the 'monkey man' to contend with, another time it was milk-swilling Ganeshas. Actually, Chhetria Patrakar is a bit worried about the heat in the Indus and Ganga *mairdaan*, in these nuclear-weaponised times. What if a heat-demented person-in-charge decided to overcome all failsafe safeguards and launch a weapon against a neighbouring country? Reason enough to ensure that everyone in positions of super-power in Delhi and Islamabad are nicely air-conditioned, thank you. The SAARC Secretariat should send a delegation to both belligerent capitals every year between mid-April and when the monsoon hits in mid-June to ensure that all air conditioners and other climate control mechanisms in key institutions, including GHQ, the prime minister's office, foreign office, ministry of home affairs and so on, are working properly and keeping everyone at a sane and sensible 28 degrees centigrade. That is the only way to save us from conflagration.

□ Chhetria Patrakar

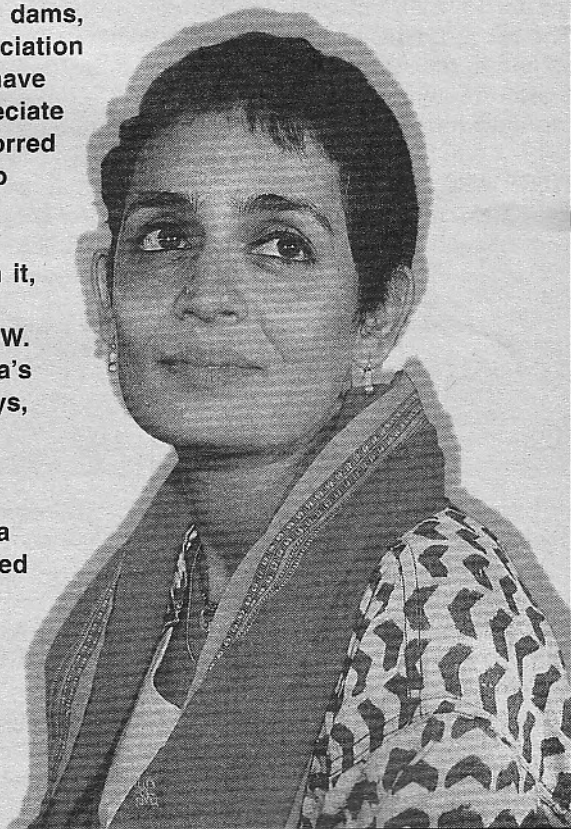
"India does not mow down its people"

THERE IS a high-stakes drama playing out in India these days, and the novelist Arundhati Roy is one of its most visible actors. Multinational companies, in collusion with much of India's upper class, are lining up to turn the country into one big franchise. Roy puts it this way: "Is globalisation about 'the eradication of world poverty', or is it a mutant variety of colonialism, remote controlled and digitally operated?"

Roy lives in New Delhi, where she first went to become an architect. But she's not working as an architect or even as a novelist these days. She's thrown herself into political activism. In the central and western states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, a series of dams threatens the homes and livelihoods of tens of millions. A huge, grassroots organisation, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), has arisen to resist these dams, and Roy has joined it. Her devastating essay on dams, "The Greater Common Good", and her searing denunciation of India's nuclear testing, "The End of Imagination", have literally kindled bonfires. The upper class didn't appreciate her critique of development, and the nationalists abhorred her for questioning India's nuclear arsenal. (These two essays comprise her latest book, *The Cost of Living*, Modern Library, 1999.)

Her most recent essay is called "Power Politics". In it, she takes on Enron, the Houston-based energy corporation that is a large financial backer of George W. Bush. In India, Enron is trying to take over Maharashtra's energy sector. The scale of what is happening, she says, makes California's power woes look like child's play.

On a cold, mid-February afternoon, Roy gave the annual Eqbal Ahmad lecture at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, before a huge crowd. It was a powerful, political talk, and afterward she was besieged by a long line of mostly young South Asian women, many of whom are studying at one of the five colleges in the Amherst area. She donated her lecture fee to earthquake relief in Gujarat. The next morning, I interviewed her in the back seat of a car taking her from Amherst to Logan Airport in Boston. The two-hour drive went by in a flash.



David Barsamian: You grew up in Kerala. What's the status of women there?

Arundhati Roy: Women from Kerala work throughout India and the world earning money to send back home. And yet they'll pay a dowry to get married, and they'll have the most bizarrely subservient relation-

ships with their husbands. I grew up in a little village in Kerala. It was a nightmare for me. All I wanted to do was to escape, to get out, to never have to marry somebody there. Of course, they were not dying to marry me [laughs]. I was the worst thing a girl could be: thin, black, and clever.

D: *Your mother was an unconventional woman.*

A: She married a Bengali Hindu and, what's worse, then divorced him, which meant that everyone was confirmed in their opinion that it was such a terrible thing to do in the first place... I grew up in Ayemenem, the village in which *The God of Small Things* is set. Given the way things have turned out, it's easy for me to say that I thank God that I had none of the conditioning that a normal, middle class Indian girl would have. I had no father, no presence of this man telling us that he would look after us and beat us occasionally in exchange. I didn't have a caste, and I didn't have a class, and I had no religion, no traditional blinkers, no traditional lenses on my spectacles, which are very hard to shrug off. I sometimes think I was perhaps the only girl in India whose mother said, "Whatever you do, don't get married" [laughs]. For me, when I see a bride, it gives me a rash. I find them ghoulish, almost. I find it so frightening to see this totally decorated, bejewelled creature who, as I wrote in *The God of Small Things*, is "polishing firewood".

D: *Tell me a little more about your mother.*

A: She is like someone who strayed off the set of a Fellini film. She's completely nuts. But to have seen a woman who never needed a man, it's such a wonderful thing, to know that that's a possibility, not to suffer. We used to get all this hate mail. Though my mother runs a school and it's phenomenally successful—people book their children in it before they are born—they don't know what to do with her, or with me. The problem is that we are both women who are unconventional in their terms. The least we could have done was to be unhappy. But we aren't, and that's what bothers people.

By the way, my mother is very well known in Kerala because in 1986 she won a public interest litigation case challenging the Syrian Christian inheritance law that said a woman can inherit one-fourth of her father's property or 5,000 rupees, whichever is less. The Supreme Court actually handed down a verdict that gave women equal inheritance retroactive to 1956. But few women take advantage of this right. And the churches have gone so far as to teach fathers to write wills that disinherit their daughters. It's a very strange kind of oppression that happens there.

D: *Since you wrote your novel, you've produced some remarkable political essays. What was that transition like?*

A: It's only to people in the outside world, who got to know me after *The God of Small Things*, that it seems like a transition. In fact, I'd written political essays before I wrote the novel. I wrote a series of essays called "The Great Indian Rape Trick" about a woman named Phoolan Devi, and the way the film *Bandit Queen* exploited her, and whether or not somebody should have the right to restage the rape of a living woman without her consent. There are issues I've been involved with for a while.

I don't see a great difference between *The God of Small Things* and my works of nonfiction. As I keep saying,

fiction is truth. I think fiction is the truest thing there ever was. My whole effort now is to remove that distinction. The writer is the midwife of understanding. It's very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank. That's what I want to do. *The God of Small Things* is a book where you connect the very smallest things to the very biggest: whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water or the quality of the moonlight on a river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom.

D: *Estha, one of the main characters in your novel, is walking "along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought by World Bank loans". The World Bank scheme for the Narmada River Valley envisioned the construction of more than 3,000 dams. The bank has since withdrawn from the project, and the government of India has taken it over. Tell me about the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the NBA.*

A: When I first met people from the NBA, they told me, "We knew that you would be against the dams and the World Bank when we read *The God of Small Things*." The remarkable thing about the NBA is that it is a cross-section of India. It is a coalition of Adivasis, upper-caste big farmers, the Dalits, and the middle class. It's a forging of links between the urban and the rural, between the farmers and the fishermen and the writers and the painters. That's what gives it its phenomenal strength, and it's what a lot of people criticise it for in India, saying, you know, these middle class protesters! That makes me furious. The middle class urban engineers are the people who came up with this project! You can't expect the critique to be just Adivasi. You isolate them like that, and it's so easy to crush them. In many ways, people try to delegitimise the involvement of the middle class, saying, how can you speak on behalf of these people? No one is speaking on behalf of anyone. The point is that the NBA is a fantastic example of people linking hands across caste and class. It is the biggest, finest, most magnificent resistance movement since the [Indian] independence struggle.

D: *One protest you were involved in last year took place at a village on the banks of the Narmada at the site of one of the proposed dams. You were among many who were arrested there. What was that like?*

A: It was absolutely fantastic. I was in a village called Sulgaon. All night, all over the valley, people started arriving, by tractor, by motorcar, by foot. By three in the morning there were about 5000 of us. We started walking in the dark to the dam site. The police already knew that the dam site would be captured, but they didn't know from where the people would come. There's a huge area of devastation there... It was amazing. Five thousand people, mostly villagers, but also people from the cities—lawyers, architects, journalists—walking through these byways and crossing streams in absolute silence. There was not a person that lit a bidi or

Interview

coughed or cleared their throats. Occasionally, a whole group of women would sit down and pee and then keep walking. Finally, at dawn, we arrived and took over the dam site.

For hours, the police surrounded us. Then there was a baton charge. They arrested thousands of people, including me. The jails were full.

D: You say that the government of India is "hell-bent on completing the project". What's driving it?

A: There are many things. First of all, you have to understand that the myth of big dams is something that's sold to us from the time we were three years old in every school textbook. Nehru said, "Dams are the temples of modern India." So they're like some kind of huge, wet national flags. Before the NBA, it was like, the dam will serve you breakfast in bed, it will get your daughter married and cure your jaundice. People have to understand that they're just monuments to political corruption, and they derive from very undemocratic political institutions. You just centralise natural resources, snatch them away from people, and then you decide who you're going to give them to.

The first dam that was built in the Narmada was the Bargi, completed in 1990. They said it would displace 70000 people and submerge 101 villages. One day, without warning, the government filled the reservoir, and 114000 people were displaced and 162 villages were submerged. People were driven from their homes when the waters rose. All they could do was run up the hill with their cattle and children. Ten years later, that dam irrigates 5 percent of the land that they said it would. It irrigates less land than it submerged. They haven't built canals. Because for contractors and politicians, just building the dam in itself is a lot of money.

D: What happens to those who are displaced?

A: Nobody knows. When I was writing "The Greater Common Good", what shocked me more than the figures that do exist are the figures that don't exist. The Indian government does not have any estimate of how many people have been displaced by big dams. I think that's not just a failure of the state, but a failure of the intellectual community. The reason that there aren't these figures is because most of the people that are displaced are again the non-people, the Adivasis and the Dalits. I did a sanity check based on a study of 54 dams done by the Indian Institute of Public Administration. According to that study, just reservoir-displaced, which is only one kind of displacement, came to an average of something like 44000 people per dam. Let's assume that these 54 dams are the bigger of the big dams. Let's quarter this average. We know that India has had 3600 big dams built in the last 50 years. So just a sanity check says that it's 33 million people displaced. They all just migrate to the cities. And there, again, they are non-citizens, living in slums. They are subject to being kicked out at any minute, anytime the housewives of New Delhi's upscale areas decide that all these slum people are dangerous.

D: You've compared this uprooting to a kind of

garbage disposal.

A: It's exactly like that. The Indian government has managed to turn the concept of non-violence on its head. Non-violent resistance and non-violent governance. Unlike, say, China or Turkey or Indonesia, India doesn't mow down its people. It doesn't kill people who are refusing to move. It just waits it out. It continues to do what it has to do and ignores the consequences. Because of the caste system, because of the fact that there is no social link between those who make the decisions and those who suffer the decisions, it just goes ahead and does what it wants. The people also assume that this is their lot, their karma, what was written. It's quite an efficient way of doing things. Therefore, India has a very good reputation in the world as a democracy, as a government that cares, that has just got too much on its hands, whereas, in fact, it's actually creating the problems.

D: But you say about your own politics that you're "not an anti-development junkie or a proselytiser for the eternal upholding of custom and tradition".

A: How can I be? As a woman who grew up in a village in India, I've spent my whole life fighting tradition. There's no way that I want to be a traditional Indian housewife. So I'm not talking about being anti-development. I'm talking about the politics of development, of how do you break down this completely centralised, undemocratic process of decision-making? How do you make sure that it's decentralised and that people have power over their lives and their natural resources? Today, the Indian government is trying to present privatisation as the alternative to the state, to public enterprise. But privatisation is only a further evolution of the centralised state, where the state says that they have the right to give the entire power production in Maharashtra to Enron. They don't have the right. The infrastructure of the public sector in India has been built up over the last 50 years with public money. They don't have the right to sell it to Enron. They cannot do that. Three-quarters of our country lives on the edge of the market economy. You can't tell them that only those who can afford water can have it.

D: Still, I sense some optimism on your part about what you call the "inherent anarchy" of India to resist the tide of globalisation.

A: The only thing worth globalising is dissent, but I don't know whether to be optimistic or not. When I'm outside the cities I do feel optimistic. There is such grandeur in India and so much beauty. I don't know whether they can kill it. I want to think they can't. I don't think that there is anything as beautiful as a sari. Can you kill it? Can you corporatise a sari? Why should multinationals be allowed to come in and try to patent basmati rice? People prefer to eat *roti* and *idlis* and *dosas* rather than McDonald's burgers. Just before I came to the US, I went to a market in Delhi. There was a whole plate of different kinds of dal, lentils. Tears came to my eyes. Today, that's all it takes to make you cry, to look at all the kinds of dal and rice that there are, and to think that they don't want this to exist.

D: *Talk about the material you covered in "The End of Imagination" concerning the nuclear testing on the Subcontinent.*

A: It's so frightening, the nationalism in the air. I'm terrified by it. It can be used to do anything. I know that a world in which countries are stockpiling nuclear weapons and using them in the ways that India and Pakistan and America do to oppress others and to deceive their own people is a dangerous world. The nuclear tests were a way to shore up our flagging self-esteem. India is still flinching from a cultural insult, still looking for its identity. It's about all that.

D: *You said that the jeering young Hindu men celebrating the nuclear test were the same as the ones who were thrilled with the destruction of the Babri mosque.*

A: Indian intellectuals today feel radical when they condemn fundamentalism, but not many people are talking about the links between privatisation, globalisation, and fundamentalism. Globalisation suits the Indian elite to a T. Fundamentalism doesn't. It's also a class problem. When people stop some film from being shot or burn a book, it's not just that they are saying, this is against Indian culture. They are also saying, you Westernised, elite, English-speaking people are having too much of a good time. It's a very interesting phenomenon. I think it has to be addressed together, not separately. The religious rightwingism is directly linked to globalisation and to privatisation. When India is talking about selling its entire power sector to foreign multinationals, when the political climate gets too hot and uncomfortable, the government will immediately start saying, should we build a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri mosque? Everyone will go baying off in that direction. It's a game. That's something we have to understand. With one hand, you're selling the country out to Western multinationals. And with the other, you want to defend your borders with nuclear bombs. It's such an irony! You're saying that the world is a global village, but then you want to spend crores of rupees on building nuclear weapons.

D: *You use a metaphor of two truck convoys. One is very large, with many people going off into the darkness. The other is much smaller and is going into the light of the promised land. Explain what you mean.*

A: India lives in several centuries at the same time. Every night outside my house I pass a road gang of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. They work by the light of a few candles. That is what is happening in India today. The convoy that melts into the darkness and disappears doesn't have a voice. It doesn't exist on TV. It doesn't have a place in the national newspapers. And so it doesn't exist. Those who are in the small convoy on their way to this glittering destination at the top of the world have completely lost the ability to see the other one. So in Delhi the cars are getting bigger and sleeker, the hotels are getting posher, the gates are getting higher, and the guards are no longer the old chowkidars, the watchmen, but they are fellows with guns. And yet the poor are packed into every crevice like lice

in the city. People don't see that anymore. It's as if you shine a light very brightly in one place, the darkness deepens around. They don't want to know what's happening. The people who are getting rich can't imagine that the world is not a better place.

D: *You made a decision, or the decision was made for you, to identify with, or to be part of, that large convoy.*

A: I can't be a part of the large convoy because it's not a choice that you can make. The fact that I'm an educated person means that I can't be on that convoy. I don't want to be on it. I don't want to be a victim. I don't want to disappear into the darkness. I am an artist and a writer, and I do think that one always places oneself in the picture to see where one fits. I left home when I was 16 and lived in places where it was very easy for me to have fallen the other way. I could have been on the large convoy because I was a woman and I was alone. In India, that's not a joke. I could have ended up very, very badly. I'm lucky that I didn't.

I think my eyes were knocked open and they don't close. I sometimes wish I could close them and look away. I don't always want to be doing this kind of work. I don't want to be haunted by it. Because of who I am and what place I have now in India, I'm petitioned all the time to get involved. It's exhausting and very difficult to have to say, 'Look, I'm only one person. I can't do everything'. I know that I don't want to be worn to the bone where I lose my sense of humour. But once you've seen certain things, you can't un-see them, and seeing nothing is as political an act as seeing something.

D: *Are you thinking about writing any new fiction?*

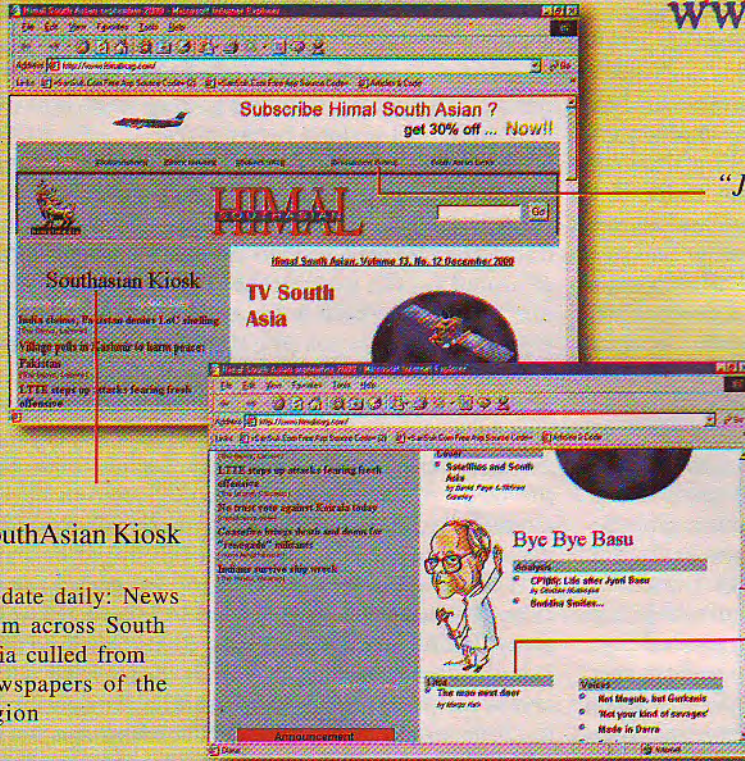
A: I need fiction like you need to eat or exercise, but right now it's so difficult. At the moment, I don't know how to manage my life. I don't know how I'll ever be able to make the space to say, "I'm writing a book now, and I'm not going to be able to do x or y". I would love to.

D: *You feel a sense of responsibility to these silent voices that are calling out to you.*

A: No, I don't feel responsibility because that's such a boring word.

D: *You're in a privileged position. You are a celebrity within India and also outside.*

A: But I never do anything because I'm a celebrity, as a rule. I do what I do as a citizen. I stand by what I write and follow through on what I write. It's very easy for me to begin to believe the publicity about myself, whether for or against. It can give you an absurd idea of yourself. I know that there's a fine balance between accepting your own power with grace and misusing it. And I don't ever want to portray myself as a representative of the voiceless. I'm scared of that. But one of the reasons some people get so angry with me is because I have the space now that a lot of others who think like me don't. It was a mistake maybe for so many people to have opened their hearts to *The God of Small Things*. Because a lot of dams and bombs slipped in along with it.



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The predicaments of conservation



The conservation establishment in India periodically finds itself caught in a cleft stick—between the developmental onslaught on biodiversity and local resistance to conservation projects that threaten human livelihood. Conservation as a necessary agenda requires a new vision that transcends the inherent limitations of the current practice.

by *Ashwini Chhatre and Vasant Saberwal*

Are you an environmentalist or do you work for a living?" Visitors to the northwestern United States routinely encounter this query on bumper stickers. The region, popularly called the Pacific Northwest, is renowned for both its beautifully forested landscapes and its prolific timber output. The slogan captures the response of the local population to the celebrated controversy that pitted the logging industry in the region against the Spotted Owl, emblem of the US environmental movement, whose last habitat the logging industry was said to be destroying. Through the 1980s, environmentalists lobbied hard to put a stop to logging activities in the Pacific Northwest. Local people dependent on logging for their livelihoods, on the other hand, contested this fiercely.

This conflict, between conservation and livelihood, between larger and local interests, and, obliquely, between science

and politics, seems to characterise modernising civilisations worldwide. In one of the many re-enactments of the Spotted Owl drama, the endangered Western Tragopan, a brilliantly coloured pheasant endemic to the western Himalaya, has been pitted against the grazing and plant collection activities of local populations in the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) in Himachal Pradesh. The preservation of the Western Tragopan, by removing human pressure on its habitat, undermines local livelihoods that are almost entirely dependent on the same resources.

The Western Tragopan and its protectors had another enemy as well—the development lobby. In 1999 it was decided that a part of the park, Jeeva Nallah, would be set aside for the construction of the run-of-river Parvati hydroelectric project. This required the construction of diversion weirs and underground tunnels in precisely the



The Spotted Owl...

area that is frequented by the Western Tragopan. With a part of the park now reserved for the power project, the rest of it was officially closed off. Local communities, in order to survive, had now to use clandestine methods to gain access to the park and its resources of food and fodder. They also resorted to local political processes to retrieve their age-old rights. Through a combination of electoral clout, everyday defiance and moral argument, the populace persuaded their leaders to bring pressure to bear on the park authorities, essentially to wink at their clandestine activities. By late 2000, the conservationists' nightmare had come true. One part of GHNP was taken over by Parvati Project while the rest was taken over by the villagers. The Western Tragopan was out of the picture.

Conservationists of all hues of red and green were unanimous in castigating the use of park land for power generation. But their unanimity broke down on the question of how best to deal with local humans and their usufruct claims within the park. Many officials of the forest department and a majority of the conservationists and scientists associated with the park maintained that the exclusion of all human activity is imperative for the effective conservation of GHNP's biological diversity. Villagers, on the other hand, argued that such exclusion is neither politically feasible, given the electoral dynamics of the region, nor ecologically necessary, given the nature of resource use. However, almost all of them overlooked one significant factor: if the area has such a wide representation of western Himalayan biodiversity, could this not, in some measure, be attributed to prevalent customs and traditions of resource-use? And if so, then could the ends of conservation be achieved by a complete exclusion of people?

The drama of the Parvati and the Tragopan, played out over the last two decades of the 20th century, symbolises the ongoing war of attrition among conservation, development and livelihoods across India. The GHNP has become an ideological and intellectual battlefield. Science, politics, and the law intermingle, underlined by a rhetoric that refers to conservation values on the one extreme, and the need for development on the other, said to be in the "national interest". In this conflict, conservation's failure stands out, both to realise its agendas and to address the reality within which it functions. The predicament of conservation stems from its one-sided emphasis on insulating itself from politics, in the process failing to take into account the realities on the ground. A viable

vision of conservation needs to consider the dynamics of decision-making and implementation, the biases of the science on which the current conservationist perspective is predicated, the malleability in the enforcement of the law, as well as the capacity of local populations to integrate conservation into livelihood practices.

Conservation and negotiation

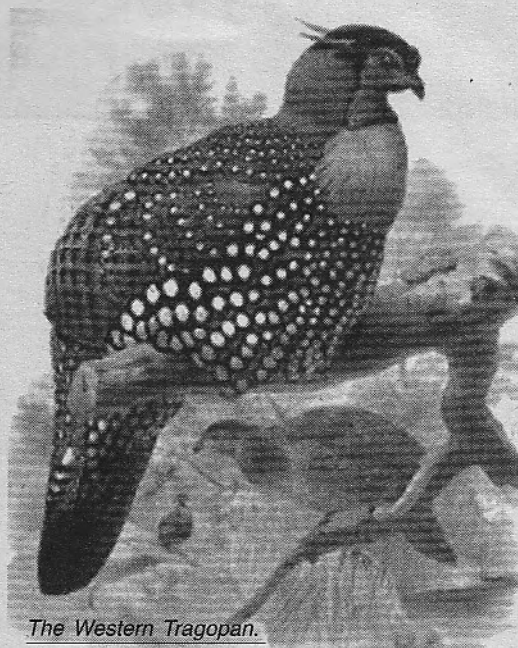
Conservation is an inherently political process. Conservation decisions and practices are necessarily a result of negotiations that take place between numerous players—biologists, bureaucrats, politicians, activists and locals. These negotiations are not always conducted in the public domain. They are almost never fair, and, as currently practised, rarely satisfying for the various claimants seated around the negotiating table.

There, of course, need be no table to begin with. Negotiations need not take place face-to-face. They can take place through an intermediary, such as when villagers approach a minister in the government and he overrides a restraining order issued by the forest department. Negotiations take place when villagers defy the law and enter a park, either on the sly or in open defiance of the forest department. The terms of negotiation are sometimes set unilaterally, as when the forest department clamps down on villager entry

into a park. Coercion, of course, is not dialogue, but it sets the terms of the contest between conflicting interests, and forms the background for further actions and interactions, as when a part of the national park is 'denotified' for a hydel power project.

The pertinent point is that direct negotiations, as opposed to unilateral actions, can take place without the consent of the parties involved. Where a decision by one party affects the interests of another party, then some form of negotiation is taking place. This may not appear to be negotiation only because it is not taking place between equals, and because some interests at the negotiating table may feel badly done by. Even so, an exchange does take place, with specific, identifiable outcomes.

Some of these negotiations take place within the ambit of the law whereas others violate it. When Jeeva Nallah was given over to the power project, the government, though tarnishing its conservationist credentials, is acting within the laws that it makes. But when the Member of Parliament from Mandi responds to pressure from residents of his electoral constituency, and orders the director of GHNP to allow villagers to



The Western Tragopan.

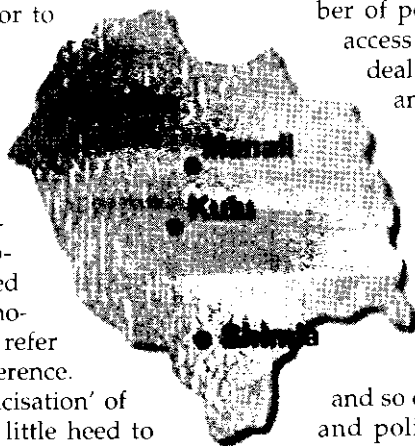
enter the park, he is asking the director to break the law.

The two issues are really two sides of the same political coin. The de-notification of the Jeeva Nallah reflects the lack of political opposition to the power project. Equally, the pressure exerted on the director of the park by a local politician reflects the lack of political support for the establishment of a protected area. Conservationists refer to the de-notification as lack of political will; they refer to the MP's directive as political interference.

Conservationists criticise this 'politicisation' of the environmental terrain which pays little heed to their carefully conducted science. It has been established that the GHNHP is one of only two areas in the world that protect the Western Tragopan, and that less than 1600 of these birds survive in the wild today. Therefore, they argue, all steps must be taken to preserve the species. Equally, scientific research demonstrates that the Himalayan Tahr population in the park is amongst the most important populations of the species in the Himalaya. The park, therefore, needs to be protected from those factors that pose a threat to the species. Human disturbance has been shown to be inimical to wildlife populations in the Park. The solution is to keep people out of the conservation areas, and the thrust of the argument is that the Indian Wildlife Act prohibits all human consumptive use of resources within national parks, hence politicians and bureaucrats should be forced to uphold the law. This is the essence of the conservationist view.

In 1996, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature took this argument to the Indian Supreme Court, seeking enforcement of the Indian Wildlife Act. The court's interim order directed all state governments to initiate proceedings, and to settle within a year, all human consumptive rights within Indian Protected Areas. Settlement proceedings were initiated in a number of states. Under existing law, this effectively meant termination of all usufruct rights and ongoing use of resources by villagers with the protected areas.

At the time, conservationists hailed the court's verdict as a victory for the conservation movement. But in a number of states—Himachal, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh—problems began to surface. Given the num-

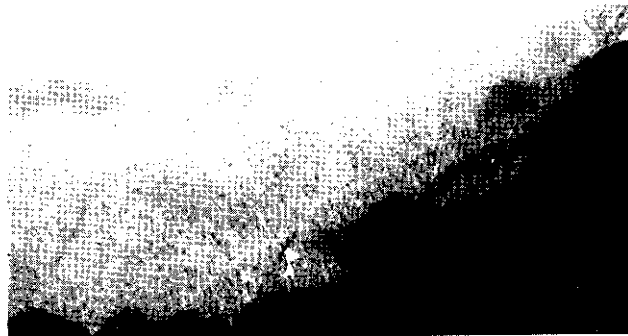
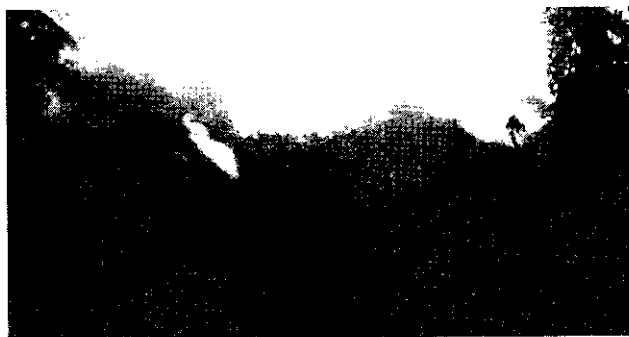


ber of people whose livelihoods depend on access to these resources, there was a great deal of resistance to the settlement process, and people approached politicians to remove the protected area status given to forests in the vicinity of their habitations.

Such de-notification, of course, potentially opens the floodgates to activities far more destructive to the area, such as open-pit mining, large-scale development projects, the building of national highways and so on. Since corrupt government officials and politicians stand to benefit financially from any activity that involves the provision of a permit to a contractor or mine-owner, frustrated conservationists blame the conservation failure on a weak and corrupt government. What they miss in their reading of myriad negotiations that lead up to all such decisions is the fact that political intervention works both ways. When a minister responds to the demands of the members of his constituency, it can be seen as the government's inability to uphold the law. Or, it can be seen as democracy at work.

On the rare occasions when middle-class urbanites get together to fight for a cause, and force the government to initiate a change in waste disposal, stop police brutality, or demand the provision of water and electricity, and the government is forced to respond, there is renewed belief in democracy. Why is not the same yardstick applied when rural India manages to force a government, through the power of its electoral franchise, to orient policy in its favour?

We are told, "The two situations are not comparable." In the first instance, and purely on moral grounds, it is the government's duty to provide clean drinking water, regular electricity and a cleaner environment to its citizens. At the same time, conservation of biodiversity in protected areas is something that will serve generations to come, in both rural and urban India. The villagers do not recognise it, it is said, but conserving that biological diversity is in their own long-term interests. Secondly, the urban population is merely applying pressure on the government to enforce its own laws regarding the provision of essential services, for example, while villagers' actions in the latter



Views of the Greater Himalayan National Park.



Meadow of contention between the villagers and conservationists.



A hydro-electric project threatens the Tragopan.

context are actively aimed at circumventing the law.

Perhaps. The question of who benefits from biodiversity conservation, and at whose cost, has been much debated. It is not at all clear whether the inhabitants of rural India have any interest in conserving much of this diversity, particularly when it comes at a great cost to them. Certainly, where tiger and elephant conservation is concerned, there is occasionally lukewarm interest at the best of times, and often open hostility to measures aimed at increasing the numbers of these potentially dangerous animals. But there are other situations in which rural India does recognise the importance of conserving biological diversity. It is just that the people most affected have been allowed to play no role in framing the laws governing the means by which this diversity is to be identified and conserved.

Inflexible models, flexible laws

Unlike the urban situation, where there is widespread agreement amongst the affected populace, about the desirability of providing clean drinking water and regular electricity, there is no such agreement in the rural situation. The laws that operate to determine how best to conserve Indian biodiversity have been crafted by bureaucrats and biologists with no personal livelihood whatsoever at stake. Their models of conservation have tended to be imported from the American experiment with wildlife conservation—which of course is a vastly different terrain. Even if there are some instances of conflict between livelihoods and conservation in the United States, there are vast expanses of forest and grassland that are virtually uninhabited and unused. This is not true of the Indian context. The Spotted Owl and the Western Tragopan, they do inhabit different environments, in this sense.

The "science" that underpins the imported model also belongs to another cultural context. At the core of this science is the argument that humans need to be separated from wilderness areas if these are to survive. This view is shaped by a cultural bias. Empty spaces devoid of human activity are valued in the West as areas to which people can escape from the noise and

bustle of urban chaos.

This science is also informed by the notion of a balance in nature, a bias that can be traced to Christian mythology and its account of God's creation of the world. This notion of a balance in nature no longer holds the sway it did amongst natural scientists, yet the model of conservation that it spawned, and much of the rhetoric surrounding this model, remain largely intact. By replicating this model, we lose the opportunity to think of wilderness conservation of a kind that may be more suited to the conditions that exist in India (and the rest of the Subcontinent).

Fortunately, there are alternatives supported by scientific research on the impact of human activities on the landscape, as well as by research in the social sciences on the optimal arrangements for managing protected areas. These options facilitate adaptive rather than prescriptive management models, and allow space for strategies suited to local conditions. It is just that these options are not even considered, owing largely to a bureaucracy that is sitting pretty and a conservationist lobby that is loathe to part with either power or a model of conservation they have staked their professional reputations on.

So, when village communities undermine the functioning of the law that is meant to enforce what is a culturally narrow definition of nature, conservationists decry the ineffectiveness of the state, the lack of political will, the political interference in conservation and so on. Arguments about "the effective functioning of democracy" are of little consequence to scientists trying to conserve Indian wildlife. What the flailing, foot-stomping conservationists have failed to do over the years is to build partnerships with local communities. They have actively failed to create common cause with the people most affected by, and therefore, most in touch with, the resources they wish to conserve. Instead, they have pursued science and the law with a vigour that assumes that the mere assertion of the importance of biological resources, combined with the repetition of appropriate legalese, should suffice to protect natural resources. But things do not always work out this way.

Things do not work out this way because of the flexibility in the implementation of the law. Such

flexibility exists in every part of the world, but it is spectacularly present in most parts of the developing world and South Asia. After all, this is a region where greasing a lineman's palm just to ensure the functioning of so basic a convenience as telephone is a regular experience. Here, the conservationist counter-argument is that it is the lineman's job to keep the lines in working condition, but that corruption in the system enables him to force us to pay him to do his job. True, but then think back to the time you jumped a red light, and then paid off the crooked cop to avoid the heavy fine he threatened you with. There is a flexibility in our interactions with the law that most of us recognise in our daily dealing with the state, but which we seem to forget in our judgement of the politician casually ordering the park director to bend the law.

We tend to see such activities of politicians as somehow illegitimate and unfair. We do not see them as merely responding to pressures that are originating within their constituency. We certainly do not see villager entry into the park as a natural outcome of democratic processes, where voters enforce an outcome favourable to themselves. Rather than blaming conservation failures on an ineffective, unresponsive state, conservation must assimilate itself into the political process. For, the hydra-headed state, across its vertical and horizontal divisions, is responding to pressures from below. Such phenomena need to be understood if we are to make any progress in the way we approach conservation in India. These are the negotiations that are taking place all the time, unseen, maligning by an apolitical conservation community rooted in the urban middle-class. And these negotiations take place in the spaces that exist within the law—the spaces that may not be apparent in the letter of the law, but which open up in its actual implementation.

The only way out is in!

Such "ineffective working" of the state has been condemned in the past, but that's neither here nor there. Instead, we need to understand it—for, it will continue to happen, again and again, irrespective of how much evidence can be compiled of such wrongdoing, or how volubly the cause can be trumpeted. It is a natural outcome of statecraft which allows interest groups, with the greatest financial or electoral power to manipulate outcomes to suit their own interests.

The crux of the problem, therefore, is interest groups. What is the support base for biological conservation in the country? What is the subscription profile of the magazine *Sanctuary*, put out from Bombay? Is it the urban middle-class? Maybe not even that—an urban upper-middle class. Let us qualify that. An apolitical urban upper middle class. What is the size of *Sanctuary Magazine's* subscription? Four or five thousand? How many of them vote? How many of them, more pointedly, are voters in the Kullu constituency from which Maheshwar Singh stands for election every few years?

To some extent public opinion in the metropolis does

influence conservation policy. It influences the way the Supreme Court may make decisions that have far-reaching legal and social consequences. And to that extent, it is important that information be made available to a public so that an informed opinion can be formed. But once policy has been formulated, the weight of various interest groups determines the ways and means by which this policy is implemented. For too long, Indian conservationists have focused their efforts on the crafting of public policy and the shaping of public opinion within urban India. Too little effort has gone into understanding the negotiated and fiercely contested process by which such policy is implemented.

An alternative perspective that has emerged in recent years places local communities at the centre, rather than on the periphery, of the entire exercise. The crux of this argument is that the environment needs to become a part of electoral politics within rural India. The objective, then, is to turn electoral power around, such that pressure from below works in the service of, rather than against, conservation.

Popular support for conservation can only come when local communities play a greater role in the decision-making concerning protected areas which affect them. Such support comes from a sense of control over a resource and a negotiating process in which the community perceives itself to be an equal partner with outsiders who also stake a claim to managing the area. Conservation partnerships with local interests are not easy to forge since these imply a loosening of state control over people and resources. Such collaborations also pose an intellectual threat to scientists accustomed to having it their way.

The Great Himalayan National Park of Himachal provides a unique opportunity to test the waters of community participation. There is mounting empirical evidence supporting the view that security of tenure is the most compelling incentive for participatory conservation. GHNP is probably the only protected area in India, which affords us the luxury of indulging all the stakeholders without compromising on basic scientific and social principles. Where else in India would you find 1100 square kilometres of area with only 15,000 people, that too populating only its southwestern periphery?

There are even now large areas inside the park that have fallen into disuse. It is possible to devise a scale of graded protection to different areas inside the park, ranging from totally closed areas to fully open spaces near villages. The villages are characterised by strong community institutions, which could be harnessed in a new conservation paradigm. But for that to happen, community representatives, politicians, conservationists and biologists ought to agree to negotiate and make the necessary compromises. This could signal the end of exclusionary conservation choices forced by urban middle-class India upon its fellow citizens who rely on the forest, and the institutionalisation of a more adaptive system of managing biological heritage.

Delay and drift on the Mahakali

Should India and Nepal not enter into any treaty? That is the implication of the article "How not to do a South Asian treaty".

by Ramaswamy R. Iyer

DIPAK GYAWALI and Ajaya Dixit's critique of the Mahakali Treaty in the April 2001 issue of *Himal* ("How not to do a South Asian treaty") is a valuable contribution, but I have certain reservations about some aspects of their argument.

Let us begin by looking at the matter from the perspectives of the governments of India and Nepal. The Indian view is that there is enormous hydro-electric potential in the Himalayan rivers, and that the realisation of this potential, the provision of water for irrigation, and to some extent, considerations of flood moderation, necessitate several big projects in Nepal. This is not merely the governmental view; it is also shared by many outside the government. The Nepali view (again, not merely restricted to governmental circles), is that water is to Nepal what oil has been to the Gulf countries, namely, a source of wealth and prosperity. The expectation is that a series of projects for the export of power will generate vast financial resources for the country. These are dominant views in both countries. Given these perceptions, there is a convergence of interests between the two sides (at any rate at the official level). That is why the two governments have been talking about certain projects, and have entered into a treaty on one such, namely, Pancheswar.

Gyawali and Dixit feel that this is a wrong path to take; that the underlying idea of 'development' is misconceived (they use Vandana Shiva's term 'maldevelopment'); that it is unwise for Nepal to embark on huge projects for the export of power; and that it would be in the national interest to focus on smaller projects (people-centred, not technology-driven) essentially for domestic needs. I respect their view and share many of their concerns. However, their essay offers not merely a critique of certain approaches to development, but also a critique of the manner in which the Mahakali Treaty was entered into and ratified. I have some difficulties here.

They clearly imply that there has been impropriety or inefficiency or both in the signing and ratification of the treaty. (Consider the words "bulldozed", "corrup-

tion" and "capitulation".) However, all that emerges is that India *wanted* the Treaty and pursued the matter vigorously. Let us assume that the Government of India did want a treaty and pushed hard for it. Is there some impropriety in that? Could not Nepal have said "No"? What evidence is there for supposing that Nepal was pushed into signing a Treaty it did not want to sign? As already mentioned, there was in fact a convergence of perceptions between the two countries.

It has been stated that the Indian foreign minister walked away with the treaty in a short visit of three days. Much work must have been done prior to the visit and the document brought to the final stage, so that it could be signed during the visit. This is the way things are usually done; there is no mystery here. As for the 'pressure' said to have been brought on Nepal by the British and American governments, Robin Raphel (then US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia) was no friend of India and was the last person that India would have approached for intervening with Nepal; and relations between India and Britain were not quite so close at the time. In any case, why could not the British government have given some well-meant advice to Nepal in its own interest as they saw it?

But what exactly had happened in this case? India wanted to reach an understanding with Nepal on (among other things) the Pancheswar Project. It also wanted to settle once and for all the vexed Tanakpur issue. Nepal, too, was interested in both these issues. Negotiations took place at the official and political levels. The Government of India, acutely aware that the treaty would need parliamentary ratification by a two-thirds majority, took the trouble of holding extensive informal consultations with all political parties in Nepal before the treaty was signed. The treaty was signed, and in due course ratified by the Nepali Parliament (in a manner of speaking—we shall come to that). Let me now turn the question of the article around and ask: "How else would a treaty be done?"

As for the present status of the treaty, I agree that there is an *impasse*. The parliamentary ratification was

accompanied by a set of resolutions (*sankalp prastav*) that are referred to as "strictures". There are certain unresolved differences between the two governments. Five years after signing it, the treaty continues to be in a state of suspended animation. But is all this the result of dilatoriness, unreasonableness and sheer high-handedness on the part of India? That is the general view in Nepal, but one did not expect that view to be reflected by implication in Gyawali and Dixit's essay. They do not say so in as many words, but on every point that is in dispute they seem to take it for granted that Nepal is right and India is wrong. The fact that on each of these points there is an Indian position (whether one agrees with it or not) does not come out anywhere in the article.

Let us consider the *sankalp prastav*. If the Nepali Parliament had been deeply troubled by certain questions, it should have refused to ratify the treaty. To say that it is ratifying the treaty but at the same time passing a series of 'strictures' is to try to have the cake and eat it too. Strictures by the Nepali Parliament can apply to the Nepali government, not to the Government of India. The Government of Nepal must of course take note of its Parliament's concerns, and if necessary, go back to the Government of India for a fresh round of negotiations. But in that event, the treaty must be treated as dormant (if not as non-existent) until the re-negotiation is completed and a fresh document is agreed upon. And of course the negotiations may fail, or may yield results that the Nepali Parliament may not approve of.

It seems to me that there can only be 'ratification' or 'non-ratification' of a treaty, and not a *conditional* ratification; and that a conditional ratification is the same as non-ratification. It could be seriously argued that the Mahakali Treaty does not stand ratified and therefore does not exist, and that the question of implementing it does not arise. However, as the general impression is that the treaty has been ratified, let us look at the differences that have emerged:

(i) **The Kalapani issue:** This is a territorial dispute. Either the area in question is part of Indian territory or it is not. If it is, the Indian military presence there is a matter of no consequence to Nepal; if it is Nepali territory, India has no business to be there. This is a matter to be resolved with reference to old records, documents, maps, survey reports, etc. The dispute needs to be settled quickly in a spirit of goodwill and not allowed to fester. Nothing is gained by arousing emotion over this issue, and in any case, this has nothing to do with the implementation of the Mahakali Treaty.

(ii) **"Boundary River":** The Nepali view, drawing support from the parliamentary resolution, is that the qualification "on major stretches" should be ignored and the Mahakali treated simply as a boundary river. No one can write that kind of a gloss on the treaty. The words of a treaty, the result of hard negotiation, are sacrosanct. If the Mahakali Treaty says "boundary river on major stretches" then that is what it is.

(iii) **"Equal sharing":** From the fact that the Mahakali is

a boundary river, the Nepalis draw the inference that it belongs equally to the two countries, and therefore half of the waters of the river belong to Nepal. These doctrines (boundary river, ownership of half the waters, etc) seem to be Nepali innovations not easily derivable from any international law or principles. The Indian view (if I have understood it correctly) is that the river can be used by the two countries but does not 'belong' to either; that in particular, any doctrine of ownership of flowing water and the implied right of the upper riparian to 'sell' the water so owned to the lower riparian (who would in any case receive that water naturally by gravity flow), seems non-maintainable in international law; that "equal sharing" really applies to the incremental benefits to be created by the Pancheswar Project; and that the relative benefits gained by the two countries would determine their respective shares of the capital costs of the project. There is a clear divergence of views here. In so far as this is the result of inadequate negotiation or poor wording, both sides must share the blame for leaving this nebulous area in the treaty. Nothing will be gained by taking a dogmatic position on this issue; this is a matter for discussion between the two countries with a view to arrive at an agreed position.

(iv) **The protection of existing consumptive uses:** Under the Treaty, the sharing of the capital costs of the Pancheswar Project would be in proportion to the relative incremental benefits, and the incremental benefits have to be reckoned after protecting existing consumptive uses of the waters of the Mahakali. India has claimed that there is such an existing consumptive use at the Lower Sarada, but the Nepalis question this on certain grounds. Without going into those arguments in detail, let us merely ask: is there merit in the claim of existing use? This issue can be easily resolved if answers are found to the following questions: a) Is there an existing consumptive use of Mahakali waters in the Lower Sarada area? If so, what is the quantum? How old is the use? Is it regular or occasional? Is it a fact that the farmers depend essentially on the Karnali and draw upon the Sarada only infrequently, when for certain reasons they are unable to use Karnali waters, and if so, how important is that occasional use? b) What would be the consequences of not recognising this as "existing use"? Is it merely a question of reckoning this against India's share of the benefits arising from the Pancheswar Project, and thus requiring India to pay more (perhaps a few hundred crores) towards the capital cost of the project? Or is there a danger of actual denial of Mahakali waters to the farmers in question? (Incidentally, if this is in fact a case of prior use, would it not be entitled to consideration under the Helsinki Rules and now the new UN Convention even if there were no Treaty?) c) In the event of the farmers being denied Mahakali waters, do they have any alternative water source, or will they be subjected to distress? As a result of this examination it may possibly be found that there is no real problem, or that it is marginal, and that solutions are available; but it is

necessary to study the matter first.

(v) Power tariff: The side letter to the treaty says that the power benefit is to be assessed on the basis of saving in costs as compared with the relevant alternatives available. Two questions would arise: first, what in fact is the 'alternative', and secondly, should the tariff be the same as that of alternative cost? In regard to the first question, there are many possibilities (other hydro-electric projects, thermal projects, gas-based projects, etc), and thermal generation need not be assumed to be the only alternative available. In regard to the second question, if in fact the generation cost at Pancheswar is lower, the gain would surely have to be shared between the two countries: if the 'alternative cost' is to be fully paid by India to Nepal, what is India's gain, and what has it 'avoided'? In any case, the price of power is not a question of abstract principles but one of negotiation. It will have to be attractive enough to Nepal to warrant the undertaking of a big project and affordable enough to India to warrant purchase from this source. Here again, the difference, if any, does not seem insurmountable; but so far as one knows, this question has not yet come up for serious discussion.

It will be a mistake to take a gloomy view of such differences and difficulties, and to regard these as indications of the failure of the Treaty. What is important is that they should be quickly dealt with and settled. Delay and drift will render them more difficult and

perhaps even intractable. Unfortunately, delay and drift are what seem to be happening.

At the end of the article, the authors have outlined an approach for the future. I have no quarrel with that. But what do we do about the Mahakali Treaty itself? Do the authors feel that the only thing that can be done is to scrap it? Should those who have the cause of a good relationship between the two countries at heart work for the salvaging of the treaty (however qualified one's approval of it may be) and the amicable resolution of differences, or for the destruction of the treaty with the inevitable impact of such a denouement on Indo-Nepal relations? This is not a rhetorical question; it is asked in all seriousness.

Let me add that I would address such a question to Gyawali and Dixit but not to certain others (whom I shall not name) in whom there is a deep visceral dislike for India. If in fact a visceral dislike for India is a ubiquitous phenomenon in Nepal (and we saw recently, in the case of some reported but unstated remarks by an Indian actor, how easily anti-India feelings could be roused, leading even to riots), then one can only say: "Let not India and Nepal enter into any treaties; they will not work; the only possible relationship between the two countries is one of coldness, correctness and distance." I hope from the bottom of my heart that it is not necessary to take such a pessimistic view. ▽

Surmise of a conspiracy

by *Irfan Ahmed*

I HAVE some questions regarding Subir Bhaumik's piece ("Conspirator's Cauldron") in the May issue of *Himal*. I am not entirely certain that there are answers to them, but I suppose they ought to be asked. Normally I feel enormously upbeat about what gets printed on *Himal*'s pages, and that is precisely why I am not sure about Bhaumik's piece, and not sure what your editorial policy is.

The reasons for this question are obvious. Bhaumik's explanation of a military incident between India and Bangladesh is based exclusively on the compulsions of the latter's domestic politics, one that seems to be dominated by conspiracies in the correspondent's reading of it. We all know that Bhaumik has been reporting on militancy in India's Northeast, so could it be that this has coloured his world view? He quotes intelligence agencies as sources. This is highly unusual because 'agency quoting' died many years ago due to its sheer unreliability. When you grab a phone to get information you will never be able to tell whether you are being fed or not. One can continue with this practice only at the risk of eroding the distinction between the

media and intelligence outfits in the legitimate dissemination of news. Conspiracy theories have no space in the media unless proved beyond doubt, which is when they cease to be conspiracy theories. But when *Himal* prints them, what does that make you? Or is it that *Himal* is not uncomfortable with intelligence feeds?

Let me say what the danger was in this case. Bhaumik concluded that the "assassination attempts" on Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the bomb explosions at the public meetings and the border incidents, were all part of a single conspiracy to dethrone Hasina. Also part of this conspiracy was the 76 kg of explosives that the police discovered 300 metres from the podium where she was to address a rally at Kotalipara in her Gopalganj constituency. Add to this the meeting at Breda, near Amsterdam, to plot the assassination of Hasina, spearheaded by one of the accused in the Sheikh Mujibur Rehman murder case, and you have great copy, too tempting to be checked even though *Himal* has a man in Dhaka (whose article actually accompanies Bhaumik's).

My contention is that reading all of one country's

internal problems in the light of its larger neighbour's military policy, will always be risky, simply because this is where the agencies come in and fill the information gap. Bhaumik quotes people to say that there is a conspiracy to undermine and destabilise the Awami League government, because it is seen as being pro-India and hence the recipient of New Delhi's patronage. But the pitfalls that follow these arguments are:

- The bomb that was found in Kotalipara was so big that it had military origins beyond any doubt. Foreign experts who assessed the situation refused to endorse the Government of Bangladesh's view that it was planted by Islamic terrorists. The main accused were arrested only recently, and seem to have no connections with any of the political parties. In any case, the planting of bombs has no political value left even in the pro-Awami League camps. Otherwise, it would have been discussed constantly and used against the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Even pro-Awami League media people do not put out such arguments. Just as Begum Khaleda Zia's claim that Hasina had planned her murder and paid a number of people to kill her, was not reported by the BBC. Only the party paper gave the claim publicity for a couple of days before toning it down because it sounded so vacuous in the absence of any evidence. Those who live in Bangladesh, know that allegations of assassination attempts are dime a dozen in a country where so many ordinary people have died unaccompanied by rumours and conspiracy theories.

It is true that Hasina's family was wiped out by military conspirators, and they have been tried and sentenced to death, and there certainly must be some people who might want to kill her but no conclusive evidence exists to link such possible attempts to the border incidents. The threat to her life and the border events can only meet at a conspiratorial point because they are two different media stories.

- The Breda conspiracy has also disappeared from the papers. In fact, check with the Dutch papers and you will see no such rumours. Notice also that the source quoted was the Indian mainstream media, and not the Dutch media. News of such incidents have a short lifespan.

- There was one instance of a bullet actually being fired at the prime minister's house and led to a scare. But although investigated, no results were made public and the matter was left there. Names were named in the circulating rumours including that of the prime minister's cousin, and Member of Parliament, Sheikh Halal, who is considered to be close to her. He is the

son of Sheikh Mujib's brother who was killed along with him back in 1975. His name even appeared in the newspapers. A bullet entered the room in which Hasina's political advisor Dr. Malek sits. Malek was given the responsibility of sorting out the 'energy mess' in the country and fingers were being pointed at Sheikh Halal as he is the biggest wheeler-dealer in this sector. After the incident, an investigation committee was set up and duly forgotten. In a place, where bullets fired at the prime minister's official residence do not get investigated, you do not buy into anything that comes to you on the first ask, even if it is the prime minister's office saying that the opposition wants to kill her. Or vice versa.

You have to be a careful buyer of facts. You check twice. If the fact is too dangerous to report, you do not report it. But you definitely stay away from what you are told by your intelligence sources whose job is to plant information.

- As for the bombs, there have been three major bombings at public meetings in the last three years. One was at a cultural meeting held by the Udichi Shilpi Goshthi in Jessore on 7 March 1999. The second was at the meeting of (a faction of) Transport Workers in Paltan Maidan, Dhaka on 21 January, this year. The third was at the Pahela Baishakh Ramna Mela (Bangla New Year) on 14 April this year. The odd common thread here is that all the three gatherings were under the umbrella of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), a moth-eaten,

tattered residue of the old Soviet variety. They have no clout, no influence on Bangla politics. Hitting CPB is really safe. But who would want to do it ?

The members of Chhayanat, the cultural organisation that has supported the New Year mela for the last 40 years, are going on a hunger strike early next month because not one arrest has been made after the blast. The chargesheets for the bombings at the workers' meeting have just been finalised though the trial is yet to commence, while in the Udichi case, none has so far been made. If you make inquiries as a reporter, the fingers will point in all directions. In the case of these bombings, there are a great many rumours about the identity of the perpetrators, but these are only rumours and they cannot be reported as facts, even if the source is an intelligence agency. A surmise is only a surmise, particularly when it involves a conspiracy. It must be proved before it can be reported or made the basis of analysis? It is best not to pass off a conspiracy theory as the conspiracy itself. Either report it as a rumour or not at all.

Now look at Bhaumik's conclusion: an Islamist-

Those who live in Bangladesh, know that allegations of assassination attempts are dime a dozen in a country where so many ordinary people have died unaccompanied by rumours and conspiracy theories.

Response

rightist anti-Indian alliance is involved in the border raids. He refers to the Padua raid and the "retaliatory" incursion at Boraibari, in which 16 Indians were killed. What does it prove? And how does one reconcile the intent of the so-called conspiracy with its actual outcome? We will have to concoct yet another conspiracy theory to account for the wide gap between the intent and the outcome.

Examine the facts of the case. The conspiracy was meant to destabilise the "pro-India" prime minister. Instead the Indian raid actually helped Hasina look like a brave anti-Indian. Now how did that happen? Is it that the Indian defence establishment, acting on intelligence reports of the plot to undermine the Awami League government, actually sent these soldiers, in the full knowledge that they would get killed, in order to strengthen Hasina's hand politically? And what about the events that followed—the bad blood and the acrimony—was all that just posturing and so much shadow boxing for the gallery? It would seem then that the main objective of the counter-conspiracy—stealing the thunder from BNP's anti-Indian rhetoric has been accomplished, for it is a fact that the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party has lost rather than gained from the incident. In fact, Awami League leaders have gleefully gone on record to say that the Indian attack demonstrates just how strong the Bangladesh defence policy is and that Hasina is now seen as being more tough with India than Khaleda Zia. This event has even ignited anti-Indian feeling within the Awami League, and there are speeches to prove that. But then what is the sense of a counter-conspiracy that strengthens the ally by weakening the alliance. Good sense militates against accepting this kind of a conspiracy theory. On the other hand, nothing else will explain why the original Islamic-right wing conspiracy achieved precisely the opposite of what it intended. Perhaps the best way out is not to accept such theories in the first place.

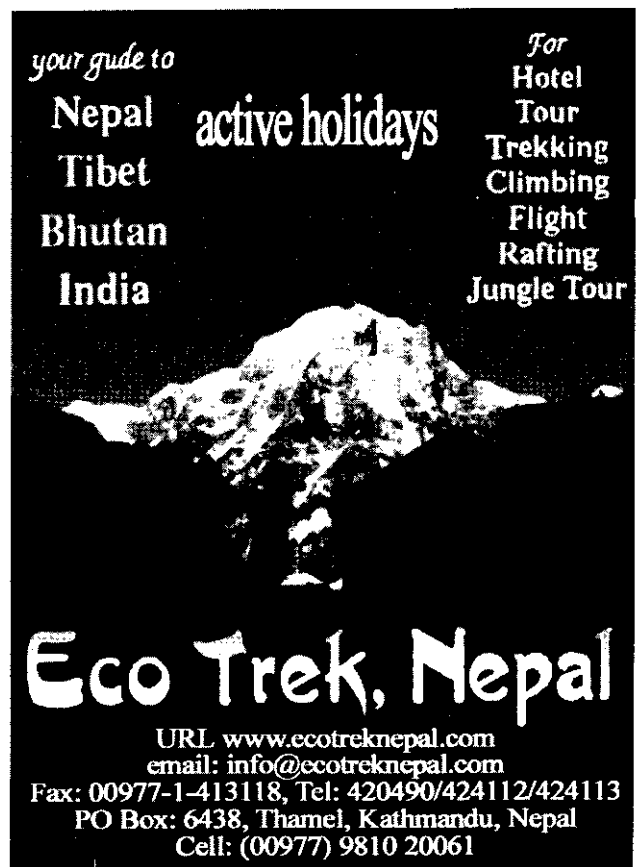
There is another point to be made about quoting intelligence sources, i.e. that it is not a restricted privilege. It is an option open to anyone who has access to intelligence contacts. Situations become murky when different versions of the same thing are passed out as classified intelligence information. And all the conflicting versions are certified as true merely because they have come from the same intelligence source. For instance, there are rumours of a secret report on the Indo-Bangla border incident prepared for the Bangladesh prime minister. Rumour also has it that another one is being prepared for public consumption. Clearly, the two reports are bound to make two completely different constructions of the same event. What then will a journalist report? Either that there are two such reports, if it has indeed been verified that there are two such reports. Or that there are rumours of two such reports which are not verified. Or just say nothing at all about the two unconfirmed reports. But most certainly not the content of any one of them. That is naive.

Now, Dhaka rumour has it that the secret report (the

first one) claims that the whole thing was a bloody mess and everything we see has been spin doctored; that the Padua takeover was a local decision which did not even have the sanction of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) chief, not to speak of the prime minister; that Padua is back with India and the road that the Indians were building close to this no man's land is no longer there; that Padua is best given away to India at some later point; that the Boraibari attack by the Indians was a local decision taken by the BSF deputy commandant BR Mondal and that the BSF top brass did not know about it either; that if the BSF men had come in broad daylight there would have been no exchange of fire, but because it was dark the BDR fired; and that the Indian forces that amassed at the border subsequently had nothing to do with the incident, but were there in connection with the elections in Assam and West Bengal. Now, all this is a far cry from both the Indian intelligence version of events and the official Bangla version. So which is the right version?

Subir Bhaumik is excellent when he reports the Assam situation. But by hinging his analysis of the border event on the Indian intelligence understanding of Bangladeshi politics he has turned in a speculative piece that will not meet the standards of credible journalism. These are standards that Bhaumik meets when he is not quoting intelligence people. And these are standards which Himal should follow all the time.

—via email



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The IMF riot

TWO YEARS ago the World Bank fired its chief economist, Joseph Stiglitz, merely because he had expressed mild dissent from World Bank-style globalisation. He was recently interviewed in Washington for *The Observer and News night* about the inside workings of the IMF, the World Bank, and the Bank's 51 percent owner, the US Treasury.

The World Bank, Stiglitz tells us, claims that it has an assistance strategy for every poorer nation, which is designed for each after careful in-country investigation. Not so, says Stiglitz, once a true insider, a member of Bill Clinton's cabinet, and chairman of the president's council of economic advisers. The so-called 'investigation' involves little more than a close inspection of five-star hotels and concludes with a meeting with a begging finance minister, who is handed a 'restructuring agreement' pre-drafted for 'voluntary' signature. Then, after an analysis of each nation's economy, the Bank hands to every finance minister the same four-step programme: privatisation; capital market liberalisation; market-based pricing; free trade.

Step one: Rather than objecting to the sell-offs of state industries, most politicians of poor countries use the World Bank's demands to silence local critics and their governments and then happily flog their electricity, water companies, and so forth. They leap, with eyes gleaming, at the possibility of commissions for shaving a few billion off the sale price. The US government knows exactly what is going on—as it did in the case of the biggest privatisation of all, the 1995 Russian sell-off. Stiglitz maintains that the US Treasury wanted Yeltsin re-elected and was totally unconcerned as to whether the election was corrupt or not. The result: US-backed oligarchs stripped Russia's industrial assets, with the effect that national output was cut almost by half.

Step two: In theory this allows investment money to flow in and out but in practice, usually, the money simply flows out. MacDonald's Kentucky Fried? Stiglitz calls this the 'hot money' cycle whereby cash flows in for speculation in real estate and currency, and flows out at the first signs of trouble. Stiglitz says that a nation's reserves can drain literally in days, and when it does, the IMF steps in and demands that interest rates be raised, thus demolishing property values, savaging industrial production and draining the national exchequer.

Step three: With a nation down on its knees, the IMF propels it towards raising prices on food, water and utilities. As one illustration of the results of what the Bank fancily terms market-based pricing, Stiglitz cites Indonesia in 1998. When the IMF put a stop to food and fuel subsidies, the country exploded into riots what Stiglitz calls Step three-and-a-half, 'the IMF riot'.

News night had obtained several World Bank documents one of which was a 2000 Interim Country Assistance Strategy for Ecuador in which it was clearly stated that the Bank expected its plans for that unhappy country to spark 'social unrest', which is

exactly what they did.

These 'IMF riots' cause new flights of capital and ensuing government bankruptcies. Who profits: foreigners who rush in to pick up at bargain prices whatever assets remain. In this game, says Stiglitz, the clear winners seem to be the western banks and the US Treasury.

Step four: Free trade is conducted by the rules of the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank. Europe and America demolish all barriers to sales in Asia, Africa and Latin America whilst barricading their own markets to purchases from these areas.

World Bank and IMF plans are devised in secrecy, they are never open to dissent or even discourse, and according to Stiglitz, are "driven by an absolutist ideology". Not only do they actually undermine the demanded democracy but they just do not work. Take Africa, for instance. Under the IMF structural assistance programmes, Africa's income dropped by 23 percent and the only nation that escaped was Botswana which gave the IMF the boot.

Stiglitz's recommendations: Forget the Bank and the IMF. Go in for radical land reforms and thus completely change the power of the elites. But changing the power of the elites is not high on the Bank's or the IMF's agenda, and neither is changing their own four-step course in the face of failures and suffering.

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH EX-CHIEF ECONOMIST OF THE IMF, JOSEPH STIGLITZ.

Pakistan's Salem trials

BLASPHEMY IS a capital crime in this volatile Islamic nation, so Dr. Younus Shaikh, while teaching at a medical college, might have wisely avoided any discussion of the personal hygiene of the holy Prophet Muhammad.

But the topic came up during a morning physiology class. And the doctor talked briefly about seventh-century Arabia and its practices regarding circumcision and the removal of underarm hair.

"Some students found his remarks deeply offensive. 'Only out of respect, because he was our teacher, did we not beat him to death on the spot,'" said Syed Bilal, 17.

Instead, they informed a group of powerful mullahs, who in turn filed a criminal complaint. Lest the matter be treated with insufficient urgency, these clerics dispatched a mob to the medical school and the police station, threatening to burn them down.

Precisely what Dr. Shaikh said in class last October is now a matter of mortal dispute, but he has been jailed ever since, awaiting trial and pondering the noose. Defending himself presents a conundrum. What can he safely say?

Pakistan, a nearly bankrupt nation with 150 million people, a military government and an expanding nuclear arsenal, is drifting toward religious extremism. Blasphemy cases are its version of the Salem witch tri-

als, with clerics sniffing out infidels, and enemies using the law to settle personal scores.

Accurate crime statistics are a low priority here, but the number of those imprisoned on blasphemy charges is estimated in the hundreds. Only the most sensational cases get much notice: when vigilantes murder the accused, or the bold judge who set him free. When a man is condemned to die if a few pages in the *Koran* are torn. When a newspaper is shut down after publishing a sacrilegious letter.

Dr. Shaikh is charged under Provision 295-C of the law: the use of derogatory remarks about the holy Prophet Muhammad. Whether such an offence is intentional or not, the mandatory punishment is death.

"Please understand, I am a deeply religious man," Dr. Shaikh said recently, professing his Islamic faith through the tight wire mesh of a jail cell. A short, rumped man, he had the weary look of someone trying to rub a disturbing dream from bleary eyes. "I cannot even imagine blaspheming our holy Prophet, peace be upon him."

Few Pakistanis have heard of Dr. Shaikh, but news of his woes has leapt the borders, flitting across the Internet. He is associated with the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which describes itself as an "umbrella organisation for humanist, rationalist, agnostic, skeptic, atheist and ethical culture groups around the world." In 1999, he gave a presentation at the World Humanist Congress.

In an attempt to save the doctor, a global letter-writing campaign was quickly begun, with pleas aimed at Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler. Publicity, on the other hand, has been discouraged.

The hope was that persistent statesmanship would outlast righteous anger, with the charges then quietly disappearing. This hushed approach has proved a frustration, however, and after declining earlier requests for an interview, Dr. Shaikh agreed to speak of his case.

"My statements about the holy Prophet, peace be upon him, were made in his praise only, and these have now been twisted out of context," he said in measured phrases.

Moments later, pressed for specifics, he said: "My students asked me about the shaving of pubic and armpit hair, and I, in describing the glory of Allah's revelations, said that before the arrival of Islam, the Arabs did not have these practices. And they did not."

Before his troubles, Dr. Shaikh lived alone in a small room in Islamabad. He had studied medicine in both Pakistan and Ireland but his practice had long periods of interruption. He preferred academic research and

his passion has been "the history of nations". After the *Koran*, he said, the important books in his life have been the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *The Story of Civilization* by Will and Ariel Durant.

Pakistan may have an ample supply of free thinkers, but free speakers have long been on the wane. Governments—civilian or military—tend to imprison opponents. Federal laws enforce a mix of mosque and state, and questions of religion are often presumed to have a single right answer, like arithmetic.

"Before saying anything in this country, you must always be aware of the forum, the place and the time," said Afrasiab Khattak, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "If accused of blasphemy, you are in great difficulty. The mullahs are not known for their generosity. Even if exonerated, you will always be in danger."

Dr. Shaikh was a member of peace and environmental groups. But while he might have asked an occasional dissenting question at a public seminar, he was not a well-known activist. His few writings have appeared mostly in cyberspace, and at least some of them accuse organised religion of mass murder, bigotry and the degradation of women. (Supporters have now removed most of this material from the Internet.)

Last fall, as Dr. Shaikh worked part time at a small clinic, he accepted a teaching job at the Capital Homeopathic Medical College, on the second floor of a shopping plaza. He had no expertise in homeopathic cures, but his subject was physi-

ology and he knew that well enough. He was paid USD 89 a month.

However badly it ended, Dr. Shaikh's brief tenure was not a contentious one. Students liked him. If he had a fault, they said, it was for lectures that meandered into irrelevancies like poetry or free sex in Western countries.

Occasionally, Dr. Shaikh's digressions embarrassed his students; occasionally, they seemed impious. One irksome topic was how Muslims had come to practice circumcision and, for purposes of cleanliness, the removal of pubic and underarm hair. A question arose: Had Muhammad been circumcised before receiving God's revelations at age 40?

The ensuing discussion brought on no great ado, and Dr. Shaikh said he only remembers saying, "The Prophet's tribe did not practice circumcision."

But the offended students repeat a different version. "He told us the Prophet hadn't been circumcised before," insisted Majid Lodhi, 22. "We asked, 'In what book is this knowledge?' And he said, 'I'm telling you the way it was, and if you have evidence to the contrary, bring in your proof.'"

Outside of school, the students had begun talking

MATRIMONIAL
 Assalamu Alaikum. Parents are requesting responses for the marriage of their son and daughter. Both parents are now visiting Pakistan for this purpose. The most compatible families are requested to visit the web page given below to learn in great details about family particularly our son.
OUR SON is 33, 5'10" tall and very athletic. He is very fit and also plays football by regularly exercising. He is very handsome, muscular with fair shade by regularly exercising. He can read the Holy Quran, says color, he cannot read or write Urdu, but can read the Holy Quran, says color. He cannot converse in Punjabi. He does not smoke, does not drink, he is a devotee, humble, hardworking and a very honest young man. He is also outgoing, humorous and very popular with his friends. He is also an excellent speaker and writer. He was student body president of his high school and has published several articles in computer magazines. He has spoken on TV about political issues related to Islam. He has a bachelors degree in computer engineering from Cal Poly and a bachelors degree in the Silicon Valley and has annual income in six figures range.
OUR DAUGHTER is 33, 5'3" beautiful with a business and computer degree. She is an expert in Oracle and SAP and works for a multinational company, value system and family orientation. She is an excellent cook, interior decorator, and loves to earth persons. Her information would be provided to the most compatible families. Parents of both these who were educated and living in USA or Canada can approach us.
OUR FAMILY members are sunny Muslims originally from Punjab but moved to the USA 25 years ago. We have one son and one daughter and both live with us. Mother has a college degree from Pakistan while father got his MBR and PhD from University of California at Berkeley. Father has been a professor and chairman, CEO of three different computer companies for over 15 years. He is in the venture capital business now. We live a very elite neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area of California.
 We are in the process of having a house in Islamabad. We have excellent family references from Pakistan, India, Middle East and USA.
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THE NEWS, ISLAMABAD

about Dr. Shaikh. Was he uttering blasphemies? they asked each other. And if so, what should a good Muslim do?

"I had heard from the sermons in the mosques that those who blaspheme deserve to be killed immediately," said Asghar Ali Afridi, who at 28 was older than most students and whose views were persuasive. "It was a weakness of faith that we did not do it."

But 11 students, the entire class, did sign a letter that listed Dr. Shaikh's possible crimes. They claimed he had said that the Prophet was not a Muslim until age 40; that before then, he did not remove his underarm hair or undergo circumcision; that he first wed, at 25, without an Islamic marriage contract; that his parents were not Muslims.

Mr. Afridi was picked to deliver the letter to the Movement for the Finality of the Prophet, a group well known for pursuing blasphemers.

"For Dr. Shaikh's own protection, we sought his arrest," said Abdul Wahid Qasmi, secretary general of the organisation's Islamabad chapter. "Otherwise, he might have been killed in the streets."

The Movement's vigilance is most often directed at Ahmadis, who regard themselves as Muslims but believe another prophet appeared after Muhammad. By law, they are barred from linking themselves in any way to Islam. Each year, many are arrested for simply reciting a Koranic verse or using the greeting "*salaam aleikum*".

Non-Muslims make up about 3 percent of Pakistan's population, and while they have obvious reasons to fear the blasphemy statutes, there is no shortage of opposition among Muslims as well. Even a strong advocate, the minister for religious affairs, Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, says the law requires revision. He has reviewed numerous cases and said the majority originate from "ill will and personal prejudice".

Last year, General Musharraf himself called for a procedural change, suggesting that the merits of blasphemy cases be reviewed by local officials before an arrest. But when fundamentalists took to the streets in protest, he backed down.

At the Movement's headquarters, the law also comes under criticism, though the complaint is of sluggish justice. Blasphemers may get locked up, but not one has been executed.

"Even if someone is only half-conscious when speaking against the Prophet, he must die," said Mr. Qasmi, who managed to sound amiable. "In Dr. Shaikh's case, his relatives have come to see us, saying the man is sorry and that he repents. But to be sorry now is not enough. Even if a man is sorry, he must die."

These days, Dr. Shaikh calls himself an "Islamic humanist," stressing the adjective. This surge in devotion is a return to his roots; he comes from a religious family in Bahawalnagar, and his father, a merchant, is a hafiz, a man who has memorised the Koran.

In hiring a lawyer, the family has steered away from human rights types. Its attorney takes a rather omnibus approach. First, there is a technicality to exploit. The

students should have filed the charges instead of the mullahs, he asserts. Second, his client never said the things alleged, and even if he did, the words are not blasphemous.

A judge will decide. And customarily, the accusing party packs the courtroom with zealots in a show of righteous concern. The Shaikh family, however, has no intention of being steamrolled by hostile fundamentalists. At a recent hearing, they brought their own mullahs—equally bearded, equally turbaned, equally able to quote from holy books.

"No blasphemy has been committed in this case," proclaimed Maulana Abdul Hafiz. An elderly, stern-faced man, he, too, heads a chapter of the Movement for the Finality of the Prophet, his being in Bahawalnagar. "Blasphemy can be committed only if issues are raised about the period after the holy Prophet declared his prophethood. These issues are pre-prophethood."

The mullahs from Bahawalnagar say they have tried to reason with the mullahs from Islamabad, but these efforts have failed. "They know we are right but they do not want to backtrack and lose face," said Maulana Hafiz, enraged by his adversaries.

How dare they? he declared: "They tell us that we ourselves should be cautious, that protecting a blasphemer is as bad as blaspheming itself."

FROM "DEATH TO BLASPHEMERS: ISLAM'S GRIP ON PAKISTAN" BY NAVEED AKRAM IN THE NEW YORK TIMES.

Bogus opinion polls

THE OPINION polls have gone wrong many times in Tamil Nadu, as well as in other states of India. In fact, they are becoming predictably unpredictable, and can misjudge even the overall trend—not just the number of seats!

Why would an opinion poll get it wrong? Even more curiously, how can an exit poll fail to predict the results, when they seem to work very well in the USA and other developed countries? Scientifically, I can think of five possible explanations:

1. In reality, opinion polls are seldom conducted; it is all eyewash. Journalists write what they think *will* happen, or what they think *should* happen.
2. Opinion polls are honestly conducted, but the methodology of conducting them in India could be inherently faulty.
3. Methodology is fine on paper, but the actual sample set chosen for the opinion poll is not representative of the voter population and preferences.
4. A major event happens after the opinion poll to drastically affect the voting tendency (albeit cannot be an excuse for the failure of exit polls).
5. Opinion polls are properly conducted, but people participating in them are not telling the truth due to some reason(s).

The first theory is the favourite of cynics who say to me: "Opinion polls? Are you mad? In India, nobody ever asks anyone's opinion about anything. Magazines just write something that suits them, and people can't care less. As a matter of fact, people like you who are

educated and can afford a magazine like *India Today* are a small minority, and you guys don't even bother to vote!" I am now increasingly convinced (and concerned) that the cynics are right, at least partially. In the last two and a half years of my life at Oxford, I have been stopped at least 10 times and asked about a gamut of things—views on homosexuals adopting children (neutral), the political party I support (Liberal Democrats), whether university fees should be hiked (no), whether John Tyndall of British Nationalist Party should be allowed to debate in the Oxford Union (no), which flower would remind me of my childhood days (Jasmine), etc. From the political to the romantic, from the weird and supernatural to the most obvious—I was questioned on a number of topics. Almost everyday I see someone being stopped on the road in Oxford and asked an opinion. Every week I get some sort of questionnaire from people ranging from my mobile phone sales executive, to a desperate graduate student of experimental psychology.

On the other hand, I lived for 25 years in India before moving to England. Those years were mostly spent in towns, and I had no experience of participating in any opinion poll. Did I ever see anyone being interviewed? No. Did I (or any of my friends from my town) know anyone (who knew anyone) who participated in a survey? No, not at all. With the exceptions of readership surveys by *The Hindu*, *Readers' Digest*, etc., and door-to-door salesgirls eagerly selling shampoos or detergents, townspeople are conveniently ignored. At least, that is my experience. If this is the situation in towns, I can imagine how many opinion polls are conducted in villages! Interestingly, my colleagues who grew up in metropolitan cities of India have taken part, or have seen someone, taking part in opinion polls.

So I think that opinion polls are seldom conducted in all rural parts of India. At best, feelers are sent to random villages to gauge the mood, and it is likely that predictions are based on crude extrapolation. Magazines write what they want, or what they believe is a probable outcome, or (taking a cynical view) what they think will sell. The people who subscribe to *India Today*, or the online readers of *Tehelka*, and the journalists who write in these media—we are mostly the bourgeoisie, a minority of India's population, who are educated and well off. Our preferences and aspirations need not match with those of the rural masses that turn up to vote in elections. India has identity politics—in terms of religion, caste, ethnicity, language, culture, gender, etc. Issues in rural areas are often subsidy, benefits, and economic prosperity, etc. whereas urban voters are more concerned about governance, transportation, facilities, wages, etc. So it is also likely that journalists who conduct the opinion poll (assuming they do) fail to vibrate in the wavelength of India's

majority rural population, and get their predictions wrong. This brings us to the second explanation, viz. the methodology of conducting the opinion polls in India could be faulty. The opinion polls have worked well in the developed West because it was started by the American private sector to measure and understand human attitudes and behaviour, for its own vested interests. The Gallup polls, for instance, have been conducted since 1935 by one of the world's largest management consulting firms, to help companies improve business performance. This is serious stuff, and as an employee-owned firm, Gallup is present in more than 25 countries and its revenues have grown by an average 25% annually over the past decade. If they don't get their predictions right for a while, they will lose their customers. When Indian psephologists get it wrong, they simply shrug their shoulders, and continue to sell their magazines or broadcast their programmes.There are pressing questions here: Who conducts these polls? What is his/her political allegiance? What are the assumptions made in the psephological model, and how can they be justified? What statistical procedure was followed? How is the margin of error estimated? Do they conduct these polls in all polling stations? In all constituencies? How do they select their sample set? Is the sample set representative?

To mask their inadequacies, India's opinion pollsters publish jargons like "psephological predictions", "swing", etc. In science, no amount of fancy theory will stand the test of time unless it is proven to predict experimental observations correctly. The same holds true for opinion polls.

FROM "PSEPHOLOGISTS, THE ERROR-KNIGHTS OF INDIA"
BY VASAN SHESHADRI IN TEHELKA.COM.



When the eye comes falling from the sky

Using a solitary camera often dangling from a parachute strap, *From Nowhere to the Middle of Nowhere*, captures the adventure of the first-ever crossing of the rugged hills of western Nepal by paraglider in May 1999. At the Banff Film Festival in Canada last year, the jury's special mention citation read: "Many adventure films in this festival are made with the aid of a helicopter. To make a film about flying over the Himalaya, without such assistance or ground support, is a truly remarkable achievement."

Pilot John Silvester and filmmaker Alun Hughes set out to fly the length of the Himalaya—from a ridge-top highway in western Nepal all the way to the flanks of Mt Everest—using a dual paraglider, in which the passenger sits strapped in front of and slightly below the pilot. The man behind the idea is John, renowned paraglider pilot and accomplished alpinist, and the idea of a para-trek film takes shape during a meeting with Alun in the former's camper trailer in Snowdonia. The flight is not powered, and therefore relies totally on the wind and convection. In May, prevailing winds in western Nepal are light, and there is nearly a month before the monsoon arrives in early June when flying becomes impossible. The two estimate that in favourable conditions it should be possible to travel 50 to 100 km a day, climbing on rising columns of warm air up to about 17,000 ft and gliding eastwards along the Himalayan foothills.

Before sunset each day, when the thermals (large columns of hot air rising from the ground) go down



FROM NOWHERE TO THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

United Kingdom, 1999,
colour, Beta-SP/PAL, 46';
Original Language: English;
Director and Cameraman: Alun Hughes;
Flightmaster: John Silvester.

reviewed by
Samuel Thomas

with the sun, the paraglidists must find landing spots that will enable them to take off the next morning. Saving the hike up to the nearest take-off point, with a payload

exceeding 200 kg, means staying high even in turbulence, storms and treacherous thermals. The inaccessibility of the terrain they are flying over increases the risk several-fold in the event of an accident.

This trip was actually the second half of a trans-Himalayan expedition that began in 1997, when John completed the first half, flying 500 km along the Indian Himalaya, which ended at the India-Nepal border. Looking across then, John finds a spot that he decides to take off from two years later in Nepal. This is where the para-trek film trip

begins in May 1999—from Khodbe, 'the beginning of nowhere'. Two weeks and 300 km later, Alun and John find themselves in a potato field in Jumla, central Nepal. The film gives the audience a sense of what it feels like to fly thermals with Himalayan griffon vultures for company, or "to find yourself climbing to 5600m only to find you're caught between a storm and a very high place". When the duo crash land near a village called Nakali on day one, they are the first-ever foreign visitors to the place; in the village of Dhuli, they are only the second-ever foreign visitors. Neither is familiar with the difficult terrain, and only the guide-book landmarks strike any kind of a chord—the Seti and Karnali rivers, and Rara lake. "It is Lake Rara, and for once we do not have to ask," says John in one scene looking for a field across the haze, reaching for his still camera while flying over.

There are two aspects to the film. The first—of two outrageous ideas actually—is the adventure of paragliding over western Nepal and

look up as well. It prompts John to say: "I hope the armed guards think we are just a couple of floating voters, not Maoist fighters." Or the time when they are invited to breakfast at the house of Karshang Lama in Dhuli, and John notes: "We felt privileged, for food is often scarce at this time of the year." Both these issues take up prominent space in the media today with the advance of the Maoists in western Nepal and the ostensible cause of their rise, but back in 1999 they were just that—chronic famine conditions routinely reported year after year in Jumla-Humla, and nothing much done about it. The gliders record other little things while they wait for a favourable wind—the near absence of a proper cash economy, the drudgery, and the huge litter compost pits that the women fill with leaves they gather from the forest.

Then there is the chance cross-cultural encounter, where only minimal verbal exchange takes place. At Nakali, a person they refer to as Sud, and who is their host on flying day two, is a government-employed schoolteacher, who happens to teach English as well. "Nobody has seen anything like this, that is why they are gathering to look," he says, explaining the throng of onlookers. Otherwise there are only the visual reminders of a very hard life out in this region, and very little talk between paraglider and local. As John says in his diary jottings: "I knew from here on there weren't going to be any more roads or buses or cars, no more phones or electricity or restaurants or hotels.

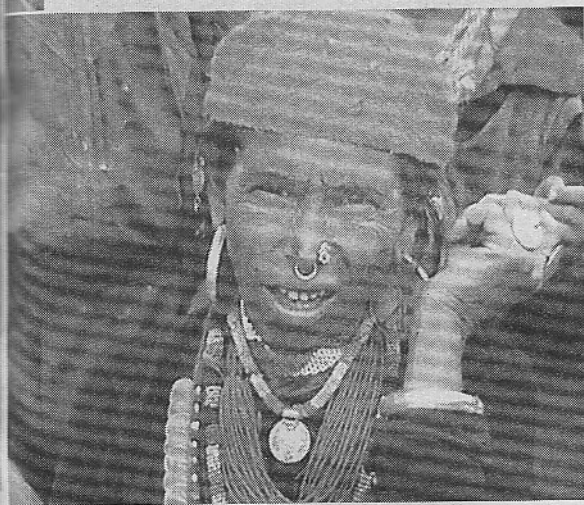
Just us and our tandem paraglider... It suddenly felt foolish and insane."

The dangers are very real. They crash twice while landing, and then there are the treacherous winds and elusive thermals, as also the ever-present threat that they will be sent dashing against the rocky ramparts that they glide past. On several occasions the tension is palpable, and a constant reminder is the altimeter that keeps up an irritating whine

when height is being lost too quickly. The timing of the two-some's para-trek also coincides with a prolonged dry spell, and you see the numerous forest fires that are blowing columns of smoke from the valleys below. At one point, they are trying to get out of a valley by crossing a ridge 5000 m high, but find themselves come up against a 7000 m mountain. John curses his naivete: "Why should we be able to go over the back of a 5,000 m mountain without expecting there to be something bigger over the back? This is the Himalaya. What had you been expecting, a nice green valley, and a glide into the sunset?" They land in Dhuli half an hour before a severe storm hits.

Marvelling at the mighty Karnali, John says: "It hits me how amazing a paraglider really is, how we are sitting here above such scenery, actively involved in it, yet physically free. The only other way to experience this part of the Humla Karnali is probably by kayak, and I'm glad not to have to think about swimming down there." This sounds a lot like accomplished Sherpas talking about the first whitewater expeditions down the rivers of Nepal: "We'll climb Mt Everest anytime, but this is crazy."

After the final crash landing, the duo spend three days hiking around and hoping for a favourable wind that will get them out of there. The weather does not permit, so they make their way to an airstrip and take a flight back. No, they have not made it across the Himalaya to Mt. Everest and the Khumbu. Instead, they have traversed a small section of Nepal's desolate, hardy far-west, from the border to Jumla. But in the process, John and Alun allow us a window on a unique way to travel, and a Nepal shorn of touristic beauty, a hard land and a hard life among the poor regions of the far-west. This is the haze season, and the High Himalaya is not visible, only the next valley of the mid-hills and villagers peering upwards in total incredulity. This is Nepal the way it mostly is—rugged and poor. It took two paraglider-documentarists to tell us this. ▽



filming it. The second pertains to the film giving "us" a glimpse into the life of the people in that region. While the documentary recounts a beautiful visual story of adventure, without engaging actively, it also throws some light on this nowhere land in Nepal's far-west. At one point, when they are nearing Jumla, they pass an election booth down below. There is great commotion on the ground, and the police

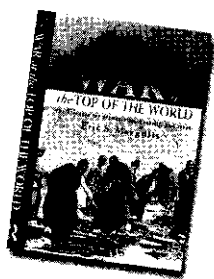
Eric's errors

The Himalayan watershed of South Asia is an area of intense tension. Potential flashpoints could now lead to regional conflagrations that test the nuclear forbearance of the two main players. Geopolitical and internal disputes have created a belt of uncertainty from the Karakoram to the Eastern Himalaya, fading off into the Burmese Highlands. This stretch of mountain hosts some of the most inhospitable and beautiful terrains in the world, and mountaineers eye them with interest. Sadly, because these regions happen to be disputed frontiers, vast areas remain closed.

The area of the Himalaya across India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, has been the focus of attention in some recent books. One of these is Humphrey Huxley's *Dragon Fire*, a fictionalised account of conflict in this belt that steadily builds up to a nuclear climax involving China, India and Pakistan. Huxley's deft handling of geopolitical and military realities makes his account highly readable and credible. Besides, *Dragon Fire* does not pretend to be anything other than a plausible work of fiction. In contrast is Eric Margolis' *War at the Top of the World*, which outlines a similar scenario but presents it as analysis of the ground situation based on a study of facts. Yet, in many ways, Margolis' description of his travels and his futuristic predictions sound more fantastic than Huxley's fiction. If Margolis lacks Huxley's sure touch, it is surely because of his inadequate grasp of regional geopolitics and of even elementary facts.

The author attempts to provide a strategic analysis of the ongoing disputes and their likely trajectory. The book's claim to authenticity of analysis and credibility rests on Margolis' brief visits to some areas of this Himalayan belt. But to be convincing, a study of this kind, requires in the first place a capacity for dispassionate analysis. Moreover,

since this is an area which many have visited, a place where armies camp, much has already been written about it. Consequently, any study of the subject ought to be based on meticulous observation and scrupulous adherence to known and incontrovertible facts. Margolis seems to have dispensed



War at the Top of the World:

The Struggle for Afghanistan, Kashmir and Tibet
by Eric Margolis; Routledge, New York; 2000;
pp 250; USD 22; ISBN: 0415927129

reviewed by Harish Kapadia

with both these requirements. The book is deeply flawed by coloured judgements and factual errors. One reads it as though through a cracked mirror because at the core of this work is the author's evident and palpable dislike of India.

It is likely that in his perambulations Margolis had an encounter with the ubiquitous Indian 'Babu', which perhaps soured his disposition. The book is replete with disparaging remarks of all things Indian, a country he describes as "quaint, exotic and a Third World derelict". He delights in characterising Indian politicians as "local warlords, powerful feudal land owners, caste-based party bosses and gangsters". The vibrancy of Indian democracy is casually written off in a few phrases. The police forces are "undisciplined thugs of little military value", the temples are "pornographic", the roads are death traps, and Indian airline pilots are

"notorious for drink and incompetence". In fact, Margolis' baleful and jaundiced eye never misses an opportunity to frown at anything 'Indian'. On the other hand, the "Islamic Warrior" is his brother deserving of constant praise—"tall, true, fierce, ferocious formidable". There are stories of "Fadil the Kurd", "Musa the Warrior" ("I like to fight wherever there are Indians") and "Commander Nadji the Egyptian". Only K.P.S. Gill finds favourable mention, and even that is backhanded. Perhaps, the author got frightened by the Punjab tamer.

Since Margolis has kept India at an arm's length, it is no wonder that his assessments go awry. The shallowness of his knowledge is evident in his comments on the caste system, where he commits the common mistake of all pseudo-intellectuals—of equating class with caste. Margolis should have read research on caste by such authorities as Ashley Montague and Andre Betteille. His account is tendentious in other matters as well. Despite evidence to the contrary, the author continues to portray the Kargil War as an incursion by 800 motivated Mujahideen. There is no disputing the courage of the Afghan and the Pakhtoon, and their earlier success against the Russian juggernaut. But the fact is that these redoubtable warriors and their mercenary brethren have failed in Kashmir, a fact grudgingly acknowledged by the author, who attributes it to skillful Indian diplomacy in isolating the Mujahideen, overwhelming Indian troop presence in the area, Israeli help to India in sealing the borders, and the brutal repression of Kashmiris, among others.

Margolis starts with a cursory visit to Afghanistan after which he zooms in on Kashmir, and particularly on the role of Afghans in the region. His account of alleged Indian repression in Kashmir is particularly merciless. He also makes the entire Himalayan region an area of dispute vis-à-vis India. For example, in one place he talks of "Chinese Sinkiang and India held Ladakh". The 'occupation' of the latter he compares with the Chinese annexation

of Tibet. It is obvious that Margolis has not heard of the famed Ladakh Scouts, sons of the soil, one of the most highly decorated regiments of the Indian Army, willing and successful defenders of Ladakh in all of India's wars. Can he find a Tibetan army fighting for the Chinese?

Eric Margolis, subtly and not so subtly, draws attention throughout the book to his vast travels and his reportage of the various conflicts that plague the globe. His smug conclusions are based on this obviously wide-ranging but depth-less experience. As one ploughs through the book, one cannot but conclude that Margolis does not even know his geography, so important at least in a mountain region. A major *faux pas* is in the chapters narrating his visit to the Siachen Glacier, a region this reviewer is particularly familiar with. Margolis has clearly been led up the garden path by the Pakistani officials and officers he came in contact with. This is especially evident in his description of travels through Baltistan with one Captain Aziz.

Margolis believes that Mount K2 and Godwin Austin are two different peaks (enough to put off anyone from the mountain-climbing fraternity from the book). More amazingly, in two days, over atrocious roads, he seems to cover the greater part of the conflict areas of Baltistan, including Kargil and Siachen. In this dream journey, Capt Aziz and Margolis leave Skardu at dawn and cross Gol and Khapalu before lunch. After an afternoon nap, they drive along the Shyok river on an atrocious dirt track till they reach

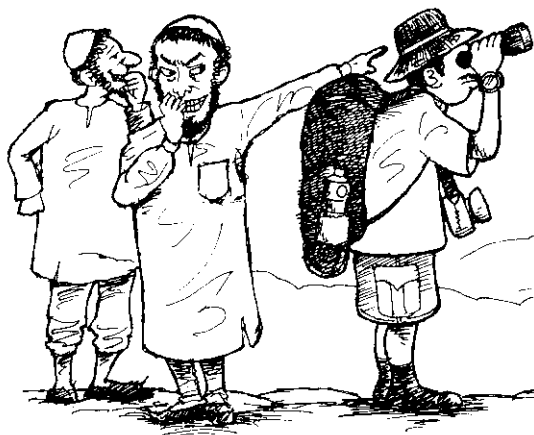
the crest of the Ladakh range from where he gets a glimpse of Kargil. The author then makes the interesting observation that from Kargil a road leads on to the Nubra Valley. Thereafter, the drive takes them over the "Bila fond Pass" (*sic*) at 15,600 feet, followed by a night halt in "a demented village". The next day's drive is again over a terrible dirt track which leads the two adventurers to the army base at Dansam at the "foot of the mighty Siachen Glacier a 50 mile river of ice". Here, of course, he meets his companion of old days, Colonel Youssef, a strapping Pathan from Peshawar who reminisces about Skendberg, Albania (the country of the author's mother).

The next day, they drive to the 25 Punjab Regiment base, where the author is received by Colonel Musa, who reminds him of the Ottoman Sultan in GK Chesterton's poem "Lepanto" ("there is laughter like the fountain in that face that all men feared"). Here the author is given a fire-power demonstration, which includes firing by 130 mm guns. The guns succeed in destroying an Indian artillery position, as reported by the Forward Observation Posts. Colonel Musa points out a commanding peak, held by the Pakistanis, which the Indian Army has been unsuccessfully trying to capture, in one instance even being driven off by an officer who had rappelled down to the top of a peak from a helicopter. The author is then taken to Conway Saddle where he gets a glimpse of Indian positions a

kilometre away. At the end of this chapter, the author observes, "No hatred I have ever encountered, save that held by Serbs and Greeks for Muslims, equalled the vitriolic detestation between Indians and Pakistanis."

As a mountaineer, I have spent some time on these particular chapters as they are of interest to the average Himalayan traveller. They contain many inaccuracies and much undigested vitriol. Throughout his tour, the author makes no mention of encountering any traffic on a road which is the lifeline of a brigade and more of Pakistani troops. The road obviously could not be in the atrocious condition described by the writer. More to the point, Bilafond Pass is not on this road. In fact, it and Conway Saddle are difficult to reach even for experienced mountaineers. And with the Indian army positions overlooking these passes, any attempt to reach there would have resulted in disaster for the visitors.

It is fairly obvious that the redoubtable Capt Aziz took the author some distance along Shyok Valley and not to the crest of Ladakh Range from where he claims he got a glimpse of Kargil. Aziz and his superiors must be laughing through their "ferocious" beards, for what he indicated as Kargil to the author was probably an Indian or even a Pakistani village in the Shyok



Valley. This is further corroborated by the fact that the approach to the Nubra is along the Shyok Valley, and not, as Margolis claims, from Kargil from where a good road goes to Leh and thereafter winds up to Khardung La before twisting down to the Shyok Valley. And Nubra. Dansam is on the Dansam river, which is fed by the Kondus, Bilafond, Chumik, Gyong and Chulung glaciers and not the Siachen Glacier, which feeds the Nubra on the Indian side.

It is most likely that the author was taken along the Bilafond glacier, where 25 Punjab Regiment's posts are located. The peak shown by Colonel Musa is most likely the former 'Qaid' Peak, captured in a fine feat of arms by Subedar Major Bana Singh and men of 8 Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry in 1986. This place was the backbone of Pakistani defence. They have never reconciled themselves to its loss, and the Pakistani public at large still remains un-aware of this debacle. The previously mentioned helicopter incident actually happened in 1992 in the Chulung Complex, where a brave Pakistani officer tried to reach a commanding height by helicopter and perished in the attempt. That particular battle also resulted in the death of a Pakistani brigadier. There is no Indian artillery gun position under observation by Pakistan, for the simple fact is that in Siachen, despite horrendous odds, the Indian Army holds the heights. Pakistani forces do not have any view of the Siachen Glacier, let alone driving Margolis to that place!

Cartographic aggression

The "hatred for Hindus" that Margolis repeatedly talks about is not reciprocated by the Indians. The Indian Army has enrolled a fair number of Muslims who have fought most gallantly on the Siachen and won gallantry awards. The Indian

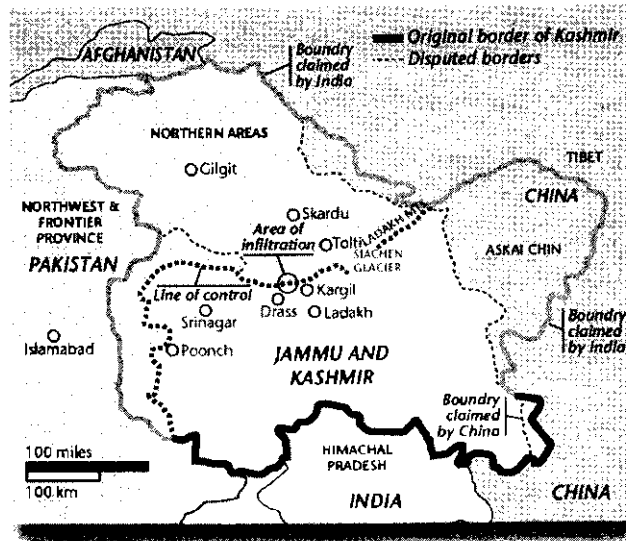
Army's motivation is based on other factors, and hatred of Muslims is definitely not one of them. This is war between two nations and not two communities, unlike what Margolis chooses to believe.

In another passage, the author turns the rationale of the Siachen conflict on its head by claiming that Indian mountaineering expeditions triggered Pakistani army activity on Siachen, whereas the entire mountaineering fraternity knows that foreign expeditions to the glacier originating from Pakistan, 14 in all, combined with 'cartographic aggression', provoked India into occupying Siachen. The climbing expedi-

with China, along the historic trade route that leads to Chinese Turkestan over the Karakoram Pass.

It is also worth remembering that any solution to the border dispute in the Himalayan frontiers would ultimately rest on the watershed principle. Himalayan borders, since the MacMahon Line was drawn, follow the ridge from where all rivers flowing south go to India, and rivers flowing north go to China/Tibet. In Siachen because of the Sal-toro Ridge, which is the dividing line, rivers that flow west and south from the ridge will be with Pakistan, and those which flow east and south with India. This is a principle Margolis conveniently ignores.

The later part of the book is devoted to the Tibetan conflict. The author, as is his wont, puts the blame for the Chinese occupation of Tibet on India, an idea that is, to say the least, innovative. In his tirades, Sikkim (now a state of India), Bhutan and Ne-pal also feel threatened by Indians. His prejudiced narration of events constantly stresses that it is India which wanted to control Tibet. And after considering various aspects of Chinese history and its leader-



tions, accompanied by Pakistani liaison officers, provided the rationale for Pakistan to lay claim on the glacier. Maps began to be published in Europe showing the extended line of control joining the Karakoram Pass in the east following the Pakistani claim (the line along the glacier had earlier been left undefined—see Himal on Siachen, December 1998). These maps conceded the entire Siachen Glacier to Pakistan, and showed Pakistan and China sharing a long common border to the east of Siachen. The Indian Army occupied Siachen in 1984 when Pakistan gave permission to a Japanese expedition to attempt Rimo, a peak located in a side valley east of the Siachen and overlooking Aksai Chin, which would have linked Pakistan controlled Kashmir

ship, Margolis speculates about the possible break-up of China, like the Soviet empire, and who is to grab which areas in such an eventuality—as if nations are available like a scattered bag of peanuts. Margolis titles the last chapter, "The Fate of Asia". What he forgets is that the fate of Asia, whichever way it goes, will now be decided by Asians, and no amount of uninformed pre-scriptions by 'parachute authors' will have any effect.

Eric Margolis has based his book on cursory personal experiences, which seem to only reinforce his stereotyped predetermined prejudices. It is exactly such a skewed view of the region and its conflicts, that the world should be wary of. That's what got us into this mess in the first place.

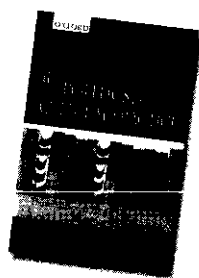
In the world of floating categories

There are many ideas floating about in the intellectual fashion houses of the West which are picked up, more or less uncritically, and bandied about in the rest of the world, particularly after the explosion of cultural and post-colonial theory in the last decade and a half. Rustom Bharucha's provocative book, *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, challenges many of these chic ideas. It is also a book that is difficult to summarise because of the wide range and complexity of issues it deals with.

A book addressing the politics of culture must inevitably contend with the prophets and the processes of globalisation, and this is among the first themes that Bharucha addresses. He points out that many cultural theorists and critics located in the West are reaping the benefits of globalisation; moreover, from within the citadels of capitalism, neo-liberal globalisation seems inevitable and all-encompassing. Bharucha draws attention to the miseries and brutalities perpetuated by globalisation, particularly in the Third World, and emphasises the need to resist it. And, contrary to much of postcolonial theory, Bharucha does not jettison the nation-state. Instead he argues in favour of the politics that does not let go of "the legitimacy and potentially liberating force of the 'national', particularly in relation to those people's movements against globalisation in Third World countries, which could be the only hope for challenging and redemocratising the state".

Bharucha writes with passion and an intellectual honesty that does not try to hide its ideological moorings behind a veil of 'objectivity'. This marks him off from so many other theorists grappling with culture in a global context. What is also engaging is his ability to combine personal anecdote and larger theoretical reflection, to the advantage of both. This last ability is most evident in second and third

chapters of the book. "When Eternal India Meets the YPO" (Young Presidents Organisation, a club of corporate CEOs which held one of its annual jamborees in Bombay) is a delightful and scathing indictment of the way in which multinational capital seeks to appropriate, package, and consume 'Indian culture'. "Gundegowda Meets Peer Gynt" chronicles Bharucha's engagement with *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen's "hybrid monster of an epic", in its Kannada adaptation.



The Politics of Cultural Practice:

Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalisation

by Rustom Bharucha

New Delhi: OUP, 2001, pp. xiv+243, hardcover, Rs 545

reviewed by

Sudhanva Deshpande

The subsequent chapters are on the politics of sexuality (on which more below), on the fragile nature of Indian secularism, and on the politics of cultural activism. Much of what he says, particularly about the dangerous political implications of postcolonial theory, is not only true, but also needs to be articulated in an analytically rigorous and politically forceful way.

One of Bharucha's prominent concerns is the study of intercultural practices in India and other parts of the world that "resist the larger forces of globalisation and communalism". Interculturalism can be taken to mean quite simply the interaction and exchange between artists from different cultures. This sort of exchange has increased since the 1970s as technology has helped in

communication across continents and countries faster and simpler. Interculturalism is distinct from multiculturalism, a phenomenon which relates to countries like the US and the UK, that have significant immigrant populations which face varying degrees of racism and discrimination. Multiculturalism is the principle that underlies state policies to provide equal opportunity to and protect such immigrant cultural groups. In Bharucha's trenchant words multiculturalism is "another mode of promoting sectarianism" in the guise of "respecting a plurality of cultural identities and ethnicities".

In contrast to this is *intra*culturalism, a term Bharucha coins to refer to the process of interaction and exchange between cultures *within* national boundaries. The fourth term he focuses on, secularism, is of course quite well known and this last provides the framework for Bharucha's theoretical and practical explorations, since his larger concern, manifested in all he writes and does, is to evolve a secular cultural practice appropriate to post-Babri Masjid India. But let me also clarify that these definitions are mine, not his, and are meant to only guide the reader unfamiliar with cultural theory. For his part, rather than define the terms too rigidly, Bharucha proceeds with working definitions, whose meanings "mutate and metabolise" in specific contexts.

Since this is a provocative book, let us get provoked. The first question we need to ask is: what is this interculturalism, and why is it being valorised as an effective challenge to globalisation? Can interculturalism really challenge the dominant logic of globalisation? The fact of the matter is that, in practice, interculturalism is a real option only for the privileged few, a very tiny elite, amongst cultural workers/artists. Not that Bharucha is unaware of this: "Interculturalism is not dealing with the dalits of this world, the wretched of the earth. Who then are the appropriate candidates for intercultural exchange? Are we—and I include myself here—part of an

exclusive club of frequent flyers, the privileged diaspora, the global intelligentsia, the enlightened exiles?" Unfortunately, the answer is yes. And unfortunately again, the situation is unlikely to change in a hurry. In a context where half the world's population has *never* made a phone call (yes, in year 2001), there is just no other conclusion but this: interculturalism is the privilege of the rich, who, globally, tend to be also white. But even that is only half the truth. I would say that the direction of intercultural "exchange" follows the direction of most other cultural and commodity trade in the world.

Since interculturalism is far too enmeshed in the structures and processes of globalisation, there is nothing much that Bharucha offers us by way of practical action, apart from exhorting whites to become "race traitors". In these circumstances, to argue that interculturalism poses some sort of challenge to globalisation, is a little far-fetched. In fact, to argue that culturalism of one kind or another, or the politics of cultural identity, is what can pose a challenge to globalisation (or 'deconstruct' it, if you prefer fancier terminology) seems distinctly odd today. If giant corporations like Nike, Shell and Macdonalds have been forced on the back foot on a range of labour, environment and human rights issues, surely it is not culturalism that has done the trick. Likewise, with the WTO protests at Seattle not so long ago, and the series of protests it has inspired wherever the IMF, the World Bank, and other such agencies and fora have met in the recent past. This is not to say that in most of these protest actions, the role of cultural activism has not been significant. Culture jamming (subverting the messages contained in the advertising blitz of megacorporations), the movement to 'reclaim the streets' (RTS), the display of those wonderful giant puppets in Seattle have been valuable not only in mobilising support but also in articulating an alternative vision of a world free of the control of multinational corporations. But this is not culturalism. This is the coming

together of cultural activists with trade unions, environmental groups, human rights groups, and others who speak for the oppressed. The politics of cultural identity has little to do with it.

One reason why Bharucha lapses into such errors is that his theoretical framework lacks a stable conception of oppression and its attendant real categories of oppressed people. What we have, instead, is the category "minorities". Bharucha's minorities include "Muslims, dalits (low-caste communities), gays, lesbians, and survivors of communal riots". A little later we encounter "women, dalits, tribal communities and other minorities". I confess I am thoroughly mystified. To the best of my knowledge, the term "minority" has pretty specific connotations in India's political lexicon, and is generally understood to mean religious minorities. The category minority, then, is intrinsically linked to the demand for minority rights, and the guarantee of those rights is at the base of India's claim to be a secular republic. That is to say, religious minorities demand, and are constitutionally granted the right, to remain what they are culturally.

But can the socially oppressed and economically exploited, for instance the dalits, whose objective is to recast their role and status in society, be defined by the term minority. Does it serve any analytical or political purpose to talk of dalits as 'minorities'? What defines a minority other than the numerical criterion? If numerical strength alone is the criterion, then one could argue that Brahmins are an even smaller percentage of the Indian population. Are Brahmins, then, to be categorised as a 'minority'? What about Sindhis, or Marwaris? Is L.K. Advani a member of a minority community? Even if one ignores this admittedly facile question, is Bharucha arguing that the struggle of the dalits is simply to ensure that certain rights are guaranteed by the state, and not to change the exploitative and oppressive circumstances that have defined dalit identity and social status for centuries? Con-

versely, if minority location is defined simply in terms of a person or group's relation to the structures of exploitation and oppression, what for instance would happen to the minority status of the Jains and the Parsees? Then again, in what conceivable way can one lump together dalits and gays? How are women, who constitute *half* the population, a *minority*? And what kind of minority category is "survivors of communal riots"? Aren't we *all* survivors of communal riots?

This conceptual muddle results, I suspect, from implicitly accepting, or working with, the basic theoretical framework of multiculturalism, even though the author rejects its overt politics. In essence, multiculturalism denies that there is a fundamental hierarchy of differences, some of which define the basic nature of a society more than others do. To take the example of India, multiculturalism would deny that differences of class, gender and caste constitute the defining divisions in Indian society more than, say, differences in sexual preference does. In this framework, all identities, relations and problems are assigned the same status and priority. In this world of floating categories everybody becomes someone's Other at some stage, and everybody can lay claim to being a member of some minority group or the other.

Muddled up theory leads to messy politics. Take Bharucha's discussion of the politics of sexuality. He discusses, among other things, the political controversy around the film *Fire*, and claims that "the politics of the extremist Hindu communal parties and fundamentalist organisations like the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the Bajrang Dal [and their] attack on the film has oddly served to enhance its [the film's] radical potentiality". It is of course imperative for all secular people to protest such attacks. Secular and feminist organisations in the country, *including* left organisations, did so unhesitatingly. And many of them did so for the principle of it, not necessarily because they particularly agreed with what the film was saying. As a matter of fact,

some, including myself and my colleagues in Jana Natya Manch (a Delhi-based theatre group), had not even seen the film when we defended its right to be shown.

It is one thing to argue that artistic and intellectual freedom has to be defended. But what is one to make of Bharucha's reading of a "radical potentiality" in the film? What is the substance of this "radicalism"? Bharucha contends that at the heart of the controversy in *Fire* was the politics of "naming" (both in the sense of naming the two female protagonists, Sita and Radha, and in the sense of dealing overtly with their lesbian relationship). Quite right. But how does it escape a critic as sensitive as Bharucha that the politics of naming in the film seems pretty selective, and one of the most crucial characters in the film, the family servant, is not even dignified with a real name, but is only known as Mundu, a generic name, much like all Nepali guards in Delhi get called Bahadur, and boys at the roadside *dhabas* Chhotu? What is this, amnesia? Or is there a class attitude on display here, in the film's contempt for domestic labour? Let it also be mentioned that the domestic servant's character is consistently painted in negative shades, and it is he again who precipitates the

action towards the end by blowing the lid off the lesbian relationship of the sisters-in-law. The politics of naming, in this instance at least, is clearly a class privilege.

But there is a larger political question also at stake here. It is one thing to argue that "the politics of naming sexual minorities... challenge...the conservative and fundamentalist orthodoxies of tradition and Hindutva", though even here, one would need to ask how fundamental this challenge is, and whether it really goes to the core of the fascist onslaught on Indian culture, society, and politics. It is quite another to argue, as Bharucha does, that there is an "implicit heterosexuality that underlies secular constructions of political identity", that "ideologies like Marxism" are marked by "patriarchal constructions of gender", and there is, as a result, "a puritanism that afflicts the cultural praxis of grass-roots radical organisations, which often censor any kind of engagement with the politics of sexuality". Bharucha approvingly cites Mary John and Tejaswini Niranjana's claim that "Heterosexual feminists [and other democratic organisations] in India show few signs of being aware of the costs and risks lesbians bear on a daily basis both in their private

and professional lives, nor of their complex strategies of survival."

About Marxism, of course, Bharucha is just plain wrong. And there are far too many injustices that Bharucha does to the left in general, and feminist organisations in particular (both left and non-left), but we can let that rest in the interest of brevity. I would like to question the larger theoretical framework which makes his criticism possible. I would argue that once all differences and discriminations in society are assigned the same status and value, once the notion of a *hierarchy* of oppressions is discarded, one loses all sense of proportion. After all, isn't it worth asking why groups (and intellectuals) which cry themselves hoarse about sexual politics never seem to be unduly perturbed when tribal activists are raped in Tripura? And if we are talking about the costs and risks which lesbians bear and their complex strategies of survival, why don't we also, once in a way, talk about the costs and risks, both sexual and social, that dalit women agricultural workers bear, and *their* complex strategies of survival? What do we call this silence? Ignorance? Amnesia? Blindness? Class snobbery? Muddled up theory, I am afraid, does lead to very messy politics. ▽



Trans-Himalayan Caravans:

Merchant Princes and Peasant Traders in Ladakh by Janet Rizvi: Oxford University Press. Delhi: pp 392. ISBN 0-19-564855-2

reviewed by **Sanjoy Bagchi**

Known as the Roof of the World, the Pamirs constitute geomorphologically and geopolitically an interesting physical feature. Unlike those of other continents, these Asian mountain ranges do not fol-

Under the Roof of the World

low any directional pattern. They seem to resemble a spiral nebula, spinning away from a central knot in all directions. In the north-east, the successive Tien Shan and Kun Lun ranges enclose between them the Taklamakan desert and the historic Silk Road passing through the ancient trading centres of Yarkand and Kashgar. Between Kun Lun in the north and the Karakoram and the Himalaya in the south, lies the forbidding western Tibetan Plateau. The Hindu Kush curving to the southwest forms a barrier between the Indo-Gangetic plain and Central Asia's fertile Ferghana Valley, home to the fabled cities of Samarkand and Tashkent.

In the centre is the nucleus, the high Pamir Plateau. This region is made up of towering snow-capped mountain ranges with peaks of more than 20,000 feet, narrow gorges of fast-flowing mountain streams that are tributaries of the Subcontinent's principal rivers, high-altitude alpine meadows and numerous ice-covered passes. Hardy hill folk inhabit the area.

This inhospitable terrain was the scene of frenetic geopolitical activity during the latter half of the 19th century. The Russians were extending their empire through Central Asia. The Chinese were probing westwards to define their outermost limits. The British believed that the

Russians had their eyes on India and were manoeuvring to forestall them. While foreign agents and adventurers swarmed about trying to figure out and thwart each other's intentions, explorers were busy tracing the courses of mighty rivers and surveying the topography. Their exploits have been recapitulated in some excellent accounts by John Keay in his *When Men and Mountains Meet*, Charles Allen in *A Mountain in Tibet* and Peter Hopkirk in *The Great Game*. They, however, focus on the exploits of the Europeans. The indigenous people figured only incidentally.

Janet Rizvi's *Trans-Himalayan Caravans* restores the balance. She deals largely with that segment of local society whom she rather generously calls "merchant princes" and with peasant traders in Ladakh. While others have relied on the archives and the memoirs of the Great Game's principal actors, Rizvi has instead carried out extensive fieldwork and used the oral method as her main research tool. The result is a unique and valuable social and economic history of a relatively unknown region. She has skillfully woven the information gleaned from her fieldwork to present a composite and rich tapestry of trade across the mountains.

Against the region's economic backdrop, Rizvi discusses in depth the long-distance trade beyond the Karakoram, between Leh in Ladakh and Yarkand in the north and Lhasa in the east, besides also looking at local exchanges. Her account provides fascinating details about the trading groups, the commodities exchanged, and the mechanisms of exchange. Particularly striking are the descriptions of market locations, the different trade routes, the difficulties of access, the modes of transport—the caravans of loaded donkeys, horses, sheep and yaks trudging the icy trails hugging the steep mountainsides. The book's value is greatly enhanced by the beautiful relief maps of the area that expertly side-step the cartographic sensitivities of the region's governments.

Rizvi plots the axis of trade

across the mountain frontiers. For long, Leh was the pivot of the commercial link between the Punjab and Kashmir in the south and Turkestan in the north. Central Asian products found their way over the centuries into India through the Karakoram pass and Leh. Some of it was diverted at Leh to Lhasa from the time when Ladakh became an independent kingdom with direct treaty relations with the Tibetan authorities. The difficulties of the two routes limited the trade mostly to small-bulk but high-value goods such as precious metals (gold and silver) and stones, musk, saffron, shawls, yak tails, and so on. The trade in dried apricot from Central Asia was also significant. And so were Tibet's tea bricks as they were the only source of supply for domestic consumption in this region; interestingly Ladakhi merchants often paid for it all in silver from Yarkand.

Pashm and *toosh* were, however, the most important items. The trade in these was critical to the economy of Ladakh and Kashmir. *Pashm*, the fibre from the undercoat of domestic goats raised on the high altitude pastures of Ladakh and western Tibet, is used in Kashmir and the Punjab for the manufacture of the exquisite, soft-textured pashmina shawls and lightweight cashmere fabrics. The Chang-pa nomads are one of its largest producers. These shawls have also provided the world's textile industry with its peculiar oriental designs based on pinecones that are known as "Paisley". A still more superior and finer fibre is *toosh* used in producing *shahtoosh* ("royal fleece") shawls. *Toosh* is obtained from the fur of the Chiru (Tibetan antelope). Ladakhi traders dominated in these two items, and most of the trade, from the northern reaches of the Karakoram and western Tibet, passed through Leh to weavers in Kashmir. A small part also found its way through the Kulu valley into the Punjab's shawl factories.

There was also large-scale local trade all along the border. The peasantry on both sides carried on this trade and in Ladakh they were known as Shamma traders. Gener-

ally the goods exchanged were of the subsistence variety, consisting mostly of pastoral and agricultural products. Barley grown by Ladakh's farmers was traded in the neighbouring Tibetan villages. The trade in butter, which was extensively used all over the region, took place generally in the winter months. Besides being the cooking medium and an essential ingredient of salted tea, it was also of ritual importance. Votive butter lamps are a necessary feature of the family shrine in every Buddhist home. In exchange for barley and butter, Shamma traders brought back salt from the lakes in western and southern Tibet.

The difficulties of communication limited the volume of trade. Its relatively small volume, however, did not affect its importance in the economic life of the local communities. Most of the trade followed traditional trails, skirting the sides of the mountains, using the few fords across fast-flowing glacial streams and going over the narrow passes. Because of the difficult terrain, the caravans made frequent halts to rest the animals and graze them in the pastures. Although the traders' destination was usually a recognised market, the goods were exchanged in every village the caravans passed through. There were regular fairs like the famed one at Gartok, just north of the Mansarovar lake. The traders would halt for a couple of weeks at these fairs or markets, completing deals and soliciting custom for the coming year. Then would begin the slow, long trek back home.

The centuries' old trading pattern between the Ladakhi peasantry and their Tibetan counterpart was rudely interrupted in the 1950s when the Chinese occupied Tibet. It would, of course, have been interesting if Janet Rizvi had also analysed the impact of the disruption of this traditional trade on the fragile economy of these communities of the high plateau. But that is only a minor slip in a book that combines absorbing narration and scholarly insights on a region of the world which is quite well known but little understood.



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Crematorial structuralism

It has never been easy to die a Hindu, when you have to contend with your near and dear ones trying to force Ganga jal down your gullet. When you are croaking your last, that bit of holy water often provides the final choke. Funny, though, how no one seems to care, even though everyone somewhat educated must know how easily fluid can be diverted from the gullet to the windpipe. And does it help that these days the holy aqua is quite polluted, with a coliform count that would do the municipal sewers proud? The ancients placed the burning ghats astride rivers, little realising that they (the water bodies) would one day serve as the carriers of varied effluents, rather inappropriate for the final departure.

But there are graver issues pending, as long as we are into death and dying. I am referring to the fact that the receding forests of South Asia and the import of exotic flora have together managed to irrevocably change the way in which we are cremated. Sadly, the structural dynamics of the funeral pyre is no more what it was in Vedic times, and later.

It has all to do with eucalyptus. The Australian species, beloved of the cuddly koala, migrated to these northern latitudes over the course of the 20th century, to take over where the local oaks, rhododendrons, sal and seeshums left off. Accused of all kinds of ills, including those associated with monoculture and water-guzzling, the eucalyptus nevertheless thrived and multiplied. Its best selling point being that it grew quick, even if the wood was soft and useless for most purposes. But the one use it did find as a source of cheap wood, was for cremations.

In the old days, when there were fewer people and more woodlands, you could enter the forest and emerge with hardwood logs that then were split to be ready for the pyre. When thus divided, the rounded logs made triangular cross-sections. These were piled on top of each other, and the waiting body placed on top. The fire would be lit, and as the conflagration took hold there was little to be done other than tend the fire. The wood burned white and furious, and the pyre generally collapsed into itself.

Now, study the eucalyptus pyre. Mostly chopped in their prime, the logs that make it to the ghats are

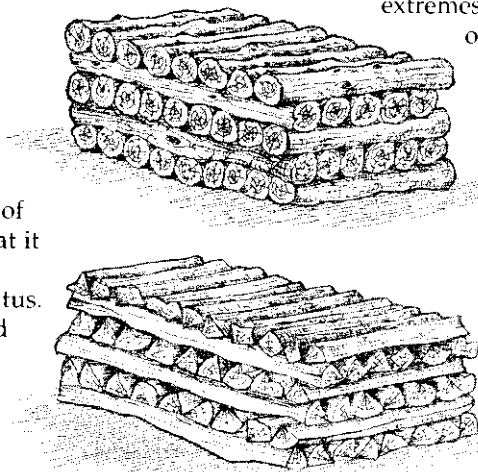
not large enough to split. The funeral pyre is now built similarly, except that instead of the triangular cross-sections of the individual components, you now have rounded logs. Completely unstable, as anyone will tell you.

The cremations now require a quicker wit of the *dom* or, as the case may be, the *ghat* brahman. From the word go, and the lighting of the match, it is a fight of the laws of equilibrium against the forces of disequilibrium. As the fire eats into the structure, the logs will want to roll off, and the body upstairs lurches this way and that. It is all that the *dom* can do to keep it on top and centered as everything threatens to unravel in a rush of rolling logs.

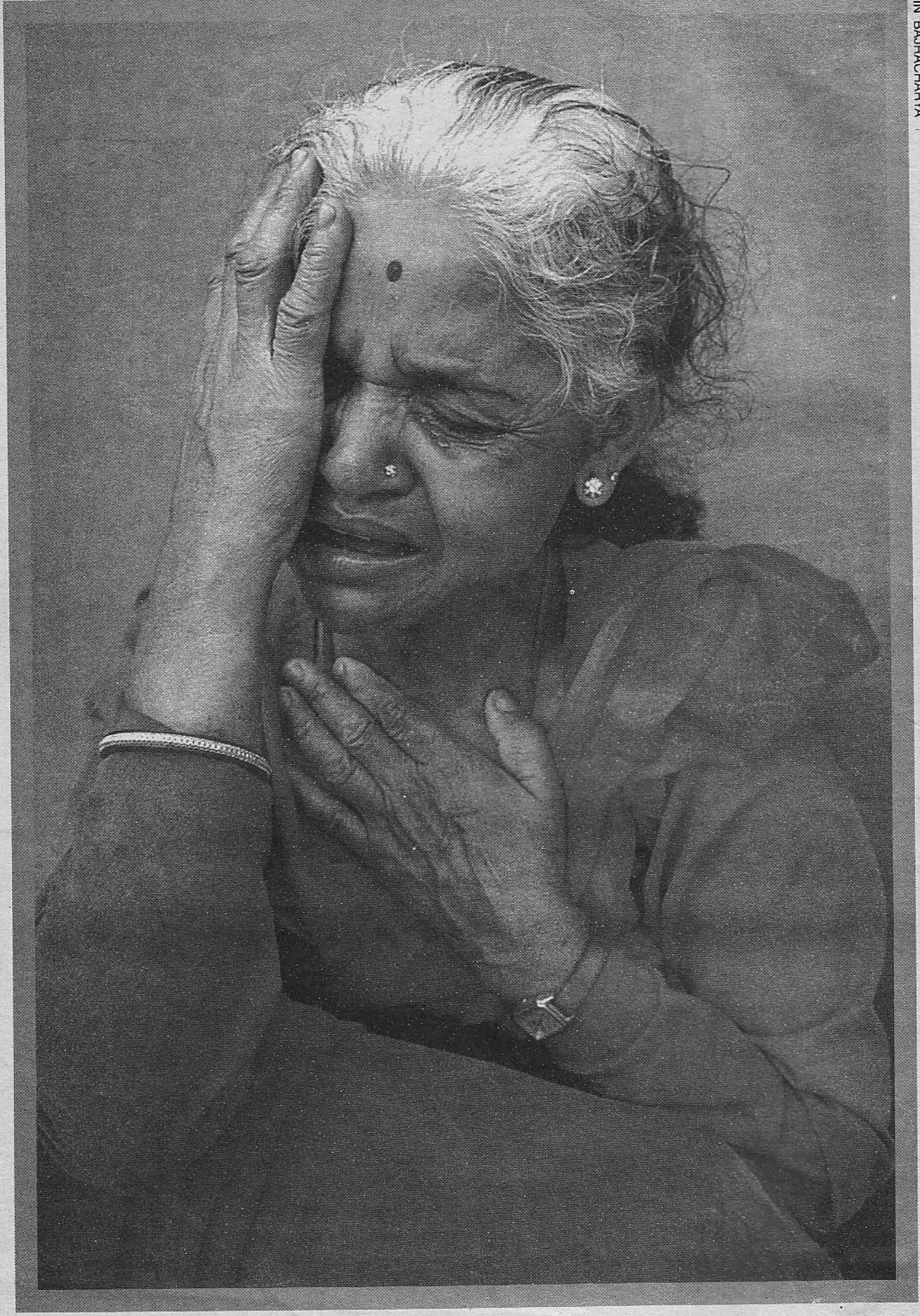
There is something to be said for human adaptability. The biggest proof of this ability to countenance extremes is how, unlike the shocked disbelief of, say, Christian friends, who cannot imagine how you can sit there and watch calmly as your relation or friend is reduced to ashes, it is very much possible. (You could similarly respond how you cannot imagine being locked under a lid, and slipped claustrophobically into the ground, and how watching the ashes-to-ashes transformation has a much better finality than a burial. You go away knowing you have not buried someone, but rather released the soul to join the ozone hole over the Deccan.)

Back to the theme at hand. While human adaptability has over historical time allowed us to watch our relations burn, this process has suddenly had unexpected drama injected into it with the arrival of the unstable eucalyptus funeral pyre. The next hour or two (depending on the girth of the deceased, the dampness of the wood, the ambient temperature, and the amount of *ghew* the family can afford for the pyre) will be a battle between man and the elements. The sprightly tender of the funeral pyre will work hard to make a dignified exit possible, without any spill or side avalanche or, heavens forbid, a complete structural failure. Mostly, he will succeed.

It is then time to go home, and wait nervously for the next time you will be called to the ghats. It is quite unnerving, really. Please pass the Ganga jal.



Kamakhya Dixit



2 June 2001
Kathmandu

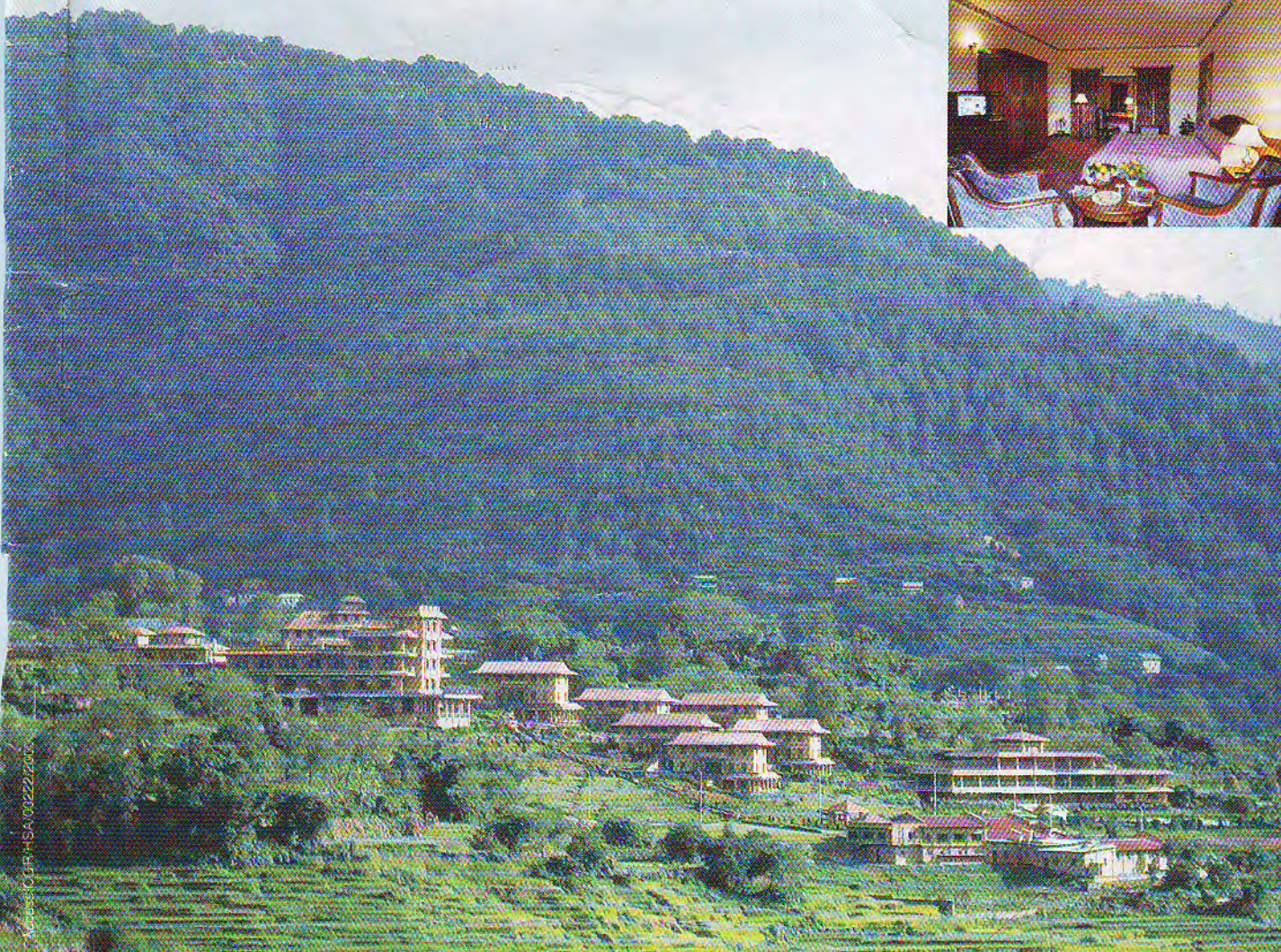
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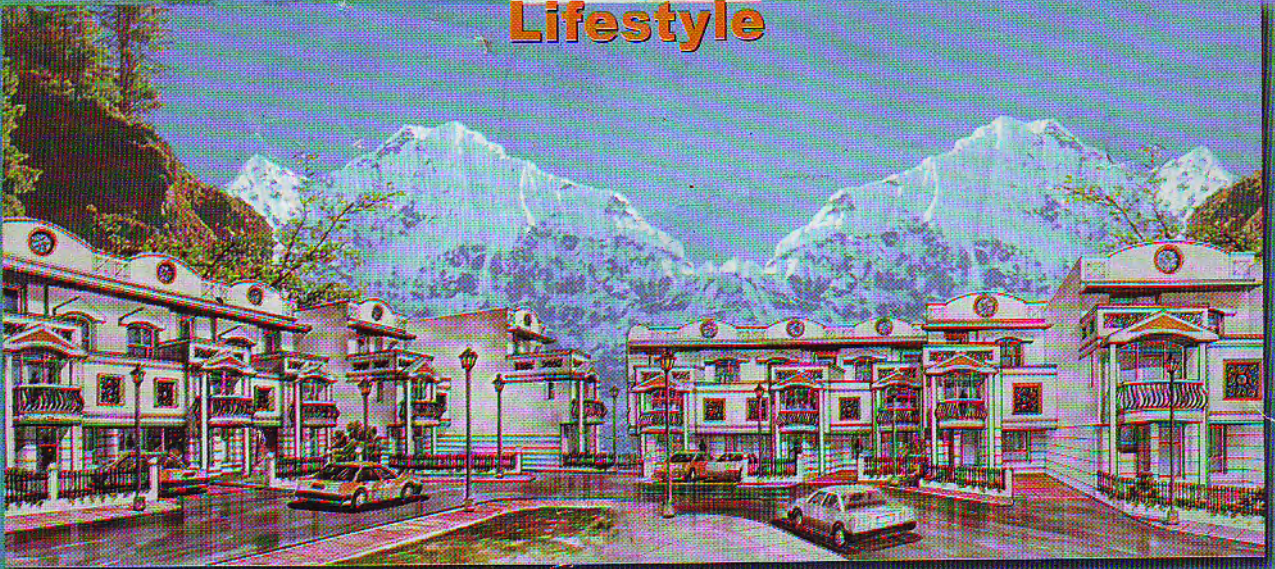
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