October 2001

HIMĀL
SOUTH ASIAN

- Nepal land reform
- Iranian eye on Afghanistan
- Make room for documentary

The failure of New Delhi

Bangladesh BDT 60 Bhutan BTN 60 India INR 50 Nepal NPR 50 Maldives MVR 40 Pakistan PKR 50 Sri Lanka SLR 80 Elsewhere USD 2/GBP 3

THE SECRET OF KATHMANDU

Nepal has eight World Heritage sights and has won two Heritage Awards. One for the Medieval City of Bhaktapur and the other for Dwarika's Hotel.

The magnificient buildings of Dwarika's with the most intricate wood and terra-cotta work of the best craftsmen and every piece of wood work an original and centuries old.

At Dwarika's the splendor of the Malla art and architecture is kept alive. The complex incorporates the multifarious features of Nepal's Heritage into one inimitable property.

70 first class standard and deluxe rooms, including a royal suite and 4 other suites, each beautifully furnished with traditional textiles and unique custom made furniture and individually decorated with hand carved windows and a character of its own but having one common factor-a very spacious bathroom with oversized bathtub, separate WC and shower, twin vanities and dressing area. Every piece of furniture has been designed and made in the in- house workshop.

KRISHNARPAN

Dwarika's Hotel, a winner of PATA Heritage Award now offers you not only the secrets of Nepalese art, architecture and hospitality but Krishnarpan a special Nepalese restaurant in a historic and beautiful setting.

Here, local chefs prepare ceremonial feasts of 6 to 20 courses for an honoured guest from the finest meat, vegetables, grains and lentils, all blended with aromatic spices, purified oils and saffrons.

Krishnarpan invites you to capture a moment of history of rife and ancient culture, to dine at tables with centuries old lattice woodwork, served on years old traditional plates, bowls and glasses by charming hosts and hostesses dressed in different ethnic wear.

Come share a mystical experience of the past with us at Krishnarpan!

DWARIKA'S HOTEL

Battisputali, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Tel: 470770, 473724 Fax: 977-1-471379
E-mail: dwarika@mos.com.np
Website: http://www.dwarikas.com

A Living Tribute to the Architectural and Cultural Heritage of Nepal

HIMAL
SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 14 No 10

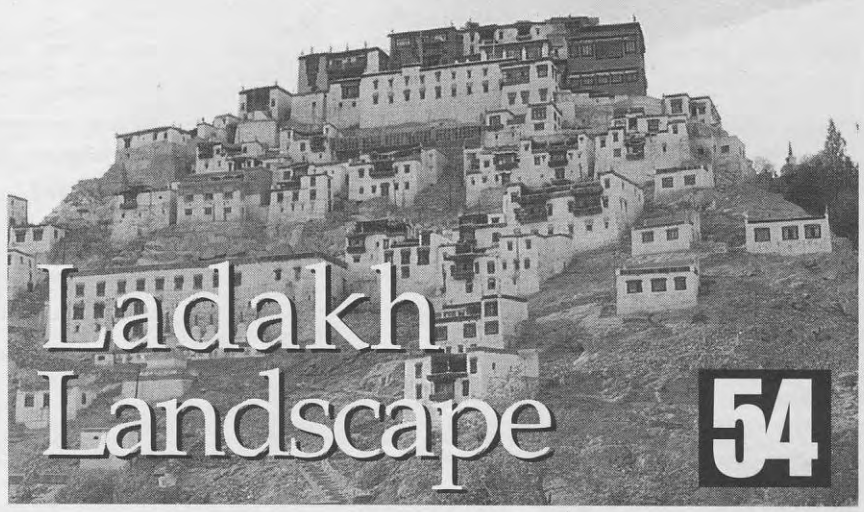
October 2001

8

Delhi's Diplomatic Debacle

Afghan Agony

38



Ladakh Landscape

54

HIMAL
SOUTH ASIAN

Editor
Kanak Mani Dixit

Associate Editor
Thomas J. Mathew

Copy Editor
Shanuj V.C.

Contributing Editors
COLOMBO Manik de Silva
DHAKA Afsan Chowdhury
ISLAMABAD Adnan Rehmat
NEW DELHI Mitu Varma
Prabhu Ghate
WINNIPEG Tarik Ali Khan

Design Team
Chandra Khatiwada
Bilash Rai (Graphics)

Marketing
Nandita Bhatt
advertising@himalmedia.com
marketing@himalmedia.com

Subscription/Overseas Sales
Anil Karki
subscription@himalmedia.com

Nepal/Northeast India, Sales
Sudan Bista
sales@himalmedia.com

Marketing Office, Dhaka
Abu Shams Ahmed
Tel: +880-2-812 954
Fax: 911 5044
shams@drik.net

Himal is published and distributed by
Himalmedia Pvt Ltd
GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977-1-543333, 523845
Fax: 521013
Email: editors@himalmedia.com
http://www.himalmag.com
ISSN 1012 9804
Library of Congress Control Number
88 912882
Printed at: Jagadamba Press, Kathmandu
Tel: +977-1-521393, 543017

Himal was a Himalayan journal from 1987 to March of 1996, when it became a South Asian magazine.

Contributors to this issue

Amit Dasgupta is Director (Economic, Trade and Transport) at the Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Kathmandu.

CK Lal is a Kathmandu-based columnist and civil engineer.

Marcus Moench of the International Centre for Social and Environmental Transition in Kathmandu, has been working in South Asia on water, environment and social change issues since 1984.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf is a filmmaker from Teheran. His essay is a redaction of a longer version that appeared in *The Iranian* in June 2001, reprinted here with permission.

Mushahid Hussain was Federal Minister for Information and Media Development in Nawaz Sharif's cabinet.

Nandini Sundar is a sociologist based in New Delhi.

Prem Jung Thapa is a development economist and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Regional Economic Analysis, University of Tasmania, Hobart.

Sudeep Sen lives in London and New Delhi, and is the international editor of *Six Seasons Review*.

Vijay Prashad is Associate Professor and Director, International Studies Programme, Trinity College, Connecticut.

Cover: Montage and design by **Subhas Rai**. Photograph of Nai Sarak by **Gopinath Sricandane.**

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Subscription rates

	1 year	2 years
Nepal	NPR 540	NPR 1000
India	INR 580	INR 1125
Rest of South Asia	USD 18	USD 34
Hongkong/Brunei	USD 22	USD 42
Elsewhere	USD 40	USD 75

Send payment in local currency in favour of our subscription agent.

Country	Agent
Bangladesh	International book Agencies Ltd., 61, Motijheel C/A 2nd floor, Dhaka. *Tel: +880-29-9551308/9560584*
India	Central News Agency (P) Ltd., 23/90 Connaught Circus, New Delhi 110001. *Tel: +91-1-7529385/777 0536*
Maldives	Asrafee Book Shop, 1/44 Chandhanee Magu, P.O. Box 2053, Male. *Tel: +960-32-3424*
Nepal	Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, *Tel: +977-1-543333-36*
Sri Lanka	Lake House Book Shop,100, Sir Chittampalam, Gardiner Mawatha, Colombo-2. *Tel: +94-1-432105/430581/430582*

***Note:** Subscribers can send payment to local subscription agents in equivalent local currency. Please notify any change of address.*

Australia	Indra Ban, 12, Norfolk St, Paddington 2021, Sydney. *Fax: +61-2-635 3207*
Sweden	Empatum AB, Box: 26159, 100 41 Stockholm. *Fax; +46-8-141088*
The Netherlands	Frans Meijer, Zwanenburgwal 278, 1011 JH Amsterdam. *Fax: +31-20-625 6690.*
UK & Ireland	Joti Giri H SAUK, 33 Tyers Terrace, London SE 11 5 SE. *Tel: +44-171-582 9355 Fax: 0207 820 9915. e-mail: himaluk@talk21.com*
Germany	Suedasien-Buro, Redaktion 'Suedasien', Grosse Heimstr. 58,44137 Dortmund. *Tel: +49-231-136 633*
North America	Barbara Bella & Associates, 500 Sansome Street, Suite 101, PO Box 470758, San Francisco CA. 94147. *Fax: +1-415-986 7860.*

Subscribers sending payments directly to the Kathmandu office from countries other than Nepal should do so at the rate quoted for their respective countries by demand draft/cheque in US Dollars/GB Pounds drawn in favour of "Himalmedia Pvt Ltd" at Subscription and Overseas Sales Department, Himalmedia Pvt Ltd, GPO Box: 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Subscribers who wish to pay through AMEX, VISA or MASTERCARD can fax details to: +977-1-521013, or email us at <subsciption@himalmedia.com>. For AMEX cards please include contact phone numbers.

www.himalmag.com

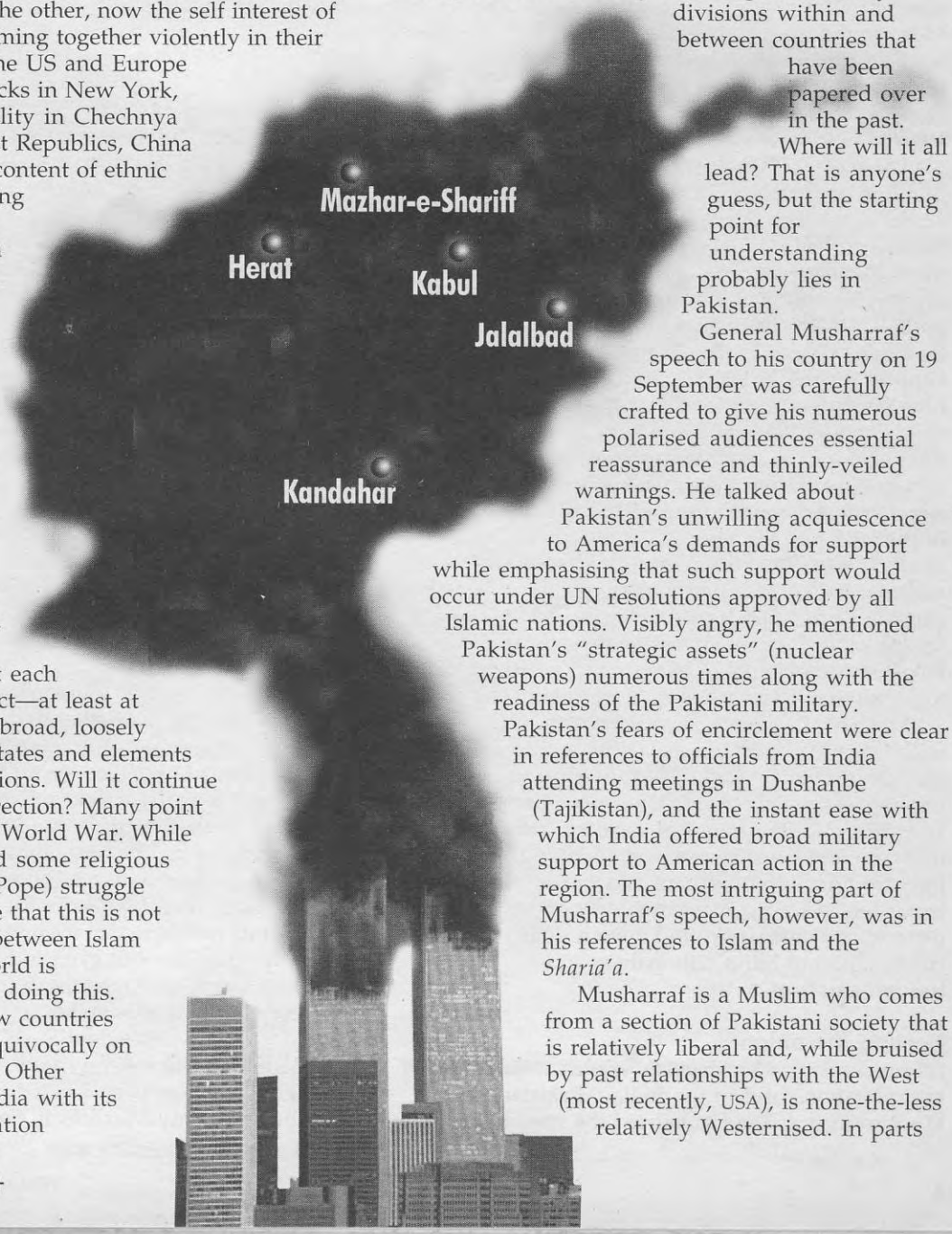
The Wakeup Call

What does the coming "war" against terrorism mean for South Asia?

by ***Marcus Moench***

A geopolitical realignment is now occurring in South and Central Asia. This is clear even if the end result is not. Where Afghanistan and Pakistan once stood on the fault line between competing powers and survived the "Great Game" by playing one against the other, now the self interest of many countries is coming together violently in their rugged highlands. The US and Europe energised by the attacks in New York, Russia facing instability in Chechnya and the former Soviet Republics, China worried over the discontent of ethnic minorities in Xingjiang Province, many Muslim nations with populations divided by differing interpretations of Islam and, of course, India tense over Pakistan, Kashmir and its own internal religious-ethnic divisions; all have interests in the region.

The geopolitical shift is of a new type. Where once states were arrayed against each other, now the conflict—at least at its start—is between broad, loosely allied, coalitions of states and elements of their own populations. Will it continue to develop in this direction? Many point to the risk of a Third World War. While global politicians and some religious leaders (such as the Pope) struggle desperately to ensure that this is not perceived as a fight between Islam and the West, the world is dangerously close to doing this. If it occurs, only a few countries are likely to fall unequivocally on one side or the other. Other countries, such as India with its huge Muslim population embedded in an even larger Hindu-dominated polity, are likely to find that the battle ground is as much internal as external. In any case, the pressure of newly-realigned global interests—and the inevitable military action—are likely to tear open the many divisions within and between countries that have been papered over in the past. Where will it all lead? That is anyone's guess, but the starting point for understanding probably lies in Pakistan.



General Musharraf's speech to his country on 19 September was carefully crafted to give his numerous polarised audiences essential reassurance and thinly-veiled warnings. He talked about Pakistan's unwilling acquiescence to America's demands for support while emphasising that such support would occur under UN resolutions approved by all Islamic nations. Visibly angry, he mentioned Pakistan's "strategic assets" (nuclear weapons) numerous times along with the readiness of the Pakistani military. Pakistan's fears of encirclement were clear in references to officials from India attending meetings in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), and the instant ease with which India offered broad military support to American action in the region. The most intriguing part of Musharraf's speech, however, was in his references to Islam and the *Sharia'a*.

Musharraf is a Muslim who comes from a section of Pakistani society that is relatively liberal and, while bruised by past relationships with the West (most recently, USA), is none-the-less relatively Westernised. In parts

of his speech, however, he sounded, as a Pakistani friend here in Kathmandu commented, like a mullah. Speaking not to his Western audience but to a broad swath of Pakistani and Muslim society, he told the story of the first few years of Islam's existence. At that time, Prophet Mohammed had signed a six-year treaty of friendship with the Jews followed by another brief no-war pact with *kafirs* (idol worshippers) from Mecca. These were essential because Mohammed's forces could not manage two enemies at once. The first treaty enabled Islam to establish itself and grow. The second enabled it to conquer the Jews and, ultimately, the Meccans as well. The treaties were not real pacts of friendship. They were signed *under duress* as strategic moves. In addition, the no-war pact with the Meccans was, from the Islamic perspective, inherently false because the Meccans forbade Mohammed from signing as "Prophet". Mohammed justified the omission because it was done for a higher good: advancing the cause of Islam. It was a strategic compromise that, in no way, compromised Islamic fundamentals.

The message Musharraf formally drew from this is that it is better to act with prudence rather than emotion in times of crisis. "Pakistan comes first", and for its survival it must work with the Americans and the wider international community. But the underlying message that much of his Urdu-speaking audience might have drawn must be different. For them, the speech anchored Pakistan's current support for the Americans, in the life and teachings of Mohammed, and stressed that this support in no way compromises Pakistan's basic Islamic credentials. Furthermore, the parable from the *Sharia'a* suggests that while Pakistan may make agreements with Americans or Indians (implicitly today's equivalent of the Jews and the Meccans), this is a temporary strategic move that does not reflect more fundamental realities, beliefs and positions. Expediency is allowed and can be justified for a higher good. The message for his more fundamentalist audience was that Pakistan is "a citadel of Islam", and needs to survive today so that it and Islam may win tomorrow.

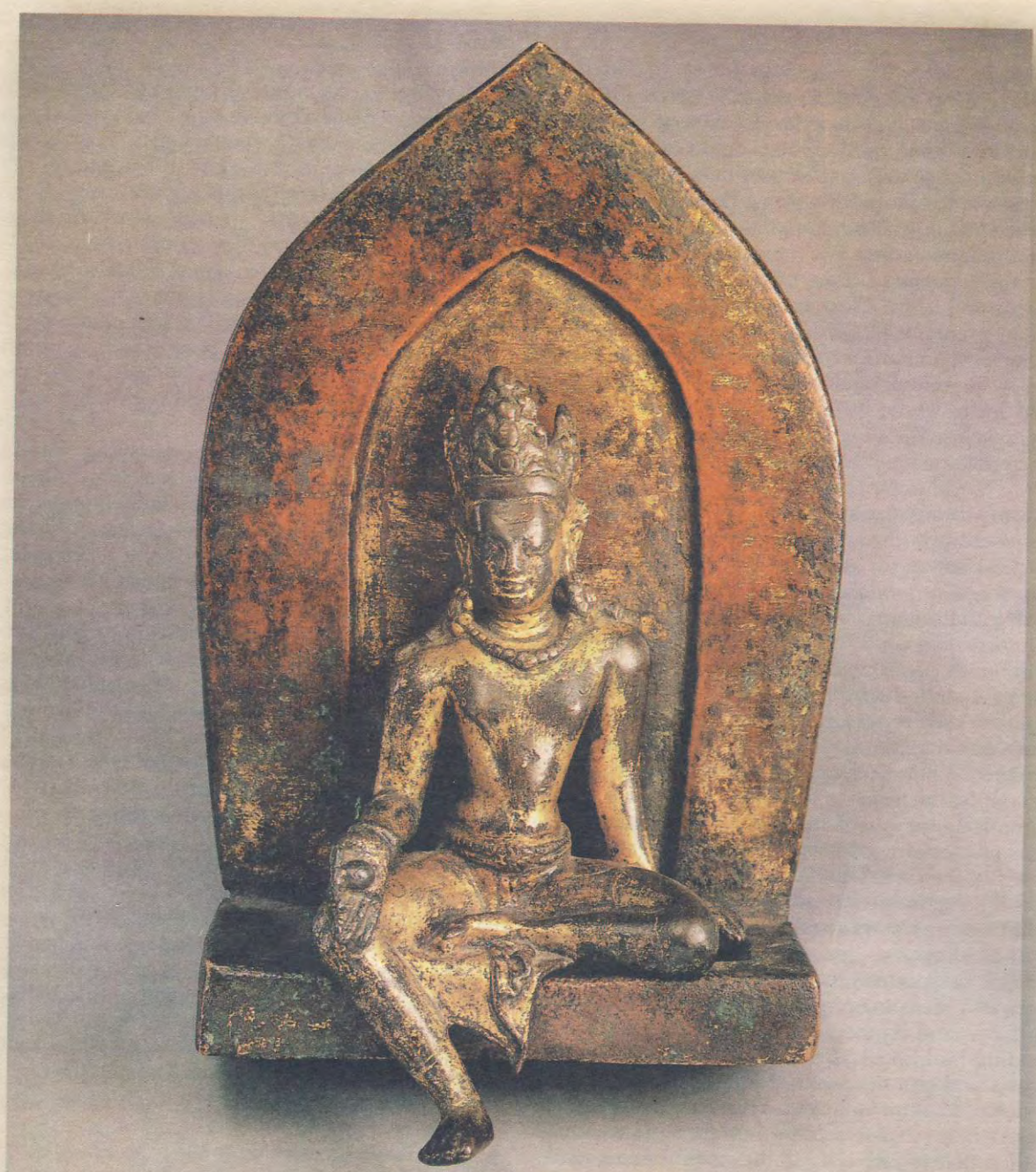
Musharraf's speech is a microcosm of the tensions within South Asian society. Splits within Pakistan are turning violent and lives have already been lost in protests against the country's cooperation with the USA. The middle ground of secular, "rationalist" dialogue and co-existence is evaporating. People in Pakistan, including perhaps Musharraf himself, are being forced to choose between unconditional and distasteful acquiescence to Western demands or a combination of blind nationalism and fundamentalism.

Peeling the onion

As interesting as Musharraf's speech itself were the interpretations of it in the Indian, Pakistani and Western media. The BBC carried the speech live but the translator either missed or did not cover many points, including the *Sharia'a* references. While recognising the tensions within Pakistan, Western media summaries primarily emphasised the government's decision to support America. Summaries in the Indian press mostly reacted angrily, viewing Musharraf's speech as an attempt to shift the focus away from terrorism to accusations of Indian aggression. Finally, summaries in the Pakistani press tended to highlight the *Sharia'a* angle and the need for Pakistan to maintain its sovereignty, economy and strategic assets.

The separate international, regional and domestic streams of press information bypassed each other. Each selected different aspects of the speech and drew different interpretations. Musharraf was attempting to speak to many different audiences at the same time. To a large extent, those audiences may have absorbed the messages intended for them while ignoring (or playing down) the messages intended for others. In many cases, the Western interpretations were factually different from the meaning of Musharraf's words whether spoken in Urdu or English. The BBC commentator who summarised the speech immediately following its conclusion, for example, indicated that Musharraf had told the Taliban to "lay off"; he hadn't, those words were targeted for India. While this misinterpretation was later corrected, the fact that the commentator jumped to the conclusion that Musharraf was criticising the Taliban is suggestive of the preconceptions that often underlie reports in the Western media.

As Musharraf's speech indicates, Operation "?" (once "Infinite Justice" now "Enduring Freedom") will be enacted on global and regional stages where many of the participants either intentionally or unintentionally speak past each other, and opportunities for misunderstanding are rife. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental implication for South Asia. The battle against terrorism is more a battle of ideas, beliefs and positions than a military battle. It is also steeped in existing disputes. One religion's blasphemy is another religion's worship. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. In South Asia, these contradictions were already intense points of conflict within most societies before last week's terrorist attacks in New York. From Ayodhya to the Bamiyan Buddhas, tolerance and understanding of other religions has been on the wane for decades. India is concerned about the West's rapid *rapprochement* with Pakistan, and may feel that its own offers of military support are being unjustly spurned—but even India must recognise that any attack on Afghanistan from its soil would be perceived as anti-Muslim by most of the Islamic world. Similarly, President Bush's use of the term "crusade" was, at the very least, unfortunate. Even though it has now been deleted from his public vocabulary, many Muslims in South Asia and



Indra

Nepal, 9th-10th century, Copper alloy, gilt. Object 23

In this superb cast image Indra sits at ease holding a symbolic lotus seed in his hand extended in charity (varada mudra). His expression is bening and, unique to him, third eye is horizontal. He wears a magnificent three-crested crown but is otherwise chastely ornamented. His lower body is draped with a loincloth decorated with rosettes to simulate a textile pattern.

Photograph by Rupert Steiner, Printed at Jagadamba Offset, Patan.

PATAN MUSEUM

Patan Museum, possibly the best museum in South Asia.
Jagadamba Press, possibly the best printing press in South Asia

JAGADAMBA PRESS

PO Box: 42, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal

Tel: 977-1- 521393 543017, 547018 Fax: 977-1-536390 Email: jagpress@mos.com.np

elsewhere see it as symptomatic of Western attitudes. According to a BBC correspondent, "There was little support for a jihad until US President George Bush spoke of a "crusade" against terrorism." If such slips force people to take sides not in a battle against terrorism but in a larger geopolitical shift with distinct religious overtones, Operation "?" is likely to deepen these contradictions in the multi-layered war of words and ideas. Clear communication is an essential prerequisite for peaceful solutions to complex problems. There are, however, many layers to the n-dimensional onion of South Asia. Foreign advisors (those who have flown over an area) and foreign experts (those who flew over in daylight) will have trouble peeling the layers.

Economy under stress

All of the above implies an increasingly complicated political situation for governments in the region. Western pressure and attention will increase, and will often reflect simplified understanding or lack of real information on the social and religious dynamics within South Asian polity. Polarisation is also likely to increase along fault lines within society. Some fault-lines, such as the one between religions, are obvious however much governments attempt to play them down. Others may be equally important. Take, for example, the tensions generated by modern communication systems. Satellite TV now transmits images of Westernised lifestyles into the homes of millions of South Asians. Some Muslims interpret this as a Western attack on Islam. Most in the West would deny any such attack, instead viewing the spread of ideas and lifestyles as demand-driven. From this perspective, technology simply delivers the images and ideas many people, particularly the young, demand on their own initiative. This *demand* is eroding traditional values across the spectrum of religions and cultures in most South Asian countries. The clash of values is far more fundamental than it seems. The West places responsibility for individuals and their beliefs primarily in their own hands, while many regional cultures locate individuals within a social space that is far more tightly defined by community and religion. Whether or not this more broadly felt line of tension will be opened by the developing conflict or papered over is impossible to tell at this point. Economic pressures are, however, likely to increase and when they do, the affluent life many in the Subcontinent aspire to—and some have begun to experience—will decline. This life and the expectations it raises for the future lie at the root of a tolerant social space in which contradictory value sets often peacefully co-exist.

South Asia's economic foundations will come under intense pressure if conflict adds to existing global economic uncertainty. A major challenge may lie in changes to global economic systems that emerge as part of the war against terrorism. Governments increasingly recognise that the financing of terrorist networks is made possible by global systems that enable funds to flow instantaneously from one part of the world to another. It will be difficult to restrict the ability of terrorists to do this without restricting the functioning of global financial systems for all users. This could have major, though unpredictable, impacts on all aspects of economic life in South Asia. Some economic impacts are, however, already evident. Tourism and travel are immediate victims. In Nepal, tourism was just beginning to look up after a disastrous spring and summer when fears of the Maoist uprising in combination with the royal massacres and economic uncertainty, drove visitor numbers down. Now tourism is wilting. Hotel bookings are low and little work is available for guides and porters. The economic lifeline for many at the base of Nepali society is fraying. India's economy is also under increasing stress. From tourism to software, India's economy has benefited hugely from increasing interaction with the rest of the world. Now, shrinking global demand is only one aspect of the challenge. South Asians travelling to the West face increased discrimination and personal risk.

Travel is, however, fundamental to business as well as personal relationships. If South Asians feel unsafe in the West, the economy of both regions will suffer. An equally fundamental concern may be the reluctance of Western companies to locate critical functions in countries that are perceived as vulnerable. One of South Asia's greatest assets is the large pool of highly trained computer professionals it contains. If Operation "?" develops into a war between religions or cultural values, this pool could itself be perceived as a source of risk. Pakistan's economy, already in shambles before this, is likely to contract still further unless the aid it receives is sufficient to counterbalance the disruption it will experience as a theatre of war. Overall, the region could see a dramatic reduction in its economic prospects.

Economic contraction is likely to exacerbate the social tensions already inflamed by any extensive military action in South Asia. Without rapid growth, the region will be unable to create the numerous jobs its growing population requires, to say nothing of meeting their rising expectations. Over the past two decades, large populations have left rural areas and migrated to towns and urban centres. This migration has been driven by many factors but better livelihoods rooted in growing urban economies have provided many with hope for a better future. Equally importantly, wealthy urban centres are places of social tolerance and relative anonymity. In them, individuals can pursue their own lives whether traditional or cosmopolitan with far less social pressure than in small villages and rural areas. As a result, urban centres endowed with increasing job opportunities have served as a social release valve

reducing tensions within and between communities. Urban anonymity combined with economic expansion create a social space in which contradictions can coexist. Urban centres in which high expectations compete over a shrinking pool of opportunities and where mistrust between communities reduces anonymity, are very different. If the safety valve of anonymity and hope for better futures evaporates, internal tensions within South Asian urban and rural society will come to the fore. There is a real danger that the politics of religion and community will come to dominate everyday life.

At this moment of uncertainty, it is easy to see the potentially large negative consequences of the emerging conflict. The conflict is, however, also an opportunity. To many analysts, its roots lie as much in poverty, inequity and corruption as in fundamentalism and anti-Western sentiment. The first three causes may, in fact, provide the intellectual justification; the evidence of moral failure that is needed to draw highly intelligent and educated individuals to the fundamentalist, anti-Western perspectives some use to legitimate terrorism. If governments, communities and corporations identify this, and make effective moves to address the first three causes, the social space available for the last two will contract.

The fight against terrorism does require direct action against terrorist networks and their financial base. Long-term solutions, however, depend on the creation of a global ethical and economic order in which the anger and despair driving terrorism evaporate. The implications of the coming fight against terrorism for South Asia depend heavily on how global and regional actors respond to this challenge. If serious and effective efforts are made to address poverty and inequity, then many of the tensions discussed above may be defused.

Initial signals on this account are mixed. Pakistan will receive very substantial aid from the West in return for its support against the Taliban. Although this is clearly an immediate political sop, it could lead to a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between economic conditions and security. In his press conference with the Japanese prime minister on 25 September, President Bush commented that Khosumi "talked about $40 million of aid to Pakistan". He then went on to say that "that's a very important contribution. And I repeat the reason why: A stable Pakistan is very important to a stable world. Throughout Pakistan, there's nuclear weapons, and we want stability in countries that may have nuclear weapons. And so that's a very important financial contribution."

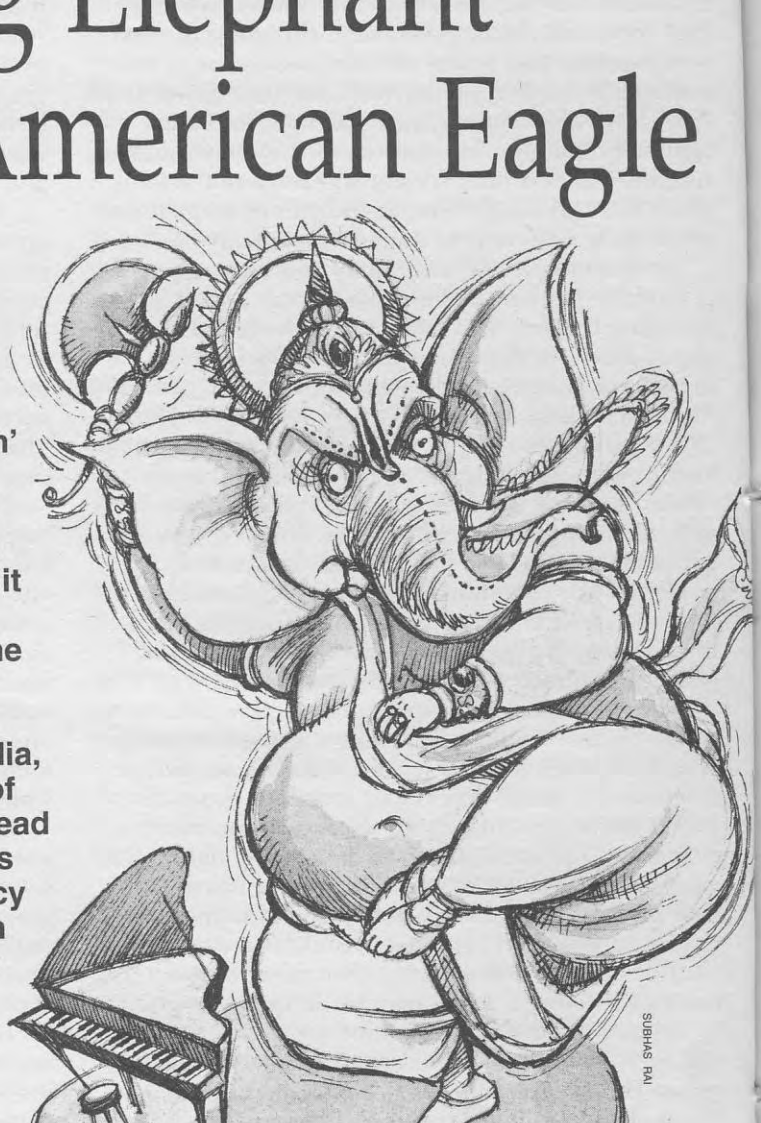
From sanctions to aid as a strategy for nuclear containment, a fundamental policy shift has occurred. While such aid is, at present, very directly related to the immediate interests of the West, it could provide an opening for broad-based re-evaluation of the links among aid, economic and trade policies, poverty, and the social instability that breed terrorism. Many argue that economic sanctions are an ineffective and unethical tool: they hit populations while giving regimes (such as that in Iraq) a *cause celebre* that strengthens rather than weakens their grasp on power. New perspectives could emerge that have efforts to address poverty and inequity as one of the cornerstones in combating the roots of terrorism and social instability.

The challenge is, however, not just for governments. Regional cultures see many elements of the global economic system as containing basic ethical flaws. Take the case of the recent battles over intellectual property rights. Many in South Asia view as theft the Western patent systems that allocate intellectual property rights to corporations for substances that have a long history of traditional use. There is a similar tension over medical patents that deny people access to medicines they need for survival. While many people acknowledge that corporations investing time and resources in the high risk process of developing medicines require an adequate return, they see a huge ethical question when only those in the West can afford such medicines. Not all such issues can be solved, but sincere attempts to acknowledge and mitigate them both within and outside South Asia would dilute the impressions of inequity that provide terrorist leaders with ethical arguments that resonate in educated as well as fundamentalist circles.

If efforts to combat terrorism bring greater attention to its roots in poverty and inequity, South Asia could see major long-term benefits in the form of growth and sustained economic development. The challenge lies in whether governments and society as a whole can see the opportunity and take advantage of it.

Terrorism has provided a wakeup call. And how we react has fundamental implications for the future. Some analysts see Osama bin Laden's ability to articulate and combine ethical insights with religion as his greatest strength. Beyond funding and organisation, it is those ethical arguments that enable him to weave together fundamentalists and highly educated, "Westernised" individuals into a powerful terrorist network. While we need to dismantle the infrastructure of terrorism, the greatest challenge to global economic and political systems lies in how we counter such ethical arguments. Our actions will speak louder than our words. If, through effective action to combat poverty and inequity in regions such as South Asia, the world can rebuild the middle space in society in which contradictions are muted by tolerance and well being, then the social tensions from which terrorism grows will decline. We now have an opportunity. △

The Dancing Elephant before the American Eagle



The ramifications of India's America tilt in the run-up to the 'war' against Osama bin Laden becomes clearer when read against the backdrop of India's own encounters with 'terrorism' in the past, and the direction of communal politics in the future. Does the ruling establishment of India even realise that it will reap the whirlwind if it uses this as an excuse to forcibly resolve the Kashmir problem? The one country which has the ability to understand the nature and undercurrents of violent politics is India, but because of the perceived power of the dollar, it is willingly following the lead of George W. Bush and his neophyte's understanding of insurgency, militancy and terrorism. Rather than grieve with the Americans, the representatives of the middle-class in the Indian ruling establishment, bureaucracy and media, have all rushed in to cash in on that tragedy across the seven seas.

by ***C. K. Lal***

When the terror hit the United States on 11 September, while watching the endless re-runs of the passenger jets ramming into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, little did one realise that the shock waves would lap against South Asian shores the way they have. Along with the 6000 or so victims of the disaster, a bit of one's faith in the unity of all humanity got buried there in the debris of a landmark skyscrapers. But before the dust had settled on lower Manhattan, and before the grieving had even begun, the verbal campaign of revenge and eye-for-eye began, and all eyes were immediately on Afghanistan—and South Asia. While the Americans homed in on Osama bin Laden as the unlikely one-stop villain of the piece, South Asia's leaders rushed to take cover, or to take advantage as the case may be.

Pakistan's Gen. Pervez Musharraf, found himself the prisoner of history in his country's support for the

Taliban regime which would give refuge to the Saudi rebel, incongruously forced to defend the very process which had been set in motion by the CIA itself during the campaign to oust the Russians from Afghanistan. He turned mullah to his flock, explaining the exigencies that had led him to side with the infidels, appealing via the *hadith* to the economic and nationalist common sense of the Pakistani-on-the-street.

If Pakistan's president-general was forced to do a tightrope act between the *ulema* and the Americans, he was making do as best as he could under the circumstances. It was the reaction of the Indian foreign policy establishment and supporting actors which was more troubling, and which will have long-term repercussions within India as well as in the neighbourhood. Non-violence and non-alignment have been jettisoned at one go, and it required terrorist attacks on the United States to tell us here in South Asia how much economic globalisation and the interests of its burgeoning middle class had distorted India's view of itself and the world. Gone were the moralistic harangues of the West that the Indians used to conduct from the United Nations pulpit for decades on end. Absent was any sensitivity to the specificities of terrorism, and how the genocidally audacious attacks on the citadels of America's economic and military might (the WTC and the Pentagon) were quite different from the militancies within—in Kashmir, in the Northeast and in class warfare in the central spine of the country.

And yet, only to spite Pakistan on Kashmir, the Indian leadership, which today speaks more and more for the middle and upper classes and less and less for the rest of the country, was willing to expose its confused and convoluted understanding of politics and geopolitics. It offered the American military its ports and air bases without being asked, it went on a gleeful anti-Pakistan spree as if the American disaster were a godsent opportunity to settle scores on Kashmir.

How can anyone without an understanding of the past seek to chart the future? When the Indian leadership went into paroxysms of anticipation after George W. Bush announced the first war of the new century and millennium, little did it try and understand how the American agenda may differ from what India seeks from its international relations. Most importantly, the Indian politicians, analysts, talking-heads on television, almost to the last one, failed to understand the very history of militancy (and terrorism if you will) within the Subcontinent—how it evolved from pre-independence days and how the reaction of the Centre in New Delhi has helped mould the reaction of the militants themselves. These self-satisfied men so willing to speak the Americanism of defence-analyst talk should have been the first to understand that the harsh hand of military rule does nothing to curb the militant's desire for recognition.

Taking the cue from the United States is the wrong tack for India's rulers. It should be the other way around. It is not George W. Bush, Colin Powell or Condolesza Rice who have battled insurgencies, militancies, terrorism over the last half century. It is the rulers of India, and the other countries of South Asia, particularly Pakistan and Sri Lanka. But rather than learn from this long history of confronting militancy and insurgency—from Nagaland to Punjab, and from Kashmir to Andhra Pradesh—and instead of going deep into India's own history of anti-state and anti-establishment action, what does the Indian leadership do? At the first opportunity that presents itself, and purely to get back at Pakistan—and perhaps even because of the humiliation the Indian foreign policy and defence establishment suffered for their poor showing astride Gen. Musharraf at the Agra summit—the Indian elephant decided to tap-dance to the American tune.

What really took almost everyone by surprise was the pre-emptive way India offered its assistance to the USA in its war against an as-yet unidentified enemy much before the guilt of Black Tuesday had been properly established. It was the submissive tone of the Indian offer of support that offended all in South Asia outside the Bhartiya Janata Party. Asked the urbane Sitaram Yechury of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) most appropriately, "Till now, America has not asked India for anything. They have thought of putting up military bases everywhere except India. So, why go out of the way to tell them we are willing to help?" Gen. Colin Powell, seemed to have similar feelings about the gratuitous offer, and decided to hitch the anti-Taliban offensive with the frontline states of Pakistan and the Central Asians instead—all of them lined up for the US war against the fundamentalist Taliban. The Indian foreign minister and the South Block were left flailing, the non-alignment foreign policy definitively out of the window and nothing else to show for it. Other than a not very convincing anti-terrorist "concert of democracy".

Policy fatigue

Jaswant Singh was only representing the New Delhi establishment's rapidly changed worldview, the first proof of which was in the 180 degree turnaround on matters nuclear after Pokhran Two in May 1998. How else could the foreign minister of a country that has won its independence by practising the non-violence creed of Mahatma Gandhi say "an eye for an eye" in response to George W. Bush's declaration to "smoke" the terrorists "out". Far from the heights in which Mr. Singh and Mr. Bush reside in their respective establishments, Gandhi had said that if everyone went for "an eye for an eye", the whole world would go blind. Egged on by the jingoism coming from President Bush (such as rabble-rousing amongst the WTC rescue hardhats, atop a mound that had yet to deliver even a fraction of its dead), India is rapidly becoming blind with misplaced rage. Gandhi had gone so far as to even advise Winston Churchill to talk to Hitler prior to the

Second World War. Indian decision-makers of the twenty-first century were urging United States of America to wage war on an unidentified enemy believed to be in hiding in a country already ravaged by violence and on the verge of collapse. Up in the sky, Winston must have teased the half-naked fakir at the ways of the world below.

Contrary to the beliefs of market-savvy South Asians of the "*Mera Bharat Mahan*" generation, Gandhi's insistence on non-violence in his struggle against the pre-imminent imperial power of the day was not just morality-based. It was eminently practical. Gandhi realised that all violence is unpredictable. Consequences of application of force, power or strength cannot be estimated with accuracy, and nobody can guide or control violence beyond the short term. Over a period of time, violence tends to invent its own justification. Once the downward spiral gathers momentum, checking the slide towards oblivion becomes nearly impossible. Abandoning violence as a tool becomes even more vital when the struggle is between two asymmetrical competitors for political power. Why, then, are India's current rulers so bent on pursuing the path of violent retribution? In the answer lies the pathetic story of the fatigue that seems to have overtaken the Indian state ruled from New Delhi.

The Indian establishment is so tired of fighting terrorism, it is so fed up with its responsibilities in South Asia, it has been pushed into such a corner by the aspirations of its middle-class, and it is affected so evidently by the post-liberalisation national media—that it sees nothing wrong in making that neat 180 degree turn in its international policy. No need, then, even to bother justifying the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal matters of another country, principles whose vanguard in international fora New Delhi's ambassadors and representatives were till not so long ago. Exasperated by the demands put on it, and aware of its own limitations in meeting them, New Delhi decided to jump when it thought Washington DC was beckoning. It saw the collapse of the Twin Towers as a great opportunity to ride Uncle Sam's coattails without being seen to have given in to the West. Alas, the realities of geo-politics are not written by the script-writers of Bollywood blockbusters, and so even though the Indian elephant is willing to dance to the tune of "America the Beautiful", Uncle Sam refuses to come to the piano.

On satellite television, India's heavyweight analysts are prone to point at the challenge of cross-border terrorism, training camps producing *jihadis*, and a proxy war being waged by a neighbouring country. This finger points to the continuing insurgency in Kashmir and Pakistan's supportive role. But will bringing the Americans into the Kashmir imbroglio solve India's problems? Ideologues of the Bhartiya Janata Party seem to have ignored the risks of inviting the sole superpower of the world to come sniffing into a region that is already volatile and dangerous. "Lay off!" General Musharraf told the Indians in English in his televised Urdu address, whereas there was a time when India, before its elites succumbed to the market, would have been using that expression against the United States if it so much as even indicate an interest in South Asian affairs. South Block may not recognise it, but the reality on the South Asian terra firm remains unchanged if you read General Musharraf's not-so-subtle reference to "strategic weapons"—nuclear bombs—and Pakistan's abiding interest in Kashmir stated in cold and calculated words. The "first war of the twenty-first century" may have been declared by a country across the seven seas, but the identity-ridden angst of South Asia's dispossessed is not going to be dealt with by deploying some aircraft carriers and landing a few cruise missiles.

Troubled history

According to Mahatma Gandhi, the practice of untouchability prevalent in society is a kind of institutional violence. Even state is nothing but a structure given to organised violence. Gandhi's praxis of Gram Swaraj recognises the evil of violence and proposes to fight it with the rule of truth—the Ram Rajya. But just as everything looks like a nail to a person with a new hammer, advancement in technology has apparently changed the world-view of Indian establishment. From post-colonial search for peace, India suddenly seems to have taken a myopia-induced leap into the past—to the days of Mauryan glory. So, even when there is a wave of post-modern "a million mutinies now" (in the catchy phrase of V.S. Naipaul) sweeping the landscape of South Asia, there is also an undercurrent of anti-colonialism in the region that exerts its continuing demand for self-rule and group identity among variegated communities. That, perhaps, explains the rise of terrorism even in Gandhi's land. After all, as Carlos Marighella asserts in his *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*, terrorism is an essential component of any kind of insurgency. Unable to understand the complexity of the historical process at work, Indian decision-makers rush in with their military solution (the hammer) and end up further confounding the confusion.

Popular perception notwithstanding, terrorism is not mindless violence. Even those who created the carnage by the Hudson and Potomac rivers had a political purpose, and we already have a faint understanding of what that may have been. As the leaders of India know more than anyone else, terrorism is an integral part of insurgency. Some Indians may blanch if one were to call Bhagat Singh a terrorist, but in purely definitional terms that is what he was. Gandhi had no hesitation in terming all violent expressions of patriotism acts of terror. On the other hand, it has to be said that India's encounter with insurgency/terrorism is relatively recent. Compared to anti-colonial struggles in other parts of the world, movements for independence in South Asia were relatively a tame affair. Once

the British crushed the the Indian mutiny in 1857 with the help of Jang Bahadur's Gorkhas from Nepal, Indians lost the will to wage an armed struggle with a power that depended upon 'natives' to fight their wars in the colonies. The British called their armed forces in India the Indian Army, and it did not give the impression of being an occupation force. For their part, the British looked at the activists of the Indian National Congress with benign indulgence.

At that time, the India which was undivided had the largest Muslim population in the world, and in recognition of the difference that it made to anti-imperial struggles, Gandhi decided to side with the Khilafat in Turkey. Khilafat became a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity, so much so that the word itself came to mean rebellion in Urdu—the lingua franca of the masses in British India. Prolonged fasts, non-cooperation, boycott and civil disobedience were the bargaining tools of Gandhi in his fight against the British. Barring stray incidents of violence, India won its independence without bloodshed. But the post-independence Partition that formed the nation states of India and Pakistan more than 'made up' for the lives saved during the independence struggle.

The process of nation formation continued right up to the 1950s as India and Pakistan fought the first of their wars for the Vale of Kashmir. Like other wars to take place later, it did not settle anything. All it did was drive the wedge of partition deeper into the psyche of the survivors. In 1962, India got a drubbing from the Chinese during a series of border skirmishes. Apart from other things, the Himalayan debacle diminished the stature of the Indian military. Barely a year after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, India and Pakistan fought their second inconclusive war over Kashmir. A peace brokered by the then Soviet Union took its toll as a crest-fallen prime minister Lal Bahadur Shastri died of a heart attack within hours of signing the Taskent Treaty. Shastri could not bear to come back and face his nation with the humiliation of a treaty that once again left the question of Kashmir wide open.

Elsewhere in South Asia, the 1960s were the years of post-colonial nation building based on the resurgence of cultural identity. The movement for self-respect gained momentum in the then East Pakistan and *Ekushe* became the war cry of Bengalis in memory of the day when language activists had laid down their lives for Bangla. Voices against Tamil domination in education and administration led to Sinhala chauvinism, which in turn sowed the seeds of sedition in a section of Tamil population in Sri Lanka. Within India, language movements erupted in much of the south. Sirdar Pratap Singh Kairon, towering figure of Indian independence struggle and a former chief minister of Punjab, was shot dead in New Delhi as secessionist politics raised its head in his frontier state. All this while, Kashmir continued to simmer on the slow burner of widespread political dissatisfaction on the one hand and a divided existence on the other.

The 1970s began with the birth of Bangladesh after the third war between India and Pakistan. A process that was started by the British with the partition of Bengal into two units of east and west came to an end with the ultimate independence of the eastern flank. The fundamental premise of the partition of India—that unity of religion was a strong enough bond to keep cultures as far apart as Bengali and Punjabi together—was blown into smithereens by the surrender of General Niazi in Dhaka. Pakistan now had even more at stake in Kashmir. If it were to forfeit its claim on Kashmir, the very foundation of Pakistan would be shaken.

That was something Pakistanis could never imagine. Till the 1970s, there were still people living in Pakistan who had fought for its formation and remembered the agonies of the earlier life under Hindu domination. It is easy for present-day Hindu scholars in India to question the demands of Pakistan, saying that secular India has the second largest Muslim population in the world, but they can never understand the pain of those who habitually suffered the humiliation of drinking from a different water pitcher marked 'Muslim' at railway stations, for example. The relief of being in a country where a Muslim didn't have to be apologetic about turning west for every *azan* was worth laying down lives for. It was this sentiment that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto exploited when he ranted about a thousand-year war even as he accepted the unequal terms of the Shimla Agreement in 1972. But Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto both lost in the bargain of Shimla, for having left the fate of Kashmir hanging in balance once again.

Terrorism got personal and brutal in the 1970s as leftist extremists commenced their extermination of class enemies in different parts of South Asia. Naxalites in West Bengal, Marxists in Kerala, Marxist-Leninists in Eastern Nepal, Maoists in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, the Peoples' Emancipation Forum in Sri Lanka—those were the years of blood-soaked dreams ruthlessly crushed in turn by the state forces.

Repression brutalises the victim as well as the perpetrators of violence. The state got more intolerant as Indira Gandhi suspended fundamental rights and declared a state of emergency in India, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was assassinated and the military took power in Bangladesh, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was deposed in a coup and then hanged in Pakistan. It was during this tumultuous decade that super-power rivalry came to the doorstep of South Asia as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, and the United States came forward to pour money into the Pakistani military and back the likes of Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalists.

It was in the 1970s that Indira Gandhi annexed the quasi-independent mountain kingdom of Sikkim. Curiously, this was also the period when she dis-

Fallout of an Afghan Strike

By ***Mushahid Hussain***

THE US response to the carnage perpetrated on 11 September, could be a catalyst for an unwinnable, long-drawn war without frontiers. A 'shoot first ask questions later' approach could spark: a) a new confrontation between the United States and the Muslim World; b) a conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan; and c) a dangerous cleavage within Pakistani society that would sow the seeds of another Algeria.

Ironies abound amidst the tragedy. The United States, looking for enemies in Pyongyang, Beijing, Baghdad and Tehran (and new allies in places like New Delhi), has suddenly realised that the threat comes from elsewhere. And what of the colossal US intelligence failure? Despite its inability to uncover the plot by 71 Americans or US-based foreign nationals (19 suicide bombers plus 52 collaborators) to strike at the country's financial and military centres, it is now eager to "smoke out Osama bin Laden" from faraway Afghanistan. There is also the bewildering spectacle of a line of unsavory Third World entities created or supported by the US, who end up on the "most wanted" list—Noriega, Saddam and now the Taliban.

When the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the CIA pumped in USD 2.1 billion over a 10-year period (with matching funds from Saudi Arabia and another billion dollars donated by the Chinese) to create a resistance that, at its height, included almost 200,000 well-trained volunteers from 20 Muslim countries, operating out of Pakistan but supported covertly by a disparate coalition comprising Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, China and the United States.

Osama bin Laden was among the early recruits to the Afghan *jihad*. Once the Red Army was driven out of Afghanistan, these out-of-job freedom fighters had little to do. Some stayed on to fight the remnants of the Soviet regime or dispersed into factions; others returned to their countries to create a new dreaded force of "Afghan Arabs" that became active in destabilising Egypt, Algeria, Palestine, Yemen, Tunisia and Jordan; some even turned on their American mentors. The more motivated fought in Bosnia and Kosovo.

For the US, terrorism is now outside the ambit of its conventional approach of certifying states as being "sponsors of terrorism" and then going after them through traditional military, diplomatic or economic means. With the 'privatisation' of terror by those who are highly motivated, the US is dealing with an enemy that has a demonstrated capacity to kill coupled with a willingness to die. This makes the war on terrorism more complex and the enemy more difficult to locate. The biggest problem that the US faces is on the public opinion front in the Muslim world, most of which is yet to be convinced about the linkage between the 11 September crime and Afghanistan.

Earlier, the United States was seeking to erect a missile defence system, costing around USD 100 billion, based on the assumption of a 'threat' to American cities from 'rogue states' like Iran and North Korea but aimed more at China as adversary. After 11 September, both China and Iran are de facto partners of the US on the issue of terrorism. More than any other region, the US anti-terrorism strategy crafted in the aftermath of the carnage in New York and Washington has grave implications for South Asia. The American worldview has undergone a radical transformation and with it is gone the premise of the Bush administration's initial South Asian policy that was propped up by three pillars: promoting India as a counterweight to China, projecting China as the new adversary which ought to be contained, and pushing Pakistan into a corner as a virtual pariah.

However, for Pakistan, the main question now is: once the "get Osama Operation" is over, who will be there to remove the rubble of revolt or the debris of discontent that this operation would bring in its wake, plus the 2.2 million Afghans already resident here? Military matters apart, other questions pertaining to Afghanistan's future have the potential to create dissent in the carefully cobbled coalition against terrorism. At the core of any possible Pakistan-American cleavage would be the competing interests over Afghanistan, particularly the scenario for the post-Osama phase. Were the Taliban regime to unravel in the process, what sort of new political dispensation would replace it?

Pakistan's concerns on this count would be threefold. First, the anti-terrorism campaign should be limited to nabbing Osama and his cohort, not removing a regime perceived as 'friendly' to Pakistan. Second, ensuring that the Northern Alliance is not enlisted in the 'get Osama' campaign since, in that case, it would surely be transformed into a 'get Taliban' operation as well. Third, addressing the concern that enlarging the American anti-terrorism agenda beyond its stated goal would generate instability and uncertainty in Afghanistan, a further exodus of refugees southward, and destabilisation of Pakistan itself.

Since it is clear that the new coalition will not be functional without major Muslim representation, Muslim leaders need to muster up the courage and vision to look beyond their own political survival so that the much talked about 'clash of civilisations' does not become a self-fulfilling prophecy. More than the Americans, it is the Muslim nations, and Pakistan in particular, which will feel the first fallout of any military action against any Muslim country.

membered Assam and formed the nearby states of Meghalaya, Arunachal, Manipur and Tripura in the Northeast. The 1970s came to a close with the declaration of referendum in Nepal that offered its people a hope of democracy but refused to deliver substantive changes in the status quo.

The following decade of the 1980s were the years of despair. Insurgency erupted with brutal force in Punjab, where Indira Gandhi had nurtured a terror named Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to check the advances of the Akali Dal in the state. Students in Assam started a movement against foreigners that resulted in a carnage of alleged Bangladeshis culminating in the massacre of innocents at Nellie, killed just because they were declared alien by the zealots of All Assam Students Union and Asom Gana Sangram Parishad. Left out of the process of compromises between different interest groups in New Delhi, the Northeast got even more alienated and insurgency spread throughout Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. Meanwhile, Kashmir continued to burn.

It was also in the 1980s that the Mohajir Qaumi Movement raised its profile in Pakistan, Chakma tribals rose up for justice in Bangladesh, the Tamils intensified their fight for an independent homeland in Sri Lanka, and Bhutan commenced the persecution and expulsion of its Lhotsampa population. This was the decade when scorpions fatted on the munificence of India's intelligence agencies became so bold as to bite their own benefactors. Indira Gandhi was shot dead by her own Sikh bodyguards enraged by her assault on the Golden Temple, and her son Rajiv was blown up by Dhanu, a woman suicide bomber of the LTTE.

Before his stint in power was cut short by the Bofors howitzer scandal, Rajiv Gandhi had succeeded in signing a string of peace accords—with the agitating students of Assam, with the Akali Dal in Punjab, and with the government of President Jayawardane in Sri Lanka. But even he could do nothing about the folly of his grandfather in Kashmir, emanating from a moment of weakness when the great liberal decided not to let go of the region for political gain. During Rajiv's time, the situation in Kashmir got distorted as new militant groups entered the fray. After the retreat of Soviet forces from Afganistan, *jihadis* funded by Americans and trained by Pakistanis found another fighting frontier in the quiet Vale.

Through these twists and turns of South Asia-wide insurgencies, because of its transnational nature and the depth of feelings it arouses on both sides, it is the continuing militancy in Kashmir that has burdened South Asian history and holds the single largest threat to the future of a by-now-nuclearised Subcontinent. The essential aspects of the problem has remained the same over the years—Kashmir continues to be the unfinished business of the partition of British India. For Pakistan, a claim on Kashmir has become a kind of raison d'être for its survival. Secure within its military might and ability to let Kashmir bleed, India just cannot fathom the depth of feeling among Pakistanis. India tries to beat Pakistan with the stick of cross-border terrorism while the latter fights back with long-forgotten General Assembly resolutions on the Kashmiris' right to self-determination.

Over the 1990s, the insurgency in Kashmir acquired communal overtones and Islamic fundamentalists of different varieties such as Laskars violently pushed aside the Kashmiri freedom-fighters of the home-grown Hurriyat variety. The blurring of distinction between fundamentalists and insurgents became so complete in Kashmir, especially after the Kargil War, that today India's Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani can conveniently use the oft-repeated quote of one man's terrorist being another man's freedom fighter and in the very next breath ask for the elimination of terrorism in the next breath without noticing any incongruity.

And now, a direct link is sought to be drawn between the American disaster and insurgency in South Asia. By trying to connect the insurgency in Kashmir with the fundamentalism of Osama bin Laden's global network of Al Quaida, India hoped to get its dirty work done by the Americans. Such was the lack of self-confidence in handling what should have been an 'internal matter' that the Indian establishment—political, bureaucratic, media and all manner of opinion-makers—thought it would utilise this opportunity to clinically excise terrorism from Kashmir, forgetting that first and foremost the wound festers within the Valley. Also, in the rush to applaud the American resolve to fight the war against terrorism and in the unasked offering of all manner of logistical support, India forgot that a miss-step on Kashmir could snowball against all India and the rest of South Asia.

For the Americans, however, the need of the hour was to encircle Afghanistan, and South Block had miscalculated—simple geography and geopolitics showed that Pakistan was a much more suitable ally than India which was a block away. Ironically, too, both Pakistan and India found themselves on the same side—both of them willing to help the Americans, the one willingly and the other under duress, and both being rewarded with the lifting of sanctions. This equidistance must have been galling for the ministers and bureaucrats on Raisina Hill, for the "concert of democracy" seemed harder to achieve than it had seemed at first.

Rise of the bourgeoisie

Indian middle-class kept itself away from the rough and tumble of democratic politics all through the years of Nehru's socialism. It devoted itself to education and the professions, and prospered from the processes of red-tape even as Indira Gandhi rent the air with her socialist call of *"Garibi Hatao"*. But the bourgeoisie was brought to the centre-stage by Indira Gandhi's younger son, Sanjay. He was a dread for the masses,

but the middle-class flocked to him. He pursued the causes dear to the Indian bourgeoisie—forced vasectomy of the poor to limit their numbers, clearing of slums in the name of urban beautification, and a disregard for the niceties of democratic politics. He made a politician of the stature of Narayan Dutta Tiwari run with his chappals on the Lucknow railway station to the applause of Indian middle-class. Trains ran on time, there were no strikes at educational institutions, and the political leaders opposed to the policies of Sanjay were in jail—the Indian bourgeoisie couldn't have asked for anything more.

It is difficult to understand why Indira called for an election when the going was so good for both mother and son, but it is likely that her advisors convinced her that she would win the polls hands down. Sensitive to the verdict of history like the power elite everywhere, Indira possibly also wanted to re-establish the democratic credentials of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty so that it could perpetuate itself.

Indira lost, but the chaos of the Janata Party's years in power frightened the middle-class no end. George Fernanedes expelled Coca Cola and made International Business Machine pull down its shutters in India. The hungry and unwashed masses of Jagjivan Ram and Chaudhary Charan Singh taking over the Ramlila Maidan for days on end in New Delhi pushed the fearful bourgeoisie once again into the close embrace of Indira's Congress. The coming of age of the Indian middle-class commenced with the entry of Rajiv Gandhi into public life.

Rajiv was a reluctant political prince of the uncrowned Empress of the Indian Republic. After the death of Sanjay in a stunt plane crash, the elder brother declared that all he wanted to do was 'help Mummy'. His baptism was by way of staging the Asian Games of 1982. Asiad's mascot was a playful baby elephant named Apu, who became the flag-carrier of the upwardly mobile middle-class. Brick by brick, Rajiv's friends from his days at the Raj-era boarding school in Dehra Dun began to dismantle the edifice of socialism. Their New Delhi world was one that would have flyovers to ease traffic, five-star discos to chill out in, and lucrative government contracts to pad a Western lifestyle-in-a-bubble. The bourgeoisie had truly arrived, and the frenetic building of 'farm-houses' in the vicinity of New Delhi was a testimony to the transition from Gandhian abstinence to conspicuous consumption.

Rajiv Gandhi's Nike led the way for this computer-savvy modernisation brigade. Pepsi made an entry and Coca Cola its comeback. Forced by a balance of payment crisis, P. V. Narasimha Rao who took over from where Rajiv left off, opened the floodgates of market economy. The size of India's middle-class grew by leaps and bounds. All of a sudden, the consuming classes of India, those with the surplus to spend on non-essentials, became a 100 million strong. The multinational corporations of the West, long resentful of India for leading the charge against them and on behalf of the world's poor, suddenly woke up to the fact that the Indian elephant had no memory at all, and was now in fact unbelievably on their side.

Even if it was Rajiv and Narasimha Rao of the Congress that carried out the volte face of the political economy, none benefited more from the burgeoning middle-class than the Bhartiya Janata Party. In its earlier avatar as the Bhartiya Jan Sangh, the BJP had held complete sway over the neighbourhood grocers and petty shopkeepers in the plains of North India. The caste politics of an opportunistic V. P. Singh, epitomised by his attempt to implement the Mandal Commission report, pushed the alienated upper-caste Hindus as well towards the waiting arms of the 'Hindu*vadi*' BJP. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the bomb blasts in Bombay together solidified the support of hard-line Hindus around the BJP, which played up the avuncular personality of Atal Behari Vajpayee as its public face. The supposedly moderate stance of Vajpayee—the same person who wrote tormented verse about Hiroshima but would pull the trigger of Pokharan Two—also helped attract a larger population into the BJP fold. After the assassination of Rajiv in 1991, there was no Congress leader of stature to sway the masses and the BJP made most of that vacuum.

Ironically, in their process of self-perpetuating isolation, the more the Muslim Indians huddled together in the aftermath of Ayodhya, the bigger the distance became between them and the chauvinist Hindu brigade which surged ahead to take power in New Delhi. While pushing their agenda for a Common Civil Code the BJP ideologues pretended to be promoting secularism, but were in fact prosecuting minority identities. The BJP also preyed on the Hindus' fears of India being a country surrounded by aggressive Islamic states, and helped instil a minority complex in the majority population. The BJP pushed and took full political advantage of the bogey of petro-dollars peddling Islam.

Muslim Indians, along with Dalits and tribals, were the main victims of the process of globalisation—the economic liberalisation and privatisation of the Indian economy. Muslims, after all, had no middle-class worth the name in India; their best professionals had migrated to Pakistan and in fact continued to do so right up to the 1960s. The upper class Muslims were the beneficiaries of minority tokenism of the ruling elite in New Delhi, and they did not find it convenient to nurture competitors by promoting the creation of an upwardly mobile class of Muslim Indians.

The mass of Muslims remained at the bottom of Indian economic heap and felt it had even less of a stake in a market-dominant India than earlier in the Nehru-Gandhi socialist era. Hindu ideologues like to blame the orthodoxy of Muslims for their backwardness, but the fact is there is not much of a difference

between Hindu Dalits and poor Muslims when it comes to an inability to pick up opportunities in a political economy run by upper-class Hindus. Even in the private sector, no industrial house (that of the Tatas being perhaps the sole exception) would go beyond the symbolic hiring of Muslims. The pre-existing divide between Hindus and Muslims was thus deepened by the market surge benefiting the Hindu middle-class. The BJP and its allies only made matters worse by stressing the differences.

The tolerance level for the *Musalmaan* is even lower among the refugees who came over to India during Partition. Deep within, they carry the trauma of their loss, and blame the Muslims for their suffering. The most prominent example of such a tormented mindset—a name that has to be taken for all the power he has today to destroy the fabric of India—is India's Home Minister L. K. Advani. A Sindhi survivor who has succeeded in reaching the pinnacle of power in *Bharat*—whose power base is stronger within the party than the Uttar Pradeshi Vajpayee's—it was Advani who ignited Hindu militancy in its latest wave after going on his Ram Mandir Rathyatra on a gussied-up truck. It is Advani who promotes the Sindhu Darshan by doing puja in Ladakh along the Sutlej, a river that flows into *Pakistan*. It is Advani who talks of hot pursuit in Kashmir. And it is he again who finds nothing wrong in urging the US to wage war against Islam. The Hindutva of Advani is harsh, non-inclusive and chauvinistic, an attitude that is ripe and ready to countenance the harsh, non-inclusive and chauvinist United States under Bush Junior.

In addition to the congenital hostility of the BJP towards Muslims, a class has emerged in liberalised India that associates Islam with the *burqa* and fanaticism. For the lovers of MTV and McDonalds, the madrasa is a places that breeds medieval mullahs bent upon waging jihad on *kafirs* everywhere. This class of globalised Indians has more in common with Americans of different races in the United States than with the Muslims in the next neighbourhood or *mohalla*. It shares the fears of Americans, but has no understanding of the frustrations of Asia's Muslims—either the downtrodden Musalmaan of South Asia or the complex and inter-woven politics of West Asia. This class also happens to be the main constituency of the BJP, and leaders like Advani find that by declaring Osama bin Laden an enemy of civilisation they can enhance the loyalty of their cash-rich supporters.

Closely tied to this class of nouvea-riche Indian Hindus is the NRI, the non-resident *desi* who mistakenly believes that he can escape identification as "Paki" in the West if only he could somehow prove his Aryan credentials. The US-based NRIs tend therefore to be natural allies of Hindu nationalists within the BJP, and little wonder then that an attack on the United States now generates such a powerful reaction in New Delhi. Globalisation has liberated the middle-class of India from the suffocating secularism of the Nehru-Gandhi years and it finds that by making common cause with the Americans, it can cosy up to the sole superpower and obtain windfall benefits. Once one understands the political compulsions of the BJP, especially when there is an election in the all-important state of Uttar Pradesh looming, the 'stoogeism' of the suave Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh starts to make sense.

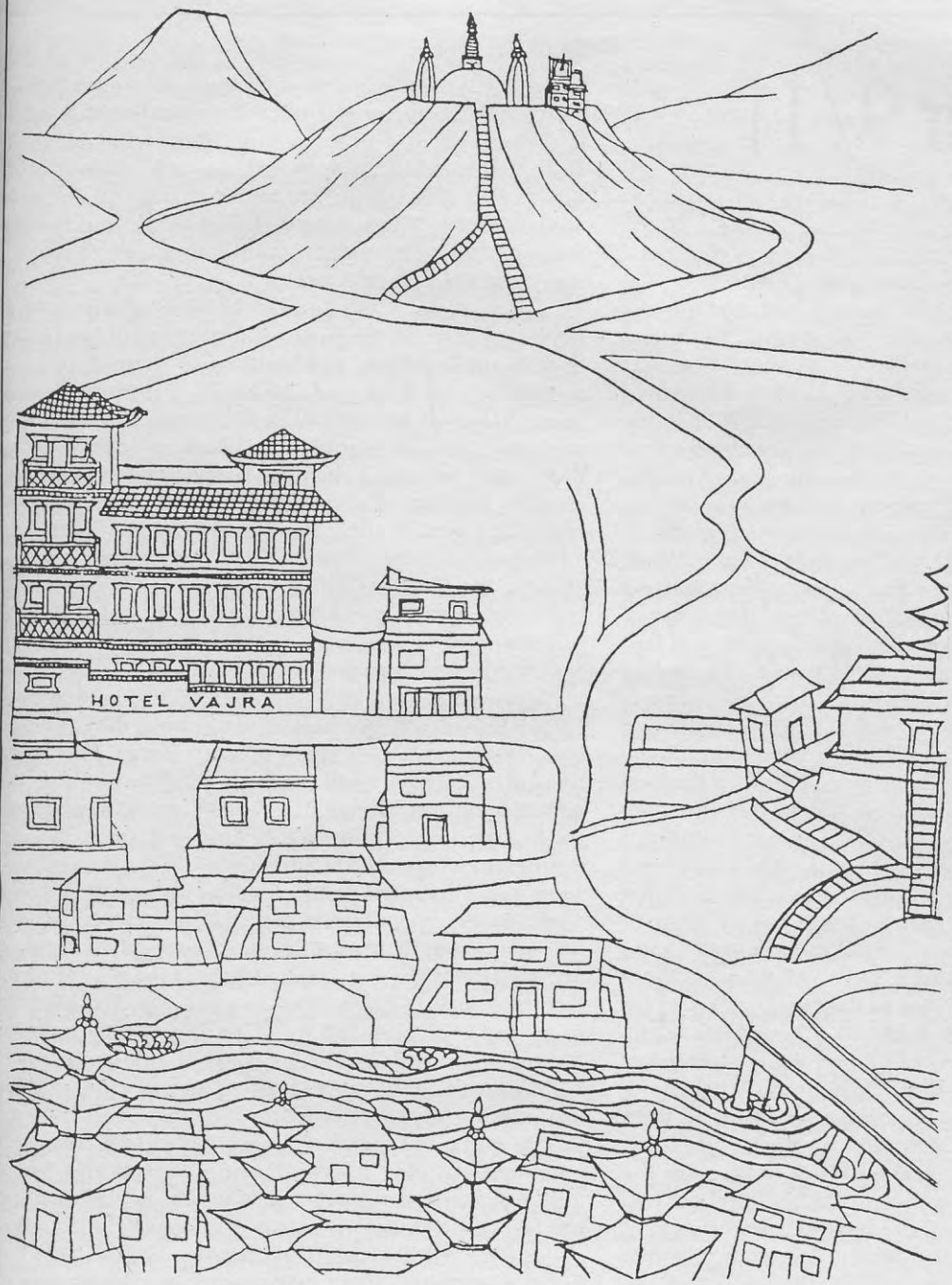
Warmongering media

Until the 1970s, television and radio were under strict government control and the print media considered itself an extension of the state. It performed its watchdog functions while remaining within the limits set by the government of the day. In a self-important kind of way, Indian journalists believed that they were the guardians of Indian democracy. The "foreign hand" that Indira Gandhi saw behind every other bush was willingly magnified many times over by the Indian press. When Nixon asked the Seventh Fleet to set sail for the Indian Ocean and the Soviets came to India's support during the Indo-Pak war of 1971, the Indian press decided that patriotism meant opposing the Americans.

The end of the Emergency ushered a revolution in the 'language press', and simultaneously, a clutch of glossy English periodicals hit the stands. Two clear strands of journalism emerged—a language press obsessed about religion and ethnicity, and English press pursuing the mantra of the market. *India Today*, the newsmagazine that was later to emerge as the trusted vehicle of Hindu chauvinism after the demolition of Babri Masjid, began assiduously to serve the needs of the growing middle class and the NRIs non-resident Indians and to project a better image of India abroad.

The 1982 Asiad introduced colour television to India, and the medium was able to mesmerise viewers with the live-cast view of the stoic Rajiv at the last rites of his mother Indira. Mythological soaps such as *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* psyched Hindus up to stand up and be counted on a massive scale, modern broadcast technology presenting a simplified oneness to a 'religion' that earlier knew no definition. The Gulf War brought the satellite channels, and in competition the print too succumbed to the charms of the marketplace.

In a moment of weakness, an editor of *The Times of India* had once boasted that the editorship of his paper was the second-most important job in the country after that of the prime minister. Perhaps he would say so no longer. The trajectory of degeneration of the *Times* has been clear for all readers to see, as the publisher, Samir Jain, struggles to make big bucks amidst a market that has no space for serious journalism. As the commentator (and presently minister) Arun Shourie says, the *Times* has left journalism, to practise infotainment. But if Jain reflects the brand of earthy and pragmatic publisher —a media equivalent of Laloo Prasad Yadav of Bihar state—Arun Purie of *India Today* is the suave Chandrababu Naidu



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

Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

John Collee
The London Observer.

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

Time.

in Kathmandu, the Vajra

Swayambhu, Dallu Bijyaswori, PO Box 1084, Kathmandu
Phone: 977 1 271545, 272719 Fax: 977 1 271695 E-mail: vajra@mos.com.np

Life after 9/11

by ***Vijay Prashad***

MY SISTER who lives in California called me on the evening of 11 September. She was agitated, and told me what someone in her workplace was saying: "My friend says we should kill all the brown people." She was aghast especially when another co-worker asked her, "Why are you looking so sad?" A devout Buddhist, my sister abhors violence of any kind, and was devastated by the tragedy in New York and Washington. And yet, her skin seared the imagination of those who see her each day; one day, suddenly, she became a terrorist.

And so did all of us. This is not a new feeling. When I first got to the US, in the early 1980s, someone had called me a "sand nigger". Illiterate in the ways of racism, I was puzzled like many immigrants, and had to ask a friend what to make of the insult. The context then was Gaddafi, and I chanced to have his hairstyle and even look a bit like him. All that reappeared during the Gulf War, as many *desis* who looked like Palestinians and Iraqis found themselves followed by men in dark suits. For the first few days after the 1995 destruction of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, I was made to feel like a terrorist again. And when I got word of the WTC devastation, I prayed in my own atheistic way that the perpetrator was not an Arab, or someone like me. They were, and I'm a terrorist again.

And so was Balbir Singh Sodhi, 49, shot in Mesa (Arizona) by a man who said to the police, "I stand for America all the way." And so was Waqar Hassan, 46, of Dallas (Texas), slain in cold blood while working at Mom's Grocery. And Ashraf Khan, another Pakistani-Texan, and a cell phone magnate, was removed from his first class seat by a Delta pilot who said that Khan was a threat to the plane. And there have been the mosques, gurudwaras and temples firebombed and desecrated, even as those who look like terrorists find their homes under threat from the forces of jingoism and xeno-racism. Many desis and Arabs refuse to leave their homes, scared to walk in the open in the "land of the free".

The Indian Embassy in Washington had the bad taste to try to suggest ways to camouflage us from the real terrorists. Women should sport *bindis*, a consular official wrote in a publicly circulated document. And the men ought to smear themselves with bindis too, said a friend in jest. In the mid-1980s, the bindi provided a set of racists with a name for their anti-desi organisation, the Dotbusters. Now the Indian diplomats, without any sense of irony, urge us to wear the dots as protection. And for Sikhs, the nightmare of the turban as a sign of difference reminds them and all of us of the horror of the 1984 Delhi riots. Turbans, bindis, *kurtas*, *kirpans*—all these signs of difference only enhance our skin tones, our features, and confirm our terrorist status.

Things got so bad so fast that President George W. Bush had to make an appearance at a Washington DC mosque on 17 September to mollify desis and Arabs, as well as to say "those who feel they can intimidate our fellow Americans by taking out their anger, they don't represent the best of America".

But just as Bush made this conciliatory, and necessary gesture, the Justice Department of the United States took action against those who look like terrorists—the desis and the Arabs. Attorney General John Ashcroft informed the country that whereas previously the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) could only hold an "alien that had been taken into custody because of a violation" for 24 hours, the new regulation would allow the INS to hold the "alien" for "48 hours, or to an additional reasonable time". In one swoop, the Justice Department revoked the right of habeas corpus for non-citizens of the US, and it allowed officers of the law to turn any "violation" into an excuse for indefinite detention.

Meanwhile, in many neighbourhoods in New York City, white men with small US flags make the rounds of the immigrant-owned small grocery stores. They bang these flags, which retail at about a dollar each, on the counter, and say things like "aren't you going to be a patriot and buy this flag"? The flag will cost the immigrant workers USD 5, but they will be far too scared to refuse. This is the test of loyalty, the *agnipariksha*.

Flags festoon the streets of the US, on most lampposts, on many cars, in front of homes, on t-shirts, on hats, and fly from baby carriages. It is as if the acts of terror from the 11th of September must be washed away or exorcised with the display of nationalism. I have no animus to the flag, but I fear that it does not say bereavement, only more death. The planes and ships are making their way to the Indian Ocean as tired sailors prime the guns for a long drawn-out conflict.

When Timothy McVeigh was arrested and found guilty of the terrorist act in Oklahoma, white men did not feel like terrorists. There was no general discussion about the civil liberties of white men. White men did not get removed from airplanes, nor did they read accusation in the whites of the eyes of those around them. In the aftermath of that event, the US government passed a draconian immigration law and an anti-terrorist act that mainly targeted those who look like terrorists. And we know that Timothy McVeigh did not look like their terrorist. I do.

In my book *Karma of Brown Folk*, I suggested that we desis are treated as a model minority mainly as a weapon against African Americans. If we lay claim to being "white", we are only whites on probation. They have now revoked our probation. We are being called to task for how we look. I am shrouded by flags, lost in the haze of that social decay called racism even as I too grieve for those innocents who lost their lives on 9/11. △

of the business. Jain comes from a family of industrialists in Bihar and understands the prerequisites of maintaining communal relationships in the countryside. Purie, on the other hand, is a scion of a Punjabi refugee family for whom the Hindu identity is a matter of faith, and personal achievement the sole criterion of belonging to the country of adoption.

Right from the beginning, *India Today* kept its eye firmly on the Indian bourgeoisie, influencing their opinion as much as reflecting them. The magazine favours the market to such an extent that it leaves even the most ardent supporters of liberalisation gasping for breath. Supporting, and supported by the middle class, the magazine naturally speaks the same chauvinist voice of Advani, and it too would see in the American carnage an opportunity to seek a 'concert' against the *musalmaan*. This was clearly evident on the magazine's special number after 11 September, which shouts "Jihad against the world" on the cover and is devoted to urging the Americans to wage a crusade. The editorial does not say it in so many words, but it drops fairly loud hints about a possible triad of US, Israel and India with its suggestion that "only collective endeavour of the civilised can take on the millennium evil". There is no particular emphasis on 'civilised', such is the certitude of the editors as to on which side they stand. Cartoons in the issue—always a measure of the hidden agenda of any publication—verge on tastelessness in ridiculing Islam.

Even more than print, it is the news channels that have taken the US president's developing war to the drawing rooms across South Asia. Before the impact of the American tragedy itself was allowed to sink in, the satellite channels were providing space for the defence analysts and the strategic thinkers to repeat what were essentially concerns not of South Block but of Foggy Bottom. None seemed too concerned—not the talking heads themselves, nor the anchors, or the producers—of the implications that a "crusade" in the backyard of South Asia would have on the large Muslim population of the region or the fragile communal relations within and between countries here, including India Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The United States eagle is blinded by rage and a need to react to the carnage visited upon it. But rather than a calibrated retribution against the criminals who would enact such a crime on innocents, the White House is bent on revenge. The American administration as a whole, has been forced to follow-through on the cowboy talk of a young, brash and inexperienced president. India's vociferous Hindu middle-class, represented by the politicians, the foreign policy establishment, and the media gatekeepers, finds it convenient for the sake of its own chauvinism to support (even unasked) an American adventure in South Asia. What this crusade might do to America, to South Asia and to the world is too horrendous to contemplate.

Lay off!

Ever since the experimental nukes shook the Thar desert and the hills of Chagai in 1998, South Asia has remained the most "dangerous" place on the planet, by the definition of the immediate-past president of the United States. An angst akin to that of Latin American youth, a fundamentalism of the Saudi Arabian variety, a poverty that compares with sub-Saharan Africa, and the cutting edge technology of Silicon Valley—all are brought together to simmer in South Asia, this historic cradle of human civilisation that is home to more than one-sixth of humanity. This is a region that has not yet been able to solve its own problem, and therefore displays the largest population of poor in the world. And the prospects for peace and prosperity in South Asia becomes even more remote as the Indian elephant goes into a trance induced by the hallucinatory power of the dollar.

With 85 percent of South Asia's landmass and even more than a proportion of its population, the primary responsibility of keeping peace in the region should have rested with India. But the India of today seems to lack the self-confidence as well as the magnanimity. New Delhi perceives little Pakistan as its rival, to the extent that it will gleefully try to corner a reluctant Uncle Sam in its fight against the western neighbour. It lacks in introspection to such an extent that it cannot countenance a Kashmir as anything other than a 'state' of the Republic, all promises of the long past meaning nothing. And now, in their obsession with Pakistan, the Indian leadership have indicated an inclination to take on Islam without bothering to ponder its consequences for the region. To borrow the expression used by a neighbouring general in a context quite different and similarly insular, the message for the Indian leadership and all who shape their agenda in the intelligentsia and media should be, "Lay off!"

There are extreme risks inherent in an alliance with the United States to fight a crusade that is perceived to be against Islam, whatever the real intent. It could end up antagonising enduring friendships with the Arab world and Russia, and complicating relationships with China, the powerfully accelerating Asian neighbour and future competitor. All this to be risked for the nightmares that Pakistan gives the Indian ruling class. Even more dangerous than losing friends and making enemies internationally, is the dangers within—the possible fallout in North India of engaging in a crusade with the jihadis of Afghanistan/Pakistan. Given the mix of poor education and poverty that has relegated the Muslims of India into such a large and sullen mass, such a challenge could well lead to the hardening of the Muslim stand, a talibanisation of extreme fringes, a polarisation of politics between hard-line Hindus and all others, aggravation of an already volatile communal relations, and loss of face of the Swadeshi brigade which would lead to god-knows what kind of reaction. But the establishmentarian intelligentsia of India gives no indication

of understanding these layers, and chooses to play second fiddle to the talking heads of Western and Indian satellite television.

In the end, India as defined by New Delhi infuriates the rest of South Asia not so much by the wrongs that it commits in the region as in failing to do the right things that it is perfectly capable of doing. More than a political unit, India represents the common cultural identity of the region to the rest of the world, and all South Asians have to face the consequences of New Delhi's acts and omissions. By refusing to recognise the dangerous face of the American 'crusade', New Delhi does injustice not only to its neighbours but also to India's own diverse population, whose interests have been jettisoned in these globalised times in favour of a select category.

Instead of offering to be a supportive player to possible American (mis)adventures in the Hindukush, the India we all knew till not so long ago would have been raising its voice for moderation. It would have urged for sanctity of United Nations resolutions, and that of Article 2 of the UN Charter that expressly forbids its member countries from "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state". It would have suggested that American not be a law unto itself. It would have been worried the moment the Seventh Fleet became visible over the horizon. Trying to cosy up to the United States due to perceived domestic compulsions, New Delhi missed the chance of rising up as a moral force after the debacle of Pokhran II, when it gave up the Gandhian mantle to mouth the language of nuclear-speak. Now, after the American disaster, it has found it easy to proceed in the already defined path.

The bewilderment of the Indian foreign policy establishment is palpable. First, it lost its reliable anchor block when the Soviet Union collapsed. Then it was forced to give up its long-cherished high moral ground in the international arena with the tests and the announcement of a nuclear doctrine. And now, a complete about-turn from non-alignment, and the Bangdung declaration, already long forgotten, thrown definitively into the dung heap. All of this done on the altar of the market place. While the politicians are savvy and can wriggle out of any situation with the use of words, it is harder for South Block bureaucrats who have to hold to some kind of consistency. This, perhaps, explains the low profile of Chokila Aiyer, the Foreign Secretary, and the haunted look of South Block spokepersons. Seeking to join an American solidarity against Osama to spite Pakistan, New Delhi has lost its standing in the Arab nations, as well as its reputation in the Third World. This loss of standing may not be immediately apparent in our increasingly West-dominated media, but it will make itself felt with some strength in the days to come.

Mall vs. bazaar

But all is not yet lost. Despite the demolition of faith in Ayodhya, the destruction of communal harmony in the Bombay blasts, and burning of religious tolerance in the torched jeep of Graham Steins, India remains truly "a secular miracle of the modern world". Muslims in Hyderabad can dress up their toddlers in the mock army uniform of Pakistan, Khasi Christians in Kohima can swear at "Indians" beyond the Chicken's Neck, and Shiv Sena shock-troops can ask all Indians Muslims to go to Pakistan and yet all of them can still belong to a nation of one billion that continues to go to the polls at regular intervals. Therein lies the hope for India, the staying power of its mass of people even when the leadership goes astray.

The United States may be the melting pot of cultures, where all comers over time strive for and achieve the generic Americanness that sometimes tends to be as dull as the country's ubiquitous suburban malls. But the South Asia of bazaars has always been "a garden of castes and races" (and religions, one might add), as the 'unifier of Nepal' Prithvi Narayan Shah stated in his *Divine Counsel*. In a garden, the different species survive together, but each retains its distinctiveness. The America-bedazzled Indian middle-class, on the other hand, increasingly looks to create an India on the melting-pot—or *khichri*—model. It is an impossible agenda, but one which will fail only after much violence will have been visited upon the population. India, and the region cannot afford to get involved in the war games that are too close to reality. The very premise of the much-ballyhooed war between "Islam versus civilisation" is fundamentally flawed, and the rulers in New Delhi who control the destiny of all of South Asia, must understand that it was proposed as a strategic exercise for the West to tackle Islam. It was never meant to be a model for India and South Asia.

Rather than parrot the theme of "clash of civilisations" that will ultimately benefit others, India needs to heed the lesson of Mahatma Gandhi: an eye for an eye would indeed make the whole world blind. For South Asians in particularly, the words of Bertrand Russel hold truth at times like this: "It's either co-existence or no-existence."

Sure, South Asia has its own reasons to oppose the fascist regime of the Taliban in Afganistan. But India will not be doing anyone a favour by supporting the Americans to spite Pakistan, on the excuse of Osama. And this year, when Indians and South Asians celebrate Gandhi Jayanti on 2 October, they will do well to remember the frail old man that gave the world the two creeds really worth having: truth and non-violence.

INDIA SURELY has the patent on ticketless train travel. And it does not merely happen in second class compartments in the *choti line* or the local 'passengers'. When the Central Bureau of Investigations in early September raided the most expensive train in India, the tourist trap known as "Palace on Wheels" (a ticket costs a princely USD 2500), there were 67 ticketless passengers on board. But these were not peasants hitching a ride to the next village, but government officials, relatives of tourism officials, and of course journalists.

■

SECONDARY-LEVEL schoolteachers in Bihar have not been paid their salary for *20 years*. The picture in *The Hindu* shows these poor teachers protesting on India's Teacher's Day, 5 September. That is a story on which I would love to have follow-up, and more details. Why did they not receive pay for 20 years? Why did they

remain silent for so long? What was the result of their protest? Who listened and who acted? When will education become a real story for the South Asian press, and when will our papers do follow-up?

■

SOON, EACH square of the Gregorian calendar on the wall is going to be pockmarked with this Day or that Day. What else remains when there's a Coconut Day (2 September), celebrated by an organisation called the Asian and Pacific Coconut Community. Now before anyone can beat me to it, let Chhetria Patrakar propose a No Day Day. On that date, the world community would declare through a General Assembly resolution backed by the full sanction-threatening powers of the Security Council, no nation state would declare a 'day'. But is there a vacant date?

■

ALL COMPLIMENTS to Bangladeshi caretaker government head, Chief Justice Latifur Rahman, for coming out with what we all suspected, "There's no need for a caretaker government had we been educated." Indeed, while in most parts of the world the opposition will allow the ruling government to conduct the elections, not so in Bangladesh, where the level of political distrust is higher than elsewhere. And as the election campaign reached a climax in the deltaic country, you came to realise that Bangladesh was where war was really happening, not Afghanistan. Murders of politicos, bomb blasts amidst innocents, and nearly 200 killed in the most violent election run-up ever. Whether it's Sheikh Hasina or Khaleda Zia who wins, they better not preen. The red carpet to the Prime Minister's Residence will have been coloured by the blood of the people.

■

FUNNY HOW, during the intense media focus on the kamikaze bombers who rammed passenger jets into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, few thought of the militant outfit which has perfected suicide bombing. And it is not the desperate Palestinians of the West Bank or Gaza. It is, instead, the troops of our own Vellupillai Prabhakaran, whose suicide bombers have long been causing mayhem in South Asia. In fact, the previous destruction of aircraft fuselages on a mass scale before the four crashes in the US were carried out by a LTTE suicide squad on the tarmac of the Katunayake International Airport. Of all the suicide attacks carried out over the last two decades around the world, it is the LTTE men and women who were involved in two-thirds of them. Perhaps a study of the political evolution of northern Sri Lanka, the Tamil psyche, and the evolution of dead-end politics can teach us all something about what leads people to destroy the centre of Colombo, the Bombay Stock Exchange or the World Trade Centre?

■

TALKING OF the Tamil psyche, what is it that led 11 followers to immolate themselves after Madam Jayalalithaa was forced to hand in her resignation as chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Somehow, I cannot bring myself to think a Bengali doing so if Buddhadev Bhattacharya were forced to resign, or Nepalis were Sher Bahadur Deuba to be asked to vacate his seat.

■

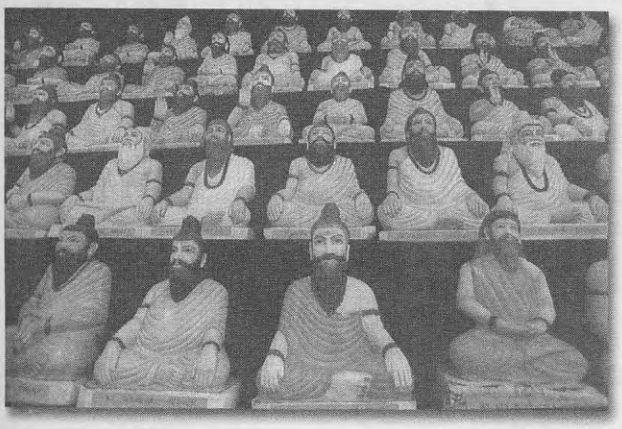
TALKING OF whom, the Nepali prime minister at a recent function made the unusual plea to his country's journalists to be "brave" while writing about the Maoists. He said that while the journalists were pretty liberal with their criticism of the government, they shied away from trashing the Maoists. Something that someone, somewhere will certainly study and pass judgement at some point. To what extent has the Maoist revolution in Nepal succeeded as it has, because it was pandered to by the Kathmandu press? And to what extent is that pandering the result of shoddy journalism, and how much of it was, as Deuba implied, the result of running scared?

■

HERE IS some bad news for the newsmen, both the spineless and spinefull. A report in *The Asian Age* says that journalists are more prone to heart attacks, because of "deadline pressure and excessive workload". The report quotes a doctor as saying, "All those who have to work hard against the clock to meet a deadline are

the victims of heart attacks..." But I daresay courageous journalists who write what they believe will not die as easily. Chhetria Patrakar is sure that the inner angst of the journalist who has compromised is the weaker for such compromises, and hence is more likely to cop it quicker.

■



THIS MAKES for a pretty picture (*Deccan Herald*). Statues of the 102 rishis of the Vyasya community of Karnataka. Great beards.

■

THE NEPAL government announced a *one-month* ban on bandhs, extortions and kidnappings. Just when the hooligans among us had decided to go home for *Dasain (Dusshera)*, to resume chakka jaams and violent rallies once the holiday period is over, the government decided to change its mind and lifted the ban. This leaves the lumpens of all political colours completely non-plussed, and the last Chettria Patrakar heard they were planning to take a delegation to the prime minister, demanding that he not play around with their sentiments so thoughtlessly. Their human rights were being affected.

■

THIS ONE has got the Sri Lankan postal authorities all red-faced for having taken the country back 5088 years. A stamp to commemmorate the country's major Buddhist societies erroneously carried a Christian date—"BC" instead of the Buddhist "BE". The printer's devil had the year as 2544 BC, instead of the present Buddhist year of 2544 BE. Nothing to do now for the Posts and Telecommunication Ministry, but to grin and bear it. What to do only.

■

"AN EQUATED preety and good qualification girl, age, from 20 to 30 years. Wanted to 35 yrs old a business man affair marriage realiaouges is not necessary." Ad in *The Kathmandu Post*. Makes perfect sense, except what is this beautiful and highly qualified "Equated" woman to expect—a religoius marriage or just an affair outside of marriage? It would help if I knew, to put in some recommendations.

■

ON NOW to the slaughter in New York and Washington DC, and how faraway South Asia has been brought up by the scruff of its neck as a result. In the initial two days, the Indian press and establishment had a field day, scrambling to put arch enemy Pakistan in the dock. But then, Pakistan has a leader like none other in South Asia; Musharraf so deftly turned the tables that the Indian establishment is now about as sheepish as they come. What has the land of the sincere Mahatma and the conscientious Nehru come to, this pusillanimous subservience before the White House?

■

TALKING OF Pervez Musharraf, one cannot but help doff one's fez at the man. In one speech, he was able to handle the West, India ("Lay off!"), the Taliban, the Central Asian States, and his own population. Speaking in considered tones before Christian Amanpour of CNN on 1 October, he is able to take his message straight to the world's drawing rooms, and convincingly. He even admitted that while the middle-to-rich classes in Pakistan were political moderates, his address to the nation after the 11 September American disaster had been aimed at "the lower-middle class and the working class", for that was where understanding was lacking of the forces at play and where there was support for the extremist mullahs. The general is walking the tightrope, but salutes to him for both his ability to take the challenge head on, and also for his confidence in speaking unrehearsed on international television. Here is a man in command of his faculty. You do not have to 'like' Pakistan to say this. If anything, South Asians of all shades and colours should at least give him credit for being a South Asian, and taking the world head on as he has.

■

ONE OF the things that the terror attacks on USA proved was that foolproof security is a myth. For all the targeting that the Indian media did against Kathmandu for allowing the Indian Airlines hijacking to take place, what do they have to say about the fact that four airplanes were hijacked in the highly secure United States? And, just to give credit that is minimally due to whoever, was it not just and good that no one thought of ramming that Airbus into any South Asian edifice? Perhaps there is some civility left here amongst us, after all!

■

ONE LAST item: show me one more Nostradamus prediction culled from the Internet, and I will turn a terrorist and come after you. I will send you a cyber-letterbomb by reply mail, which will destroy you and your computer. Near and dear ones will not be touched. Nostradamus also said that this would happen, mark my words.

—*Chhetria Patrakar*

Make or Break at Doha

The developing countries have woken up belatedly to the fact that they have been 'had' at the Uruguay Round. They now want a hearing and a reappraisal. If the North is unwilling to listen, the global trading regime may be headed for a collapse.

by ***Amit Dasgupta***

Word has it that the world as we knew it will no longer be the same after the terrible 11 September attacks in the US. On the economic front, the impact is going to be severe. Even before the terrorist attacks, the global economic scenario was looking gloomy. Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Hong Kong were all suffering from an economic slowdown. Japan was in stagnation. Europe faced a worse-than-anticipated GDP growth in the 12 countries that share the Euro. Latin America, plagued with its own financial problems, was finding the prospects of recovery remote, and looked to the US for a bailout. But economic data released in the week preceding 11 September already pointed to a slowdown in the US economy.

The 11 September events have sharply increased uncertainty about the American economy and thus, about the global economy. As *AsiaWeek* put it, distance offered no buffer when the World Trade Centre was struck; the attack at the heart of the world's financial centre and the blow aimed at the US would be felt just as sharply by every country that participates in the global economy.

All indications suggest that the US economy is rattled and that recession is unavoidable. What is a matter of debate is how deep the recession will be and for how long it will last. Consumer spending has touched an all-time low because of fears of more terrorist attacks in shopping malls, airports and public places. Securities, transport, tourism and retail have been the first to feel the shock. The aviation industry has already announced cut-backs and requested financial support from the government to face up to the drop in travel and the demands of security. The effects are now being felt across the globe and across all sectors of international industry. The world is moving towards recession. Given this situation, the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference that is to take place in Doha in the first half of November promises to disadvantage the poorer countries further. Is there an alternative course possible?

Uruguay to Seattle

Many argue, and not without cause, that the historic transition from GATT to WTO in 1994, following the Uruguay Round negotiations, was the single most important development for the global economic system in the 20th Century. Prior to WTO, we had GATT (The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), which was essentially what the name suggested, that is, an agreement among trading nations. It operated through a secretariat in Geneva and while its successes were indeed remarkable, they were perhaps more so because it was nothing more than an agreement. It did not enjoy the status or the organisational standing and influence of other bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The transition from GATT to WTO also signified a transformation from agreement to an organisation. With one single and dramatic move on 1 January 1995, the WTO was placed on the same legal and organisational and influential standing as the Fund and the Bank. Indeed, the emergence of the WTO, unlike the GATT, lent a new meaning to the words "economic globalisation" because it has come to be seen as being synonymous with the integration of national economies into the global economy, or the Multilateral Trading System. Almost every country is a member of the WTO and those that are not, barring a few exceptions, are in the process of joining.

Barely six years into its existence, however, the WTO has generated mixed responses. Critical questions are being asked about the style of the WTO's functioning and whether the distribution of gains from market liberalisation has been fair. Many have begun to argue that the WTO is at a crossroads and that the future of the organisation may well depend on the outcome of the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference in Doha. Why is this happening?

It is useful to consider some of the criticisms, which tend to be sweeping and wide-ranging. At one level, there is growing scepticism about the claim that integration into a global economic order through trade liberalisation *per se* will result in greater economic prosperity and enhanced human welfare. Indeed, there is credible evidence that poorer countries will be further marginalised. In other words, trade liberalisation will only succeed in concentrating wealth in the hands of the already rich and result in an accompanying increase of poverty in the majority of the world's population, coupled with unsustainable patterns of production and

consumption. The 1999 Human Development Report of the UNDP emphatically cautions against the unequal and inequitable spread of the opportunities and rewards of globalisation, as it would result in concentrating power and wealth in a select group of people, nations and corporations, marginalising the others.

The sudden proliferation of anti-globalisation views bears mention. Writings, speeches, publications and public demonstrations not only berate globalisation but also seem to imply that there is some kind of sinister 'hidden agenda' or conspiracy that is being hatched by the richer countries against their poorer counterparts. Disruption of meetings and conferences on trade liberalisation are no longer unexpected by the host governments or the delegations that attend such meetings. Seattle started the trend, which was replicated in different cities, such as Bangkok, Davos, Buenos Aires, Quebec City, Genoa and elsewhere, with varying degrees of success. Die-hard anti-globalisation pundits with a "Well, what did you expect?" attitude argue that they had all along pointed out that free trade could never be fair trade since the WTO was essentially a power-based system.

Indeed, the legitimate concerns surrounding the enormous asymmetries in the economic situation of the rich and poor countries needs to be recognised. Economist Amartya Sen suggests that doubts about the global economic order, which extend far beyond the organised protests at Davos or Seattle, have to be viewed in the light of the dual presence of abject misery and unprecedented prosperity in the world. The central issue, to put it differently, is inequality and the growing perception that the distribution of gains through trade liberalisation is tilted against the poorer countries, which are, in fact, receiving the short end of the stick.

At another level, it is being argued that the organisation is not working to everyone's benefit and that it functions more like an exclusive club for the richer countries in which the poor countries are treated not as equal members but as hangers-on in the fringes. Such a perception is based largely on a somewhat late realisation by the developing countries that they were 'done in' at the Uruguay Round negotiations and the sense of isolation and alienation that they felt in Seattle at the Third WTO Ministerial Conference.

Even many developed countries' representatives agree today that the developing countries were made to concede far more than they received at the Uruguay Round negotiations. The reasons are fairly straightforward and unfortunate: developed country delegations were much better prepared than the developing countries with regard to where their interests lay and what concessions they were willing to make. There exists considerable variation in the level of understanding of the different WTO instruments. The fact was that most developing country delegations were inadequately prepared at the time of the Uruguay Round nego-tiations, which turned out to be "GATTastrophic" for the developing and least developed countries. Indeed, the two fundamental and interrelated problems that the poorer countries face with regard to WTO nego-tiations are purely logistical.

Firstly, not all of the developing and least developed member countries of the WTO have embassies in Geneva. This is, quite simply, because they cannot afford to locate a mission and to staff it adequately. A recent study prepared by John Weekes for the Commonwealth Secretariat pointed to as many as 36 WTO members, and observers not being able to maintain permanent diplomatic presence in Geneva. Given the high cost of living in Geneva, it is understandable why many LDC delegations are not able to maintain full-fledged missions there.

In addition, very few of these countries that do have embassies in Geneva have diplomatic personnel exclusively engaged in WTO-related work. Thanks to the large number of international organisations situated in Geneva, such as, ILO, WHO, WIPO, WMO, etc., considerable burden is imposed on the diplomats who are required to shuttle from one meeting to another on subjects as wide-ranging and complex as human rights to the Agreement on Agriculture. This naturally results in the all-important trade issues not receiving the attention that they merit.

Secondly, many developing and least developed countries are still in the process of understanding the implications of the various WTO agreements. The highly technical and legalistic language of the agreements is such that many diplomats say, and not in jest, that after years of trying to understand the WTO agreements, they discover that they have actually misunderstood them! Regrettably, in many of these countries, no debate or consultation with the different 'stake-holders' took place primarily because expertise to conduct informed discussions was lacking. As a net result, it is only much later that they realised that the implementation of the agreements imposed considerable costs and sacrifices on the part of poor countries. As per World Bank estimates, the average cost to each developing country to implement just three of the Uruguay Round agreements is US $150 million. The serious domestic political impact of not protecting interests cannot be ignored.

The lack of preparation by the developing world compares very poorly with the sort of preparation undertaken by richer countries. Delegations from the US, the EU or Japan or any of the developed countries to the WTO conferences or even at their WTO missions in Geneva, are considerably larger than those from the poorer countries and, furthermore, include specialists and lawyers, allowing for a detailed and thorough evaluation of every clause, comma and amendment. In short, these negotiators are fully *au fait* with where their interests lie and how these can be ensured and protected. As one delegate pointed out only half in jest, "Developed country delegations have lawyers who specialise in bananas and those who specialise in

plantains; developing country delegations rarely, if ever, know the difference between the two!"

Seattle and system credibility

A combination of the financial and substantive factors referenced above has resulted in severely constraining the participation of the developing countries and LDCs in the WTO conferences thus far. The fact is, the full import and implications of the WTO agreements were never realistically assessed nor appreciated by them. It is true, however, that at the time of the November 1999 Seattle Conference and its build-up in Geneva, the developing countries took a far more activist role than earlier. The process of consultations among like-minded countries was intensified and while there was no common developing country position at the Seattle conference, there was general consensus among the developing countries that the Uruguay Round agreements had imposed significant obligations on the South without providing them either sufficient rights or effective access to the markets in the North. Accordingly, they called for a renegotiation of these agreements. While this pro-active stance and better preparation augurs well for the developing countries in future negotiations, much more needs to be done in the area of capacity building to fully appreciate the import of the negotiating process and the fine print of the agreements. Criticising the developing countries for failing to promote, protect and project their interests and concerns is therefore not an entirely fair criticism.

There was unanimous disappointment at the manner in which the Seattle Conference was conducted, which constitutes another reason why there is a disenchantment with the WTO. Indeed, even after two years, post-mortems of the Seattle Conference continue to yield harsh and critical results, having to do with the manner in which the developing countries were subjected to threats and arm-twisting by the developed countries. It is no exaggeration to say that Seattle severely eroded the credibility of the WTO, ruthlessly driving home as it did the point that the global trading system was far from global. Developing country delegations were left expressing their "disappointment and disagreement" and "anger" at the lack of transparency in the proceedings and their continued marginalisation and exclusion from issues of vital importance to them. They saw Seattle as a betrayal of trust and of good faith, splitting the global system once again on North-South lines.

"Integration", which is the basic objective of the global trading system, by its very definition refers to a process of co-opting everyone and everything into a larger space that is inclusive and not exclusive. Yet, Seattle succeeded in doing exactly the opposite because the poorer countries were made to feel isolated, alienated and marginalised. They were relegated to the fringes of discussions and the negotiations through facetious arguments—in some absurd instances, having to do with the lack of chairs. Very tellingly, the Seattle

GATTastrophic!

Conference, especially in the manner it was conducted, seemed to be making the point that free trade, and not fair trade, was the end objective for the developed countries and the big business lobbies influencing their delegations. This meant opening up the markets in the developing countries through a time-bound schedule, while at that same time, their own markets remained protected through a variety of tariff and non-tariff measures. There were also doubts raised with regard to the role of the WTO Secretariat and, in particular, the role of the Director General, Mike Moore, as both were increasingly being perceived to be partisan and representative of the interests and concerns of the richer countries alone. Indeed, Mike Moore is on record as saying that he makes no secret of his conviction that a new "round" is necessary, a position taken by the developed countries.

A sense of deep disenchantment, uneasiness, suspicion and even fear has begun to characterise the developing country perceptions of the so called "opportunities" that the global trading system was expected to offer. Some have even begun to believe when referring to the "opportunities and challenges of WTO", that the opportunities are for the developed countries while the developing countries face the challenges.

Salvaging WTO

All eyes are now on the forthcoming Doha Conference, slated to begin on 9 November 2001. Has there been

any dramatic change in the situation since Seattle? Most analysts would say that, by and large, status quo persists in terms of positions that the developed and developing countries are going to adopt. The South insists that the imbalances of the Uruguay Round Agreements need to be corrected up-front, and draws attention to a series of commitments made which have so far remained only on paper, such as the development dimension and the Special and Differential provisions. The North insists that any corrections can only be done through a new round of negotiations. In Doha, the developed countries can be expected to make every effort to expand the trade agenda through the introduction of 'new issues'. In this, they will deploy all the tools they can muster, from cajoling to threats and arm-twisting. The US has already threatened isolation for those who do not agree to play ball. There would also be attempts to wean away some LDCs from taking a hard stance by offering sops. Marginal concessions, if any, will be made. In the end, they hope to open developing country markets further.

It would appear, therefore, that Doha is drifting towards a Seattle-revisited scenario. It promises to be acrimonious and bitter, even though there may not be the same bands of demonstrators on the streets. Clear battle lines have been drawn and there does not appear to be a common meeting ground. One fact that cannot and should not be ignored is that the faith of the developing countries in the WTO has been severely eroded. Rather than protecting their interests, the WTO is seen to be active as a spokesman and apologist for big business and the big economies. If Doha, therefore, becomes a re-enactment of Seattle, with the developing countries again being made to feel isolated and marginalised, it will raise serious doubts and misgivings about the credibility of the WTO as an institution and its future. Thus, it would strengthen the hands of all those who are opposed to globalisation and the WTO. This augurs ill for the WTO and for a rule-based global trading regime that all countries are committed to strengthen.

Add to this the new dimension of the 11 September attacks. With global recession setting in, developing countries will be pressurised into making more concessions and, indeed, into agreeing to the expansion of the trade agenda as part of their contribution to nursing the global economy back to health. This would also mean that there is no guarantee under the present scenario of preoccupation by the North that the demands of the developing countries would be addressed.

Can anything be done, and if so, what? To consider the different possibilities, the first could be a repeat performance of Seattle. By and large, this would be a zero-sum game where both sides stick to their positions and the talks collapse. The status quo would prevail, with neither side satisfied. This could precipitate serious rethinking about the WTO and where it is going and thus, the search for an alternative to the WTO.

The second scenario is the so-called 'give-and-take' approach: the trade negotiations are expanded and a new round agreed to, and simultaneously, the developed countries agree to take a fresh look at how to redress some of the concerns of the developing countries. While this is the option that the developed countries and the director general of the WTO would be striving for at Doha, there are serious problems with such an approach because developing countries would be extremely cautious in trying to ensure that they do not once again end up giving much more than they receive. Having realised that they lost out at the Uruguay Round because of poor preparation, governments would be in no position to tell their people that they repeated the same mistake at Doha. As a result, negotiations and bargaining would once again be acrimonious and highly guarded. At that stage, the discussion and negotiation process could become less than transparent. The developed countries would not hesitate to twist arms. The developing countries, already distressed at the manner in which the WTO decision-making process is operating, would refuse to cooperate and the talks would collapse.

There is, however, a third and viable option for Doha. This rests on a genuine desire to strengthen a rule-based multilateral trading regime and the WTO by specifically addressing developing country concerns and in particular, their loss of confidence and trust in the global trading regime and the manner in which it is

functioning at present. In other words, using the Doha Conference to unambiguously endorse the need to correct the anomalies and the deficiencies in the current system and to win back the trust and confidence of the developing countries. This would mean that the inclusion of new issues through a new round of trade negotiations would be put on hold for the time being. It would also mean that a mechanism is decided upon to list out and address, within an agreed and reasonable timeframe, the concerns of the developing and least developed countries in the first instance. In other words, Doha would be a confidence-building measure.

The business interests and lobbies in developed countries, particularly the US and the EU, will be tempted to reject such a proposal outright, but they may want to reconsider. For one, the proposal would salvage an organisation, which has haemorrhaged horribly, and has all but lost its legitimacy. Doha could see the beginning of a search by the developing countries for an alternative to the WTO. Once the faith of the developing and the Least Developed Countries is won over the WTO would be strengthened, giving a fillip to trade liberalisation and to a rule-based multilateral trading regime. This would be good for business in the long run and good for the global economy.

But winning back trust is not going to be easy, since it would mean recognising the inequality which lies at the centre of the present system and enquiring as to why the distribution of gains has not been fair. It would also mean that the "development dimension" needs to be placed at the core of the global trading regime. Developing countries need to be treated as equal partners and the WTO Secretariat itself needs to function neutrally and transparently, with greater global representation at middle and senior levels from developing and Least Developed Countries than it has at present. This would encourage the poorer countries to feel that they are part of the system and that they have much to gain by participating in it fully.

In other words, the Doha Conference needs to address what ails the health of the global economy and to specifically take stock of the likely economic impact of the current developments. Whether the global community and WTO, in particular, will have the courage to take such a step remains to be seen. Either way, the Director General will have made history: either by burying the WTO at Doha or by giving it new and invigorated life.

It's your call, Mr. Moore. Do you have the courage to take the road less travelled by? Or will it be business-as-usual? △

(The views expressed in the article are the writer's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the SAARC Secretariat or the individual member governments of the SAARC.)

The cost-benefit of land reform

MOHAN MAINALI

The populist land reform package announced by Nepal's prime minister is preoccupied with the politics of setting new reduced ceilings on agricultural land holdings. Economic considerations targeted towards boosting agricultural productivity are largely ignored. What is required is not a "revolutionary" perspective on determining the maximum amount of agricultural land that one person can own but instead a genuine revolution in the way we approach the justification for and the design of land reform.

by ***Prem Jung Thapa***

Land reform is back in the public policy spotlight in Nepal after many decades. This time it comes with a "revolutionary" tag. But alas, there is hardly anything new, much less revolutionary, in the objectives and basic design of the land reform programme that has been outlined so far. The central focus is a significant lowering of the ceilings on the maximum amount of agricultural land an individual or family can own, with the excess land to be acquired by the government and distributed to those whom it sees as worthy recipients among Nepal's rural poor.

Perhaps the "revolutionary" tag is only a political ruse. The new land reform programme, announced in August this year, is a key plank in the eight-point Special Programme announced by the recently installed Sher Bahadur Deuba government of the Nepali Congress party, which is now in the midst of delicate negotiations with the Maoist rebels in search of a political resolution to the latter's six-year-old "people's war".

Land reform may be a populist platform through which the "revolutionaries" of the present Congress government seek to win the hearts and minds of Nepal's rural poor from the armed Maoist revolutionaries. Any Nepali Congress government must also cope with the legacy of another group of "revolutionaries"—the parliamentary opposition of the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist-Leninist), also called the UML. When the UML formed a minority government in 1994, it created a Land Reform Commission whose report (referred to as the Badal Commission Report) is now treated as the holy book on land reform in Nepal by most left political parties. While the coverage of the Badal Commission report is quite wide-ranging on land

In the picture, paddy ploughing on in Budhbare, Jhapa District of Nepal, where the first test land reform was carried out in 1965.

ownership and tenure issues, its main focus is on setting drastically reduced ownership ceilings on agricultural land that were first enacted in the initial phase of Nepal's land reform programme by King Mahendra in 1964.

While various land reform packages may thus appear only as vehicles to prove the revolutionary credentials of various political groupings, it is essential, of course, to pay attention to the economic issues that surround such reforms. Indeed, the current and past fixation with specifying what is the appropriate land ceiling in Nepal, and the inference that a revolutionary land reform programme must embrace rather low levels of ceilings, is most counter-productive.

Land ceilings are only the means to an end. But what are those ends and how are they affected by different levels of the ceiling and other aspects of the land reform programme? How does a land reform package compare with alternative means of achieving those same objectives? The proponents of land reform, past and present, have not paid sufficient attention to these underlying matters. In the present context, perhaps there is even a perception in the Congress party circles that the core economic issues really do not matter now that the difficult question of setting new land ceiling levels has been achieved through political give-and-take among its factions.

This has been a most unfortunate way to revisit a fundamental policy matter that was ineffective in its previous guise, and which remains so critical to the livelihood of the majority of Nepalis, and also for the long-term structural transformation of the Nepali economy.

Any land reform programme, revolutionary or not, raises many complex legal and philosophical issues about property rights, the balance between the rights of individuals and the rights of the community, and the role of the state. In order for land reform to be effectively implemented, these complex issues must be addressed in a satisfactory manner through the political process, and by upholding existing laws. Ignoring these wider concerns initially, let us focus instead on the pure economic arguments for and against the specific aspects of the proposed land reform.

Land reform, like any other public policy, must pass an economic cost-benefit test, and its efficacy in achieving its desired objectives must be clearly demonstrated. Otherwise a land reform programme, if based on arbitrary land ceilings and inadequate compensation, will just be a form of expropriating the principal economic asset of a certain group of people in a clearly discriminatory way.

The setting

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world, with an estimated per capita income of USD 210 and a Human Development Index ranking of 129 (out of the main list of 162 countries). Almost half of Nepal's rural population is estimated to be below a minimally estimated poverty line, and all of Nepal's main socio-economic indicators—literacy, life expectancy, public infrastructure—are unsatisfactory even in a South Asian setting. A critical structural weakness of the Nepali economy is the heavy reliance of the population on the agricultural sector as their source of livelihood. While the agricultural sector accounts for between 40-45 percent of GDP, roughly 80 percent of the population is still mainly employed in agriculture.

Because of the increasing population pressure on land resources, substantial deforestation has occurred, and agricultural yields have declined because of destructive environmental effects and the cultivation of marginal lands. The periodic Agricultural Census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics reveal that in the 30 years after 1961/62, the number of agricultural holdings in Nepal has increased from 1.5 million (with an average land size of 1.1 hectares) to 2.7 million holdings (with an average land size of 0.96 hectares). This increase in the number of holdings is at a rate almost commensurate with the doubling of the population from 9 to 18 million in this period.

The consequence is an agrarian structure that, while still unequal in terms of land ownership and operational control, has been squeezed by population pressure through sub-division and partial sales into a range of small sizes. As indicated in Table 1, while 43.2% of land holdings in Nepal in 1991/92 were smaller than 0.5 hectares, at the upper end only 0.3% of all holdings, occupying a mere 5.8% of total land area, were more than 10 hectares in size.

The land ceiling levels that currently exist and those that have been proposed in the new land reform programme are indicated in Table 2. Since the 1964 Land Act, it has been an anomaly of Nepali land reform legislation that differing arbitrary ceilings have been prescribed for three geographical regions: the northern hill regions, the southern plain (tarai) region, and the capital area of the Kathmandu Valley (of which a substantial part is still agricultural land).

No effort has been made to relate the different regional land ceiling levels to land productivity or market value of the land, nor to regional income differences.

Table 1

Size Distribution of Land Holdings in Nepal 1991/92

	Number of Holdings		Area of Holdings	
Size of Holding	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Percent	Cumulative Percent
under 0.2 ha.	16.1	16.1	1.9	1.9
0.2 - 0.5 ha.	27.0	43.1	9.4	11.3
0.5 - 1.0 ha.	26.3	69.4	19.2	30.5
2 - 5 ha.	19.6	89	27.6	58.1
1 - 2 ha.	9.5	98.5	28.0	86.1
5 - 10 ha.	1.2	99.7	8.1	94.2
over 10 ha.	0.3	100	5.8	100

SOURCE: CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS, *AGRICULTURAL CENSUS* 1991/92

The ceilings are based essentially on perceived differences in regional population density, but substantial intra-regional variation in density exists within the hill and tarai regions, which are ignored in these ceiling levels. Over the last two or three decades, internal migration in Nepal has been from the hill to the tarai region. The tarai region still has, on average, larger land holdings than the other regions. As the relative population share of the tarai region has grown, there is more political pressure now to reduce tarai land ceilings, which on a direct area basis are more generous than the land ceilings in the other regions. Nevertheless, the different ratios by which the new proposed ceilings differ from the existing ones—with the most dramatic reduction being made for tarai region land ownership—can be genuine grounds for the perception of discriminatory treatment by tarai landowners of plains' rather than hill origin.

Table 2

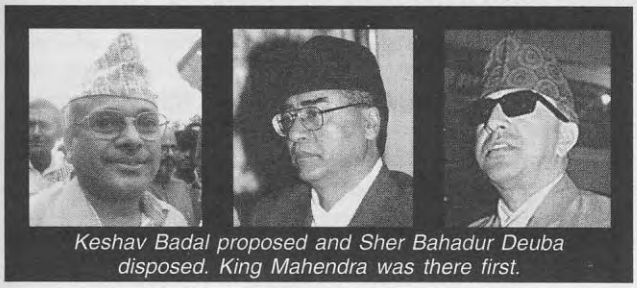
	Current ceilings	Badal ceilings	Proposed ceilings
Hill region	80 ropani (4.1)	40 ropani (2.0)	75 ropani (3.8)
Terai region	25 bigha (17)	4.5 bigha (3.1)	10 bigha (6.8)
Kathmandu Valley	50 ropani (2.6)	20 ropani (1.0)	30 ropani (1.5)

Note: These ceiling levels ignore the separate limits placed on land used for a homestead. Figures in parentheses are equivalent area in hectares. (1 ha. = 0.68 bigha = 0.051 ropani).

Structural transformation

The main justification for the proposed programme announced by Prime Minister Deuba is "social justice". An economic interpretation would be that the land reform programme is focused on the immediate goal of poverty alleviation through land redistribution. This is a worthy goal given Nepal's current economic context and the extent of rural poverty. But, as indicated in Table 1, the limited amount of land distribution that is feasible, no matter where the land ceilings are pegged, and the inordinate amount of resources required for the government to act as land broker between excess land holders and worthy recipients, are critical constraints. There are considerable doubts about how imposing ceilings on agricultural land will be an efficient way to achieve meaningful poverty reduction.

If excess land is to be sold to the landless and other marginal farmers at more or less the just level of compensation provided to the former owners, is such a programme even feasible from a poverty-reduction perspective? Even if land redistribution is based on minimal compensation to owners, and more or less free distribution to a selected few recipients, the net effect on rural poverty could be negligible. On the other hand, there is scope for many poor rural households to be negatively affected by redistributive land reforms. As the demand for labour on big farms collapses with land redistribution, the economic well-being of many landless and marginal farmers, themselves not the beneficiaries of the land distribution, could be gravely jeopardised.



Keshav Badal proposed and Sher Bahadur Deuba disposed. King Mahendra was there first.

Certainly there must be more thorough analysis of how the excess land is going to be acquired and rationed to various worthy recipients, and how different segments within the rural poor are likely to affected by the proposed land ceilings. But the poverty alleviation impact is likely to be minimal. The direct recipients of land will have benefited, but even then the extent will depend on the way their land purchase is to be financed and on the returns from alternative investments that could have been made on their behalf. And there will be segments of the rural poor who will be hurt. In terms of nudging a large number of poor people above a reasonably defined poverty line, this writer does not see much promise in the proposed land reform programme. Nor would the Badal Commission ceilings have made much difference if one thinks of the additional resources that would now be tied up in acquiring substantially more land for re-distribution. Alternative approaches to rural poverty alleviation would end up giving more bang for the bucks that will be tied up in any proposed land redistribution scheme which is not purely expropriatory.

No matter what the short-term effect on poverty alleviation will be, one should never lose sight of a more fundamental objective of land reform in Nepal's context—an effective land reform programme must boost agricultural production. In the long term it must promote the structural transformation of the Nepali economy whereby the number of people engaged in the agricultural sector is reduced, while at the same time agricultural productivity is increased. One of the immutable facts of economic development is that higher levels of national income per capita can be sustained only by transferring more and more people out of agriculture into the industrial and service sectors. It is essential that a land reform programme, even if focussed on a short-term objective of poverty alleviation, not hinder this long-term goal of structural transformation of the entire economy.

While the share of agriculture in Nepal's GDP has diminished considerably in recent decades, the share of employment is still high by world standards, even in comparison to poorer countries. The challenge for Nepal's development planning is to facilitate this movement of agricultural labour into other sectors—whether urban or rural. The average income of Nepali

farmers will increase significantly only when the number of people dependent on Nepal's limited land resources is substantially reduced and the average holding size and the capital investment that goes with it is increased dramatically, instead of being reduced further.

The 'who' question

From this long-term perspective, clearly the more critical element of an effective land reform programme is to determine how many people Nepal's agricultural sector should be supporting, rather than how much land someone can own at any time. Once we ask the 'how many' people question, then the obvious corollary is the 'who' question: who should receive priority for owning and operating the land?

This is what would lie at the heart of an effective land reform programme—designing legislative and market strategies to influence the relations of production in Nepali agriculture so that land ownership and cultivation are targeted to the 'right' kinds of owners, and that others are helped to exit the agricultural sector permanently. Land ceilings should be a means to achieve this objective and not a primary objective in and of themselves.

Who, then, are the right types of landowners? It is difficult to answer this question without bringing in personal views and political perspective. Nevertheless, there is a simple economic answer: land ownership should be targeted towards those who will use it most productively. From this perspective, one group often identified as the 'wrong' type of owners for not using their land resources productively is the Kathmandu-based urban elites with their *maujas* in the tarai, often given to them by Rana rulers for services rendered. Although hard data is difficult to come by, this common conjecture seems valid for this group of mostly absentee owners who depend primarily on tenant farmers. Between both owner and tenants in the maujas, there is little physical or human capital applied for improving land productivity.

However, this does not mean that most land holdings in the tarai in excess of the proposed 10 *bigha* ceiling are being used inefficiently. There is a group of local tarai landowners that have large holdings but who provide the required local managerial inputs and ancillary capital. One has to ask to what extent this group has to be discouraged from long-term involvement in Nepal's agricultural sector.

An indiscriminate breaking up of large farms is often justified on the grounds of the technological advantage of small-scale farming. There is considerable international literature, particularly from South Asia, to suggest that land is cultivated more intensively on small farms, leading to higher productivity per hectare. While direct evidence for the higher efficiency of small farms in Nepal is limited, it is important to study carefully what is the exact cause of the higher productivity of smaller holdings and whether these underlying causes can be maintained with re-distributive land transfers. There would be many mitigating factors that operate the other way round, that is, economies of scale that make production more efficient on bigger farms, as is normally the case with most economic activities.

To the extent that small farms are more productive, a legislative approach to the break up of big farms into smaller farms is desirable. But surely the 'who' question is once again paramount. An arbitrary and ad hoc break up of big farms is not going to lead to efficiency gains. Who gains access to the land and how the common property resources such as irrigation systems are maintained intact, will have to be considered. Also there probably are clear limits to the efficiency gained by continually lowering farm size. Certainly, the productivity benefit of breaking a 20 *bigha* farm into 200 small two-*katha* plots, which will used mainly for a homestead and vegetable garden, is not going to be the long term answer to increasing productivity in Nepali agriculture.

Farm size may not be as critical as the right type of farming and management skills that make small farms more productive, but which are difficult to duplicate upon the breaking up of bigger farms. All these concerns reinforce the argument that the main objective of a well-designed land reform programme should be to address the 'who' and not the 'how much' question.

Market-mediated redistribution

So if the core land reform issue is who should be left behind in the agriculture sector to increase the efficiency of production can we really expect the politicians and bureaucrats to be able to prioritise satisfactorily who are going to be the more productive landowners? Readers will have to form their own opinion on the matter. Economic logic, however, dictates a simple alternative approach to land re-distribution: excess land should go to those who are willing to bid the highest price to acquire ownership rights. Those who are able to use the land most productively should be willing to bid the highest price to acquire it. Of course, willingness and ability to bid are two very different things. With access to credit markets being imperfect, and people's attitude to risk-taking being different, a lot of poor farmers who would be productive cultivators would be left out of this bidding process. It is in these areas of access to credit and risk amelioration that the government has a more important role to play to ensure that the poor can bid competitively, rather than in devising administrative rules for the direct allocation of excess land to those whom it nominates as being worthy recipients.

One can go a step further along this competitive bidding process for allocating excess land by making it a direct transaction between holders of excess land and those bidding to acquire it. The main role of the government would then be to facilitate a market-mediated approach to land transfers from those holding more than the ceiling to those who are below the ceiling.

Such an approach also gets around the tricky question of how the compensation for excess land is going to be determined. The compensation will be based on what the bidders are willing to pay. It is not necessary for owners to get exactly what the buyers are paying. But the important point is that there is no administrative price set for the acquisition of excess land. It is almost impossible to get that price right by administrative fiat.

The above argument for a market-price based mechanism is based on the efficiency argument of channelling excess land to those who are likely to use it productively. It is not meant to promote a backhanded effort to ensure that owners of excess land receive fair market-based compensation for their assets. It is quite obvious that a market price-based mechanism will not produce an equitable result on post-reform land ownership by any means. On the other hand, it is also just as obvious that equity objectives should be tackled through other means, and should focus on equity of total income or total assets and not just agricultural land.

It is often claimed that agricultural land has one distinguishing feature that warrants its rationing—because it is in fixed supply. This is not necessarily so. There is plenty of evidence that the amount of land that is brought into cultivation, and more importantly, the extent of multiple cropping, can be changed dramatically through infrastructure investments in irrigation and by providing proper economic incentives to farmers to cultivate land more intensively. The Agricultural Census data show that the total physical area of agricultural holdings in Nepal increased from 1.7 million hectares in 1961/62 to 2.6 million hectares in 1991/92. (A lot of this was due to forest encroachment which is neither desirable nor sustainable in the long run, but certainly there has been and will continue to be some scope for increasing the supply of cultivated land).

Even if we ignore this possibility of the supply of effective land under cultivation being somewhat elastic, the fixed supply nature of agricultural land is no different from that of urban property or the human capital inherent in a medical doctor's education/experience. Using the human capital comparison, imagine a law that said no family could have more than one medical doctor among its members. If there were more than one, the income earned from their human capital would be expropriated by the state or, worse still, the extra doctor in a family would be assigned to other families that did not have any medical doctors! This is the logical extension of what is being proposed by way of a land reform fixated on land ceiling levels.

The case for market-based compensation

It is of course not just desirable but also necessary to provide fair compensation for the owners of excess land, based principally on the market value of their land, less any taxes or administrative charges the government levies to cover some of the costs of the land reform programme. The need for fair compensation comes from the necessity for non-discriminatory treatment vis-a-vis the holders of alternative assets.

Land is an economic asset in the same way as other forms of holding wealth, such as ownership of factories, urban property, savings deposits, and human capital through higher/professional education. In a democratic and civil society where private property rights are constitutionally guaranteed, it is difficult to make the case for discriminatory treatment of alternative assets. While it may be desirable to impose restrictions on how much economic assets an individual or family can own in total, in the interests of reducing overall income or wealth inequality, there is little social or economic justification for treating different kinds of assets in a discriminatory manner. Why should one type of economic capital have ownership ceilings while other forms of capital—industrial or urban property—do not, especially when inequality in ownership may be even more extreme for these other assets?

There is perhaps no better example of the arbitrarily discriminatory nature of land ceilings than the vastly different amounts of land a family can own based on the timeline of its demographic lifecycle. Under Nepal's prevailing inheritance laws, which allow sons aged 16 and above to be recognised as a separate coparcener in ancestral property, a husband and wife with two sons, aged 16 and 18, would be allowed to hold three times as much land as a couple with two sons, aged 15 and 13. Is there any economic or social justification for discriminating against the second family so that their income and welfare level over the family life cycle should be less than the first family's? If not, then it necessarily follows that any excess land that the second family has, must be "sold" at market prices. This way it can maintain the same wealth level as the first, but in a different composition between land and non-land assets.

A related reason for market-based compensation is that all regional land ceiling levels, no matter how they are derived, are eventually arbitrary. There is no such thing as an "ideal" farm size nor even a "minimal" farm size which land ceilings are meant to attain through land redistribution. It is almost impossible to give a scientific basis to land ceilings. If one cannot give sound economic reasons as to why one person's farm size should be limited to 10 *bigha* and not 5 *bigha*, then it is also imperative that the economic consequences to that person of having either of the ceiling levels imposed should not be of much significance. Fair compensation relying on market-based prices for any land acquired above the ceiling—whatever it is—accomplishes this goal.

If the general principal of non-discriminatory treatment of large landowners is accepted, then the whole debate about what is the appropriate level of land ceilings in Nepal's different regions, and whether these levels are 'revolutionary' or not, really becomes a moot point. With appropriate compensation, the ceilings do not become a way to expropriate the wealth

of a select group only. The main role that land ceilings take on is to artificially promote an active market in land transactions, whereby land can be transferred from less productive to more productive use, relying on market price signals.

Restricting monopoly

In addition to resolving the 'who' question through an artificial stimulus to land transactions, land ceilings can be relevant from a quite different perspective. Limiting the size of agricultural land holdings is an effective way to restricting the monopoly power that landowners would otherwise obtain in their individual villages. Given the limited nature and size of rural markets, especially local labour markets, the concentration of land ownership among a few large landowners, or in the worst case, with a single landlord in a village, can lead to undesirable outcomes. For instance, large landowners could exploit their monopsony power in the labour hiring market in terms of the wages paid to labourers and the conditions of their employment. Also economic power from land ownership often gets translated into monopoly power in other sectors as well, including local politics, with unfavourable outcomes to the land-poor.

There is always an economic logic to limiting monopoly/monopsony power in any market. But again the argument must be properly understood. Concentration of land ownership does not necessarily give rise to monopoly power in the production of agricultural goods. A traditional monopolist takes advantage of his market power by reducing the supply of what he produces in order to charge a higher price. This sort of monopoly behaviour is unlikely from large landlords, except perhaps in a few very remote communities in the mountain region, because agricultural product prices are usually not determined in local village markets but are linked to the wider region and, indeed, in Nepal's case, to the Indian market just across the border.

The real source of the monopoly power of large landlords comes from inter-linked markets for labour and credit where the individual actions of the landlords can affect the local village level wage rates and interest rates for loans. The monopoly power concerns are probably much less important now than in the early 1960s when the first round of land ownership limits were being determined. Rural communities in Nepal are now more closely intertwined with the larger regional and national markets. As transportation/communication and labour migration networks expand, the monopoly power of big local landowners tend to diminish but may still be significant enough to be an issue to justify further controls on land holding limits.

History of land reform in Nepal

THE POLITICAL changes of 1951 led to the first expression of interest in land reform in Nepal. After the overthrow of the Rana rule, various land reform commissions were established, and laws relating to land tenure and tenancy were enacted between 1951 and 1960. Land reform in the sense of re-distributing ownership of agricultural land was an important plank in Nepal's first democratically elected government of the Nepali Congress under B.P. Koirala, in 1959. However, the first legislative programme on re-distributive land reform was formulated after the royal coup of 1960 when King Mahendra dismissed the B.P. Koirala government and initiated a period of direct rule under the partyless panchayat system. The main element of the 1964 Land Act was to establish ceilings on agricultural land that one individual or family could own.

The success of the land reform package of 1964 was limited. Very little excess land was acquired and re-distributed because large landowners were able to register their excess land in the names of others, and there was inadequate administrative rigour in checking up land ownership across the country. If nothing else, this earlier experience showed that basing a land reform programme on arbitrary land ceilings with inadequate compensation to the landowners, creates an administrative nightmare and leads to very little change in the effective control of agricultural land, even if a few very big farms are seen to be broken up.

Land reform remained on the backburner through the latter decades of the panchayat regime. With the political change of 1990 and the political parties becoming active again, land reform featured in the election manifestos of most of them. Discussion of land reforms in Nepal received a particular boost with the election of the minority government of the Nepal Communist Party (UML) in 1994. Because of their minority status, the UML was unable to push through a legislative programme on land reform. Nevertheless, their government left an imprint on land reform policies through the report prepared by the High Level Commission on Land Reform which was headed by a Central Committee member of the UML, Keshar Badal, (subsequently referred to as the Badal Commission Report). This Report recommended a drastic reduction in the land ownership ceilings set out by the 1964 legislation. While detailed in coverage, the focus of this Report was political prescription and not economic cost-benefit calculation. Hence it is unfortunate that the Badal Commission Report now serves as the standard by which the "revolutionary" character of any new land reform policy in Nepal is going to be judged.

Unfortunately, there is very little analysis of this problem in order to understand what the economic costs of the present land ownership structures in Nepal are. Without this background analysis, it is difficult to prescribe how far one needs to go in dismantling the existing structure in a way that ensures that the economic benefits of any particular policy exceed the costs it is likely to impose. This means the relative merits of alternative means of restricting the economic power of large landlords, short of mandating a break-up of the large farms, needs to be carefully assessed. The argument is exactly analogous to the US government's anti-trust case against Microsoft. Should Microsoft be broken up into smaller separate companies to limit its monopoly power derived from the inter-linking of its Windows operating system with its application software? That answer, as well as the one for land reform options in Nepal, is not easy. But we must first do the underlying homework into the costs and benefits of alternative policy choices, and carefully assess alternative designs of specific options to make the land reform package effective.

Conclusions

The need of the hour is not a politically motivated "revolutionary" land reform package, but effective land reform to boost agricultural production and long term structural change of the economy. The needless fixation on what is an appropriate land ceiling in Nepal's special context, including its regional dimension, detracts from a sound approach to analysing and designing an effective land reform programme. In fact, what is required is not a revolutionary perspective on what should be the maximum ceiling levels but instead a revolution in the way we approach the justification for and the design of land reform.

The economic mechanism through which the pros and cons of breaking up large farms should be clearly understood and a net cost-benefit assessment made. The success of any land reform programme will depend crucially on what mechanisms are designed to allocate excess land. Priority must be given to those who are likely to use the land most productively. This objective can be met effectively through market-mediated transactions between holders of excess land and potential buyers in a time-bound framework.

Land reform should not be viewed as a tax on the assets of large landowners to fund rural poverty alleviation. Rural poverty in Nepal is indeed severe; but it should be tackled with the resources available from all sectors of the economy, including taxes on all types of assets that wealthier individuals own. What is the economic or, indeed, the social logic of taxing only one type of asset holder and not others whose relative wealth may actually be much larger, for funding poverty reduction measures? Just because large landowners and the landless live side by side in a village, it does not follow that a re-assignment of property rights within that village only is the most effective way of alleviating rural poverty.

One really has to look beyond the local village economy and its assets for the long-term welfare of the truly disadvantaged sections of the rural population. Should we be thinking of providing every landless family with one *katha* of land and condemn them forever to a marginal existence of subsistence farming? Would they not be better off if we were to provide them with two rooms in a lodge in an urban setting in the tarai or even in Kathmandu and encourage them to take the plunge into the urban semi-proletariat?

In a free society, the direction to be taken on this difficult choice will have to reflect the wishes of the poor that we all are trying to help. But we must keep in mind that these individual choices also have very significant economy-wide consequences.

If, 10 to 15 years later, more than two-thirds of Nepal's population is still dependent on the agricultural sector, then the fruits of the current round of revolutionary land reform will have been just as disappointing as that of the 1960s round. The main game is to reduce significantly the number of workers in the agricultural sector, and so increase the average productivity of each person who remains engaged in agriculture. The economic prosperity of all Nepalis, not just of the owner-cultivator farmer or the agricultural labourer, depends on that one single variable. It does not really matter how many more new factories are built in the tarai or luxury hotels in Kathmandu by local or foreign investors. If the average return of a day's work in the agricultural sector is to remain at about NR 60, then the average income to be earned from a day's work for unskilled labour in any factory or luxury hotel, or indeed in any sector of the economy, will not be much more than that NR 60. So it really is worth everyone's while to get beyond the revolutionary rhetoric of the current round of the land reform package and pay more attention to the underlying economic analysis required to design an effective programme.

What is required is a careful and open-minded consideration of alternative options for achieving both the objectives of alleviating rural poverty in a sustainable way, and of laying the foundations for an agrarian structure that promotes a dynamic and more commer-cially oriented agricultural sector with larger farm sizes and fewer people. The starting point should be a land reform programme that accepts in principle full compen-sation for any excess land acquired by the government or required to be sold. This alone ensures that all aspects of a land reform package, including the land ceiling levels, will be considered on the basis of the economic benefits it confers to the nation, and not on the political advantages of parties trying to outdo each other on expressing their revolutionary zeal. The latter road is indeed fraught with danger. A haphazardly developed land reform package can do immense harm to Nepal's economy and polity; and ultimately it is the poor who tend to suffer the most in such situations.

Why not to fear a nuclear war?

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the cold war between the US and the USSR was such that if the former launched a nuke-mounted missile, Soviet satellites were capable of informing the USSR army in three seconds, and in less than 45 seconds, Moscow would be able to launch its counter-missile. Washington knew that, and therefore, never attempted to launch one. Recent studies commissioned by US Department of Defence included one likely scenario on a nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan army decides to launch a nuke-missile towards India... They don't need any permission from their government, and promptly launch the missile. Indian technology is highly advanced. In less than eight seconds, Indian army detects it and decides to launch a missile in retribution. But they need permission from The Government of India (GOI). They submit their request to the Indian president. The president forwards it to the Cabinet. The prime minister calls an emergency Lok Sabha (LS) session. After three days, when the LS meets, due to several walkouts and severe protest by the opposition, it gets adjourned indefinitely. The president asks for a quick decision.

In the meantime, the Pak missile failed to take off for reasons unknown. Their attempts for a relaunch are still on. Meanwhile, the Indian ruling party is reduced to minority because a party, giving outside support, withdraws support. Therefore, its first task is now to cobble a majority. The president asks the PM to prove majority within a week. Meanwhile, an external affairs spokesman requests Pakistan for some bilateral talks, at the secretary and minister levels. The following week, as the ruling party was not able to get confidence vote, a caretaker government is installed. The acting PM decides to permit the armed forces to launch the Nuclear Missile. But the Election Commission says that a caretaker government cannot take such a decision because elections are at hand and this decision might affect the swing of votes in the election. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) is filed in the Supreme Court of India, alleging misuse of power by the Election Commission. The Supreme Court comes to the rescue of the PM, and says the acting PM is authorised to take this decision, in the interests of the nation. In the meanwhile, one of the Pak missiles successfully takes off, but falls 367 miles away from the target on a government building at 11:00 AM. But there were no casualties since no employee had reached the office till then. In any case, the nuclear core of the missile had detached somewhere in flight.

Pakistan army now tries to get better technology from China and the US. The US condemns the use of a nuclear missile by Pakistan, and offers to send its Seventh Fleet to the Arabian Sea. The Indian government declines the offer. New Delhi finally decides to launch a nuclear missile, after first convening an all-party meeting. This time, all the parties agree. It is but three months since the army sought permission.

But this time, some "pro-humanity", anti-nuclear activists take to the streets against the government's decision. Human chains are being formed in CA, LA and Washington for peace. Many e-mails, condemning the government, are sent to Indians with the request "Please forward it to as many Indians as possible." On the Pakistan side, the missiles keep failing. Sometimes they fail to take-off, sometimes the payload gets detached from the missile during flight. At other times, the missiles deviate from target due to high-speed winds blowing over Rajasthan, or they have to be neutralised by Pakistan itself, as these are now moving backwards towards Islamabad. A missile (smuggled from the US) is used. Since Pakistan army is unable to understand the software, the contraband missile heads for its original destination: Russia! The Russians successfully intercept the missile and, in retaliation, launch a nuclear missile towards Islamabad. (Note: Russian missiles never fail.) The missile hits the target and creates havoc. Pakistan cries for help. It asks for loans from the IMF and the World Bank. India expresses deep regret for what had happened and sends in a million dollars worth of soap and detergent. So in the end, India never got to launch its missile and Pakistan never got it right. △

A country abandoned

Impressions of Afghanistan by an Iranian filmmaker who travelled extensively in the country between 1988 and 2001.

By **Mohsen Makhmalbaf**

I came on foot, I'll leave on foot
The same stranger who had no piggy bank, will leave.
And the child who had no dolls, will leave.
The spell on my exile will be broken tonight.
And the table that had been empty, will be folded.
In suffering, I wandered around the horizons.
It is me, who everyone has seen in wandering.
What I do not have, I'll lay and leave.
I came on foot, I'll leave on foot.

(A Herati poet who was turned back from Iran)

For much of the world Afghanistan is just a drug producing country with rough, aggressive and fundamentalist men who hide their women under veils with no openings.

But there is perhaps another story to be told. I have travelled within Afghanistan and witnessed the reality of life in that nation. In 13 years I have produced two feature films on Afghanistan—*The Cyclist* (1988) and *Kandahar* (2001)—for which I have studied numerous books and documents to collect material for the films. Consequently, the Afghanistan that I know is very different from the image that much of the rest of the world has. It is a more complicated, different and tragic picture, yet sharper and more positive. It is an image that needs attention rather than negligence and suppression.

The tragedy in statistics

According to available figures, Afghanistan had a population of 20 million in 1992. In the past 20 years, and since the Russian occupation, about 2.5 million Afghans have died as a direct or indirect result of the war—army assaults, famine or lack of medical attention. In other words, every year 125,000, or about 340 people a day, or 14 people every hour, or one in about every five minutes have either died or been killed. When the crew of that unfortunate Russian submarine, *Kursk*, was facing certain death some months ago, satellite news reported every minute of the incident. When the Buddha statues of Bamian were being demolished the world heard about it non-stop. But nobody has had time for the death of Afghans every five minutes for the past 20 years. The number of Afghan refugees is even more tragic. According to the more precise statistics available, Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan total 6.3 million (*before the current and continuing exodus*—Editors). If this figure is divided by the year, day, hour and minute, in the past 20 years, one person has become a refugee every minute. This number does not include those who scurry from north to south and vice versa to survive the civil war. I personally have no knowledge of any nation whose population has been reduced by 10 percent via mortality and 30 percent through migration and yet faced so much indifference from the world.

The customs post at the Dogharoon border between Iran and Afghanistan has a sign that warns visitors of strange looking items. These are mines. It reads: "Every 24 hours seven people step on mines in Afghanistan. Be careful not to be one of them today and tomorrow." I came across more hard facts at one of the Red Cross camps. A Canadian group that had come to defuse

mines found the tragedy simply too vast, lost hope and returned. Now, over the next 50 years the people of Afghanistan must step on mines in large numbers to make their land safe and liveable. The reason is that every group or sect has strewn mines against the other without map or plan. The mines are not set in military fashion as in war and collected in peace. And when it rains hard, surface water repositions these devices, turning once safe remote roads into dangerous paths. Very simply, a nation has mined itself to the brink of extinction.

Why then should Afghans not migrate when there is constant fear of hunger and death. A nation with a 30 percent emigration entertains no hope about its future. Those still alive in Afghanistan are people who were not able to cross the borders or if they did, were sent back by neighbouring countries. And when Afghans themselves wish to flee Afghanistan why will there be any constructive foreign presence in the country? Businessman, barring drug dealers, will not risk investing there, and political experts prefer to meet in Western countries. There are no political experts in Afghanistan, there are only political suppositions offered from a distance. Hence, there are few outsiders to observe the enormous scope of its tragedy.

Around the city of Herat I witnessed about 20,000 men, women and children starving to death. They could not walk and were strewn on the ground awaiting the inevitable. This was the result of the recent famine. That same day, the then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Japan's Sadako Ogata, also visited these people and promised them the world's help. Three months later nothing had changed and Ogata gave the number of Afghans dying of hunger to be a million nationwide. It struck me then that the statue of Buddha at Bamian crumbled out of shame for the world's ignorance towards Afghanistan. It broke down knowing its greatness did not do any good.

In Dushanbe in Tajikistan I saw 100,000 Afghans running from south to north, on foot. It looked like doomsday. Such scenes are never shown in the media anywhere in the world. War-stricken and hungry children had run for miles and miles, barefoot. This fleeing crowd was attacked and refused asylum in Tajikistan. They died in their thousands in a no-man's land between Afghanistan and Tajikistan and neither you found out nor anybody else. As a Tajik poet put it: "It is not strange if someone in the world dies for so much sorrow that Afghanistan has. What is strange is why nobody dies of this grief."

Such indifference is perhaps the fate of a country without images. Afghan women are faceless, which means 10 million out of the 20 million population do not get a chance to be seen. A nation, half of which is not allowed to be seen is a nation without an image. During the last few years there has been no television broadcasting. There are only a few two-page newspapers with names like *Shariat*, *Heevad* and *Anise* that have only text and no pictures. This is the sum total of the media in Afghanistan. Painting and photography have been prohibited in the name of religion. There are no movie theatres in Afghanistan any more. From the world of cinema nothing is forthcoming from or about Afghanistan. True, Hollywood produced *Rambo* about the war in Afghanistan. The only authentic scene was Rambo's presence in Peshawar, Pakistan, thanks to the art of back projection! It was merely employed for action sequences and creating excitement. This is Hollywood's image of a country where 10 percent of the people have been decimated and 30 percent have become refugees and where currently one million are dying of hunger. Afghanistan is without an image despite its history and geography.

The history of an imageless country

Afghanistan emerged when it separated from Iran. It used to be an Iranian possession some 250 years ago, a part of Greater Khorasan province, in the era of Nadir Shah. Returning from India, one midnight, Nadir Shah was murdered in Ghoochan. Ahmad Abdali, an Afghan commander in Nadir Shah's army, fled with a regiment of 4,000 soldiers and declared independence from Iran. Since Ahmad Abdali belonged to the Pashtoon tribe, his absolute authority would not have been recognised by other tribes such as the Tajik, Hazareh and Uzbek. It was agreed, therefore, that each tribe would be governed by its own leaders. The rulers collectively formed a tribal federalism known as the *Loya Jirga*. From then to the present, a more just and appropriate form of governance has not emerged in Afghanistan.

Equally, from then till now Afghanistan has not evolved economically from an agricultural existence, nor has it moved beyond tribal rule to achieve a sense of nationalism. An Afghan does not regard himself an Afghan. In Afghanistan each Afghan is a Pashtoon, Hazareh, Uzbek or Tajik. Tribalism is the first aspect of their identity. From the time of Ahmad Abdali until today, when the Taliban rule over 95 percent of the country, the main leaders have always been from the Pashtoon tribe. (Except for the *Bacheh Sagha* or the nine-month rule of Habiballah Galehkani, and the two years under the Tajik, Burhannuddin Rabbani.) Even the *mujahedin* of Afghanistan, when they fought the Russians, did not represent a unified struggle against a foreign enemy. Rather, each tribe warred with the enemy in its own region.

In the Niatak refugee camp (on the Iran-Afghanistan border) that accommodates 5,000 residents, it is not easy for Pashtoon and Hazareh children to play with each other and sometimes there is mutual aggression. Tajiks and Hazarehs find Pashtoons their greatest enemy and vice versa. They are not even willing to attend each other's mosques for prayers. We had difficulty seating their children next to each other to watch a movie.

The reason for Afghanistan's perpetual tribalism rests with its agrarian economics. Each Afghan tribe is trapped in a valley with geographical walls and

is a natural prisoner of a culture stemming from a mountainous environment and farming economy. Cultural tribalism is the product of farming conditions rooted in the deep valleys of Afghanistan. Belief in tribalism is as deep as these valleys. Farming is the foundation of this tribalism which in turn is the basis for deep internal conflicts that prevents this would-be nation from achieving a national identity.

Pashtoons with a population of about six million make up Afghanistan's largest tribe. Next are the Tajiks with about four million people, followed by Hazarehs and Uzbeks with populations of about four million and one to two million respectively. The rest are small tribes such as the Imagh, Fars, Balouch, Turkman and Qezelbash. The Pashtoons are mostly concentrated in the south, the Tajiks in the north and the Hazarehs in the central regions. This geographical concentration in different regions will mean either complete and final disintegration or continued tribal federalism through the Loya Jirga system. The only alternative to these two scenarios necessitates changes in the economic infrastructure and the replacement of a tribal identity with a national one. Only such a change can break traditional culture and create a more modern one. But Afghanistan has nothing but drugs to exchange in the world market. Therefore, it has turned back on itself and become isolated.

For the Afghan farmer his world is his valley and his profession is farming when drought spares him. Meanwhile a tribal system resolves his social problems. Given this situation, he cannot have a share in the world economy. Furthermore, USD 80 billion in the global drug turnover depends on Afghanistan remaining as it is, without change, because if change prevails that USD 80 billion is the first thing to be threatened. Hence, Afghanistan is not supposed to realise a considerable profit even from this contraband trade since that itself may yield change for Afghanistan. If we add the USD 500 million income from the sale of opium to the USD 300 million from the sale of northern Afghanistan's gas, and divide the total by the 20 million population, the result is USD 40 per capita annual income. If we further divide that figure by 365 days, each Afghan would earn about 10 cents a day. How are grounds for his economic and cultural transition to be provided to let him have a share?

Consequences of geography

Afghanistan has an area of 700,000 square kilometres. People live in cavernous valleys surrounded by towering mountains. To the same degree that these mountains obstruct foreign intrusion, they block the influence of other cultures and commercial activities. A country that is 75 percent mountainous has problems creating consumer markets in its potential industrial areas and in exporting agriculture products to the cities. And despite the use of modern weapons, wars take longer to wage and seem never to end. Being mountainous increases both the cost of war and reconstruction after peace. If Afghanistan was not so rugged it would have had a different economic, military, political and cultural fate. Afghanistan is a victim of her own topography.

In its present state the economy of Afghanistan can keep its people half fed without any economic development. The average life expectancy of an Afghan has been calculated at 41.5 years and the mortality rate for children under two years of age was between 182 to 200 deaths per 1,000. The average longevity was 34 years in 1960 and in 2000 was pegged at 41. The reality however is that in recent years it has gone down to even lower than what it was in 1960.

The basic question that comes to mind then is, how are the Afghan people supported? It is either through construction work in Iran, participation in political wars, smuggling or becoming theology students in the Taliban madrasas. On the Iranian border the United Nations pays 20 dollars to any Afghan volunteering to return to Afghanistan. They are taken by bus to the nearest cities inside Afghanistan or dropped along the frontiers. Interestingly, due to lack of jobs in Afghanistan, the Afghans quickly come back and if they are not recognised, get back in line again to get another 20 dollars. The jobless Afghans turn every opportunity into an occupation. But there is a grim harvest to be reaped. I never forget those nights of filming *Kandahar*. While our team searched the deserts with flashlights, we would see dying refugees like herds of sheep left in the sands. When we took those who we thought were dying of cholera to hospitals in Zabol, we realised that they were dying of hunger.

The camp at Zabol looked more like a prison. The Afghans who had fled home because of famine or Taliban assaults were refused asylum and were waiting to be returned to Afghanistan. It all seemed legal and rational upto that point. People who enter a country illegally do get deported. But these particular people were dying of hunger. The camp could not afford to feed so many people and they had not eaten for a week. They had only water to drink. We offered to provide meals. We brought food for 400 Afghans ranging from one-month-old babies to 80-year-old men. Most of them were little kids who had fainted from hunger in their mothers' arms. For an hour, we were crying and distributing bread and fruits. The authorities expressed grief and regret and said that it took a long time for budget approvals. They kept saying that the flow of hungry refugees was far greater than they could manage. This is the story of a country that has been ravaged by its own nature, history, economy, politics and the unkindness of its neighbours.

If Afghanistan were Kuwait, with a surplus of oil reservoirs, the story would have been different. But Afghanistan has no oil and neighboring countries deport its underpaid labourers. So it is only natural that when opportunities for normal employment are unavailable the only remaining choices are joining the Taliban, smuggling, or falling to the ground in a corner

in Herat, Bamian, Kabul or Kandahar and dying for the world's indifference.

For many, theology is the obvious alternative to starvation. There are over 2,500 Taliban schools with a capacity between 300 to 1,000 students which attract hungry orphans. In these schools anybody can have a piece of bread and a bowl of soup, read the *Quran*, memorise prayers and later join the Taliban forces. For some, drug production and narcotic smuggling are the remaining and none-too-lucrative options. According to a UN report, in 2000, 50 percent of all narcotic drugs worldwide was produced in Afghanistan. From this, Afghanistan earns only half a billion dollars annually, though the final global turnover amounts to 80 billion dollars. In transit to the rest of the world, the mark-up stretches 160 times. Thus, heroin enters Tajikistan at one price and exits at twice that much. The same goes for Uzbekistan. By the time drugs reach consumers in the Netherlands, they cost 160 to 200 times the original price. The money ends up with the various mafias who manipulate the politics of the countries en route.

If it were not for the extremely high drug profits, Iran for example, could have ordered half a billion-dollars worth of wheat to Afghanistan as an incentive to stop planting poppy seeds. Yet the 79.5 billion-dollar profit is far too valuable for the mob and its allied forces to dispose of poppy seeds. Ironically, the Afghan drug producer is not himself a consumer. Drug use is prohibited but its production is legitimate. Its religious justification is sending deadly poisons to the enemies of Islam in Europe and America.

Drugs are an interesting business for many. Just a few months ago when I was in Afghanistan, it was said that every day an airplane full of drugs flew directly from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf states. In 1986, when I was doing research for the making of *The Cyclist*, I journeyed by road from Mirjaveh in Pakistan to Quetta and Peshawar in Pakistan. It took me a few days. When I entered Mirjaveh, I boarded a colorful bus of the kind that you might have seen in *The Cyclist*. The bus was filled with all kinds of strange people. People with long thin beards, turbans on the head and long dresses.

At first, I was unaware that the bus roof was filled with drugs. We drove across dirt expanses without roads. Everywhere was filled with dust and the wheels would sink into the soft soil. We arrived at a surreal gate like the ones in Dali's paintings. It was a gate that neither separated nor connected anything from or to anything. It was just a superfluous gate in the middle of the desert. The bus stopped at the gate. There appeared a group of bikers who asked our driver to step down. They talked a little and then brought out a sack of money and counted it with the driver. Two of the bikers came and took over our bus. Our driver and his assistant took the money and left on the bikes. The new driver announced that he was now the owner of the bus and everything in it. Together with the bus we too had been sold. This transaction was repeated every few hours and we were sold several times along the way. We found out that a particular party of smugglers controlled each leg of the route and every time the bus was sold, the price increased. First it was one sack of money then it went up to two and three towards the end. There were also caravans that carried Dushka heavy machineguns on camel-back. If you eliminated our bus and the arms on the camels, you were in the primitive depths of history. Again we would arrive in places where they sold arms. Bullets were sold in bags as if they were beans. Kilos of bullets were weighed on scales and exchanged.

I had gone to Khorasan and along the border was looking for a site for filming. By sunset the villages near the border would be evacuated. The villagers would flee to other cities for fear of smugglers. They also encouraged us to take flight. Rumours of insecurity were so widespread that few cars passed after sundown. In the darkness of the night, the roads awaited the smuggling caravans. The caravans are believed to be made up of groups of five to a hundred people between 12 to 30 years of age. Each carries a sack of drugs on his back and some carry hand-held rocket launchers and Kalashnikovs to protect the caravan.

Émigré destinies

The Afghan's choices are clearly very limited. Upon waking up each day, an Afghan has four options to consider. First is his livestock and this depends on drought not being an obstacle. The Afghans between 1986 to 1989 had about 22 million sheep. That is one sheep per person. This has traditionally been the main wealth of Afghanistan. This wealth was lost in the recent drought. Fighting for a group or sect is his second concern and generally because of unemployment he enters the army. All else failing, he enters the drug business. But the possibilites of this last opportunity is limited and the labour options of a nation of 20 million people cannot really be settled with a $500 million account accrued from cultivating poppy seeds.

Emigration and theology are therefore the compelling Afghan reality. Because of widespread need to migrate, human smuggling has become a new occupation for Iranian smugglers. Afghan families that reach the borders have to go a long way to arrive in Tehran and since their arrest is likely in Zabol, Zahedan, Kerman or any other city en route, they leave their fate in the hands of pickup-driving smugglers. The smugglers demand one million rials for every refugee hauled to Tehran.

Since in 99 percent of the cases, the Afghan family lacks this kind of money, a couple of 13-14 year old girls are taken hostage and the rest of the family is secreted into Tehran through back roads. The girls are kept until their family finds jobs and pays the debt. In most cases the money is never provided. A 10-member family with a 10 million rial debt has to pay the interest as well after three months. Consequently, a great many Afghan girls are either kept as hostages

around the borders or become the personal belonging of the smugglers. An official in the region related that the number of girl hostages in just one of those cities is in the region of 24,000.

Those who emigrate to Iran are Hazarehs, who are Farsi speaking Shiites. Language and religion incline them towards Iran. Their misfortune is their distinctive appearance: their Mongoloid features distinguish them from Iranians. The Pashtoon who goes to Pakistan, however, blends in with Pakistanis because of common language, religion and ethnicity. Although the Shiite Hazarehs find Pakistan more liberal than Iran, job opportunities in Iran are more appealing to them than the freedom in Pakistan. Bread clearly has priority over freedom.

For the Sunni Pashtoon it is a different trek that ends in the trap of another nation's politics. As a result of not finding a suitable occupation, a hungry Pashtoon is attracted to the theological schools ready to offer food and shelter. Pakistan has promoted, organised and put into action the Taliban government for a variety of reasons. The first is the Durand line. Before Pakistani independence, Afghanistan shared borders with undivided India and serious disputes ensued over the Pashtoonestan region. The British drew the Durand line and divided the region between the two countries, on the condition that after 100 years, Afghanistan would regain control over the Indian part of Pashtoonestan. When Pakistan declared independence, British-held Pashtoonestan became part of Pakistan. Some six years ago, Pakistan, according to international law was supposed to cede Pashtoonestan back to Afghanistan. But how will Pakistan that still has claims over Kashmir agree to return this land?

The obvious solution was to raise hungry Afghan mujaheds to control Afghanistan. The Pakistan-trained Taliban would naturally no longer harbour ambitions of recovering Pashtoonestan from their patron. No wonder the Taliban appeared just as the 100-year deadline drew to a close. From a distance, the Taliban appear to be irrational and dangerous fundamentalists. When you look at them closely, you see hungry Pashtoon orphans who are theology students by vocation, whose impetus for attending school is hunger. When you review the rise of the Taliban you see the political interests of Pakistan. If fundamentalism was the reason for Pakistan's independence from Gandhi's democratic India, the same applies for Pakistan's survival and expansion at the expense of Afghanistan.

The Taliban have always been criticised for their fundamentalism but little has been said about the reasons for their arrival on the scene. The Herati poet who had come to Iran on foot returned to Afghanistan on foot, but the orphan who had walked to Peshawar in Pakistan returned to conquer Afghanistan driving Toyotas offered by Arab countries. How could Pakistan afford to feed, train and equip the Taliban? With the help of Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Who are the Taliban?

A nation's demand for security from its government is greater than any other consideration. Welfare, development and freedom come next. After the Soviet retreat, the outbreak of intense civil war created nationwide insecurity and the country was in perilous straits. Each group sought to provide its own security through continuous fighting. None, however, was able to provide safety for the nation. The mocking irony of this period was that everyone tried to ensure security by making the country unsafe.

The people were exhausted by civil war and when Pakistan dispatched the army of the Taliban holding white flags with the motto of public disarmament and peace, they were welcomed. In a short time, the Taliban had control over most of Afghanistan. It was then that the Taliban's Pakistani roots became evident.

The strategy of disarmament and dispatch of the religious Taliban claiming to be harbingers of peace quickly succeeded in winning popular consent. In Herat, where they speak Farsi, when I inquired about the Taliban, who speak Pashtoon, the reply I heard from the shopkeepers was that prior to the Taliban, their shops were robbed daily by armed and hungry men. Even those who opposed the Taliban were happy with the security they brought.

Security was established for two reasons. One was the disarmament of the public and the other the severe punitive measures, such as cutting the hands of thieves. These punishments are so harsh, intolerable and quick that if 20,000 hungry Afghans in Herat saw a piece of bread before them, nobody would dare take it. Today, when you enter Afghanistan, you see people lying around on street corners. Nobody has the energy to move and no arms to fight with. Fear of punishment stops them from committing crimes. The only remedy is to stay and die in the face of humanity's indifference.

In order to film these starving Afghans, I called Dr. Kamal Hussein, the UN representative from Bangladesh. I told him I wanted to get permission to go to north Afghanistan (then controlled by the late Ahmad Shah Massoud) and Kandahar (controlled by the Taliban). It was decided that a small group would go and eventually just two of us (my son and I) received approval to travel with only a small video camera. We were to be permitted to go to Islamabad (Pakistan) and take a small 10-seater UN airplane that flew once a week to the north of the country and once a week to the south.

It took two weeks for the UN office to call and inquire when it was convenient for us to depart. We were ready but they said that it would take another month. "Since it will get colder in a month and more people will be dying, it will make your film more interesting," they said. They recommended February. I asked, "More

interesting?" They replied that perhaps it would provoke the conscience of the world. I did not know what to say. We were silent for a while. Then I asked whether or not we could go to both north and south. The Taliban did not agree. They are not too fond of journalists. I made a promise to film only those dying of hunger. Again the Taliban did not approve. I told them I need another invitation from the UN to re-enter Pakistan. Later, I received a facsimile stating that I had to go to the Pakistan Embassy in Tehran. I was happy because on an earlier occasion I had gotten a visa to Pakistan from the embassy to bring costumes for *Kandahar* from Peshawar.

At the embassy, at first I am not received warmly. A little while passes and I am called in. A very respectable lady and a gentleman direct me to a room. For 15 of the 20 minutes that I am in that room they talk about my daughter Samira and her international success in cinema. They avoid the main issue and in between I am asked why I applied through the UN to get a visa. They informed me that it would have been better if I had approached them directly. In addition they do not favour a film that misrepresents the Taliban government. They prefer that I go to Pakistan and not Afghanistan. I feel like I am in the embassy of the Taliban. I ask if they have seen *The Cyclist* and tell them I made a part of it in Peshawar and that it is not a political film. I tell them that my intentions are humanitarian and I want to help the Afghans. I tell them that my film is about the crisis of employment and hunger. They say, you have 2.5 million Afghans in Iran. Why not film them? It is useless to continue the discussion. They keep my passport and I am kindly asked to leave. A few days later, I receive my passport with a statement saying that if I want to go to Pakistan as a tourist, the visa can be issued but not for filming or going to Afghanistan. When I leave the embassy, all of what I have read or heard about the Taliban passes before my eyes.

I remember a Taliban school in Peshawar where I was escorted out as soon as my Iranian identity became known. And I remember a day when in Peshawar for filming *The Cyclist*, I was arrested and handcuffed. I do not know why every time I intend to make a film about Afghanistan I end up in Pakistan! People tell me to be careful. There is always the threat of kidnapping or terrorism at the borders. The Taliban are reputed to assassinate suspected opponents en route between Zahedan and Zabol. I keep saying my subject is humanitarian not political. Eventually, one day when we are finished filming near the border, as I am walking around, I come across a group that has come to either kill or kidnap me. They ask me about Makhmalbaf. I am sporting a long thin beard and wearing an Afghan dress. A Massoudi hat with a shawl covering it and half of my face makes me look like an Afghan. I send them the other way and begin running. I cannot figure out whether they have been dispatched by a political group or smugglers have sent them to extort money.

Let me go back to the issue of security. The Taliban have brought an apparent security to Afghanistan. On *Shariat Radio* (the voice of Taliban), which only has a two-hour programme daily, even if there is fighting somewhere they do not announce it, just to maintain a sense of national security. When they say, for example, that the people of Takhar welcomed the Taliban, it means that the Taliban attacked and conquered Takhar. The rest is just news about Friday prayer or the amputation of the hand of some bandit in Bamian, the stoning to death of a young adulterer in Kandahar or the punishment of some barbers who have cut a few teenagers' hair in the style of the Western infidels. Whatever it is, with all the punishments and propaganda, a sense of national security suffuses Afghanistan.

But this has also created for the world an enduring image of Afghan aggression and barbarism. According to Freud, human aggression stems from human animalism and civilisations cover this with a thin veneer that splits at the snap of a finger. Violence exists in both East and West. What is different is the style not the fact of its existence. What is the difference between death by decapitation using knives, daggers or swords and dying by bullets, grenades, mines and missiles? In most cases, criticism of aggression is really the disapproval of the means of aggression. The death of one million Afghans as a result of the world's injustice is not regarded as aggression. The death of 10 percent of the Afghan population by civil war and war with Russia is not perceived as aggression. But decapitation by the sword will for long remain the headline of satellite television news.

It is naturally fearsome and horrible to see a person being decapitated but why does not the death of people every day by land mines give us the same feeling? The West can create a tragic story for a fallen statue, but for death by the millions, statistics suffice. As Stalin put it: "The death of one person is tragedy, but the death of one million is only a statistic."

Who is Mullah Omar?

In my seemingly endless trip to Kandahar, everywhere there is talk of Mullah Omar. His title is *Amir-al-M'omenin* (Commander of the Faithful). Nobody really knows much about his background. Some say he is 40 years old and blind in one eye but there is no photograph of him to prove or disprove this. How does a nation choose a half-blind man overnight to lead them, when not even a picture has been seen of him? I am tempted to make a film about Mullah Omar. For political reasons I avoid it but my curiosity is not satisfied. If Pakistan prepares a precise script for the war-stricken people of Afghanistan under the rubric of disarmament, by what analysis do they plan for a leader called Mullah Omar who has no prior image? Someone who is nobody and has not been seen by anybody, becomes the leader of a country in which each tribe or sect has its own leader.

Perhaps this is where the secret lies. If a known person were appointed leader of Afghanistan, then many would have an excuse to oppose him. I hear a joke near the border about a teahouse. "A teahouse hosted Afghan customers on a regular basis. There was a TV set in this teahouse equipped with a windshield wiper. When necessary, the owner would spray water on the screen and clean the stains on it. The owner was asked about this and he replied that whenever there was a TV programme on the mujahedin in the border areas, their opponents spit on the TV. Since the customers used snuff their spittle was coloured. After a while the TV screen would became opaque so he invented the wiper."

When leaders are needed to rule Afghanistan, the best way is to design an imageless leadership that cannot be criticised for its form or background. Every one I ask about Mullah Omar says he is a representative of God on earth who introduced the *Qur'an* as the country's constitution. He is extremely devout, as are his followers. His wages are as paltry as the Herat's governor's—USD 15 a month—and he lives like the poor people who are dying in the streets. I realise that the image of this imageless man is complete and appealing because in the East, nobody expects leaders to be updated and specialised or to possess a national vision and universal insight. If only the leaders seem a little ordinary, it is enough to satisfy the people. As a starving Afghan put it, though he was starving he was happy that Mullah Omar too was always fasting. They were like each other. He thanked God for such a leader.

In Herat I speak to a medical student. He is hesitant to be seen talking to me. I ask him if he knows the total number of college students in Afghanistan. While he keeps walking and looking directly ahead, he says: "A thousand." "In what major?" I ask. He says: "Only medicine and engineering." "Which one are you studying?", I ask, and he says: "Theoretical medicine." I asked what that meant and he replied that Mullah Omar thinks human dissection is a sin. I asked if he had ever seen Mullah Omar's picture. He said no, and left. Among the Pashtoo refugees, I ran across someone who had himself not seen Mullah Omar but knew of people who had. I even met Iranian politicians who believe Mullah Omar does really exist and that he is also handsome. A few Afghans who sleep in Iran at night and cross the border by day to sell dates in Afghanistan are fascinated by Mullah Omar. They tell me that he is an ordinary monk who dreamed of Prophet Mohammad one night and was commissioned by him to save Afghanistan. Since God was with him, he was able to conquer Afghanistan in one month.

Afgahnistan's failed modernity

This is Afghanistan some 70 years after its first brush with modernity and reform. Between 1919-1928 Afghanistan was ruled by Amanullah Khan. He was inclined towards modernism, travelled to Europe, returned with a Rolls Royce and made known his reform programme. This included a change in attire. He told his wife to unveil herself and asked men to forego their Afghan costumes for Western suits. He also prohibited polygamy. Traditionalists immediately begin opposing Amanullah's modernising.

None of the agrarian tribes submitted to these changes and rioting ensued. The superficial, formalistic and petty modernism served only as an antibody to stimulate traditional Afghan culture, making Afghanistan so immune to it that even in the following decades, modernism could not penetrate the culture in a more rational form. The most advanced people in Afghanistan do not believe that Afghan society is ready yet for female suffrage. It is obvious then that the most conservative will prohibit schooling and social activities. It follows naturally that 10 million women will be held captive under their *burqas*.

With the coming of the Taliban, girls' schools were closed and for a long time, women were not allowed on the streets. Even before the Taliban, only one out of every 20 women was able to read and write. For all practical purposes, Afghan culture had denied education to 95 percent of its women. The Taliban denied it to the remaining 5 percent. The realistic question to ask then is whether the culture of Afghanistan is affected by the Taliban or was it the cause for the Taliban's appearance?

When I was in Afghanistan, I saw women with burqas on their head begging in the streets or shopping in second-hand stores. What caught my attention were the ladies who brought out their hands from under the burqas and asked little peddler boys to polish their nails. For long I wondered why they did not buy nail polish to use at home? Subsequently, I found out that this was the cheapest way to do it. Initially I told myself that this was a good sign, that women under burqas still like living and despite their poverty, care about their beauty. It struck me later that there is really little satisfaction to be derived from seeing socially imprisoned women adorn themselves with cosmetics.

An Afghan woman has to maintain herself so that she will not be overlooked in the competition with her rivals. Polygamy is quite common even among the younger generation, and many Afghan homes have been turned into harems. Getting married means buying a woman. I have seen old men giving away 10-year old girls and, with the bride price that they receive, marrying other 10-year old girls. Scarce capital is circulated in a closed society by transferring young girls from one house to the other. Time and again I asked myself, did the Taliban bring the burqas or did the burqas bring the Taliban? Do politics affect change in culture or does culture bring politics?

Opposition to modernism is not necessarily expressed by traditional organisations. Sometimes it is a reaction by the poor against the rich, a war between poverty and wealth. Today, in Afghanistan the only modern objects are weapons. The ubiquitous civil war

that has created jobs, in addition to being a political-military action, has also become a market for modern weapons. Even though it lags behind the contemporary age, Afghanistan can no longer fight with knives and daggers. The consumption of weapons is a serious matter. Stinger missiles next to long beards and burqas are still symbols of a profound modernism that are proportionate to consumption and modern culture.

For the Afghan mujahed, weapons have an economic basis. If all weapons are removed from Afghanistan, the war ends and then, given the sub-zero economic conditions, all of today's mujahedin will join the refugees in other countries. The issue of tradition and modernism, war and peace, tribalism and nationalism in Afghanistan must be analysed with an eye to the economic situation and employment crisis.

Of hope and despair

Some 180 international organisations are said to be active in Afghanistan. They too avoid my non-political questions. I soon learn that they have taken on colossal tasks. One is to distribute bread among the starving. A second is to negotiate the exchange of north-south prisoners and a third is to make artificial limbs for land mine victims.

I am fascinated by the young people who have come here through the Red Cross. I meet a 19-year old British girl who says the reason she has come "is to be useful". It is only here in Afghanistan that she can make so many artificial hands and legs for people each day. In England, which offers so much satisfaction, she cannot find a job. Since she came, a few hundred people have been able to walk with the artificial limbs she has made. But can all this do anything more than remedy the deep and extensive wounds of this nation in some very limited way?

Dr. Kamal Hossein, who is probably embarrassed about the visa to Pakistan, does not call me anymore. I remember his words the day he came to our office saying how he felt his job and efforts were in vain. And now, after I have finished making *Kandahar*, I feel futile about my own profession. I do not believe that the little flame of knowledge kindled by a report or a film can part the deep ocean of human ignorance. And I do not believe that a country whose people in the next 50 years will loose their hands and legs to anti-personnel devices will be saved by a 19-year old British girl. Why does she go to Afghanistan? Why does Dr. Kamal Hossein with all his despair, still report to the UN? Why did I make that film or write this note? I do not know, but as Pascal put it: "The heart has its reasons that the mind is unaware of".

When I was crossing the border, I saw Iranian artillery pointing towards Afghanistan. When I entered Afghanistan, I saw artillery pointing to Iran. On the Afghan side of the border I heard that the region's military commander had called the Iranian consul and told him that their homes were made of clay so what did the Iranian guns aim to target? He had said, "The worst that you can do is bombard our houses and when it rains we will take the wet mud and build our homes anew. Don't you find it a pity if our guns destroy your beautiful homes? You can't make glass and iron and ceramics with rain. Why don't you come and build the road to Herat for us?"

The road from Dogharoon to Herat is worse than the winding roads of Iran. On the undulating terrain ahead, shovel-wielding men and boys stand for eternity. As far as the eye can see, there are shovel-wieldingmen. As soon as our car gets close to them, they start filling up the ditches with dirt and, while throwing worthless Afghan paper currency to them, we see them in the dust the same way that we saw the dance of leaves in *Once-Upon-A-Time-Cinema*. It is a scene of shovel-wielding-men who disappear in the dust and have created an occupation for themselves out of nothing. This is the most surreal scene that I see in Afghanistan.

I ask the driver how many cars pass this road every day. He says, "About 30." I ask if these thousands of shovel-wieldingmen gather for only 30 cars, but the driver is preoccupied and is not in the mood to answer me. I turn on the radio. It has been years since I listened to the radio or watched TV and I have not read any paper for months. The 2 o'clock Iranian news is on. It makes me cry to hear that two million Iranian kids have gone to first grade today. I do not know if it is out of joy for the children who are going to school or out of sorrow for those who do not go to school here in Afghanistan. I look at the road and I feel like I am watching a movie. The driver tells me that in some of these houses girls schools are established secretly and some girls study at home. I keep thinking here is a subject for a film.

I arrive in Herat and see women polishing their nails from under the burqas. I tell myself here is another subject for a film. I see the 19-year old British girl who has come to dangerous Afghanistan to be useful. I tell myself again, here is another subject. I see loads of lame men who have lost their legs to mines. One of them, in lieu of an artificial leg, has tied a shovel to the left side of his body and walks with it. I tell myself, here is yet another subject. I arrive in Herat and see dying people covering the streets like carpets. I no longer see it as another subject. I feel like quitting cinema and seeking another occupation. In my opinion, the only solution for Afghanistan is a rigorous scientific identification of its problems and the projection of the real image of a nation that has remained obscure and imageless both to itself and to others.

Since the day I saw a little Afghan girl 12 years of age—the same age as my own daughter Hanna—fluttering in my arms in hunger, I have tried to bring forth the tragedy of this hunger, but I always ended up giving statistics. I have become powerless, like Afghanistan. I feel like going to that same poem, to that same vagrancy and, like that Herati poet, get lost somewhere, or collapse out of shame like the Buddha of Bamian.

"I came on foot, I'll leave on foot."

Film South Asia '01

The third edition of the Festival of South Asian Documentaries

4 to 7 October 2001

Film South Asia, the competitive festival of documentary films, invites entries from filmmakers of the subcontinet and the world. The biennial event brings together the best non-fiction films of South Asia. It provides a visible platform for new works and helps promote a sense of community among independent filmmakers. Film South Asia'01 is also committed to developing a larger audience and market for South Asian documentaries within and outside the region.

Dates and Venue

FSA '01 will be held in Kathmandu for four days running, from 4 to 7 October 2001 (Thrusday-Sunday). Films will be secreened back-to-back, and a three-member jury will announce awards at the closing ceremony. Time will be set aside for discussions following all screenings. Talk programmes and symposiums will be held concurrently.

Criteria

Entries have to be on South Asian subjects, broadly understood. They may cover any subject in the range available to filmmakers, from people, culture, lifestyle and adventure to development, environment, politics, education, history and so on. Entries must be dubbed in English or have English subtitles. Entries that have not been released publicly will receive priority. Filmmakers need not be South Asian.

Length

The duration of a film is not a bar. Preference will be given to full-length documentaries.

Competitive and Non-Competitive Categories

Films completed after 1 August 1999, if selected, will be admitted to the competetive category. (Entrants may ask not be be included in competition.) Films made before the cut-off date will join the non-competitive category.

Submission Deadline

All entries must reach the Festival Secretariat in Kathmandu by 30 June 2001. Entry is free of cost.

Entry Forms

Please contact the festival office for entry forms, or download from <http://www.himalassociation.org/fsa>.

For more information, contact

Manesh Shrestha, Festival Director
PO Box 166, Lalitpur, Nepal
TeL: +977-1-542544
Fax: +977-1-541196
Eamil: fsa@mos.com.np

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

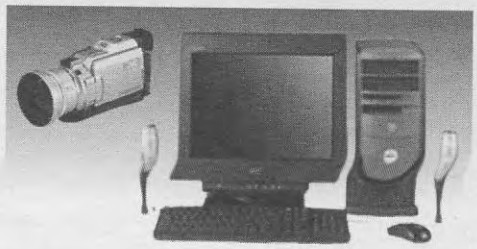
Speak up for the Documentary

South Asia needs a documentary revolution, and it can happen if we promote a screening campaign.

by ***Kanak Mani Dixit***

As non-fiction productions, documentary films have the power to educate, entertain, energise and even enrage. More than any other medium, electronic or otherwise, they can shake up society, spread understanding of our increasingly complicated planet, and provide a potent medium for anyone willing to express beliefs and opinions or delve into deep issues. But as has happened with television, radio and celluloid features, the documentary medium too has been prevented from coming into its own and emerging as a harbinger of societal transformation in South Asia.

Other than in Nepal, radio still remains under the control of government everywhere in South Asia. Indian satellite television managed to slip away from under the state, only to come under the control of the market which, thus far, has shown its abhorrence of public interest programming. Cinema, of course, has not gone beyond serving as the opiate for the masses and remains a tool of the bazaar. Under such circumstances, it is the neglected documentary genre—perhaps for the very reason of its neglect—that holds the near-term possibility of shaking itself up and coming to the rescue of society at large. It is because non-fiction film and video remain furthest away from the control of the state and market that they have this social role cut out for them. And with rapidly declining costs of both production and screening, it is no longer conscionable that the diverse masses of South Asia are denied the watching great documentaries.



All you need to produce: a digicam and a computer.

To the extent that it has been controlled by anyone, of course, the documentary has conventionally been under the influence of governments. This meant propaganda newsreels and turgid development productions. In the last couple of decades, the documentary was also discovered by the non-governmental sector, which again concentrated on preachy development films and videos. Despite the vice-like grip of the state and the 'donor', however, the documentary film's possibilities remained intact. This was because, unlike the electronic media and the airwaves, there could be no control over the media of transmission.

Blooming documentaries

Despite the possibilities inherent in the medium— its freedom from the state and distance from the market—the documentary failed to take off because of the costs involved in production and the unavailability of screening opportunities. But the one wholesome trend of the last five years has been the continuing collapse of production and screening costs, which will help both film making and film viewing, making it more mass-based and 'democratic'. The filmmakers are themselves already wise to the lowered expenditure of production, and it is therefore the responsibility of all others who believe in the power of non-fiction film to single-mindedly pursue an exponential multiplication of screening opportunities. Essentially, let a thousand documentaries bloom!

Viewing possibilities can be divided into two categories: first, television and, second, screening halls used by festivals, film clubs and the like. As far as television is concerned, while some inroads have been made to present useful and interesting fare in the government-owned stations, the private channels shirk from the documentary as if it were infected with a fatal virus. Even within their political and programming strictures, the broadcast companies should have been able to make space for quite a large spectrum of non-fiction fare, but they do not. This is because it is so much easier to reach into the shelf and bring out more Hindi song-and-dance numbers at minimal cost.

Even if this is so, there is a need to develop a lobbying force across regions, countries and capitals to pressure the television stations to carry more public interest programming. At the same time, to talk of the unspeakable in a region that is so thoroughly globalising, there must also be pressure to establish one or more public television channels on a regional South Asian scale. The wait for private television channels to be sufficient in number for the competition to deliver good programmes, is likely to be a long one. Furthermore, it is hardly appropriate that a region of 1.4 billion people is serviced by less than two dozen television channels, and the northern Hindustani-speaking and related regions of South Asia are even more restricted. It should also be noted that the more variety and

languages there are in television offerings, the more localised will be the programming, and the more space for non-fiction productions.

While we must force open the door for documentaries in television, the larger challenge is to promote the screening of non-fiction films in front of live audiences everywhere. Even convincing television executives is probably easier than this much harder and longer-term task of promoting live screenings everywhere, but this is the way to make documentaries a part of the lives of the people. The more documentaries are shown before the public, the more it energises the filmmakers, and the more engaged with local issues their productions become. If this process is promoted, ultimately South Asia will be well-populated with filmmakers who make documentaries in the local languages and dialects rather than in English, and they will find satisfaction in their individual locations without having to seek a pat on the back from festival organisers in New Delhi, Bangalore or Kathmandu.

Again, organising festivals and screenings of documentaries is now more feasible than ever before because of the advances in projection technology. Previously, and for decades on end, local organisers of a festival or a screening would have to receive the heavy celluloid rolls of film, assemble projection and sound systems, and contend with the noise and excessive hassles of running the overwhelmingly mechanical devices. Today, things are much, much easier. Simply put, all that is required for a quality film screening now is a VHS cassette (and, soon, all this will be in digital format, with entries arriving on DVD), a home videocassette player (or DVD player) and—the most important piece of equipment—a video projector. The cost of video projectors is coming down by the month, and though there is a lot of variety, as yet a machine that can be used to show to an audience of about one hundred costs about USD 2000. This is already within the reach of many organisations.

All you need to screen: a video player and a projector.

Shelved productions

Which brings us to the problem of quality in the documentary films themselves. Due to the misguided efforts of governments and donor-seeking ngo's, the documentary film has typically trotted out governmental or developmental propaganda or, alternatively, dull descriptive films that fail to engage the audience's imagination through the creative use of audio and video. In fact, many fine filmmakers have been diverted to making intellectually unchallenging and unrewarding productions commissioned by organisations with a fulsome budget. No matter that the reels or cassettes get shelved the moment they are made.

But, the primary reason that even capable South Asian videowallahs have shunned making documentaries that make statements, stimulate the mind, and excite audiences is that they lack venues to screen their productions and they lack audiences. Despite the potential of new, affordable technology and the existence of an audience starved of viewing opportunities (without knowing it), too few good documentaries are being made.

It becomes a chicken-or-egg situation. The majority of filmmakers—like good journalists—do not need their coffers filled, just their egos fed (and that is not such a bad thing). To be able to screen one's creation in front of audiences and revel in the reaction is taken as just reward, and is enough to keep the committed filmmaker energised and producing. When there is no audience, therefore, such films will not be made. And when there are no good films produced, there will be no audience.

Fortunately, there is every indication that this tragic circularity is about to be broken. This heartening change can be charted in the nature, quality and variety of films made in cosmopolitan centres as well as in the far corners of South Asia over the last decade. The improving standard of films can also be judged from the films submitted to the three Film South Asia documentary festivals organised in Kathmandu since 1997. The difference is evident both in the quantity and quality of films produced in this six-year period, in the range of issues taken up, as well as in the fact that more and more documentaries are being made in local languages rather than in English. All this points to enhanced creativity and localisation, which will lead to a surge of audience recognition of the documentary as a superlative genre.

The documentary genre is still evolving in South Asia, and the vicious cycle is being broken by bold and brash new documentaries. Of the kind, for example, submitted to the Film South Asia '01 festival this year. There is a move away from newsreels, development documentaries and beyond the deeply political activist films which was the one area where 'statements' were made by documentary. The variety is there in terms of approach to filming, thematic treatment, and camera and editing techniques. There is increased confidence in audience's ability to grasp sophisticated cinematic grammar, which makes more room for creative energy. From one extreme comes the ultra-sophisticated and extra-evocative film on sexual abuse of children in Bombay high society, while an alternative angle explores, with a handheld camera, the life of Lachuman Magar, a former soldier with the Indian Army working now as a housekeeper at a tourist resort. Or, consider the no-holds-barred look at the innermost feelings of young Nepali women who have migrated to the United States, to the sexual self-questioning of a well-known New Delhi filmmaker, to the raw footage of male masseurs on the hard pavement of Lahore, or to the sober exploration by some Dhaka artists on why they paint what they paint. The variety and quality are firmly in place, and we must get these films viewed by

an audience that does not know what it is missing.

Indeed, this trend of "good and better documentaries", the slogan of Film Festival South Asia '99, is set to continue on its own, but it needs focussed support. The non-profit Film South Asia is committed to use the 15 films of the Travelling Film South Asia (selected from the 50 screened at FSA '01) to make one more concerted push for festivals in cities and towns all over South Asia. But that will be a drop in the ocean. Others—all who see the potential for societal transformation through the audiovisual medium—should get into the campaign for more screening and projection. No longer should documentaries be limited to elite circles in the large metros, while rural and mainstream audiences are force-fed government newsreels and development films. We must "speak up for the documentary", as the rallying cry of Film South Asia '01 urges us to do.

Documentary films can help achieve a lot, if they can swim away from the arena of governmental control, market pressures and the developmental agenda. The fact that non-fiction film has not become a mass-based industry elsewhere in the world is all the more reason to make it happen here, in Punjab, Bengal, Nepal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Sindh, Gujarat, Andhra, Sindh...

(The writer is the chairman of Film South Asia.)

Travelling Film South Asia

When the first Film South Asia festival in 1997 turned out to be a resounding and fun-filled success, the organisers decided to take 15 select films on a trip of South Asia and the world so that people beyond the Kathmandu venue of FSA would be able to share in the thrill of watching well-made non-fiction films. It turned out to be a good idea, and the Travelling Film South Asia was off and running. FSA had given birth to TFSA.

South Asian films have by now travelled twice, once after FSA '97 and the next after FSA '99. TFSA has by now touched down in Bangalore and Berkeley, Lahore and London, Colombo and Pondicherry, Dhaka and Amsterdam — a total of more than 75 venues. Everywhere, TFSA has been appreciated for its ability to encapsulate South Asian issues and concerns in 15 pithy productions, sensitising the audiences at home and overseas. These travelling fests have also been significant for their ability at one and the same time to indicate both the unity of South Asia as well as its diversity.

A special focus of the upcoming TFSA will be to promote the screening of documentaries in cities large and small all over South Asia — a single-minded effort to raise people's awareness of the possibilities inherent in non-fiction film to inform, educate and entertain. This goal is especially feasible this time around because of the extraordinary quality of films submitted to FSA '01. The organisers believe 15 films selected from these have the ability to excite audiences like never before.

We seek the help of all who appreciate documentaries to help TFSA in this task by energising individuals and institutions to become hosts to the travelling fest in their city, town or community. The 15 TFSA films are provided free-of-charge to hosts in South Asia (this is subsidised by charging a modest fee from venues overseas). Prospective hosts must be able to organise screening halls and screening equipment, as well as publicity so as to be able to gather an adequate audience. Because of the introduction of hassle-free video projection systems, the organisation of film festivals has become very convenient, but this possibility has yet to be used optimally on behalf of the documentary.

Once the FSA Secretariat is convinced of a host organisation's ability to effectively mount a TFSA fest, it sends the 15 films in VHS format via courier. In addition, we also send posters and catalogues. The hosts must commit to non-commercial screening of the films, as per commitments made by the FSA to the filmmakers. (Non-commercial screening means that, at best, entry fees may be charged to offset the cost of hall and equipment rental and nothing else. Also, the hosts must commit not to make copies of the films that they receive on good faith.)

We are always on the look-out for interested groups and organisations to host Travelling Film South Asia, and we ask you to help spread the word so that more people than ever before get to see good documentaries.

Contact: ***Archana Bhandary****, TFSA Coordinator (ph. +977-1-542544)*

Literary resurrections

Far away from the mainstream, on the fringes a literary revival is taking place. Let us salute the little magazines.

It is not mainstream literature and the media hype that accompanies it, nor the glossy interviews and journalistic reviews in the print and broadcast media, that provide an authentic barometer to the health of a nation's literature. The true test and taste for literary climate reside within the unpretentious pages of literary magazines; here you can hear genuine outcries, conflicting unfashionable views, hard criticisms, cutting edge experiments in writing, opinionated editorials, and individual signatures which one respects in spite of one's personal views.

So it indeed is great news that there has been a birth, rebirth and sustenance, in the last few years in South Asia, of a range of literary (and arts) magazines—traditionally known as 'little magazines'. A tiding all the more remarkable since most of these little magazines and annuals suffer from the problems of financial support, inefficient distribution networks, and the difficulty of having a consistent roster of dedicated contributors who will write regardless of payments.

There are several publications that could have been featured in this essay—*The Brown Critique* (edited by Gayatri Mazumdar), *Kavya Bharati* (edited by Paul Love), *Poesies* (published by The Poetry Circle), *The Indian PEN* (edited by Nissim Ezekiel), *The Journal* (published by Poetry Society of India), *Haritham*, *NIRIEL*, *The New Miscellany* (edited by P Lal of Writers Workshop), *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi journal edited by K Satchidanandan) and *Yatra* (published by HarperCollins). Most of these are active, while some remain inactive (coming out occasionally). Others are defunct like the excellent *The Bombay Literary Review* (edited by Vilas Sarang) and *Kavi India* (edited by Santan Rodrigues).

But, for reasons of space and immediate relevance, the ones discussed here are: *Chandrabhaga*, *Katha Prize Stories*, *Civil Lines*, *International Gallerie*, *The Little Magazine* and *Six Seasons Review*.

Overview

One of the recent joys—as the editorial in the current *Civil Lines* states, "resurrections are momentous, joyous"—in the specialised area of literary magazine-publishing has been the wonderful rebirth of *Chandrabhaga* in a sophisticated matt-finished avatar. The current issue (New Series, Number 3, 2001) edited, as earlier, by senior English-language poet Jayanta Mahapatra, has all the hallmarks of the previous series, plus an injection of new blood and direction.

One of the most gripping items is a powerful long poem by Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh titled "The Moon Wears a Crooked Smile" (the Hindi original has been translated by Karni Pal Bhati). The translated version retains the visual and rhetorical force of the original, delivered in a contemporary free-verse idiom. Here is an extract:

The wind's sari border quivers
bullets pierce empty nests on the fig-tree
Bald detective of pale moonlight
wander the city streets
penetrating its many secret woes
in multiangular corners...

and further on:

Her lips turn dark
Suspended on
a sculpted torso in a harijan temple
greying thatch-roofs
gnarled banyan roots
misty ghosts of lime-smeared rags
arrested in
blouses
petticoats
tattered bedsheets
The lustful eye
of the bald crooked moon...

There are two engaging essays on poetry itself—Pramod K Nayar's "Persistence of Memory" and Krishna Rayan's "The Poetry is in the Pity"—plus fine pieces of writing by some of India's better known contemporary poets. For these alone, it is worth subscribing to this journal, and most certainly, *Chandrabhaga* is one of the best sources for new poetry in India.

The *Katha Prize Stories* is in its tenth volume. Geeta Dharmarajan's fantastic crusade for over a decade to get translated literatures of India on an equal footing with English-language writing, is clearly one of a huge but quiet success. Volume 10 presents the best short fiction published during 1999-2000 in 13 Indian languages—Assamese, Bengali, Dogri, Hindi, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Oriya, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu—chosen by a panel of distinguished writers and scholars. It would be unfair to pin-point specific stories or their authors, as the fact that they have made it to a nominated volume itself is a source of pride and cele-bration. The English translations read well, and some

exceptionally well.

Civil Lines' fourth number appears unannounced and under the guise of self-confessed erraticism—an aspect I have been quietly attracted to over the years of its publication. The editors simply and plainly state that if there aren't enough writing in India worth publishing, then an issue just needs to wait until it has garnered sufficient material. A refreshing aspect of *Civil Lines* (like *Chandrabhaga*) is that it is largely edited by practising writers (Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan and Ivan Hutnik) rather than academics. This brings a sense of verve and edge to the selections that appear here, rather than staid middle-of-the-road literary drones.

The pieces in the current issue that stand out for me are Kai Friese's prose piece, "Liver is not Mutton", and two convincing pared-down poems—"Delete" and "The Parable of Mr Paranjpe" by Amarish Satwick. Increasingly, for obvious reasons of viability, these kinds of magazines are getting co-published. In the case of *Civil Lines*, this time around, it is jointly published by Ravi Dayal, Permanent Black and *The Hindu*.

And as usual, its cover is stunning—a partial front image by Lauent de Gaulle of a parked Fiat taxi, where the old-fashioned metre and the underside of a driver's foot resting on the dashboard, are in primary focus—both in visual harmony but contradicting each other's intent. For every issue, the selection of a very unusual cover photograph is in itself an indicator of the kind of content the magazine generally tends to have—eclectic, intelligent and wry.

International Gallerie is graphically and visually outstanding. Its sense of design and layout ought to be models for many who aspire to such sophistication. Edited by Bina Sarkar Ellias, and supported by Rafeeque Ellias and his design team, *Gallerie* is now in its third successful year. Another attractive aspect (apart from the highly charged individualised writings) is its large format of 33 x 24 cm. *Gallerie* not only has liberal space to do justice to photographs and artwork, but also cleverly uses typography and white space to enhance the all-

Chandrabhaga: A Selection of Indian Writing (New Series)
Frequency: Biannual/Price per copy INR100
Editor: Jayanta Mahapatra
Address: Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack-735001, Orissa
Annual Subscrption Rates: INR 200 (India)/$25 (Foreign)

Katha Prize Stories
Frequency: Annual/Price: INR 250
Editor: Geeta Dharmarajan
Address: A-3 Sarvodaya Enclave, Sri Aurobindo, Marg, New Delhi 110017
Tel: 6868193/6521752 **Fax:** 6514373
Email: katha@vsnl.com
www.katha.org

Civil Lines: New Writing from India
Frequency: N.A./Price: INR 195
Editors: Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan, Ivan Hutnik
Address: 51-E, Sujan Singh Park, New Delhi-110003

International Gallerie
Frequency: Biannual/Price: INR 250
Editor: Bina Sarkar Ellias
Address: 208 Om Chambers, Kemps Corner, Bombay-400036
www.gallerie.net

The Little Magazine
Frequency: Six times a year/Price: INR 75/£5/$9
Editor: Antara Dev Sen
Address: A-708 Anand Lok, Mayur Vihar 1, New Delhi-100091
Tel: 2252375/Fax: 2258434
Email: writenow@littlemag.com

Six Seasons Review
Frequency: Biannual/Price: Taka 250/$10/£6
Address: Editors, University Press Limited, Red Crescent Building, 114 Motijheel C/A, P.O.Box: 2611 Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh
Fax: (++8802) 9565443
Email: upl@bttb.net.bd

The Indian P.E.N.
Frequency: Quarterly/Price: INR 8/£1.10/$2
Editor: Nissim Ezekiel
Address: The PEN All India Centre, Theosophy Hall, 40 New Marine Lines, Bombay-400020

Yatra
Frequency: Thrice a year/ Price: INR 95
Editors: Alok Bhalla, Nirmal Verma, U R Ananthamurthy
Address: HarperCollins India Pvt Ltd, 7/16 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi -110002

Kavya Bharati
Frequency: Annual/Price: INR 50/£4/$6
Editors: Paul Love, R.P.Nair
Address: SCILET, American College, P.O.Box 63, Madurai-625002

Indian Literature
Frequency: Six times a year
Editor: K.Satchidanandan
Address: Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi-110001

The Brown Critique
Frequency: Quarterly/Price: INR 15
Editor: Gayatri Majumdar
Address: 98 Park Street (2nd floor), Calcutta-700017
Tel: (033) 2801386
www.browncritique.com

The Journal
Frequency: Quarterly/Price: INR 50
Editor: Ajit Khullar
Address: The Poetry Society of India, L-67A, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi-110017

The New Miscellany
Editor: P.Lal
Address: Writers Workshop, 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta-700045.
Tel: 4734325/4732683

important text itself. The current issue (Vol 3 No 2/2000) is a special on India and Pakistan—to "the peace process that should have begun a long time ago". There are excellent pieces—fiction, poetry, essay—by Altaf Fatima, Moeen Faruqi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Teesta Setalvad, Salima Hashmi, and a superb duo-tone sepia-tinged photo-essay titled "A Day in the Life of Pakistan" by Ayesha Vellani.

I have, like many others I am sure, been following this magazine ever since its first issue over three years back. What perhaps started out as a high-quality literary and arts magazine, has now grown to being a platform where the boundaries between the creative arts and the polemics merge, the borders between opinionated pieces and subtle creative writing are finely defined, and above all, for almost all the issues, there is a specific topic-thread that runs seamlessly through the genres. It is the organic nature of both its content and presentation rather than the traditional sewn-spine that makes *Gallerie* stand out even among so many glossies that compete for commercial space.

The newest and the most exciting entrant in this genre is *The Little Magazine*. I was bowled over by its classy understated persona, its balance of high-profile and unknown contributors, its stylish design sense, and its peculiarly witty subversive editorial stance. I have seen and read all the issues that have appeared so far, and to produce a 100-odd-page 'A4' format magazine every two months without diluting its content or quality is a fine testament to its editors' talents.

The Nov-Dec 2000 (Vol 1 Issue 2) has two fine essays—"Queering the Family Pitch" by Shohini Ghosh, and "The Voice of Sadhvi Rithambhara" by Tanika Sarkar. The lead piece is by India's most recent Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, followed by pieces each by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, and Ashish Nandy—quite an arsenal-packed opening volley that.

But the most moving and evocative contributions in this issue are by the poets, fiction writers and visual artists—Arun Kolatkar, Nirmal Verma, Ram Rahman, Sudip Roy, Gopi Gajwani and Raghu Rai. I could go on and on about other aspects as well—such as typography and design, sections like "Mapping India", and the editorial gnome who mouses around in "Readers Block" and "For New Writers".

The *Little Magazine* is a refreshing, unapologetic, clever, well-presented magazine of ideas that make and break other ideas of literature, politics, and art. Highly recommended—go ahead and subscribe!

Six Seasons Review is published by Mohiuddin Ahmed of University Press Limited (formerly Oxford University Press, Dhaka) and edited by writers, translators, and academics. It is a journal I am proud to be associated with as its international editor. It is perhaps the first significant and professionally produced literary and arts magazine from Bangladesh. The unusual name of the magazine is derived from the fact that South Asia is the only place in the world that officially has 'six seasons'—Summer/*Grishma*, Monsoon/*Barsha*, Autumn/*Sharat*, late-Autumn/*Hemanta*, Winter/*Sheeth*, and Spring/*Bashanta*.

Inspired in part by the *London Magazine* and *Granta*, *Six Seasons Review* uses the same paperback book-format, and is devoted to new writing in English, and English translation—poetry, fiction, non-fiction, drama, belles lettres, interviews, and other arts. Of course, due to its provenance, it has a special interest in writings from the region and the Bengali diaspora, but it is by no means restricted to just that.

Six Seasons Review is international in scope, a fact well borne out by its contributors' nationalities which is as wide ranging as the writing itself. The inaugural issue had pieces by Jibanananda Das, Rabindranath Tagore, Shamshur Rahman, Rafiq Azad, Shaheed Quaderi, Kaiser Haq, Fakrul Alam, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Bernard Bergonzi and William Radice. It also featured an outstanding black-and-white photo essay, "Life in a Char", by a talented young Bangladeshi photographer, Mahmud. *Six Seasons Review* is a biannual publication, and the new issue has contributions on Ted Hughes by Daniel Wiessbort, James Sutherland Smith, Anne Rouse, Tomas Salamun, Chung Hee Moon and Hans van de Waarsenburg. In the forthcoming issue, a selective portfolio of the architect Bashirul Haq's red-brick-and-concrete signature works will be presented. *Six Seasons Review*'s strength lies in its intelligent and unpretentious approach, where the art of writing and that of the other arts are given premium space and value.

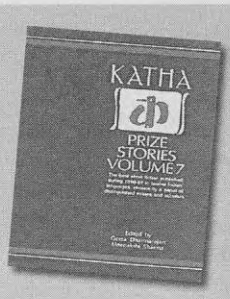
That in effect, is what all these little magazines are about—big space, and value for the arts.

– reviewed by ***Sudeep Sen***

Civil Lines:
"verve and edge"

Little Magazine:
"unapologetic"

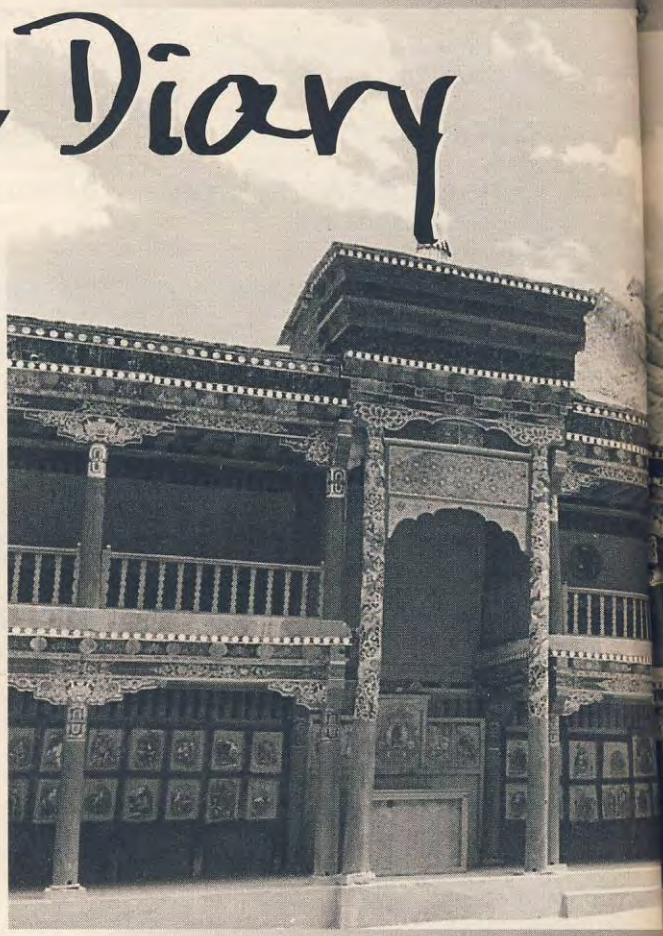
Gallerie:
"organic nature and content"



Katha:
"quiet success"

Ladakh Diary

by **Nandini Sundar**



Ladakh, in Jammu and Kashmir, is just 90 minutes by air from Delhi, but physically and topographically it seems more than a world away. The flight to Leh crosses slender green valleys separated by miles and miles of uninhabitable brown desert mountains. It almost seems as if human life has sprung up autonomously in the valleys, each isolated from the other, for migrations across such terrain seem daunting even to the modern imagination. Yet, tea came from China, and polo from Baltistan. Buddhism went to Tibet and returned, elaborated and transformed, while Western Ladakh borrowed Islam from Central Asia. Caravans of cosmopolitan traders crossed from Central Asia to China, travelling for days and months, through narrow precipitous passes and braving the dangers of night and snow.

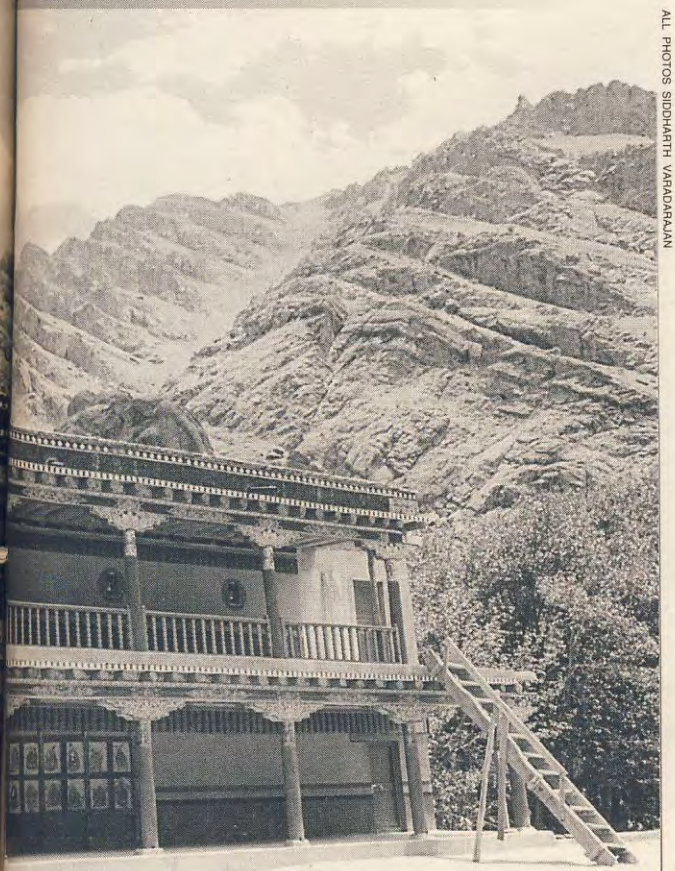
How tedious travel must have been, I thought. Yet, when we got off the plane and started driving through the mountains, I realised I would never again be able to think of brown as a boring colour. Each range, each hill is of a different shade—flecked with dark purple, striated by wandering winds, bare rock adorned with little bunches of bright flowers that seem to assert some fine point about survival. Gigantic sand dunes have been planed into smooth patterns, and bleak mountains have been cast up violently by the collision of continental plates. Amidst all these windswept forms are the roads maintained by the Border Roads Organisation, with their cheerful yellow signboards every hundred yards, which bear such cryptic legends like, "Himank cares, where Eagles dare", "Yes, U R Right. It is Himank at your service" and "Don't be a Gamma in the land of Lama", this last being a warning against rash driving.

But for these signs though, it is easy enough to forget the human sweat that goes into the domestication of this overpowering landscape. At Khardung-la, the highest motorable road in the world, where travellers dare not linger because of the lack of oxygen and the cold that gets to your heart, we met a small brown man from Calcutta, his snub-nose barely peeping out from his *parka*. He had been in Ladakh for the last 10 months, working on maintaining the pass. The majority of the workers here come from Bihar, brought by contractors on year-long stints.

Secular seminarists

I was a gatecrasher in a van-load of people travelling from Leh to Nubra valley to attend a small seminar on "National Integration", as part of a "Baudh Mahotsav" at the village of Diskit. The Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department had invited my journalist-husband to attend, along with a bunch of other people from Delhi and Bombay. The invitation had noted that the need to discuss national integration was nowhere keener than in the extremities of the nation. But by the time the idea reached the extremity in question, like a game of Chinese whispers, it had been completely transformed.

At breakfast the next morning, we met a portly old man, Diwan, who announced that he was the head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's International Coordination Division and that both the Baudh Mahotsav and the seminar were the VHP's idea (fortunately, however, the Kashmir state government insisted on drawing up the list of participants). If only one billion Hindus and two billion Buddhists across the world could unite, he said dreamily, how easy it would be to "defeat" the rest of the three billion Muslims and Christians. So for a start, the VHP had decided to mobilise the Hindus and Buddhists of India. They had



ALL PHOTOS SIDDHARTH VARADARAJAN

Rock formations behind Lamayuru.

persuaded the Ministry of Tourism in New Delhi, then conveniently headed by an RSS man, Ananth Kumar, to organise Baudh Mahotsavs in Ladakh, Arunachal, Himachal and West Bengal—wherever there were Buddhist populations. The last in the series is to be a grand mahotsav at Sarnath in February 2002.

But what had originally been envisaged as a day-long talking shop was converted by the local tourism officials into a public event, with dance troupes from different villages. They figured that if they had important "national" visitors, the public should get to hear their words of wisdom. But being even wiser themselves, they alloted 10 minutes of time to each speaker so that the dances could be interspersed in between. Even worse for the VHP organisers, the seminarists—journalists, a JNU professor, a Bombay college principal, a couple of trade union activists, a *maulana* and a filmmaker—all turned out to be rabid secularists who spoke vociferously against the idea of equating India with the notion of "one religion, one culture". Out there in this extremity, between the Buddhist women from Diskit dancing with gentle waves of their hands and the Muslim men from Turtuk, whose song had all the Lamas in splits, the whole idea of Hindutva would have seemed farfetched and ridiculous anyway. The only concession to the VHP's vision was the daily dose of North Indian food that was served, despite our loudly expressed desire for stew, thukpa and momos.

The Sangh's other grand idea—the Sindhu Darshan festival which was first held at a site near Leh, in the middle of the Kargil war in 1999—is remembered by local inhabitants chiefly because regular flights got disrupted by VIP traffic to such an extent that even soldier's bodies could not be sent home promptly. Young men in a small bakery in Diskit complained that the Sindhu Darshan business was all a ploy to drive out foreign visitors by increasing the number of domestic tourists, which was bad for the local economy.

Although Buddhist-Muslim tensions are evident, and are fanned both by the VHP and the ruling National Conference party, the conflicts are really more about local resources and autonomy from Srinagar, than religion. The conflict over resources surfaces even in seemingly patriotic circumstances. "At first," said the owner of our guesthouse in Diskit, "we were happy when the Indian army captured five villages from Pakistan. But when these villages started getting all the block development funds, we became resentful." Konchong Dorji, who attended a special school in Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh) exclusively for children from border areas and then dropped out from Delhi University's Dayal Singh College because he had to help with the family farm, said he had worked as a porter for three months during 'Kargil'. And he was not alone—each household in the village had contributed a porter during the war. Yet, all the army's attention was concentrated on developing villages like Turtuk, where 24 suspected militants had been arrested during the Kargil war.

On the other hand, General Arjun Ray, whose idea it was to involve the army in development work, argued that it was precisely those alienated villages which needed to be wooed. Another army officer added that while patriotism may have had something to do with the population's willingness to help, the INR 80 per 'attendance' paid by the army had much to do with it as well. During the Kargil operations, some porters it seems had made lakhs.

The Army is present everywhere in Ladakh, and not just because of General Ray's Operation Sadbhavna. At Nimmu in the Leh valley, we chanced upon two sheepish sardars in army fatigues unloading from a truck bags of sugar for sale. Locals say sleeping bags meant for Siachen costing INR 30,000 could once be bought here for one-third that price. On highways, traffic often becomes one way because of army convoys. In some households, the relationship with the army is intimate. One charming old man in Hunder village with a passion for Rani Mukherjee posters, has a son and a son-in-law in the army. His other son is, of course, studying to be a lama and had gone to the Tibetan settlement in Mangalore, way down south in Karnataka.

Which way, S

If Gene
his way, t
Although
Ladakh, th
General R
Ladakh Sc
convincing
Islamic fur
now runs
centres an
militancy
convinced
the Kashm
INR 30 m
operation
that mere
be care a

Lipstick
Besides t
other dor
annual fe
there is l
the Tou
"Nubra"
on a mu
not only
Mahotsa
Nubra e
mountai

The
festival
monaste
and yel
facing e
to the c
blowing
stand i
of each
men c

Which way, Sindhu Darshan?

Maitreya at Thikse: The Buddha who is to come

If General Ray, Commander of the 14th Corps, had his way, the intimacy would be of a higher order. Although Muslims are nearly half the population of Ladakh, they were barely represented in the army before General Ray increased Muslim recruitment to the Ladakh Scouts from 8 percent to 30 percent, and began convincing his staff that there was no such thing as Islamic fundamentalism. Among other things, the army now runs 16 Sadbhavna schools, vocational training centres and health care camps. Having managed to keep militancy out of Ladakh, the general is passionately convinced that this approach is the only solution for the Kashmir Valley too. He told us that the army spends INR 30 million in Siachen every day, while his entire operation had cost only 15 million for the year, and that merely money would not do the trick, "there has to be care and compassion too".

Lipstick and love marriages

Besides the olive green of the army, monastries are the other dominating presence. The major monasteries have annual festivals, mostly during the winter months when there is little else to do. For the last 10 years, however, the Tourism Department has been organising a "Nubra" festival in September. This year it will be held on a much smaller scale or perhaps not at all, because not only has the department got roped into the Baudh Mahotsav, but also a bus carrying young men from Nubra en route to the Hemis festival crashed down a mountain side, killing all the passengers.

The Baudh Mahotsav in Diskit started, as all such festivals in Ladakh do, with performances in the monastery. After the monks, rich in their maroon robes and yellow scarves, had finished chanting in the hall, facing each other in long sonorous rows, they descended to the courtyard below. Two of them stood in one corner blowing into long trumpets that rested on a wooden stand in front of them, marking the beginning and end of each dance. In one particularly impressive dance, 10 men clad in dark blue robes, blue hats and skulls enacted the story of the monk who had defeated an unjust king by performing a dance in front of him. At the end of the performance, he takes out the bow and arrow concealed in his long sleeves and shoots the king. He then escapes on a dark horse, and as they cross the river, the monk flings off his dark robes, while the horse's paint comes off and becomes white. Children laughed delightedly as another masked dancer, accompanied by two small masked imps, flung sugar rice at them, and two British journalists squabbled as they blocked each other's camera angle. I also get incidental lessons in local culture. A group of young girls, wearing lipstick and salwar kameezes, assure me that the days of polyandry are over, and love marriages are now all the rage in Ladakh.

Once back in Leh we did the usual tourist routes—the monasteries at Hemis, Thikse and Shey one day, and Alchi, Basgo and Lamayuru the next. Both routes run along the Indus, which is most uninspiring at this time of the year—like grey dishwater or milky tea, depending on the angle. But the monasteries more than made up. Hemis, like the others, is poised at the top of a hill. A long flight of stairs leads from the wooded terrain below up to the monastery. A large open courtyard with two tall flagpoles, now completely empty, frames a mountain in the distance, the wind sings, and the large Buddha in the hall inside is kept company by a monk silently beating a drum. In the open-air restaurant below, a scrawny French man, who is a sound technician back home, served at the tables in exchange for spiritual salvation.

Thikse, by contrast, hummed cheerfully with construction activity and lama industry. At a room off the courtyard, three or four monks stitch silk covers for the holy books kept in the old library at the very top of the gompa. A 14-year-old novice, Sonam Angmo, who came all the way from Zanskar to join the Thikse monastery, told me that his day begins at 5.30 am with prayer and breakfast. He attends regular classes, learning subjects like English, Maths and Science. After

lunch, they read prayer books, followed by tea and more prayer. By 6.30 they are free to read whatever they want. There is no television, of course, and home visits are allowed once a year. The small ones, who may start as young as seven, are kept with an older monk till they grow into their own. At Thikse, the lamas, most of whom are locals, live in rooms scattered across the hill below the gompa. The head lama is a Member of Parliament. But as our irreverent old drivers, Salamat Ali and Sharafat Ali, put it, their creased faces grinning from ear to ear, his holiness was not enough to win him votes, and he had to spend money to win elections like everyone else. The monastery gets its money from donations, and from selling grass to the army from the lands it owns.

While Thikse may have more money, Shey, the abandoned palace of the Ladakh kings, has the best views and some of the best frescoes. An aged monk who looks no less than a hundred opens the doors to a 12-metre high blue haired Buddha. Down below, the plush green beetle-velvet fields merge abruptly into desert, and a woman and her son load a small donkey with grass.

The next morning we set off early for Lamayuru—past spectacular wine-red gorges and crater-ridden mud coloured mountains, appropriately signposted "Moonland". Lamayuru itself perches precariously at the top of a hill, riddled with caves where monks meditate. A hotel in the village plays cheerful Ladakhi music, which lingers in our mind till we return to Leh. The most delightful of all the monasteries, and one of the oldest, is the low-lying Alchi, with a cluster of *chortens*, and five small whitewashed temples with wooden doors. The frescoes—multiple images of the Buddha—have preserved their rich blues and reds. Next door, from within the monastery tea garden, the aroma of fermenting apricots wafts up. Although guesthouses surround the place and there is no village visible nearby, it does not as yet feel like a tourist trap. Alchi is a place to linger, to regain one's soul, to lie back in spiritual and mildly alcoholic bliss.

Apple strudel and maths tuition

For a town out in the middle of the Karakoram ranges, where the air is thin and the winters desolately cold, Leh is amazingly cosmopolitan. Although cars traverse Leh's narrow streets, this is really a city for walking. And if you get lost, you can always ask one of the many pink-cheeked school children on their way to or from school or maths tuition, that tyranny which yokes children across the Subcontinent. The city has several 'German bakeries' mostly run by Nepalis, serving delicious cheesecakes and apple strudel. Many of the restaurants serving Tibetan food have waiters from Goa or Bombay—some mournfully biding their time till they can go home. But there's good money to be made in Leh—an old man shining shoes at the corner claimed he makes INR 10-15,000 per month and even a lakh in a good season. Ram Singh the cobbler has brought three sons and their wives over from Ganganagar in Rajasthan, and they all repair shoes. He has not been home to see his wife for three years but, he said, he could always fly back if there is an emergency.

Many of the shopkeepers are from Kashmir, selling pashmina shawls and Kashmiri carpets. One young Kashmiri said he spends the summer in Ladakh and the winter in Madras, and visits his native valley in between. That is when the security forces harass him and ask where he has been all this time. The gem trade—amber, turquoise, silver and pearls—is controlled largely by Tibetans, who number approximately 10,000 in Leh. If there is any resentment by the locals, it is generally well concealed. Every gompa has a photo of the Dalai Lama, often placed within the palm of the Buddha or given some other pride of place, and he is clearly a revered figure.

Here, in Ladakh the rest of India is referred to as "Down". On the flight back, I make grandiose plans, frame research projects that will involve spending years in Ladakh, and vow to read whatever I can on Ladakhi Buddhism. But like all such projects, they vanish the moment I touch 'Down'.

Have a heart for infidel bovines

The Bharatiya Janata Party of India, and its backup organisations, the Shiv Sena and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, would like to pretend that they stand up for the cow. But they do not, really. At the very least, they show a disregard for overseas cows that is nothing less than racist.

In Vedic times, perhaps before the transition to sedentary agriculture, it seems that beef was not taboo. But then the bovines helped the ancients in the settlement of the Ganga plains and hence developed a sanctity that was consecrated by received religion. Cattle provided milk, *gobar* and muscle power for the plough, all of them crucial for the plains agriculturist.

But if you think that the Hindus of present day Hindustan revere the cow in a way that it matters, then chew the cud and think some more. Where do you think old cows go to? How many bovine hospices have you seen in your area? And with the gradual phasing out of bulls from fieldwork as agriculture becomes mechanised, what is happening to the male offspring?

For many old cows and otherwise 'useless' cattle from parts of North India and eastern Nepal, the not-so-happy hunting grounds are in the abattoirs of Dhaka. Ageing bovines walk or are driven overland, to the Bangladeshi border on trucks, then transferred to huge boats, where they ride shoulder-to-shoulder on a life-ending voyage along the Ganga. Out of sight becomes out of mind.

Cattle slaughtered over 30 days ending 24 June '01

Regions	Abattoirs	Incinerators	Total
England	2,758,394	263,777	3,022,171
Wales	454,531	84,486	539,017
Scotland	663,964	54,841	718,805
N. Ireland	738,438	Nil	738,438
UK	4,615,327	403,104	5,018,431

SOURCE: UK DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.

Centuries ago, some Hindus of Nepal with an obvious taste for beef decided that it was okay to consume the close cousin of the fair cow, the milk-giving dark-skinned buffalo. And so, just as ageing cows head for Dhaka, superannuated buffaloes from all over northern India head up the slope to Kathmandu, their hooves destroyed along the rocky trails. Or, they are transported, cramped and distressed, on Tata trucks to serve the demand for *momos* in the Nepali capital. They are roped through their nose rings to the truck rafters so that each animal remains standing to allow the carriage of the maximum number of the sad creatures.

But the human barbarism displayed in these death marches of the Ganga hills and plains are nothing compared to the bovine genocide being carried out in another 'civilised' part of the world. The original culprit is Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, or BSE, "mad cow disease". The disease incubates in cows, and enters the human chain through beef, leading to fatal brain illness.

About a hundred people have died since 1996 when the UK government admitted that the cattle were infected with BSE. About two lakh cattle in all are known to have contracted BSE. To tackle this disease, the British authorities have slaughtered all the 200,000 infected cattle. Just to make sure, they also killed another *five million* creatures that did not show physical signs of BSE.

So, five million cattle (mostly milch cows) killed in Europe, and do I hear a spontaneous wave of outrage amongst those who have made it their political agenda to speak up for the cow? Why this silence as television gives us graphic visuals of massive mounds of carcasses being torched in the rolling hills of central England, or of heavy earth-moving equipment stringing dead cows in the air before dumping them into mass graves?

While this largest ever culling of cattle in the history of the world might be justified in the interest of public health, what does it say of Hindutva's Commitment to the Cow, *Gau Mata*, Cow the Mother Goddess? It is obviously because these are European cows, infidel bovines, and hence of no concern for those whose agenda it is merely to use the cow as a political tool. For, genetic material being the same, it should not matter that one is a British cow and the other a Bihari. As this bovine genocide of *phoren* cows continues, therefore, do not expect a peep of protest from Balasahebji, or the militant Bajrang Dal units of Uttar Pradesh.

Kanak Dixit

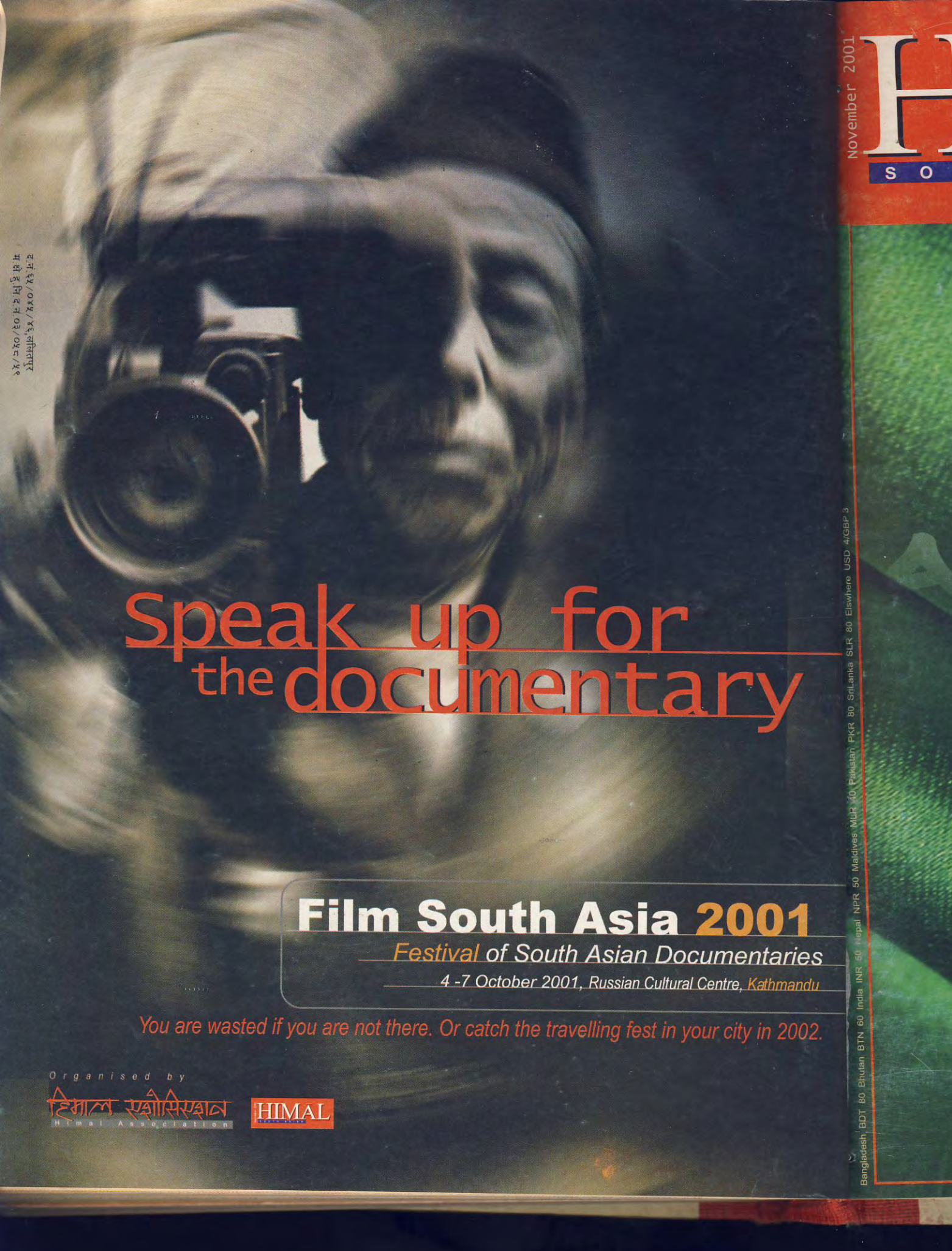
The Explore Nepal P.Ltd.

the explore nepal group

Vistas & Vignettes of Kathmandu Valley & Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve

Bhojan Griha... a grand old building restored and converted into the finest restaurant serving traditional ethnic cuisine Kantipur Temple House...a hotel that combines the unique architecture of a Newari Temple with traditional decor to create the perfect ambience Koshi Tappu Wildlife Camp...a remote luxury safari tented camp in eastern Nepal for exclusive sightings of rare wild water buffaloes & hundred of bird specieWe like to bring you more with our deep commitment towards restoration & conservation.

Post box: 536, Kathmandu, nepal.
Tel: 247078, 247079, 247081, 226130 Fax: 977-1-224237/243250
e-mail: explore@mos.com.np Website: www.catmando.com/the-explore-nepal-group


Speak up for
the documentary
Film South Asia 2001
Festival of South Asian Documentaries
4 -7 October 2001, Russian Cultural Centre, Kathmandu
You are wasted if you are not there. Or catch the travelling fest in your city in 2002.
Organised by
हिमाल एसोसियसन
Himal Association
HIMAL
November 2001
S O
Bangladesh BDT 80 Bhutan BTN 60 India INR 50 Nepal NPR 50 Maldives MLR 40 Pakistan PKR 80 SriLanka SLR 80 Elswhere USD 4/GBP 3