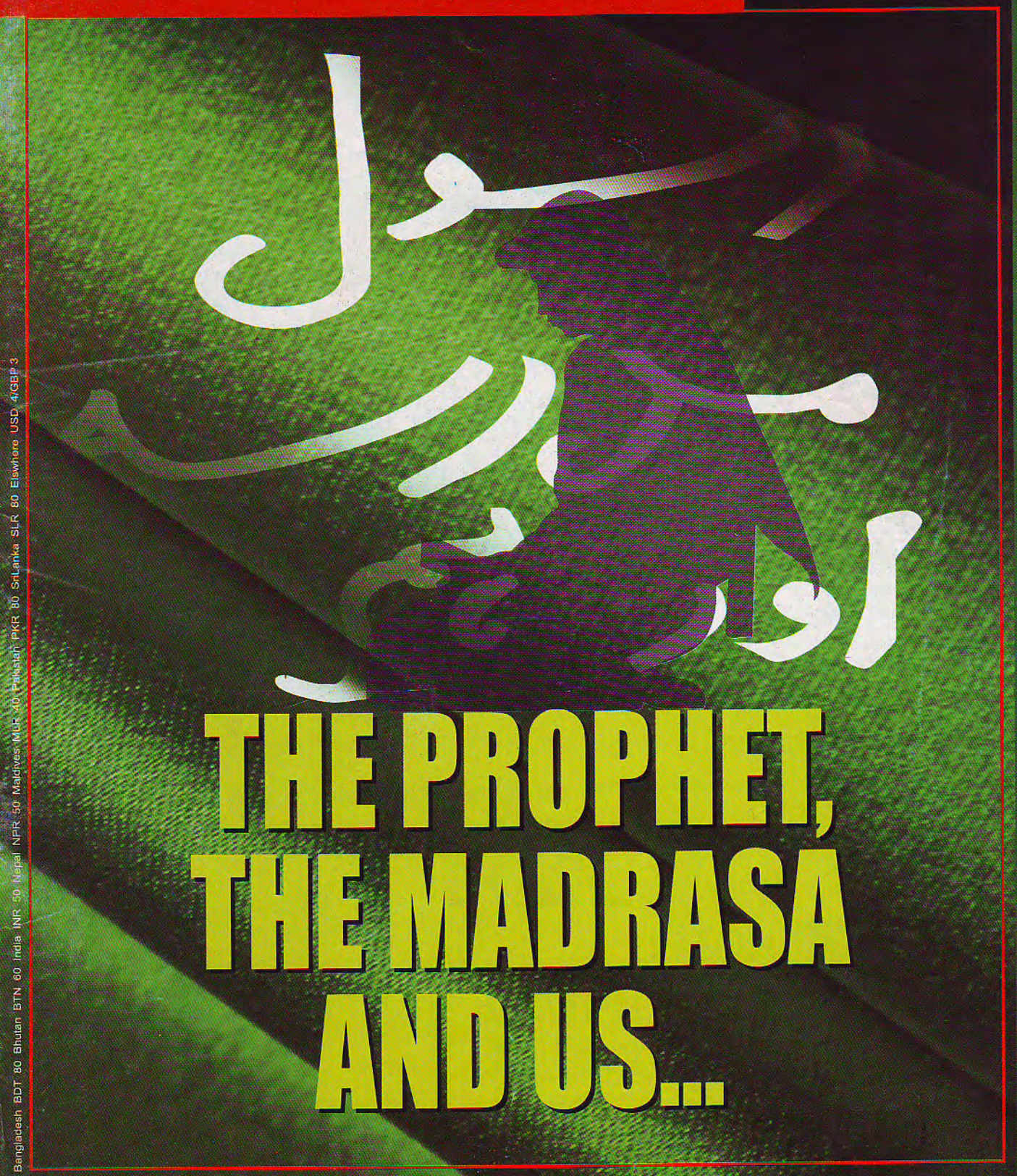
November 2001

HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN

- War & peace in Nepal
- Doubting donors
- Kabul and the king



THE PROPHET, THE MADRASA AND US...

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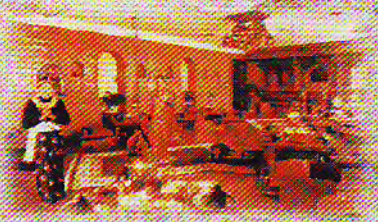

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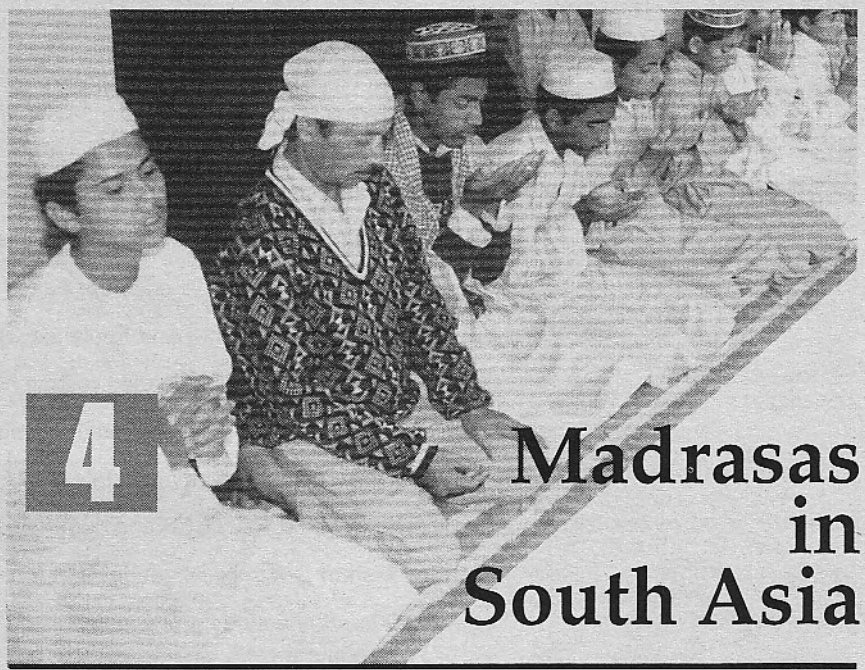
HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 14 No 11 November 2001



4

Madrasas in South Asia

39

Nepal's uneasy peace

21&36

The Laden Effect

HIMAL
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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

Abbas Rashid is a Lahore-based researcher who has made an exhaustive study of the Taliban.

Anagha Neelakantan is an editor with the Nepali Times.

Aqil Shah is a political and security analyst based in Islamabad.

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

Hemant Babu is a researcher and freelance writer based in Bombay.

Michelle Chawla is a Bombay-based researcher and activist.

Nihal Rodrigo is a South Asian diplomat based in Kathmandu.

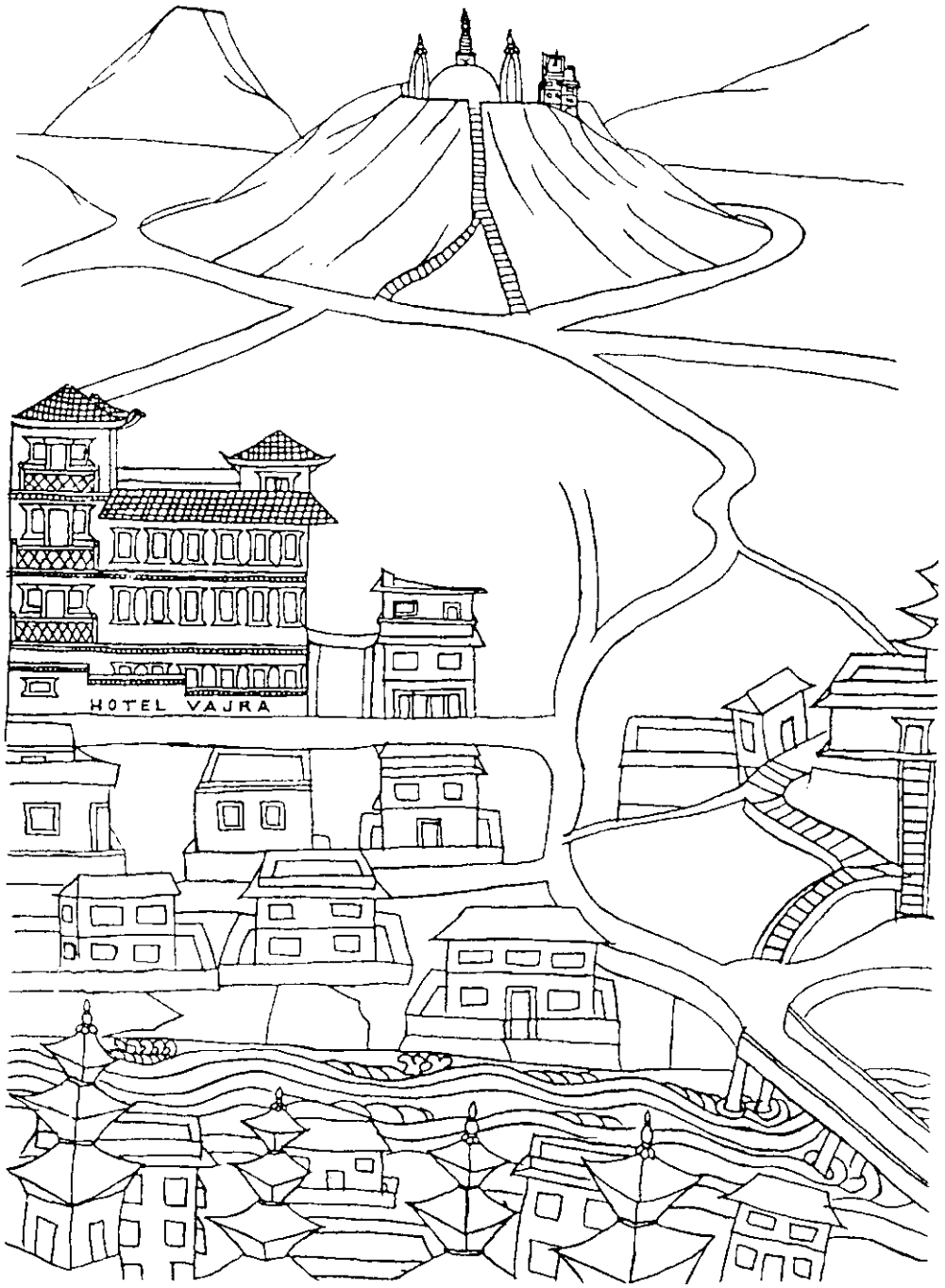
Ranjit Devraj is Indian bureau chief, Inter Press Service, New Delhi.

Rupa Joshi is with the UNICEF and currently stationed in Uzbekistan

Surendra Mohan is a socialist leader and former member of the Indian parliament.

Yoginder Sikand is a student of Islamic history and freelance writer based in Bangalore.

Cover montage by **Subhas Rai**.



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.

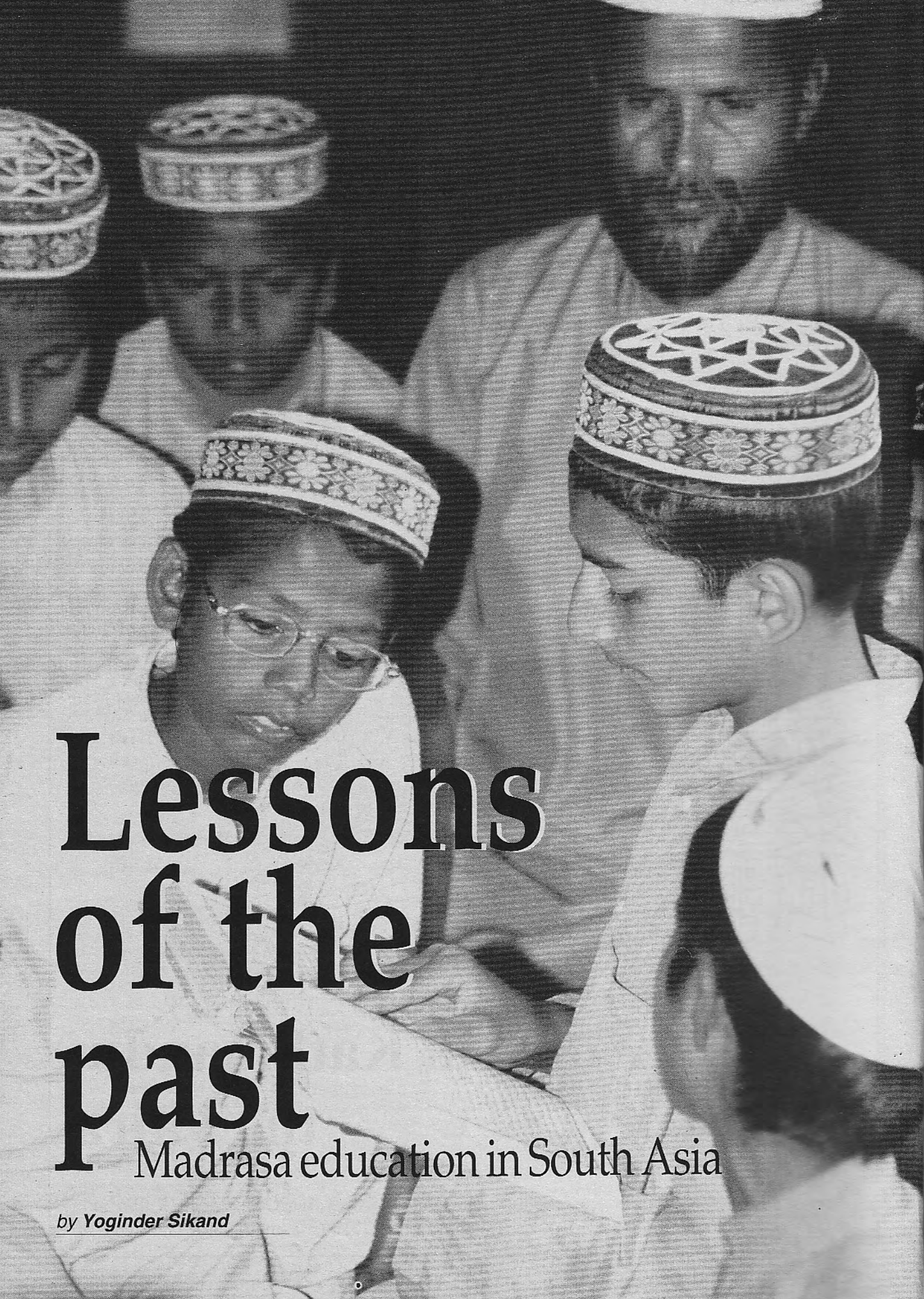
John Collee
The London Observer.

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



Lessons of the past

Madrasa education in South Asia

by **Yoginder Sikand**

Madrasas first emerged in South Asia under the patronage of medeival Muslim rulers, who sought to create a class of clerics to interpret Islamic tradition in ways that suited statecraft. From then till now these institutions have persisted with a curriculum that has seen few changes. The Islam they teach leaves little room for creative interpretation, and it is from this tradition that many political tendencies in the Subcontinent, including the Taliban have emerged.

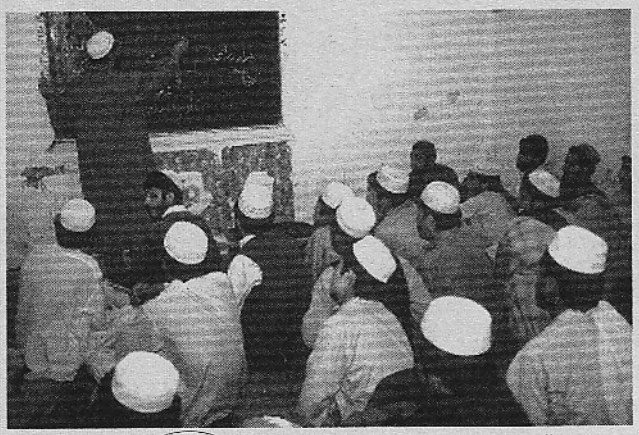
With the seemingly ineluctable march of modernity and secularisation, Western-style development planners in much of the post-colonial Muslim world had hoped that traditional Islamic centres of education—the *madrasas*—would be rapidly replaced by Western schools. These schools would train a new generation of educated Muslims who, while rooted in their own cultural traditions, would imbibe the best that the West had to offer. Madrasas were seen as centres of obscurantism and superstition, and as one of the principal causes of Muslim decline at the hands of the West. In different Muslim countries the attack on the madrasa system took different forms. In Turkey, for instance, a government decree in 1925 ordered the closure of all madrasas in the country with a single stroke of the pen, soon after the Republicans under the staunchly secular Kemal Attaturk took power after deposing the last Muslim Caliph.

This policy was followed in several Muslim countries that came under communist rule in the aftermath of the Russian revolution in 1917, such as Albania and the entire Muslim belt of Central Asia. In other countries, such as Morocco and Algeria, while the state continued to base its legitimacy on Islamic foundations, Islamic education was sought to be 'modernised', with departments of Islamic studies in modern universities taking the place of traditional madrasas. In 1961, the socialist and Arab nationalist, Jamal Abdul Nasser, in his impatience with the traditional Muslim *ulama* (clerics and scholars), transformed the world-renowned Al-Azhar in Cairo, the oldest, largest and most respected madrasa in the world, into a modern university.

South Asia, where over a third of the world's Muslim population lives, followed a slightly different course. While the madrasas were left largely untouched, the effective delinking of madrasa education from the job market led to the declining popularity of traditional Islamic schools. However, the 1980s witnessed a rapid revival of the madrasas across South Asia, in terms of numbers as well as power and influence. In India, the number of madrasas is now estimated at some thirty to forty thousand, with a similar figure for Pakistan and probably a slightly smaller number in Bangladesh. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, madrasas today play a crucial role in national politics. The former has several ulama-based political parties with millions of supporters. The Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan is entirely ulama-based, products of Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. In India, the ulama and their madrasas wield less direct political influence. While there are few ulama active in Indian politics, they, however, exercise an enormous influence on Muslim public opinion. The massive agitations that India witnessed against what was seen to be an attack on Muslim Personal Law in the 1980s were led principally by the ulama. The Muslim Personal Law Board, which sees itself as the key representative of Indian Muslims, is also largely in the hands of madrasa leaders.

Although the power of the ulama among the Muslims of South Asia is today substantial, it is interesting that early Muslim history knew no such separate class of professional clerics and religious scholars as the ulama or of an institution of specialised religious training as the madrasa. After all, Islam is unique among the world's major religions in its radical disavowal of any intermediary between God and lay believers. The Quranic assertion that Muslims could approach God directly obviated the need for a professional class of priests. Every Muslims was seen as, in a sense, his own priest. Prayers could be led by any believer, for God was believed to be equally accessible to all Muslims. The institution of priesthood was further undermined because acquiring knowledge of the scriptural tradition was seen to be a duty binding on all Muslims, men as well as women, and not as the prerogative of a special class. While some people were recognised as more learned or pious than others, early Islamic history saw no paid class of ulama as religious specialists. Islamic knowledge could be had by all, generally provided freely in mosques and, later, in Sufi lodges.

The word madrasa shares a common root with the term *dars*, which means 'lesson' or 'instruction'. Although it does not specifically refer to a religious seminary, the word has come to be used as such in



Methods old and new: A lecture in a madrasa and Muslim women at a computer lab.

common parlance. It is a specialised institution for the training of ulama (literally 'scholars'). The word ulama (singular, *alim*), too, does not denote a class of specialists in the Islamic disciplines, for early Islamic tradition did not countenance any distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' education. However, today the term ulama is used to refer to a class of scholars who are well-versed in the intricacies of the Islamic legal tradition.

The emergence of the institution of the madrasa—as distinct from the mosque—as a centre for religious learning, and of the ulama as a class of religious specialists, coincided with the spread of Islam outside the Arabian peninsula in the years after the death of the Prophet. By the eighth century, large parts of West and Central Asia, in addition to almost the whole of North Africa, had been brought under Muslim rule. A de facto division between political and religious power, foreign to pristine Islam, now came into being. Under the Caliphates of the Umayyad in Damascus, and, then later, the Abbasid in Baghdad, while political power rested with the Caliphs, religious authority gradually began being exercised by a special class of men—the ulama—set apart from the general body of Muslims as experts in Islamic theology and law. The two classes worked in tandem, the Caliphs providing the ulama with protection and official patronage, and the ulama seeking to interpret the Islamic tradition in order to legitimise the rule of the Caliphs, which, as the historical records tell us, rarely, if ever, accorded with the foundational principles of Islam.

It was in this period that madrasas as specialised institutions for the training of ulama emerged, first in West Asia, and then, as Muslim rule spread, in Africa, southern Europe and South Asia. Madrasas were subsidised with permanent sources of income, such as land grants by the state (*inam*) or by endowments (*awqaf*) by rich Muslims. Although madrasas, as distinct from elementary mosque-schools (*makatib*), were known before the tenth century, the first major madrasa dates to as late as 1065, when Nizam-ul Mulk, the Seljuq *wazir*, ordered the construction of the grand Nizamiah madrasa in Baghdad. It appears that the multiple challenges posed to the Sunni religious and political establishment at the time, in the form of the Ithna Ashari Shi'as (fierce opponents of Sunni claims to orthodoxy), the Batini Isma'ilis (with their belief in the abrogation of the shariat) and the Mutazilite rationalists (who insisted that religion must be understood through the intellect), prompted Nizam-ul Mulk to set up the Baghdad madrasa to train a class of loyal ulama who could effectively deal with what were seen as challenges to the state in the form of dissenting religious sects and movements.

The Nizamiah school, like the madrasas which, following it, were set up in other parts of the Muslim world, was intended to train bureaucrats for the royal courts and the administration, as well as judges (*qazis*), jurisprudents (*fuqaha*) and *muftis* qualified to issue *fatawa* or legal opinions, all of whom were appointed by the state to staff various levels of the bureaucracy. Typically, teachers as well as students were drawn from the elite, and there seems to have been little provision for the education of children from the poorer classes. The thirteenth century commentator, Ziauddin Barani, a Turkish noble attached to the court of the Delhi Sultans, insisted in his *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* that higher religious education and top religious and administrative posts were to be kept as a closely-guarded preserve of the foreign-born Turkish, Central Asian, Iranian and Arab Muslim elite. The poorer classes of the Muslims, in India consisting largely of 'low' caste indigenous converts and their descendants, were to be content merely with knowledge of the basic principles of the faith. Barani's views, of course, had no legitimacy in the *shariah*, for the Quran lays down the fundamental equality of all believers, as such, but they reflected the way in which large sections of the medieval Muslim elite perceived themselves and the world around them.

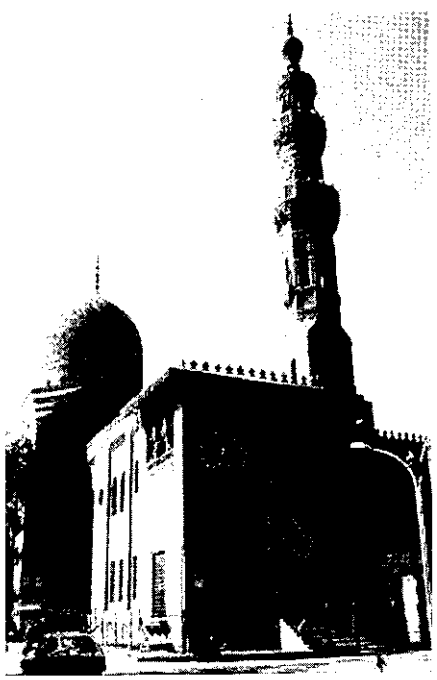
Since one of the primary aims of the madrasas was to produce a class of bureaucrats and, particularly, judges, as employees of the state, the teaching of Islamic law (*fiqh*) came to occupy a major position in the madrasa curriculum. This stress on the law became so

pronounced that in the minds of many ulama, Islamic education was practically reduced to the teaching of the *shariah*, which the later Sufis were to vehemently protest. Among the Sunnis, who today account for some ninety per cent of the world's Muslim population, four schools of jurisprudence developed—the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi—and each of these schools had its own chain of madrasas, wherein its own system of jurisprudence was taught. The four Sunni schools recognised each other's legitimacy, but differed on minor points of detail in their understanding of the derivation of the rules of Islamic law from the primary sources, the *Quran* and the *Hadith* (reports of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), and the two secondary sources, *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ijma* (the consensus of the community). In addition to law, Arabic grammar and prose, logic and philosophy, subjects that a prospective bureaucrat would find indispensable, were also taught at the madrasas. Theology (*kalam*) and mysticism (*tasawwuf*), subjects that one would have expected religious seminaries to specialise in, received relatively little attention. Orthopraxy, proper ritual practice and social behaviour, rather than orthodoxy or correct religious belief, was the major concern of the establishment ulama, and so it remains till this day, and this was clearly reflected in the subjects taught at the madrasas.

Ulama, world and truth

In South Asia, Muslim rulers made elaborate arrangements for the setting up of madrasas to train a class of ulama attached to their courts and to provide them with the legitimacy that they needed to bolster their rule. Not all ulama accepted royal patronage, however. In the eyes of many Sufis, particularly those belonging to the Chishti order, by far the most popular in India, those ulama who accepted employment under the Sultans were seen as little more than puppets in their hands, willing to barter their faith for worldly trifles and ever ready to provide favourable fatawa to support even those policies of the Sultans that were in flagrant violation of the Islamic law. They were branded as 'worldly ulama' (*ulama-e-su*), in contrast to the ulama of the truth' (*ulama-e-haq*), who refused any favours from the state or from the ruling nobility and thereby preserved their faith intact. In addition to madrasas producing higher-level ulama, most mosques had schools (*makatib*) attached to them where children were taught to recite and memorise the *Quran* and a smattering of Persian and Arabic, a pattern that continues till this day. No standardised syllabus was employed in the madrasas, however, and each school was free to teach its own set of books, many of which, however, they shared in common. These consisted, largely, of commentaries on classical works on Islamic law. With the general consensus of the ulama that the 'gates of *ijtihad*', or creative understanding of the law in the light of changing conditions, had been 'closed' following the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate in the late thirteenth century, after the devastation of Baghdad by the plundering Mongol hordes, the madrasa curriculum lost its earlier dynamism, degenerating into a timeless warp. Many, though not all, ulama now began to insist that new understandings and interpretations of the divine law were forbidden, and all that Muslims needed to do to preserve their faith intact was to "blindly follow" (*taqlid*) the interpretations laid down by the medieval scholars. New books, attuned to the very different context in which Muslims found themselves in India, ceased to be written and read, and a strict conformity to the classical works was sought to be rigidly enforced.

Signs of change emerged in the late seventeenth century however, when the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir commissioned a team of ulama to prepare a compendium of Islamic law, named after him as the *Fatawa-i-Alamgiri*. The emperor granted one of the ulama associated with this project, Mulla Nizamuddin, an old mansion owned by a French trader, the Firanghi Mahal, in Lucknow, where he set up a madrasa that soon emerged as the leading centre of Islamic studies in North India, with students flocking there from different parts of the Mughal empire. Mulla Nizamuddin prepared a fresh curriculum for study here, which came to be known after him as the Dars-i-Nizami or the "Syllabus of Nizami". The focus of the Dars-i-Nizami was on what were called the "rational sciences" (*maqulat*), subjects such as law, philosophy and grammar that would befit prospective bureaucrats. Three centuries later, the Dars-i-Nizami continues to be the syllabus of most madrasas in South Asia today, although an increasing number of books on the "revealed sciences" (*manqulat*), such as theology (*kalam*), the traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the principles of Islamic law (*usul-i-fiqh*) have been added over time.

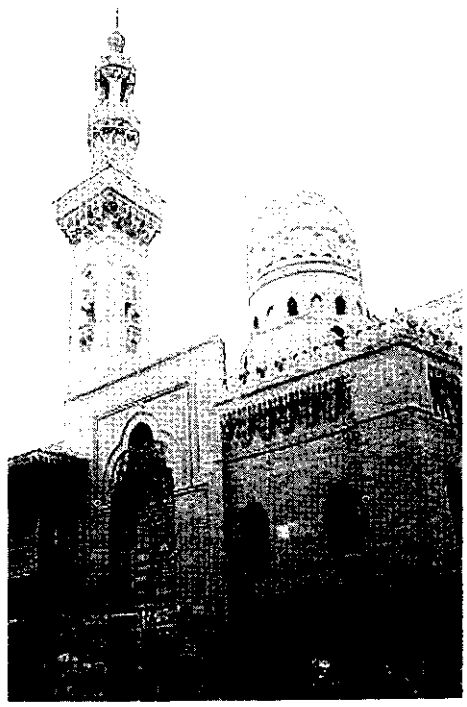


While in Mughal times the madrasas served the purpose of training an intellectual and bureaucratic elite, leaving the poorer classes largely out of their purview, things began to change with the onset of British rule. By the early

nineteenth century, the British had replaced Persian with English as the language of officialdom and Muslim qazis and muftis with lawyers and judges trained in English law. The eclipse of Muslim political power in the region, and the administrative changes wrought by the British, meant that the ulama and their madrasas were now bereft of sources of political support and patronage. In many cases, the vast grants (awqaf) that Muslim rulers had provided the madrasas were taken over by the East India Company.

In this rapidly changing context, the ulama now began to turn to ordinary Muslims for support. It is striking that it was only in the aftermath of the failed revolt of 1857 against the British that a vast network of madrasas was established all over north India. In the absence of Muslim political power, it was the ordinary Muslim who was seen as the "defender of Islam", and, for this, every Muslim, it now came to be believed, must be armed with a knowledge of the principles of the faith. Islamic knowledge now became far more easily accessible to ordinary Muslims than ever before. The introduction of the printing press was eagerly taken advantage of by the ulama, who published scores of tracts to impart Islamic knowledge to an increasingly literate constituency. The rapidly increasing number of madrasas that now began being set up further galvanised this process of bringing ordinary Muslims to share in the *shariah*-centred Islamic tradition, which they had hitherto been effectively kept apart from.

The most important event in this regard was the setting up in 1867 of the Da-rul Ulum madrasa at the town of Deoband in the Saharanpur district of present-day Uttar Pradesh, not far from Delhi. The Dar-ul Ulum is today the largest Islamic seminary in the world after the Al-Azhar in Cairo, and has several thousand smaller madrasas attached to it all over India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as well as in countries in the West where South Asian Muslims are to be found. Some of the founders of Dar-ul Ulum had taken part in the aborted revolt against the British in 1857, inspired by a commitment to re-establishing Muslim rule in the Subcontinent. After the defeat of the revolt, they turned their attention to the field of education with the aim of promoting a religious consciousness among the Muslims in order to carry on the struggle against the British through other means. They envisaged the madrasa as a centre for the preservation of the tradition of Islamic learning and Muslim culture, which they saw as being under grave threat from the British, and from the 'irreligious' influences of modernity that British rule had brought in its wake.



Thus, many of those who founded Dar-ul Ulum were opposed to the modernist attempts at reconciling Islam with critical reason, Western culture and Victorian morality, as best represented by reformist, liberal Muslim leaders like Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan and Amir 'Ali. They were equally opposed to the Christian missionaries, and, later, to the fiercely anti-Muslim Hindu revivalist Arya Samaj. British rule, atheism, rationalism, modernism, scepticism, Christian missionaries and the Arya Samaj attacks on Islam were all seen as major challenges which could only be met if Muslims firmly abided by the dictates of their faith, and, in the minds of the founders of the Dar-ul Ulum, the most effective means for this was by setting up a chain of religious schools which would train young Muslims in the *shariah*-centred Islamic tradition.

The closed gates of *ijtihad*

In a marked departure from the pattern of the traditional Muslim religious schools, the founders of the Deoband madrasa consciously decided not to depend on the state or on the traditional Muslim elites for patronage and monetary support. Instead, they insisted that ordinary Muslims must contribute to the running of the institution, in whatever small way they could, in order for it to be a real community-wide enterprise. Special delegates were appointed by the madrasa to travel to towns in villages throughout north India to collect contributions from ordinary Muslims to support the costs of running the seminary.

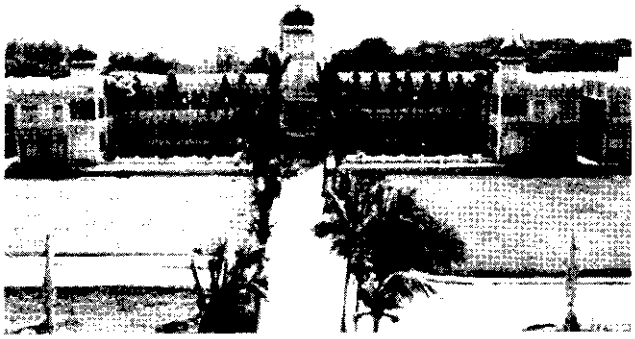
In its early years most of the Deoband Madrasa's students were drawn from families from western Uttar Pradesh *qasbas* or small towns with a significant population of Muslim gentry with a long and established tradition of Islamic education. But in a few decades its student composition gradually changed. As more well-off Muslim families began sending their children to modern schools, and, in particular, to the Aligarh College set up by Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan (who, interestingly, was branded a *kafir* by leading Deobandis for his rationalistic views on religion, notably his conviction that the "Word of God", the *Quran*, could not contradict the "Work of God", the laws of nature), Deoband began attracting increasing numbers of students from lower-middle class and even peasant and artisan families, who, in the centuries of Muslim rule, seem to have had little or no access to Islamic education at all. The free

education, including board and lodging, that was provided at the madrasa, and the hope for a job as a mosque *imam* or madrasa teacher upon graduation, a position of considerable respect and authority, acted as powerful incentives bringing large numbers of young boys from poorer families to enroll at the Dar-ul Ulum. The new access that the madrasa provided these students to the *shariah*-centred Islamic tradition and the culture of the Muslim elite added further impetus to their quest for upward social mobility.

The madrasa at Deoband represented a new form of Islamic "orthodoxy", seeking to come to terms with the challenges of modernity. Thus, on the one hand, it willingly embraced the bureaucratic methods of functioning associated with the British government and Christian missionary schools, including a fixed syllabus, regular examinations and an administrative hierarchy. It also made good use of the new media of print to spread its doctrines far beyond the narrow circles of the madrasas of earlier times. On the other hand, its theology remained firmly grounded in the Hanafi tradition, enjoining, as it did, stern conformity to past precedent as formulated by the medieval *fuqaha*, or jurists. It refused to recognise the need to reinterpret Islamic law and jurisprudence in the vastly changed context of British rule. In the face of the challenges of modernity, it insisted that Muslims must firmly abide by the traditional corpus of fiqh or jurisprudence as laid down in the books penned by Hanafi scholars centuries ago. To depart from this tradition was seen as tantamount to *bidaat* or "innovation" from the path (*sunnat*) of the Prophet Muhammad, which was nothing less than grave heresy.

Pre-Deoband madrasas had no fixed curriculum or a system of regular classes. A student would travel from place to place, reading a particular book from a particular alim (religious scholar) who was considered an authority on it. After he had mastered that particular book, often having had to memorise it completely, he would be given a certificate (*sanad* or *ijaza*) which would allow him, in turn, to teach that book to others. The Deoband madrasa can be credited with having instituted, for the first time in South Asia, a radical change in the methods of transmission of religious knowledge. The peripatetic seeker of knowledge (*talib*) was replaced with a regular student who enrolled for a *maulvi alim* or *maulvi fazil* course, which required him to stay at the madrasa for a period of between seven and twelve years, depending on the degree of specialisation that he wished to pursue. Each year he would be required to take a series of examinations, the papers for which were set by the leading *sheikhs* or masters at the madrasa. Yet, these pedagogical innovations did not go far enough. Students were still required to memorise the texts and critical debate was strongly discouraged.

The content of the syllabus of the Deoband madrasa represented a firm commitment of the founders of the school to the classical Hanafi tradition. The Dars-i-Nizami of the early eighteenth century Mulla Nizamuddin continued almost intact, except for the excision of certain "rational sciences" (maqulat) such as Greek philosophy, which were deemed to undermine faith in the divine nature of the Quranic revelation. In addition, more books of *Hadith* (narrations about the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) and fiqh were introduced. The overwhelming focus of the curriculum was on Islamic jurisprudence, so much so that, in the minds of the Deobandis, Islam was seen almost as synonymous with the *shariah*, while the rich tradition of classical Islamic theology (kalam) was almost completely ignored. Unlike the Muslim modernists of their time, as represented by Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh school, the Deobandis saw no room for ijtihad or interpreting the demands of the *shariah* in the context of modern conditions. The "gates of ijtihad" (*bab-ul ijtihad*), were, they insisted, "firmly closed".



The Darul Uloom Islamiyyah Arabiyyah Matliwala in Bharuch, Gujarat.

Of particular concern to the founders of the Deoband madrasa was the need for Muslims to strictly follow the practices (*sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad in every aspect of their lives. This required that all influences, practices and beliefs that had no sanction in the sunnah of the Prophet be strongly attacked, these being branded as un-Islamic. Among these were what were seen as 'Hinduistic' influences, such as the worship of local deities, participation in Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi, child marriage, consulting soothsayers and astrologers, the ban on widow remarriage and a host of domestic rituals associated with birth, marriage and death and other life-cycle events. It was held that if these practices continued unabated, the Muslims would gradually be absorbed into the Hindu fold, a fear that gained particular impetus in the wake of the *shuddhi* (purification) campaign launched by the aggressively anti-Muslim Arya Samaj under Swami Shraddhanand in the 1920s, which saw the mass conversion of several thousand neo-Muslims to Hinduism in large parts of north India. Firm lines of division were, thus, sought to be drawn between Muslims and Hindus, to stave off the looming threat of mass apostasy.

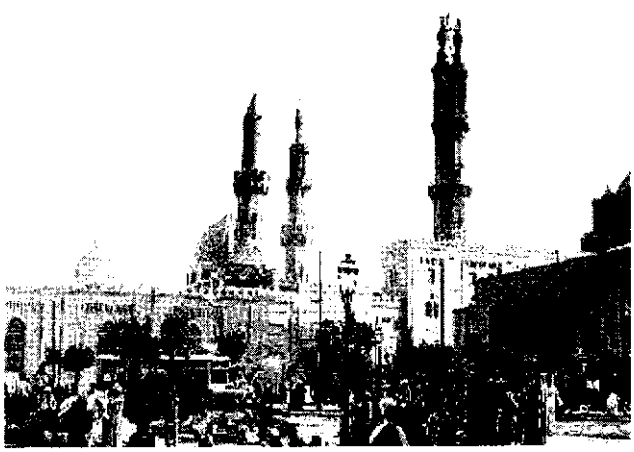
The Deobandis were also equally opposed to what they viewed as the 'un-Islamic' beliefs and practices among the Sunni Muslim populace associated with popular Sufism and Shiaism. Although not opposed to Sufism as such, and many of the Deobandi sheikhs were themselves Sufi masters, they vehemently attacked many popular practices that had, over the centuries, developed around the cults of the Sufis. These included prostration at Sufi shrines (arguing, instead, that prostration, being tantamount to worship, was due to Allah alone), musical and dance performances and wasteful and costly rituals. They also bitterly critiqued those *be-shariah* Sufis who did not abide by the dictates of Islamic law. The mystical quest (*tariqa*), they insisted, must be trod within the bounds of the *shariah*. Sufis who believed that they were not bound by the *shariah*, as well as the Shias, were condemned as infidels and enemies of the faith.

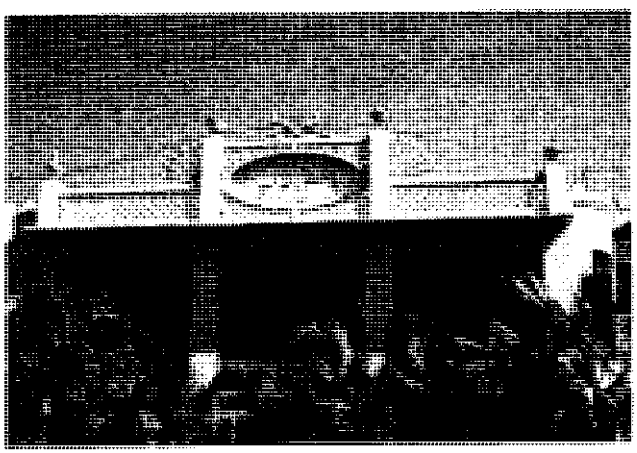
United nation, *mutahhida qaum*

Today, the Deobandis have emerged as a powerful school of thought, with several thousand madrasas all over South Asia associated with the mother madrasa, the Dar-ul Ulum at Deoband. Many students from these madrasas go to Deoband to spend some time in specialised training in Islamic law. Till recently, several hundred students from Deobandi madrasas abroad would enroll at the Dar-ul Ulum to pursue their higher studies, but the number of such students is now negligible. Co-ordination between the Dar-ul Ulum and smaller Deobandi madrasas is diffuse and loose, however, more in the nature of a shared vision rather than in terms of any identifiable linkages or organisational bonds. The overall commitment to the Deobandi vision of Islam is what unites them, besides visits and lecture tours by leading Deobandi ulama and the exchange of books and periodicals. The Deobandi vision also inspires several Muslim political movements active today in various parts of South Asia. Thus, the ruling Taliban ("students") in Afghanistan are products of the numerous Deobandi madrasas located in Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan. Common to them is the understanding that western influence is to be shunned and so must efforts to interpret Islam afresh. 'Blind following' of the medieval scholars of the Hanafi fiqh is strictly enjoined.

Similar is the case of the Jami'at-ul Ulama-i-Islam, one of the several radical Islamic political parties based in Pakistan which are today actively involved in what they call the 'jihad' against the Americans in Afghanistan and against the Indians in Kashmir. Radical Deobandi madrasas got a major boost in the Zia-ul Haq years, when the Pakistani dictator, in an effort to bolster his own fragile legitimacy, liberally funded numerous madrasas all over the country. They dispensed a radical Islamist discourse, churning out thousands of young students who later went on to join the ranks of the *mujahidin* fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Deobandis in Pakistan, along with the Jama'at-e-Islami (to which, interestingly, many of the Deobandis have been fiercely opposed) were the major beneficiaries of this newly-found state largesse of the Zia years. In Bangladesh, too, governments with little popular legitimacy, beginning with Gen. Zia-ur Rahman in 1975, have been actively patronising the madrasas, employing the ulama as a weapon with which to beat the secular opposition with.

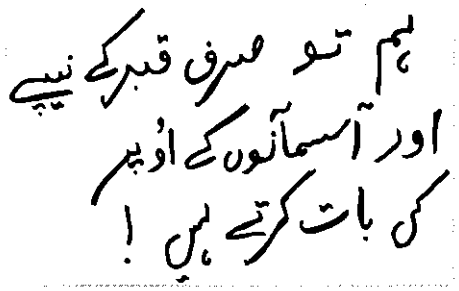
However, not all Deobandis are active on the political front, and there are sharp differences even among them. This diversity in political positions of the Deobandis can be traced to the early evolution of the Deoband vision in post-Mughal India. Among the founding fathers of the Deoband were some who were actively committed to armed jihad against the British, while there were others quite willing to work within the framework of British rule for preserving and promoting Muslim interests and the Islamic tradition. Even among the former there were acute differences on the nature of the jihad that was envisaged. Some called for armed struggle against the British to convert India into *dar-ul-islam* or "land of Islam", but they were always in a minority. The dominant voices at the madrasa from the





The Al Azhar in Cairo: First a madrasa, then a university and Darul Uloom Haqannia near Peshawar: School for the Talib?

first decade of the twentieth century till 1947 were of those who, while committed to the struggle against the British, insisted on the need to co-operate with the Hindus in a joint effort for winning freedom for India. Prominent among these was the Shaikh-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmud-ul Hasan, who, along with several other Deobandi stalwarts, played a major role in the Khilafat movement in the second decade of the twentieth century, roping in the Indian National Congress party, led by Gandhi, to jointly oppose Britain's policy towards Ottoman Turkey and to rally support for the rule of the Caliph in Istanbul. The Khilafat movement failed in preventing the abolition of the Caliphate—the Young Turks under Mustafa Kemal Attaturk themselves did what the Deobandis had accused the British of conspiring to achieve—but the links established in the course of the movement between the Deobandis and the Congress were further strengthened in the years to come.



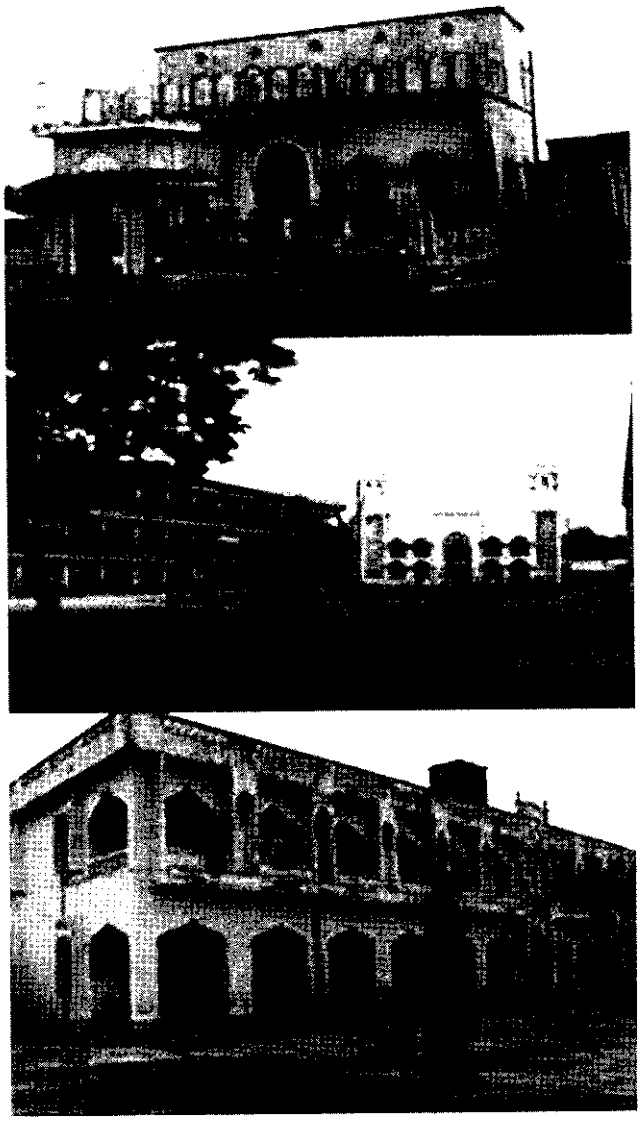
"We talk only of the grave below and the heavens above" — the refrain of the Tablighi Jamaat.

Thus it came to be that the majority of the Deobandis, represented by the largely-Deobandi Jamiat-ul ulama-i-Hind (the "Union of the ulama of India"), established in 1917 in the course of the Khilafat movement, vehemently opposed the Muslim League and its 'two-nation theory'. The head of the Deoband madrasa, Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, a strong supporter of the Congress, penned a tract against the claims of the advocates of the Pakistan movement, insisting that the Hindus and the Muslims of India were one "united nation" (*mutahhida qaum*). He insisted that the territorial nationalism of the Congress was fully in keeping with the Prophetic tradition, for, he argued, the Prophet himself had established a united nation of Muslims, Jews and pagan Arabs in the city-state of Medina. Although Madani remained the dominant voice within the Deoband tradition, some notable Deobandis, including such renowned scholars as Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi and Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, opposed the Congress and lent their full-fledged support to the Muslim League.

This tradition of political pluralism, rather than any one fixed political stance, continues to characterise the Deobandi tradition today. Thus, if the Taliban represent one extreme, the Tablighi Jamaat, the single largest Islamic movement in the world today, and active in countries around the globe with several million activists, characterises the other. The Tablighi Jamaat has its global headquarters in New Delhi, and has a major presence in all countries in South Asia. Unlike the Taliban, it has no overt political pretensions. It insists that political power is not to be actively struggled for but is a gift that God might, in his wisdom, choose to bestow on the Muslims if they faithfully follow his religion, and that Muslims must turn their attention from these worldly concerns to the world after death. "We talk only of the grave below and the heavens above", is a constant Tablighi refrain. Like the Taliban, the Tablighis also owe inspiration to the Deobandi vision—its founder, Maulana Ilyas (d.1944) was a student of the Deoband madrasa, but in terms of politics it stands poles apart. In fact, radical Islamists have not refrained from accusing it of being used by the 'enemies of Islam' to depoliticise the Muslims and to divert their attention from worldly concerns to imaginary pies in the sky. In between these two extremes is the Jamiat-ul Ulama-i-Hind. It adopts a middle-of-the-way path, striving to promote Muslim community interests, such as the cause of the Urdu language, the preservation of Muslim Personal Law, provision of religious education and protesting against atrocities against Muslims in India. It is, however, largely a spent force in terms of political appeal, being considered by many to be a feeble, ineffective and pliable appendage of the Congress party.

Deobandi scriptural reformism coupled with Aligarh-style modernism provided the inspiration for the establishment in 1894 of the Nadwat-ul ulama madrasa at Lucknow. Its founder was the renowned Islamic scholar Maulana Shibli Numani. Shibli was equally dissatisfied with the unrelenting traditionalism of the Deobandis and what he saw as the uncritical embrace of Western modernity by Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan and his British-supported Aligarh College. Shibli left his job at the Aligarh College following differences with Sayyed Ahmad Khan over the college's overtly pro-British leanings. An ardent supporter of a united Hindu-Muslim struggle against the British, Shibli believed that the future of the Muslim community in India critically depended on the emergence of a new class of ulama who, while firmly grounded in the tradition of Islamic learning, were also fully conversant with the challenges of modern life. Shibli sought to reform the traditional madrasa system, making subjects such as science, history and English compulsory for the students of the Nadwa. Today, the Nadwa has some 2000 students from various parts of India, as well as some from abroad. Shibli's vision for a new generation of ulama able to creatively respond to the demands of modernity, however, was to fail. The Nadwa, in its syllabus and methods, now differs but little from Deoband, except that rudimentary English and science are taught, a cosmetic concession to Shibli's original vision.

Vehemently opposed to the Deobandis are what are loosely called the Barelwis, who insist that they alone represent the true Sunni Muslim tradition, and so arrogate to themselves the term *Ahl-i-Sunnat wal Jamaat* ("The People of the Sunnah and the Community").



From top: Jamia Muhammadiya (Tulsipur), Darul Uloom (Basti), Jamia Siraj ul Uloom (Boundhiyar), all madrasas on the Indo-Nepal border under attack from the Indian Home Ministry .

Unlike the Deobandis, the so-called Barelwis do not represent a homogenous and clearly defined school of thought. They represent, rather, the traditional Sufi-centred and internally plural and loosely organised Islam of the South Asian countryside, heavily influenced by local cults and belief-systems. The term Barelwis is not used by the Ahl-i-Sunnat wal Jamaat themselves, but, rather, by their detractors to characterise them as followers of the nineteenth century Qadri Sufi, Imam Ahmad Raza Khan (b.1856) of Bareilly in present-day Uttar Pradesh. Imam Ahmad Raza was one of the foremost traditional South Asian clerics who played a leading role in defending traditional popular Sufism from the attacks of a diverse range of opponents, including the Deobandis and the Aligarh modernists, all of whom he branded as infidels and 'enemies of Islam'. In 1906, he issued a fatawa accusing leading figures at Deoband—including Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi and Ashraf Ali Thanvi—of being kafirs and hence outside the pale of Islam. (In turn, the Deobandis countered with a fatawa of their own, insisting that the Deobandis alone were the true Hanafi Sunnis).

In contrast to his opponents, Imam Ahmad Raza insisted that traditional Sufism, centred in the belief in the intercessionary powers of the Sufi saints and the various ritual practices associated with their shrines (*dargahs*) represented the true Sunni tradition. Another major point of dispute with the Deobandis was the Imam's belief in Muhammad's superhuman nature, as being "present and hearing" (*hazir-o-nazir*) even after his departure from the world, with which the Deobandis disagreed. In order to defend the tradition of popular Sufi Islam from both the Deobandis and the Muslim modernists, Khan set up the Madrasa Manzar al Islam in Bareilly. Like the Dar-ul Ulum at Deoband, against which it sought to define itself, the Manzar al-Islam madrasa taught the Dars-i-Nizami, to which were added numerous Sufi texts penned by Khan himself as well as polemical treatises seeking to prove all other Muslim groups as deviant. Over the years, several madrasas owing inspiration to the Barelwi vision were set up in various parts of South Asia, affiliated in a loose, largely ideological rather than organisational sense, to the madrasa at Bareilly.

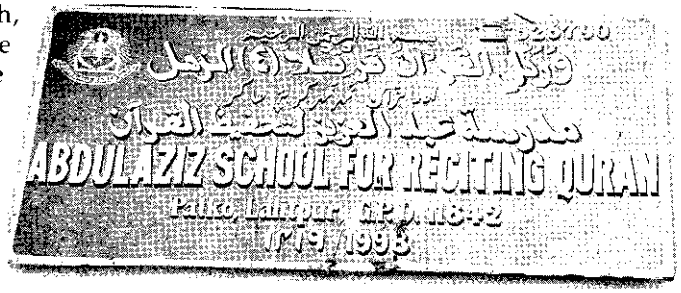
Despite this spirited defence of popular Sufism, the Barelwis remained politically conservative. This political stance should be seen, at least in part, as owing to their differences with the Deobandis. Thus, in contrast to the Deobandis, the Barelwis strongly opposed the Congress, prohibited agitation against the British and enthusiastically supported the Muslim League. When the Non-Cooperation Movement was launched in 1920 by an alliance of the Deobandi Khilafatists and Gandhi, Maulana Ahmed Riza remained predictably aloof. He objected to Muslim collaboration with Hindus in preference to "People of the Book", namely the Christian British. In the post-1947 period, the Barelwis and their madrasas have remained by and large politically quiescent, in India as well as in Pakistan. Within India, their ire has been directed more at fellow Muslims—in particular the Deobandis, Jama'at-e-Islami and the so-called Wahhabis—than at non-Muslims.

The all-embracing ideology

The Jamaat-e-Islami and the so-called Wahhabis are the two other major Sunni groups in South Asia, and both of them are linked to or have their own madrasa networks. In India, the Jamaat has its headquarters in

Delhi and units in almost all the states of India. In contrast to other Sunni groups, the Jamaat in India does not have any official madrasa of its own. Instead, it is loosely affiliated with several madrasas scattered all over the country, the most prominent being the Jami'at-ul Falah at Baleriaganj (Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh), the Markazi Darsgah ('The Central School') in Rampur (Uttar Pradesh) and the Idara-e-Tahqeeq-o-Tasneef-e-Islami at Aligarh. Common to all these madrasas is the understanding that underlies their own vision of the Islamist project—of Islam not simply as a bundle of rituals, of prescriptive and proscriptive rules, or simply as a private relationship between the individual believer and God. Rather, Islam is seen as a complete worldview and an all-embracing ideology and way of life, covering all aspects of personal as well as collective life.

In line with this understanding of Islam, and in contrast to the traditional Sunni madrasas, in religious schools associated with the Jamaat Islamic disciplines such as jurisprudence and Arabic grammar are taught along with modern subjects such as English, history and science. The voluminous works of the founder of the Jamaat, Maulana Sayyed Abul Maududi, are also compulsory reading. Unlike both the Deobandi and Barelwi madrasas, Jamaat-related madrasas stress the need for Muslim scholars to exercise ijtihad or the application of reason in matters of Islamic law within the broad framework of the shariah. In contrast to the Deobandis and the Barelwis, the Jamaat does not turn its back on the challenges thrown up by the onward march of modernity. Rather, it critically accepts modernity, seeking to Islamise it. Thus, Jamaat scholars have been in the forefront of what is known as the "Islamisation of knowledge" project, seeking to ground not just the social sciences, but even linguistics and the physical sciences in a normative framework based on the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The Jamaat has published scores of tracts and books on Islamic perspectives on issues of contemporary concern as diverse as family planning and women's rights, on the one hand, and international relations and biotechnology, on the other.



A madrasa in Patan, Kathmandu which gives shelter, food and lessons to orphaned children.

The Ahl-e-Hadith, or the so-called Wahhabis, are the fourth major Sunni group in South Asia, and they have their own network of madrasas spread all over the region. The Ahl-e-Hadith, in contrast to the other Sunnis, are vehemently opposed to all forms of Sufism. They insist that rather than rely on Sufi saints or imams of the four recognised schools of Sunni jurisprudence, Muslims must go back to the *Quran* and the *Hadith* of the Prophet for instruction and inspiration—hence their name of "People of the *Hadith*". They insist on a literal reading of the Quranic text and the corpus of *Hadith*. They derive their inspiration from the puritan eighteenth century Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahhab (hence the pejorative title of 'Wahhabi' by which they are known by their detractors), who crusaded against popular practices and Sufism in the Arabia of his time, insisting that Muslims strictly abide by the dictates of the *shariah*.

The Ahl-e-Hadith also traces its origins to the jihad movement launched by the charismatic Sayyed Ahmad and Ismail Shahid against the Sikhs in the Punjab and the Pathan borderlands, seeking to mobilise the Pathans against what they considered Sikh misrule and oppression. The jihad was crushed by the army of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh in 1831 at the Battle of Balakot, where its main leaders were killed, but spontaneous 'Wahhabi'-inspired revolts continued till the end of the nineteenth century in the North-West Frontier Province. Thereafter the 'Wahhabis' remained low and largely quiet, their opposition being directed more at other Muslims than at the British. They set up major madrasas in Amritsar, Sialkot, Delhi, Bhopal and Benaras, and the last three are still the nerve centres of Ahl-e-Hadith scholarship in India. As compared to the Barelwis and Deobandis, the Ahl-e-Hadith failed to emerge as a mass movement, owing largely to its vehement opposition to Sufism and to the traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence. It remains till today an elitist movement, with its core support base among the urban, educated middle-classes, a constituency that it shares with the Jamaat-e-Islami. While in India the Ahl-e-Hadith is still largely apolitical, in Pakistan it has emerged in recent years as a major political player. The madrasas it runs through its *Markaz Dawat-ul Irshad* ("The Centre for Invitation and Instruction") are today major training grounds for militants involved in the *Lashkar-e-Tayyeba* ("The Army of the Pure"), the armed wing of the Pakistani Ahl-e-Hadith. The Lashkar is active in armed movements in places as far afield as Kashmir, Afghanistan, Bosnia and the Philippines.

Most madrasas share a common system of administration. At the apex is the *sadr mudarris* (the head teacher), who is assisted by a team of fellow ulama. The teachers are themselves products of madrasas, few having had any access to modern education. Funds for the running of the madrasas generally come from public donations, from earnings from properties controlled by

the madrasas, from endowments (awqaf), from sale of skins of animals sacrificed on the day of Bakr Id, and, in some cases, from organisations based in Arab countries. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, several madrasas also get funds from the government. The students generally come from poor families, being provided free education, food and accommodation at the madrasas. Some come for a year or two, to memorise the Quran. Others stay on for up to twelve years, training for the maulvi fazil or maulvi alim degree, after which they are recognised as accomplished ulama.

Contrary to popular perception, Muslims in South Asia, like Muslims elsewhere, are not a homogenous whole. Sharp differences of schools of thought, jurisprudential affiliation and sect serve to set them apart, and these divisions are particularly marked in the madrasas that each group runs. A Prophetic tradition (*hadith*) illustrates this predicament perfectly. The Prophet, it is said, predicted that after his death the Muslims would be divided into 72 quarreling groups, of which 72 would be destined for hell. The only one chosen group (*firqa-e-najiya*) would be that which faithfully abided by the *Quran* and the Prophet's sunnah or practices. Each of the several Muslim groups claims that it alone is the one saved sect, the others being doomed to eternal perdition. Intra-Muslim conflicts thus continue to rage in many madrasas. Indeed, the role of some madrasas in fanning the flames of sectarian conflict is one of the major causes of intra-Muslim strife in countries such as Pakistan, and to an extent, India.

While ordinary Muslims might be oblivious of the minor details that divide them on sectarian grounds, several ulama owing affiliation to madrasas of rival sectarian groups have been involved in promoting inter-sectarian rivalry that has, on many occasions, taken violent forms. Scores of polemical treatises have been penned by rival groups of ulama seeking to brand all other Muslim groups as heretical. On a visit to the Dar-ul Ulum, Deoband, some years ago, this writer was struck by the students' wall-magazine that greets the visitor at the main gate of the madrasa, the Bab-ul Qasim. Almost all the articles, penned in the most exquisite calligraphy, dealt with the refutation of other Muslim groups—Barelwi, Ahl-e-Hadith, Shi'a, Ahmadi and Jama'at-e-Islami, as deviant sects, for all practical purposes outside the bounds of orthodox Sunni Islam.

Today, all over South Asia, barring probably Afghanistan, Muslims are increasingly advocating reforms in the madrasa system to make it more relevant to modern times. Some see reform as the only way to prevent the madrasas from emerging as breeding grounds of Taliban-style militants. Secular, westernised Muslim elites, or, in India, anti-Muslim Hindu groups, are not alone in demanding such reforms, though. Numerous ulama are themselves now among the most vocal in pressing for change. Although most South Asian madrasas continue to faithfully follow the eighteenth century Dars-i-Nizami and traditional pedagogical methods, voices advocating reform and change are now impossible to dismiss. Several madrasas are now experimenting with new methods of teaching, including using computers in instruction and encouraging access to the Internet. A small, yet increasing, number of madrasas has now begun teaching 'modern' disciplines, including English, mathematics, science and history. Several have introduced texts and tracts by modern Muslim thinkers. Efforts are on to develop a standarised syllabus and evaluation procedures for the madrasas, but given the sharp sectarian divisions, this seems to be an uphill task.

Rumblings of change are now being heard even within the seemingly impregnable walls of the Deoband madrasa. The madrasa now has a computer section and a web-site of its own, modern technology being pressed into the service of a time-tested theology. Exposure to the world outside might well lead to the

The class...

rethinking of traditional theology, however grudgingly and painfully slow this may be. A good example is the Markaz-ul Ma'arif ('The Centre of Wisdom'), based in Bombay with branches all over the country. Set up in 1994 by a group of Deobandi scholars and Muslim traders, it runs scores of modern schools, hospitals, orphanages and social work centres. At the Markaz's Delhi centre, graduates from Deobandand the Nadwat-ul Ulama spend two years learning English, computers and comparative religions. Says Muhammad Umar Gautam, director of the centre, 'Ulama who train here go on to work not just as madrasa teachers but also as journalists, computer specialists and translators.

Despite these efforts at innovation, the overwhelming majority of the madrasas in South Asia carry on with merely teaching the compendium of medieval commentaries. Few, if any, madrasas, have dared to depart from the traditional focus on jurisprudence or have even attempted to come up with new ways of understanding Islam in the light of modern conditions. Nor is there any indication of a widespread desire to break the shackles of "blind conformity" (taqlid) to

medieval Islamic jurisprudence, itself a product of the medieval Arab world, and to revive the tradition of ijtihad. If other religions are taught, it is merely for polemical purposes and to prove them 'false', there being no serious engagement with the pluralistic predicament and with the need for inter-faith dialogue. Instances like the Madrasa Moin-ul Islam in Nuh, located in the heart of Mewat, south of Delhi, an area considered to be its most successful experimental ground by the Tablighi Jama'at, for it was here in the 1920s that the movement had its humble origins, still abound. Here students are forbidden even to read newspapers or watch television, for fear that they might go astray. But, clearly, such madrasas are gradually being marginalised as a new breed of ulama with at least some exposure to the challenges of modern life emerges.

Leading South Asian Muslim scholars who do not identify themselves with any particular school of thought or system of jurisprudence, such as Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, Nejatullah Siddiqui and Asghar 'Ali Engineer, have argued for a thorough revamping of the madrasa curriculum to make it consonant with modern demands. However, their voices are barely heard. In his recent book *Dini Madaris: Masa'il Aur Taqazey* (Religious Schools: Problems and Demands), the well-known Islamist scholar and leading Jamaat-e-Islami ideologue, Nejatullah Siddiqui, writes that the madrasa system desperately needs to be revamped if it is to have any relevance in today's context. The measures that he suggests include the teaching of modern disciplines along with the traditional Islamic sciences, new methods of instruction, and a climate of critical debate in place of blind conformity. Some local-level madrasas have taken up these suggestions, but it is yet to emerge as a major wave in the world of the ulama.

and the reading room.

A sharp dualism characterises Muslim education in South Asia today. On the one hand are the madrasas still relatively impervious to change, barring minor, local-level experiments. On the other hand are the modern, western-style secular schools. Given the complete de-linking of madrasa education from the job market, it is not surprising that few middle class Muslim families send their children to madrasas for higher education, being content with the basic religious education that the part-time mosque-school or makatib provides to young children if at all they choose to send their children there. If madrasas were once the preserve of the Muslim elite, providing them an education that trained them to take up posts in Muslim courts and in the administrative services, today most madrasa students come from families which cannot afford the cost of modern education for their children. To make matters worse, few madrasas, if any, have any facility for vocational training for their students. A visitor to the grand Dar-ul Ulum, Deoband, will be appalled to discover that all that this biggest of all South Asian madrasas had by way of vocational training were classes for bookbinding, calligraphy and watch-repairing—all three declining trades with little or no scope for large-scale employment. Not surprisingly, many unemployed madrasa graduates have gone on to become ready fodder for militant Islamist groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Given the sort of education that they receive, madrasa products may be equipped to work as imams in mosques and teachers in madrasas, but little else, and even these positions are limited. The bulk of the students are probably led to join the ever-growing mass of the unemployable unemployed. Organisations based in Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, are said to liberally finance several Wahhabi-style madrasas in South Asia, but, predictably, have shown little interest in promoting economic development projects where madrasa graduates can find gainful emplyment.

Changes in the madrasa system are slow in coming, and given the rise of violent Islamophobia, on the one hand, and Islamist militancy, on the other, the emerging voices for reform seem to be doomed to silence. One has only to remember that it was the medieval Arab madrasas which provided the prototype of the modern western university at one time to realise the enormous distance that the madrasas have traversed since. Bridging the dualism that sharply divides the world of the madrasas from the modern education system remains the only way out for madrasas to be able to positively engage with the demands of modern life, in particular with the vastly transformed global context, characterised by religious pluralism and the demands for accommodating the interests of traditionally marginalised groups such as women and ethnic and religious minorities. But given the twin challenges that the Muslim world is today confronted with—Islamism and Islamophobia—there seems little hope for any major breakthroughs in the years ahead.

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Fellowship Activities

Fellowships may involve a variety of activities, including field-based research, language study, or courses related to another Asian country (preferably in a different region of Asia). Fellows may also have opportunities to present guest lectures or to conduct seminars and workshops at the invitation of host institutions. The program is open to applicants who are **citizens of and resident in** Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Republic of Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea. Projects can be carried out **only** in these countries. The program is not open to applicants from Afghanistan, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, North Korea, or Taiwan, and projects **cannot** be carried out in these countries. **In this notice, we invite applications from citizens of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka only.** Projects must focus on an Asian country **other** than the applicant's own. While an applicant from South or Southeast Asia may propose a project in a country within his/her own region, preference is given to applicants who propose to study or conduct research in a region of Asia other than their own (e.g., a fellowship to an Indian scholar or professional for research/study in China). Applicants should not plan to study or conduct their research in a country with which their home country has a difficult diplomatic relationship because of the uncertainties of securing an affiliation and obtaining a visa for research or study for a long-term stay. **Fellowships are not for the principal purpose of completing doctoral dissertations.**

Eligibility Requirements

- Citizens of the above South Asian countries
- Master's or doctoral degree or equivalent professional training and experience
- Proficiency in English or in the language of the host country appropriate to the proposed research project
- A minimum of 3 years of university teaching experience for scholars or 5 years of work experience for professionals
- Preference is given to candidates under age forty-five and to those without recent experience in the proposed host country.

Application Forms

Please write, fax or e-mail for Information Brochures and Application Forms:

ASIA Fellows Program
C/o University of Pennsylvania
Institute for the Advanced Study of India (UPIASI)
India Habitat Centre
Core 5A, Ist Floor
Lodi Road
New Delhi-110 003
India
Tel./Fax: 91-11-460-4126/27, 469-8201
E-mail: upiasi@del2.vsnl.net.in
For further information, access the ASIA Fellows Program website:-
http://www.iie.org/cies/asiafellows/

Deadline for Completed Applications: January 11, 2002

The Scholar of Peace Fellowships

Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) is an initiative committed to promoting an alternative, gender sensitive discourse on a range of issues related to peace and security in South Asia. WISCOMP invites applications from South Asian professionals and scholars under the age of 45 for its **Scholar of Peace Fellowships**. Awarded annually, the Fellowships cover a period ranging from three months to one year. The **last date** for receipt of application is **Friday, 7th December 2001.** Candidates interested in conducting high quality academic research, media projects or special, innovative projects may seek further information from:

WISCOMP
Foundation for Universal Responsibility
Of His Holiness The Dalai Lama
Core 4A, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi-110003, INDIA
Tel: 011- 4648450 Fax: 011- 464851
E-mail: wiscomp@vsnl.com Url: www.furhhdl.org

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- **Deadline is February 1, 2002** for applications for fellowships in 2002-2003.

Application materials can be found on the
UK Appalachian Center website
www.appalachiancenter.org
or contact:
Nyoka Hawkins, (859)257-8265, nyoka@pop.uky.edu
Appalachian Center, University of Kentucky, 624
Maxwelton Court, Lexington, Kentucky
40506-0347 USA.
Tel : 859-257-4852 Fax : 859-257-3903

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies Invites applications for Study Visits to West Africa

The Centre for Democracy and Development (Lagos) and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Delhi) in partnership with the Ford Foundation invite applications from eligible scholars to participate in their ongoing programme "**Democracy and diversity in a comparative perspective: Exchange programme between South Asian and West African scholars**".

Themes: The programme is focused on formal and non-formal political arrangements that help accommodate social diversities within a democratic framework. While the focus of this programme is comparative, scholars participating in it will not be required to carry out research on the other region or take up directly comparative research as in the sub-discipline of 'comparative politics'. We would like to be flexible in interpreting what can be covered under the rubric of 'democracy and diversity'. It could include the following sub-themes: **Ethnicity and Politics:** The role of politics in forging ethnic identities, plasticity or otherwise of politically salient social cleavages, institutional logic of crosscutting or reinforcing cleavages, can social cleavages be deployed for deepening democracy? **Federalism:** Power sharing arrangements for accommodating diversities with geographical expression, the problem of non-correspondence between the legal-political and the social-cultural boundaries, challenges and prospects of constitutionalism and the dynamics of party system in operation. **Minorities:** Political competition and the logic of manufacturing majority and minorities, the situation of the religious and ethnic minorities, participation of women in democratic processes, affirmative action for deprived sections. **Institutional design and reform:** 'Consociational' arrangements in and outside the constitution, electoral system, the structure of party system and its alignment with social divisions, specific innovations versus universal solutions. **Politics of Economic Liberalization: Political consequences of SAP, differential impact on various social segments, a retreat of politics?** Civil-Military Relations: Army rule as sectarian politics by non-democratic means, security sector transformation, ethnicization of the army. Ways to prevent social differences from taking the military intervention route.

Study Visit terms: Three scholars will be selected for study visits for three months each. The selected scholars will be required to give a seminar at the host institution and submit a publishable output based on the study visit. Selected scholars will be paid international air-fare to and from West Africa. They will also be entitled to free accommodation besides living expenses of US $1,000 or its equivalent in local currency per month. The study visits shall ordinarily be completed in year 2002.

Eligibility: The programme is open to all the scholars who have a proven ability for independent research and innovative work. Young and women scholars are particularly encouraged to apply. Eligible scholars must be based in South Asia and may come from universities or other organisational settings. The programme may also support independent researchers working outside of institutional contexts. **Application Procedure:** Curriculum Vitae with a Statement of Purpose and a sample of published work should be sent to the address below. The application may be routed, if the institution requires so, through the head of the institution where the candidate works or studies. The applications shall be reviewed by a selection board and final results communicated to all the applicants. Short-listed applicants may be called for an interview. **Statements of Purpose (about 1,000 words) should contain:** Title and overview of the proposed research work, Description of its expected output, A Statement of how a visit to West Africa could help. Deadline for receiving applications is November 15, 2001. E Mail applications shall not be entertained.

Send applications and inquiries to: South-South Exchange Fellowship Co-ordinator, Lokniti: Institute for Comparative Democracy, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 29, Rajpur Road, Delhi, 110054, INDIA Tel: +91-11-3951190, 3971151, 3942199, Email (enquiries only) : **lokniti@vsnl.com**

NOW, NOW, we know that Indian Airlines is a government-owned airline. There was no need to have *Swagat*, its in-flight magazine (October 2001), carry such a cloying profile of Syed Shahnawaz Hussain, the 32-year-old Minister of Civil Aviation. There is a picture of Shahnawaz with his son Arbaz, another one with his wife Renu, and, a box item on what Renu thinks of him. "His favourite dress is the kurta-pyjama but she wants him to wear trousers and shirts. She also likes to see him in a sherwani." On being asked how she feels now that her husband is the youngest cabinet minister, she proudly answers, 'Great'." Hmmm.

■

THE BHUTANESE Foreign Minister Jigmi Thinley was at his urbane best in an interview with *The Times of India*, replying to questions about Bhutan's 'opening up': "the Bhutanese people now have the necessary intellectual and psychological preparedness"; about dealing with external influence: "we will not sell our souls for enrichment. Our goal is that of gross national happiness"; about the events following 11 September attacks: "The initial steps are in the right direction." And about the Bodo-ULFA: "If they don't leave by December we may have to pull the trigger." Tough words from the savvy little can-do nation. But did Ms. Anouhita Mojumdar, *TOI* reporter, forget something there? It's that small matter of some 100,000 Lhotshampa refugees. Nope, not a peep from Ms Mojumdar. As for Lyonpo Jigme, he didn't have to answer if he wasn't asked, did he?

■

WE WILL not bore you more than this once with tirades against the Indian print and satellite media - we all come under their footprint one way or the other - for being such pushovers for all that America dishes out. In the television strap lines, "America under attack" was soon replaced by "Strike against Terror" and "America strikes back". The defence analysts, having waited decades for socialist India to turn market friendly so that being hawkish would be prized, all strutted their stuff. The Pakistan factor (its links to the Taliban) made it difficult to be dispassionate about what was being done to Afghanistan, and there was obvious ambivalence because on this one Musharraf and Vajpayee were essentially on the same side! The Delhi dailies, with so little reporting from the war front, made do with grandiose front-page pictures of bombers in the air and special forces soldiers on the ground – Pentagon stock footage (nicely framed, well-lit) unrelated to the action in Afghanistan. And when the action began, they showed again and again video from special forces exercises, passing them off to a believing public as the real thing. The diagrams and data on the special forces (US Army Rangers, Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Delta Frce, USAF


Tomahawks fired from ships in Arabian Sea ❑ Taliban to fight 'till the last breath'

WAR! AT LAST

Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad bombed; Laden, Omar alive

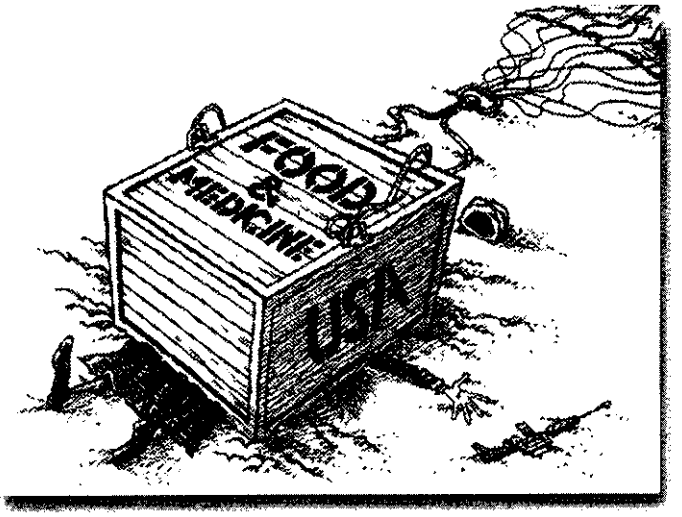
Special Ops), the modern carbines, night-vision equipment, the gunships, and the maps and charts - this was the time for a little voyuerstic sidetrip while the Afghan rubble got bombed into dust. Why this rush to cover the technicalities of the war? Well, the editors and correspondents are by and large members of the Indian generation, which thinks of itself as part of globalised American can-do category, and this is what the urban Indian audience with purchasing power wants. They do not want cowering turbaned peasantry, they want footage of cruise missile takeoffs and night-vision video of crosshair targets being hit. So, on with some more coverage of taped segments of Blackhawk helicopter somewhere in Afghanistan.

■

C.P. WONDERS whether those who do the thinking behind the policy formulators who guide the politicians of the Great Indian State even realise the incredible backlash they are inviting because of the alacrity with which they have jumped on what is being perceived as an anti-Islamic crusade? Forget the rights and wrongs, think purely in the terms of the dangers confronting an under-educated, increasingly sullen Muslim mass within India, the second largest in the world. Why is there not enough worry among the analyst-sahebs on the possibility that massive mayhem may be around the corner? It can only be that the Hinduvaadi leadership which calls the shots will not have it otherwise as they lead us all down this dangerous path, and the English-speaking demographic bubble is too busy trying to ape America to understand the alienation of this Urdu-speaking Islamic mass.

■

THREE CARTOONS about the American bread-and-bombs campaign in Afghanistan that I think work well, one from *The Rocky Mountain News*, another from *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and the last from the 'Yak-Yeti-Yak' column in the *Nepali Times*, from Kathmandu. If you remember, there were about two hundred labourers trapped when there was a "land subsidence" near Asansol in West Bengal's coal belt. This happened just as the George Bush was beginning his bombing run. I



■

have not seen another event get so overshadowed by war in another country. True, there was probably no hope for the ("illegal"!) miners in any case. But the two column, page-five treatment was less than what such a mass death deserved. But then, again, media coverage is defined by what the English-speaking bubble increasingly seems to want. Don't give us local deaths, please, we live in Gurgaon.

■

IS AN advertisement which is good enough for Western Europe for its skin content - well, France at least - appropriate for India? Do adver-tisers have to worry about the public, and do magazine editors have a responsibility that goes beyond "I print what's given to me"? The ad for Monte Carlo Outerwear in the *India Today* shows a hunk with a positively un-human waste that is unreal (it just goes on forever, must be virtual). But that's not the point. There is the little matter of the female hands on his waist. One could do a lot better than to try and extrapolate where she would have to be positioned to have her hands placed thus? And all this to sell a banyan? For the sake of decency, CP refuses to reproduce the offending advertisement.

■

WHAT IS Nobel Laureate Vidia Sagar Naipaul's ancestry? Dare we say Nepal? A century or so ago a mass of indentured labourers from Bihar and what was then the United Provinces traveled to the sugarcane plantations of the West Indies, Fiji and Africa. As a result, Trinidad today is full of Gangetic surnames such as Kanjai, Kallicharan, Ramadhin, Ramprakash, Ramsumair, Chanderpaul, Asgarlai — Naipaul. Interestingly, there is no surname in the Ganga maidaan today that comes close to 'Naipaul'. On the other hand, we know this was one variation of the spelling the British used then for Nepal — Nipal, Nipaul, Nepaul, Naipaul... As for tradition, many Nepalis do take on Nepal as a surname even today (Madhav Kumar Nepal is the head of the Unified Marxist-Leninists of Nepal), and it is used by dalit families who want a neutral identifier. Vidia Sagar, who is a fourth generation Trinidian (and hates it, evidently), had this to say about his ancestry in a speech delivered in 1990, "We were an agricultural immigrant community from India." Perhaps you are wrong there, Sir. And Nepal has always wanted a Nobel Laureate, and this would be just a little more interested than being listed in the Guinness World Record Book for this or that exploit, no?

—Chhetria Patrakar

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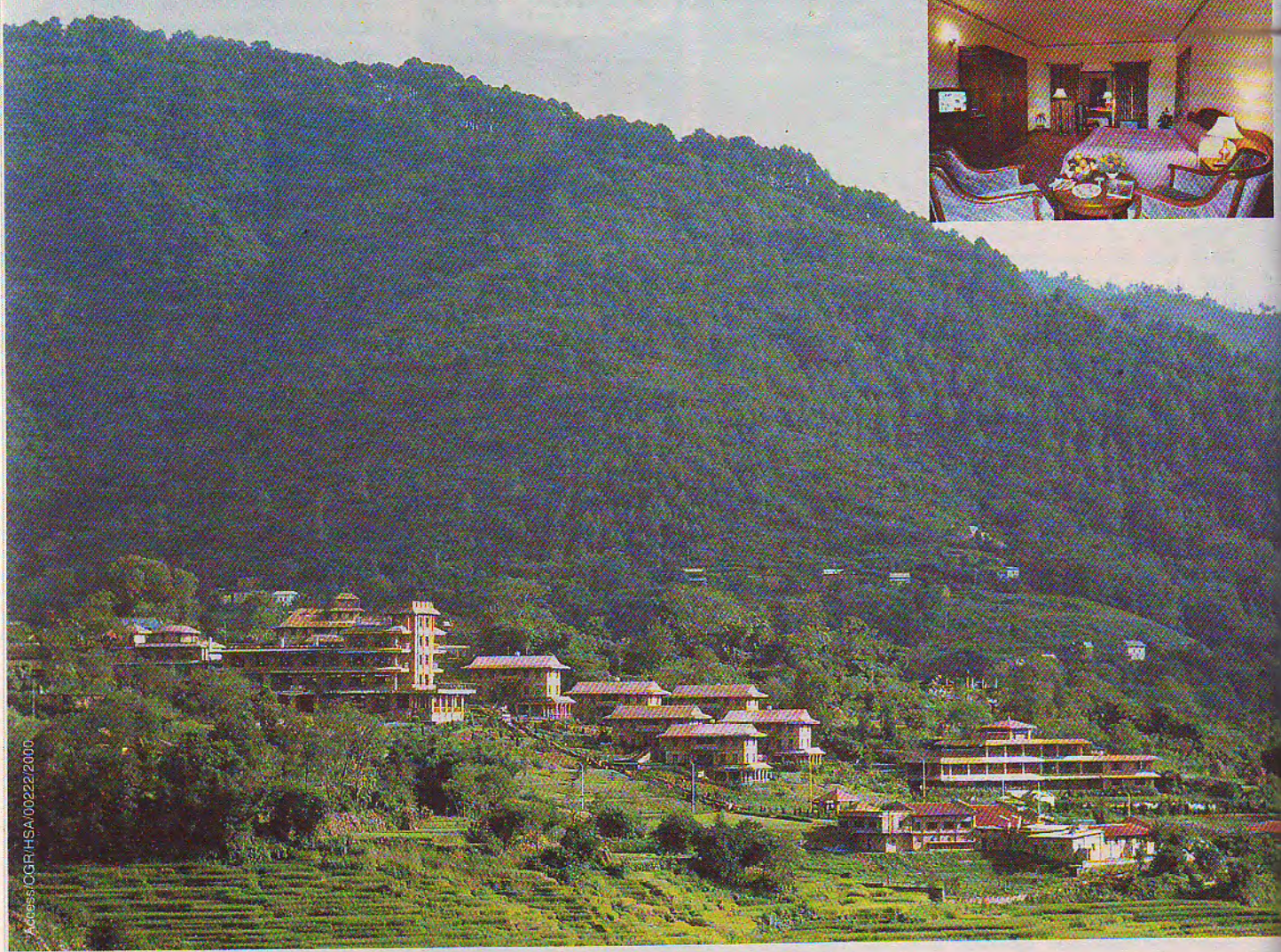

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PAKISTAN

The general's labyrinth

by ***Adnan Rehmat***

Pakistan has moved from being an international 'basket case' to 'frontline state' in just a month. The change has been stunningly quick. For two years, Musharraf was hectored by the West for Pakistan's lack of democracy. Since 11 September, no one has talked about democracy. They just want a reliable friend and it appears they have one now. But these are not happy days for Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf. Though his dramatic U-turn on most long-standing foreign and domestic policies of Pakistan makes him as popular abroad as Mikhail Gorbachev came to be, he is also turning out to be as unpopular at home as the last Soviet leader was. The world that derided him for toppling an elected government is now desperate for him to be firmly in the saddle but the man who seized power two years ago to domestic acclaim now sees his effigy burnt in the streets.

The self-appointed president who favoured the Taliban and spoke some weeks ago of the strategic depth of 2,300 km that they provided his armed forces has not only had to turn his back on the Muslim neighbour but was also compelled to say that his gem about strategic depth is "an old theory". After mollycoddling religious extremists for two years, he has come down hard on them for protesting against his surrender to Western allies who had shunned Pakistan till now. Musharraf's supporters, however, have chosen to see in this development signs of promise, claiming that the fast pace of events has given him the leverage to curb extremists at home. It is certainly true that he has started to reign in groups and leaders who hope Pakistan will disregard the West and create an Islamic alliance that stretches from Saudi Arabia into Central Asia.

So far he has got away unscathed in the struggle to neutralise his extremist opponents. On the night the US strikes on Afghanistan began, he removed three key pro-Taliban generals known for their hardline religious views, among them the hawkish and powerful intelligence chief. But prevailing circumstances cannot permit him or his supporters to take too sanguine a view of the future, particularly since the trajectory of Pakistan's domestic politics is likely to be influenced, if not actually determined, by what the West chooses to do in Afghanistan. The signals, however, are not too promising. For one, Washington's claim that the ongoing war on Afghanistan is directed at terrorists and not Muslims finds few takers in Pakistan. Even Muslims with liberal political views believe that the repeated pounding of a prostrate Afghanistan can only strengthen the Taliban rulers and their Pakistani supporters, while eroding sympathy for the US.

Musharraf's discomfiture with the US attacks on neighbouring Afghanistan is apparent but so is his eagerness for better relations with the West at a time when hard-pressed Pakistan can use wealthy friends. Musharraf may be determined to hold back the extremists but the longer the US pounds Afghanistan with Islamabad's backing and the more civilian casualties are reported, the more difficult it will become for his security forces to restrain the fundamentalists. Musharraf realises this, which is why he has been pressing for an end to hostilities before the onset of the Muslim month of fasting—Ramzan—which begins mid-November. The crucial question is whether he can rally Pakistanis behind him if and when events get out of hand. Or will he lose out to fundamentalism?

Fundamentalist bonfires

Islamic extremism may have limited institutional clout, but it is an active force in society. In the absence of mainstream political activity, it is the only force that can mobilise civil society and articulate opposition to the aggression in Afghanistan. Consequently, today many Pakistanis are extremely susceptible to its rhetoric. The growing appeal of fundamentalist activity is evident in the anti-government and anti-US protests that have now become a regular feature of everyday life in parts of Pakistan. While these protests are noticeably absent in the Punjab and Sindh—provinces bordering India—they are frequent and militant in Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP)—both bordering Afghanistan.

There is perhaps good reason for this. It is among Pashtoons that the rioting has been most serious—a cinema was attacked, a United Nations compound and a bazaar burnt down in Quetta, four people shot dead in a village. Significantly, the local Balochs have played virtually no part in the riots. It is a purely Pashtoon phenomenon. Worse still, in the NWFP, which is dominated by Pashtoons who belong to the same tribes as their cousins across the border in Afghanistan, Peshawar has disappeared

behind a cloud of tear gas. Police firing is a common occurrence and has left at least half a dozen dead.

Machismo is the most conspicuous aspect of Pakistan's rugged Frontier Province. Bandoliers hanging on shoulders is a common enough sight. It is a land where men nonchalantly tuck grenades into their pockets. The Pashtoons, or Pathans as they are called in Pakistan, have never been completely conquered, at least not since the time of Alexander the Great. They have seen off centuries of invaders, and this has given them the mixture of self-confidence, independence and suspicion that is their hallmark. Beyond the checkpoints on the edge of Peshawar, tribal law—based on the tribal council and blood feud—rules unchallenged. Even in normal circumstances it takes very little for the latent discontent of the Pashtoons with the Pakistani government to erupt. Today, conditions are far from normal and the latest wave of riots is on a scale different from anything Pakistan has witness since Partition.

Anti-war protesters in Pakistan.

This raises fundamental questions about the very future of Pakistan. There is a possibility that the Pashtoons will be willing to chart out a destiny separate from that of Pakistan's. There have in the past been incipient if ineffective movements for a union with the Pashtoons in Afghanistan to form "Pakhtunistan", straddling the Durand Line—the hated frontier drawn up by the British in 1893, which broke the tribal homeland into two. It must surely be a matter of concern to both Islamabad and Washington that if Afghanistan breaks up in the aftermath of the American assault, with the multi-ethnic Northern Alliance controlling the north, and a Pashtoon post-Taliban successor state taking the south, then demands for the creation of Pakhtunistan can only gain momentum. For the present that remains a distant possibility largely because Pashtoon nationalism in Pakistan has over the years mutated into a primarily Islamist form under a variety of Taliban-like groups like the radical Jamiat-Ulema-Islam.

An additional source of worry for the government is that because these Islamist groups have taken up the Afghan cause in the name of religion, they have gained considerable public sympathy despite the official crackdown on them, and support for them could come from sections of the population not normally part of their constituency.

Serious civilian casualties in Afghanistan or heavy-handed action against protestors by Pakistani security forces—both of which are inevitable if the war is protracted—can only further radicalise the population in Pakistan in the coming days. Even before the war, Pakistan was steadily drifting in a more-strict Islamic direction. The military, the judiciary, and the street have become more fundamentalist. After nearly a decade of Talibanisation, Pakistan has never been closer to an Islamic revolution, or at least an Islamist coup. Such a coup, the West worries, will put nuclear weapons into Islamist hands. Musharraf has publicly tried to allay these fears, saying the country's "strategic assets," a euphemism for nuclear weapons, are in "safe hands" and that no fundamentalist can get to them.

Caught in a bind, the Musharraf regime has been forced to intensify its crackdown on the Islamic groups. In a recent speech, he told the nation, "When there is a crisis situation, the path of wisdom is better than the path of emotion". And just to make sure the message went across clearly, he added, speaking of the radicals, "There is no reason why this minority should hold the majority as hostage." That certainly is a sentiment no Pakistani leader has ever dared articulate in the past. And to back these words with action the government has placed at least three high-ranking leaders of hardline Islamic groups under house arrest. Officials have also warned they will not hesitate to arrest other senior members of hardline groups in the event that more attempts are made to organise violent protests.

While all this represents a major shift in policy, senior officials in the military government also admit that religious groups, which were the main beneficiaries of the earlier policy, will not give in without a fight. A senior functionary of Pakistan's biggest religious party, the Jamaat-e-Islami describes the government offensive as a "well calculated American plan to suppress the Islamic movement in this region. So our protest campaign is not just in support of the Taliban, it is for the survival of the Islamic movement in Pakistan as well."

A new partnership?

But while the dangers for Musharraf inherent in the events that were sparked off after 11 September are all too visible, so are the opportunities he has before him to alter the course of Pakistan's politics. He has a historic chance to eradicate the roots of extremism in the country. But, tragically, how this opportunity is used does not depend only on him. It also depends on the conduct of his Western allies, particularly the US, who, unfortunately, have so far not shown

themselves to be particularly reasonable or pragmatic as far as Pakistan's compulsions and interests are concerned. Thus, for instance, how Pakistan shapes out in the coming months will depend a great deal on the scale and kind of aid that the US can deliver in the immediate future. That is an open question and the experience of the past is not very inspiring.

In the 1980s too, the US had supported a military government in Pakistan in the fight against the Soviet occupation army in Afghanistan. The US aid of that period went to the Pakistani intelligence and military services, the Afghan resistance, and Afghan refugees. It did not benefit Pakistan's people. And by supporting a military regime, Washington was seen as an obstacle to Pakistani aspirations for democracy. When the Soviet forces vacated Afghanistan, the US abandoned Pakistan and this contributed substantially to shaping Pakistani perceptions of the West in general. This was where US diplomacy failed significantly and continuously. Even in the aftermath of Pakistan's nuclear tests it was still possible for Washington to have fashioned a diplomatic and aid strategy that did not alienate the US government from the people of Pakistan. Diplomacy and pragmatism were sacrificed at the altar of rhetoric and expediency.

If such errors are not to be repeated Washington will have to provide assistance to Pakistan on a scale and of a type that demonstrates that the basic aspirations of the Pakistani people for democracy and development are best fulfilled by associating with the US and by rejecting extremism. Pakistan once offered the hope of becoming the model of a modern and progressive Muslim nation. That is today a receding hope and much of the appeal of political extremism has grown in the economic deterioration and hopelessness of the vast majority of its 140 million people. US aid, directed to the benefit of ordinary Pakistanis, will not only reverse the trend but also restore some of the enormous goodwill that the US once enjoyed in the country. Since aid will also serve the interests of Musharraf government, the US can insist that he honour his commitment to restore democracy next year. Musharraf and US now have a shared interest in this.

What is happening in Pakistan today is essentially a struggle for the soul of the country. Musharraf has taken a decision to try and stem the tide of Islamic fundamentalism. He is either going to win big or lose big. And winning or losing with Musharraf will be Pakistan.

BANGLADESH

Votes & Violence

by **Afsan Chowdhury**

The just concluded parliamentary election in Bangladesh has produced a stunning reversal of fortunes. The Awami League (AL), which commanded a majority in the previous parliament, has been reduced to just 58 seats. The four-party alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition in the dissolved house, has secured 214 Of the seats garnered by the alliance the controversial Jammat-e-Islami, which elicits extreme reactions because of its support to the Pakistan army in 1971, got 17 seats. Of the smaller parties which fought the election independently, former president, General Mohammad Ershad's Jatiyo Party, now just one among the three splinters that the parent party broke up into, has 14 legislators.

Whole numbers, real numbers

The political arithmetic that has yielded this parliamentary configuration is indeed striking. The most obvious anomaly of the result is that the single largest party in terms of the share of popular vote has been reduced to a pathetic minority in parliament. The Awami League garnered more than 40 per cent of the votes cast in the current election, which is a significant improvement on its performance in 1996, when it secured 37 per cent of the vote to form a government on its own steam. The BNP-led alliance has accounted for nearly 47 per cent of the votes. It is, of course, impossible to calculate from this combined figure the distributed share of the support that each individual constituent of the alliance got from the electorate, though it is a plausible that the BNP too has increased its share of the vote. But it is evident enough that under the existing rules of the political game, a difference of just 7 per cent of the national vote has upset the apple-cart in as many as 156 constituencies.

The shibboleths of Subcontinental psephology are clearly inadequate to explain such a disproportionate relationship between the popular vote and its parliamentary outcome. After every election, it is customary for number-crunching think-tanks and the talking heads of television to focus solely on the seats won by parties and, on that basis, churn out cliches about the "national mandate", the "popular will" and the "vote for change". It is difficult to recognise any such grand and coherent pattern in the statistical break-up of the Bangladesh elections. If any meaning is to be found it must sought in the mechanics of party alliances at the constituency level. The analysis of this simple arithmetic is more instructive than any attempt to divine a national message from meaningless numbers.

This is clear enough from the fact that political analyst, Nazim Kamran Chowdhury had tallied constituency-level figures in April this year to predict the results of the election with a fair degree of accuracy. The BNP alliance won in most of the 80 seats where the BNP had come second in the 1996 elections, and in the 60 odd seats where the Awami League had won by a margin of less than 5000 votes the last time around. It is also likely that the split in the Jatiyo Parishad (JP) has affected the pattern of the vote. When the JP split into three, one of the factions joined the BNP combine, another under Ershad cobbled together a new alliance with a political pir (holy man) from the coastal area, while the third led by Anwar Hussain Manju, a cabinet minister in Hasina's government and owner of the Ittefaq group of publications, was with the AL. The holy man obviously did not do much good for Ershad and the JP's share of the vote went down by half, from 14 per cent to 7 per cent. It is not unlikely that these lost votes went to the AL and BNP. The redistribution of the residual vote and the pooling together of the electoral resources of the BNP's combine obviously had a major impact on the final outcome.

The change in government was, therefore, effected by simple addition (BNP+Jammat-e-Islami) and subtraction (the Jatiyo Party) and not by a decisive shift in the ideological basis or inclination of the electorate. In the light of the figures cited and the fact that the AL polled more votes now than it did in 1996, Sheikh Hasina's claim that the election was rigged in favour of the BNP makes little sense. On the other hand Khaleda Zia's triumphal statements about the absolute majority that her alliance commands may be premature.

It is difficult enough for four parties to get together, forge an electoral alliance and form a coalition government. It is far more difficult for the members of the coalition to establish such a harmony of views on policy and the sharing of governmental largesse that their respective social constituencies can co-exist in peace. The stresses that such coalitions are subject to could quite easily transmit downward to the cadres and so subtract from the ability of the alliance to deliver votes in the future. Besides, parliamentary stability does not quite add up to social stability. The AL has a larger electoral base than the BNP does

and, in the circumstances, Hasina's instruction to her party workers to use "any means whatsoever" to resist attacks by the ruling party is both ominous and irresponsible. The spiral of violence that Bangladesh has experienced in the last few years may well continue if the nature of the election campaign and the events of its aftermath are anything to go by.

That this seemingly cosmetic change of government need have nothing to do with peace on the streets is evident from the recent harassment and intimidation of the Hindu minority. This development seems to be a continuation of the violence that marked the election campaign. Although the caretaker government had tried its best to ensure law and order, it failed to curb mass violence. Nearly 200 people died during the period leading up to the elections and many more were injured.

Hindus in the crossfire

Caught in the crossfire between the two parties is the Hindu community which has in general tended to vote for the AL. There have been attempts in the past to scare away Hindu voters from the polling booths to deplete AL votes. But the scale of such intimidation this time provokes deep unease. Poll observers expressed their concern over the matter and the Election Commission as well as other officials were given special instructions to ensure the safety of minority voters. The election itself was free of any incident, but as soon as results started pouring in the violence began.

Although initially these appeared to be stray incidents, media reports about continuing attacks against Hindus were too numerous, explicit and consistent to be ignored. The matter soon became something of an embarrassment for the BNP government because of the amateurish handling of this sensitive problem by the newly-appointed Home Minister, Altaf Hussain Chowdhury, a former Air Vice Marshall. His statement to BBC radio that reports of the attack were "part conspiracy, part exaggeration and part fact" elicited strong reactions from the media and the public. His next measure, presumably an attempt to make up for his earlier blunder, was to take a helicopter ride to the affected areas. On his return he announced that the situation was normal. He then attempted to get minority representative to deny that there was violence against Hindus. The ploy backfired when they, instead, publicly affirmed that such attacks had taken place. As a man who has three corruption charges filed against him by the last government—reportedly as punishment for joining the BNP—and an average of one faux pax a day to his credit, he was proving to be a major liability. The government has eventually begun to tackle the situation, but only after the President of Bangladesh, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, asked the BNP government to take action to protect minorities.

Predictably, political hype has accompanied the attack on Hindus. The Awami League has lost no time in trying to make political capital of it by alleging that the BNP is an anti-minority party, and citing the ruling party's alliance with the Jammat-e-Islami as proof of this. But evidence trickling in suggests that the matter is not quite so simple as it is made out to be by the AL. Reports suggest that Hindus are being attacked as a retribution for past repression by the AL. In the areas where such violence has occurred, apparently the Awami League had, during its rule, refused to tolerate opposition activities and all other political parties were consistently victimised. As a result, once the AL lost power, its cadres, fearing the wrath of BNP activists, began fleeing from these areas. Failing to find their intended prey, the BNP workers vented their anger on those who they perceive to be traditional Awami League loyalists. Since the Awami League had systematically destroyed much of the democratic space during its period in office, the BNP on gaining power could very easily replicate those same tactics without any hindrance. As part of this, they have taken over all the illegal toll collection rackets and other money spinning activities previously monopolised by Awami League supporters. The attacks on Hindus are a part of this national change-of-guard at all levels. In that sense, these attacks are not communal by design, they are so by happenstance.

But it really does not matter why what happened did happen. The fact is that it has become dangerous for Hindus to exercise their democratic rights in the open and to that extent their public space has been eroded. In the final analysis, it is just possible that this culture of political intolerance could transform itself into communalism as the natural corollary of a conflict process. Any sustained attack on one community by another can set off a chain of reactions that will affect the ways in which these communities interact with each other everyday. The consequences could be fatal for a country whose social fabric has already been under considerable strain for the last many decades. While the political elements, including AL supporters and activists, have been denouncing the BNP for its communalism, the Hindus themselves have protested the loss of their safety in a more subdued and down to earth way. As a gesture of mourning they have refrained from celebrating Durga Puja, the biggest festival of the Bangali Hindus. But if the attacks continue, it is hardly to be expected that the reaction will always be muted and restrained.

Given such developments, there is little point in seeing the results of the elections as either a vote for change or a mandate against the reign of political terror in the public space. Certainly the political parties, despite all their rhetoric, do not seem to think so. And unless they seriously do, it is unlikely that the mutual violence that they indulge in, and in which innocent bystanders get killed, will abate.

An Indian law for war-time

By **Ranjit Devraj**

You cannot fault the government for timing on this one. The 11 September terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and the United Nations response in calling on members to enact anti-terrorist legislation provided the perfect backdrop to resurrect the thoroughly discredited Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA).

Such was the notoriety of TADA that when it lapsed in 1995, the then Congress Party government ran into problems trying to replace it. There were just too many tales of horror coming in from the north-eastern states, Kashmir and, of course, Punjab which had then just been "pacified" by supercop K.P.S. Gill's "bullet-for-bullet" policy.

The activism of rights groups such as the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) and scathing comments from no less a body than the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) ensured that the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was consigned to the backburner. And it stayed there for six long years because even the U.N. Human Rights Committee had looked askance at legislative proposals to reintroduce parts of TADA, which contravened the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). And here again it is the familiar story of India being an enthusiastic signatory to an international convention but somewhat less keen on actual implementation back home.

Of course the times have changed since 11 September and this is clearly not the season for civil liberties. *The New York Times* had warned in late September that the United States would be tempted "in the days ahead to write draconian new laws that give law enforcement agencies or even military forces a right to undermine civil liberties." The paper may have been speaking of New Delhi. India has decided that the best way to handle that temptation is to give in to it.

And so, at the end of October the government once again resorted to bureaucratic fiat to foist on an unsuspecting public the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, 2001. It reads suspiciously like TADA with a few frills thrown in to mislead the human rights community, such as provision of a review committee. Closer examination, though, shows that the review committee would consist not of an impartial judiciary but the police and the executive.

Rajindar Sachar, former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court and an activist of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), has pointed out that it is now internationally accepted that any review committee must consist of the judiciary. The new Ordinance, he says, actually resembles the Defence of India Rules framed by the colonial British government in that bail cannot be granted to a detainee unless a court is satisfied that grounds exist to believe that he is not guilty. "This clearly violates Article 9 (3) of the ICCPR which provides that it shall not be a general rule that persons are detained prior to trial but that release pending trial may be conditional on guarantees to appear for trial," Sachar said.

Another section of the new law that rights activists find objectionable is one which renders confessions made before a police officer admissible during trial. Given the hair-raising track record of police functioning in India, this is an open incentive to third-degree and worse. "Experience with TADA already shows that if you give police and armed forces more powers, they are likely to be abused rather than used," said Prashant Bhushan, well-known Supreme Court lawyer and human rights activist. Bhushan has also questioned the usefulness of special powers in deterring terrorism: "You cannot deter a person who is willing to die for his cause and what is really important is to understand why he is willing to die," he said. According to Bhushan, existing, ordinary laws are more than adequate to tackle terrorism provided they are implemented properly, and the new law merely gives "unbridled" powers to the executive and to the police. Besides, the police are known to protect the wealthy and the powerful while targetting those without connections, he said.

But P.N. Ghatate, a member of India's Law Commission, who helped draft the bill, denies the charges made by the critics and argues that there are many safeguards against abuse in the new law. "Under the new law an officer found guilty of abuse can end up with a two-year prison sentence and he must file an affidavit regarding the arrest, which if found false later, can result in punishment," according to Ghatate. He also cited the reduction of the period for which an accused can be held in custody before production in court from 180 days to 30 days, as an example of improvement in the new law .

Ghatate further argues that with continuing violent separatism in places like Kashmir, where India claims to be fighting a "proxy war" with Pakistan, the country has no choice but to arm itself with tough laws. He thinks situations like those in Kashmir demand laws applicable during wartime rather than laws that have to do with human rights.

"Any armed person who crosses a border is liable to be shot under international law," he said.

Ravi Nair, director of the South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre (SAHRDC) points out that even the four-day custody period specified in the United Kingdom's Prevention of Terrorism Act has been objected to by the European Human Rights Court. So much for the claim that the Indian law was based on the U.K. Act.

Meanwhile, S.S. Gill insisted that there was no other way to deal with a situation in which foreign mercenaries were active on Indian territory. He says, "Religious fundamentalism, weapons in the hands of unscrupulous persons, liberal courts and bleeding hearts have created a very dangerous situation in the country." Advocates of tougher laws like Gill cite the fact that known terrorists like Masood Azhar, a Pakistan national who was detained in Indian jails without trial for years, could get away scot free because of poor legal provisions. Azhar, who was among other jehadis released in exchange for a plane with more than 150 passengers on board that had been hijacked and flown to Kandahar in December 1999, went on to form the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed group, the assets of which were frozen by the U.S. government recently.

"Those who talk of human rights should realise the ground reality by assessing the situation in Jammu and Kashmir where terrorists have killed thousands of people and where the existing legal system has failed to combat terrorism," said N.N. Vohra, former Home Secretary to the central government in New Delhi.

According to Sachar, the atmosphere has been vitiated to such an extent that those who oppose the legislation, purportedly aimed at countering terrorism in places like Kashmir, could now find themselves accused of unpatriotic behaviour by jingoistic nationalists. What the government aims to do is clear enough from the sudden ban and institute a nation-wide crackdown on Student's Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) and the incarceration of its top leaders on the grounds that they supported the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. On the other hand, Hindu fundamentalist groups, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), have gotten away with an intrusion into the heavily guarded site where the Babri Masjid once stood.

VHP leader Ashok Singhal has gone on record saying the VHP did not much care for laws which obstructed the will of the people. The reference was, of course, to the Supreme Court order on the Babri Masjid site which stands in the way of the VHP declaration that construction of the temple would begin in March next year. So while anti-HIV and public health activists (such as the Abhijit Das and his wife Yashodara who were arrested and kept for weeks in jail last year under national security laws) and sweepers who go on strike (they perform a service deemed essential) may fall under the definition of "terrorist" under the new law, Singhal evidently will not. △

Nepal's Wild West

by ***Rupa Joshi***

Thirty out of every hundred men in the village of Nawadurga in Dadeldhura District at the western edge of Nepal have permanently settled in India. Another thirty go to India on a seasonal basis every year looking for work. At least one member of every household in this village in remote far west corner of Nepal is out in India. Some in Punjab, some in Bombay, some in Delhi. "It's like a compulsion that people here think they have to go to India," says Siddharaj Bhatta who works as a social mobiliser in the village. "There's a certain prestige attached with men going to India. In fact, parents think twice before they agree to give their daughter's hand in marriage to a person who doesn't work in India. A man who says he works in Delhi will find a bride very easily!"

Gagan Singh Khati, an elderly villager, who himself never went across the border for work says that the general belief in the village is that one cannot earn a livelihood without India. "Why wouldn't they want to go?" he questions, "What kind of security does this place offer? This soil does not provide enough for us to sell. What is the incentive for them to linger here?" Bhana Dev Bhatta, another septuagenarian, has a slightly different view, "These people will want to go to India at the drop of a hat. They fail in the exams or they get a scolding, and they make a dash for the border!"

The villagers say that times are not that good these days for Nepali migrants to India. Jobs are hard to come by. Even those who do find work are not paid as promised. "It used to be much better for those who went south 20-25 years ago," says Nar Bahadur Khati. "A villager who went to India over two decades ago and worked with the Bank of Baroda recently came home with Rs. 14 lakhs. And there are others who worked in other companies who

have come back loaded."

While the pickings may not be as easy, the lure of good compensation continues to attract the men folk of Nawadurga to head west. "Even now people manage to save up to Rs. 10,000 per year," admits Khati. "I guess if they stayed home and worked hard, even raising four goats in a year, they would be able to save that amount. But the attraction of India is too strong!"

Bishu Devi Khati's husband has not come home from Bombay for four years. "Every year he used to send me around Rs 7000," she says. "But last year I received nothing." So Bishnu Devi, nearly landless, is struggling to ensure the survival of her family of two daughters and two sons, all by herself. "If it wasn't for the little money I'm earning by raising and selling goats, I don't know how I could have fed the children."

Bishnu Devi says she has heard reports that her husband is ill. She says that she has heard about HIV AIDS and is aware that her husband could come back infected with the disease. Two men and a woman in the village have already died due to the infection, and many more could be infected. "If my husband comes back I will be the first to take him to the health post and have him cleared medically before we have any *samparka* (contact)," she says matter-of-factly. But Bishnu Devi admits she had not heard of the "window" period of infection for HIV. She also does not seem to know that the blood-screening test her husband would have to submit to is not available at the local health post.

Meanwhile, increasingly the male migrants from the village pose a threat to the health of those they have left behind in Nawadurga. Considering the threat, there is very little awareness-raising programme in the village. Bishnu Devi came to know a little bit about AIDS during discussion in her community organisation. "There has to be more awareness campaign," says Parbati Shahi a community facilitator in the village. "Currently the mindset of the people is so closed, they rarely talk about it. They will definitely not go for blood screening even if the health post were equipped for it, or if there were mobile screening clinics."

Aside from the threat of alien diseases, which include various forms of sexually transmitted diseases brought back by the menfolk, the seasonal migrants also bring with them a peculiar pattern of lethargy once they are back home. "When they come back, these men just laze around, drinking and gambling," says Siddha Raj Bhatta. "They tend to be braggarts and usually squander away all their savings." Bhatta says that the expensive transistor radio, a ubiquitous appendage for these "lahureys" (the term used for Gorkha recruits, now used for any villager who goes away to earn), is usually sold at one-third the price when they run short of funds. "In a couple of months, strapped for cash, they will head down to India again."

Alcoholism is a big problem amongst migrants, say the women of Nawadurga. "But they'll drink anyhow," laments Bishnu Devi. "Through our community organisations we have tried to launch several anti-alcoholism and gambling campaigns, but to no avail," says Mandari Devi Bhatta, a community health volunteer. "Now, *Maobadi ko meherbaani ley khaana chhodya chhan!*" (Now, thanks to the Maoists, they have stopped drinking.) Actually, the men do not seem to think alcoholism is a big deal, and the current ban by the Maoists in the district is not something to raise such a fuss about, they hint. One gentleman scoffs, *"yo kahiley aunchha, kahiley janchha."* (These bans come and go.)

Weaving a rope out of the strands of a tattered plastic sack while keeping an alert eye for the buffaloes grazing on the hillside over a local river, Bal Bahadur Air is a man who has come back home for good, having spent many years in India. His heavily Hindi-accented speech gives away the fact of his sojourn. "When I came back home on leave I found that my wife had died that summer due to snakebite," he says while absent-mindedly twining the rope deftly with his hands. Pointing to a shy girl by his side he says, "This girl was tiny when her mother died. She would not have survived if my parents had not taken care of her." Air has remarried, he says, because he needed help in raising his four children. He adds he will not have any more — the vasectomy he had undergone a couple of years earlier has taken care of that. He also says going to India is out of the question now. "I have got to raise these children and see to their education."

Air had no option but to stay behind. But for every male in Dadeldhura District, the choice to cross the border is always there, and one out of three men do exercise this option. The temptation to leave for India has become heightened in the past year with the growing influence of the Maoist insurgents in these hills of western Nepal. In neighbouring Achham District too, most of the younger males who would have otherwise stayed home are now opting to migrate. Staying home would mean either being targeted by the insurgents or having to join them. The choice is to go to the jungle as a Maoist cadre, or head for the southern plains and most seem to prefer the latter. The women, of course, stay behind as usual with responsibilities doubled and tripled.

The people of the western hills of Nepal regard migration to India as a natural part of their lives. The suffering of the womanfolk and children at home, and the early life of a male menial worker in the plains metropolis is seen as a historical part of life. Only when Nepalis wake up to their responsibilities, and the economy of their hills begins to live up to its potential, will families live together here in Nawadurga, as they are meant to.

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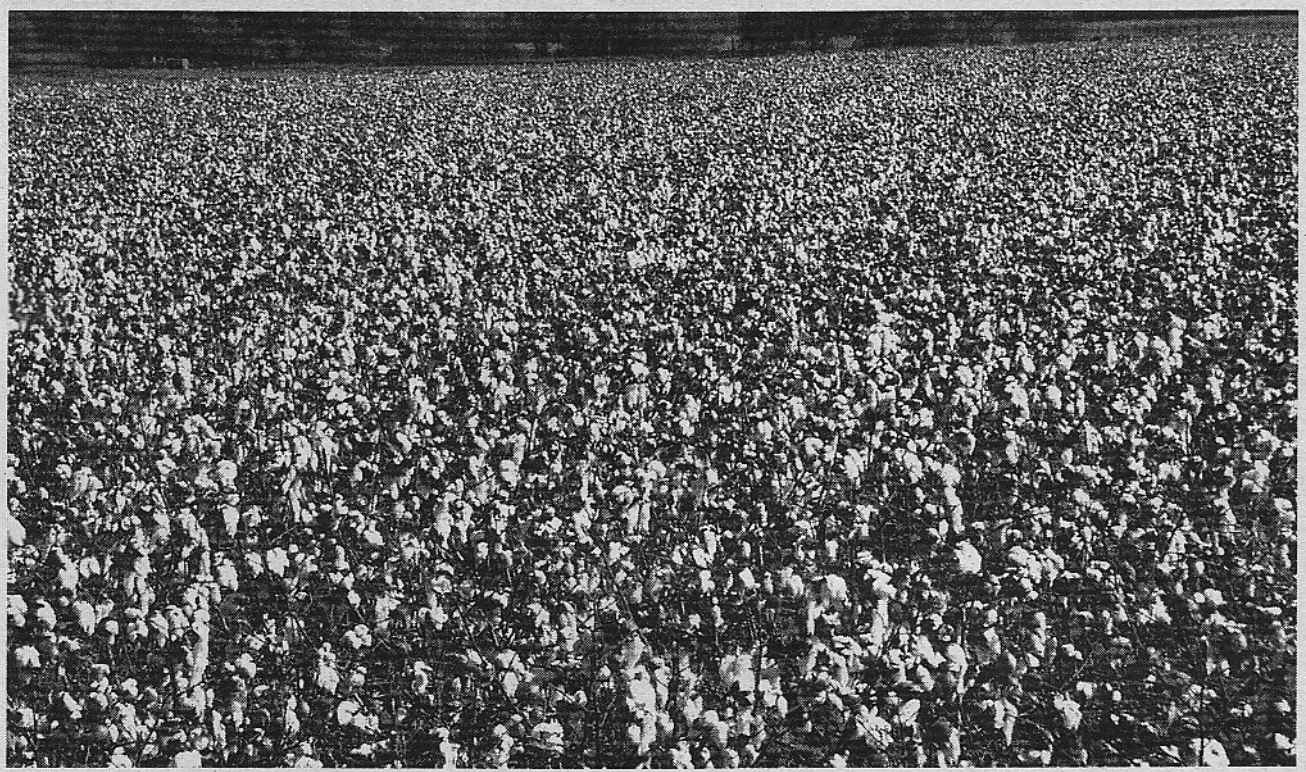


The discovery of illegal, genetically modified cotton in Gujarat has revived the debate on engineered seeds. It is time to take a look at the situation from the roots up.

by ***Michelle Chawla and Hemant Babu***

This year's southwest monsoons had already advanced on the western Indian peninsula and agricultural operations were well underway, when the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC), constituted by the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests, began deliberating on the pros and cons of introducing a transgenic variety of cotton seed into India's complex agrarian economy. Barely three months later, in October 2001, a genetically modified variety of cotton crop was found on about 10,000 hectares of land in the western Indian state of Gujarat. While this discovery raises serious doubts about the Indian government's capacity to perform its regulatory functions, subsequent developments also point to the complex web of interest groups and lobbies that the polity has to confront in the immediate future.

The unauthorised use of genetically engineered cotton seeds has sparked off a controversy. While big farmer groups are demanding, even more vociferously, the commercial introduction of transgenic seed varieties, the administration and environmental activists insists that the unauthorised crop must be destroyed. The conflict over cotton in India is not just about the familiar clash between the commercial drive for profit and environmentalist urge to protect biodiversity, it also typifies corporate methods of manufacturing consent in liberalised times.

A cotton controversy

Interestingly, the discovery of illegal Bt cotton plantations was made by the Bombay-based Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco), in which US transgenic crop giant Monsanto holds a 26 per cent equity stake. Mahyco had applied to the GEAC for permission to commercially introduce Bt cotton. Bt is a transgenic variety of cotton that contains the soil bacterium *Bacillus thurngiensis* (Bt) which encodes an insecticidal protein through a gene called Cry1Ac . Mahyco claims that this genetic property enables the cotton plant to resist the pest *Helicoverpa armigera* or bollworm. The company also claimed that it had carried out field trials of Bt cotton, whose "successful" results were apparently submitted to the GEAC. Environmentalists, on the other hand, claimed that the company's field trials would not withstand critical scrutiny and hence could not constitute the basis for official endorsement. The GEAC decided to take a balanced approach and invited the company and its critics for a hearing. Thereafter, on 20 June, GEAC announced its decision to have yet another round of field trials since the available data was grossly inadequate to make any reasonable surmise of yield projections and net agronomic advantage. The GEAC's decision provoked an uproar from the big farm lobby which has repeatedly argued that biotech is the answer to India's agrarian troubles. To compound matters, the GEAC, rather imprudently, found it unnecessary to publicise the available field trial data for independent scrutiny.

Meanwhile, an Ahmedabad-based private seed company, Navbharat Seeds, had already begun marketing cottonseeds that contained Cry1Ac, patented globally by Monsanto, and for which the Indian license is held by Mahyco. Navbharat is believed to have developed the seed as a hybrid from transgenic seed imported from the US, where Bt cottonseeds are freely available. In India any individual or company can sell seeds without applying for permission. The only statutory obligation is to paste a label on the seed packet, a requirement with which Navbharat had complied. Subsequently, Navbharat also applied for registration of its brand, which was duly granted. The fact that the seeds were genetically modified was concealed and that is a legal violation for which the company could be prosecuted.

Estimates suggest that more than 10,000 packets, each containing 450 grams of Bt cotton seeds, were sold through retail outlets for a price of USD 11.5. Though the illegal cotton crops were discovered in October 2001, investigations revealed that Bt seeds were available and were being cultivated in Gujarat since 1999. It is impossible to accurately estimate the exact acreage under Bt cotton in Gujarat or the number of farmers growing it. Preliminary field visits by personnel of the State Agricultural Department reveal that it is widespread in districts like Bharuch, Kutch, Amreily, Gandhinagar, Surendranagar and Saberkantha. Confronted by legal violation on this scale, the GEAC was forced to take action. On 19 October it issued a directive ordering the State Biotechnology Coordination Committee to destroy the standing Bt crop. GEAC stated that the crop was ready for harvest and hence immediate intervention was needed. GEAC also directed the administration that the affected farmers should be compensated. However, the directive appears to have come too late, as farmers had already carried out one or two rounds of pickings. The order to destroy the crop set in motion a chain of reactions. The government of Gujarat and the central government in New Delhi seemed to be more interested in evading the issue of compensation, as each tried to pass the financial burden onto the other. The farmer lobby, meanwhile, was quick to try and seize the initiative. The firebrand leader of rich peasants, Sharad Joshi, was immediately out on the streets denouncing the move to destroy the illegal genetically modified (GM) crop.

Growing a profit

Given the turn of events, and evaluating the situation from a net-gain perspective, it would appear that the final beneficiary of this episode is the seed giant Monsanto. In the last several years Monsanto and other biotech multinationals such as Syngenta and Novartis have been making concerted attempts to capture the global seed market. In Europe their efforts seem to be yielding few returns. Therefore, the fragmented and unorganised farm sector in Latin America and Asia has now become the focus of their activities. In this drive to penetrate underdeveloped economies, the biotech industry has found a new and, on the face of it, unlikely cheerleader—the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *The Human Development Report 2001*, released by the UNDP a few months ago, is in large measure a fairly explicit sales pitch for the industry. The report asserts, quite presumptuously, that "biotechnology offers the only or the best 'tool of choice' for marginal ecological zones—left behind by the green revolution but home to more than half of the worlds poorest people, dependent on agriculture and livestock".

With such respectable institutional backing it is not surprising that transnational corporations have felt free to act unilaterally and in violation of sovereign laws to gain entry into third world markets. There is no dearth of propaganda on the benefits that this technology offers to farmers, so much so that the reputed power of GM seeds to miraculously transform agriculture has acquired the status of a religious revelation among some of the more influential circles in many poor countries. Witness the insistent demand of rich farmer lobbies to legalise the introduction of modified seeds. Presumably the corporations are within their rights to operate

through lobbies of this kind. But this is often accompanied by more dubious activities that amount to malpractice. Among others, biotech companies are known to make misleading claims, suppress information about possible negative consequences, doctor field trials, and, most notoriously, introduce seeds by stealth in clear breach of the law. It is this last tactic that has prompted industry insiders to speculate on a possible connection between Mahyco and the furtive activities of Navbharat Seeds. Mahyco is reported to have spent USD 8 million on commercialising Bt cotton in India and it has reason to try and hasten a favourable government decision. For the record, Mahyco's managing director has lashed out at Navbharat Seeds demanding "strong and immediate action" against it for "blatant contravention of the legal and regulatory processes".

Sceptics, however, are not convinced by such public statements, primarily because the Monsanto-Mahyco combine has been extremely reluctant to take legal action against Navbharat for the infringement of its patent. As a rule, biotech multinationals are very aggressive in their use of the legal system to extract the maximum advantage for themselves. Only recently Monsanto dragged a Canadian farmer, Percy Schmeiser, to court for allegedly infringing its patent on GM canola. Schmeiser claimed his organic canola field was invaded by Monsanto's genetically engineered variety of canola from a neighbouring field because of high pollen flow. The court eventually ordered the farmer to pay damages to Monsanto. In marked contrast, in the Navbharat case Monsanto-Mahyco have cited the ambiguity of existing Indian patent laws as the reason for not legally pursuing the matter. There are many who feel that a company that has created legal history by securing a new precedent in Canadian case-law could not have forfeited its possible claims to redressal under the Indian legal system without some compelling motive of profit. Whatever be the truth of it, overnight a lobby of farmers in favour of Bt cotton has been created in Gujarat through illegal means, at no cost to Mahyco and to the considerable profit of Navbharat. If anybody loses financially it will be either the farmers who planted the seed or the government that destroys the crop.

Friends of the farm

Meanwhile, in what must be the strongest argument for legalising the biotech seed, the affected farmers in Gujarat today say they had larger yields due to Bt cotton. In effect, spurred by short-term gains, they speak Monsanto's language. And of course the farmers cannot be mindful of any of the possible negative consequences that environmentalists have warned of, since they have yet to be made aware of them. In many ways this calls to mind the green revolution farmer's excessive enthusiasm for chemical fertilisers and ground water, in a bid to maintain productivity in the face of a continuing spiral of depletion. As has happened the past in India, the cash starved farmer's immediate financial relief may well become the benchmark for granting legitimacy to yet another technology whose agro-economic suitability, relevance and sustainability have not been established rigorously.

Seed giants and a cotton controversy.

Ironically enough, the introduction of these technologies is always legitimised by pointing to the plight of the Indian farmer, which is governed by too complex a set of factors for it to be ameliorated by the purely technocratic solution proffered by the biotech industry and supposedly neutral organisations like UNDP. These factors include the absence of a micro credit system, poor utilisation of land and water resources and the price fluctuations of the international market. Cotton is indeed one of the most volatile crops in India. The country has the world's largest tract of land under cotton cultivation: about 8.9 million hectares. The Indian cotton economy employs 7 million people. Yet, the country's cotton fields rank among the lowest in the world in terms of productivity. Two-thirds of the cotton crop in India is cultivated under rain fed conditions, exposing farmers to the vagaries of weather. In addition poor soil health, constraints in the adoption of sound agronomic practices, the small size of land holdings on which the crop is cultivated, and the poor spread of integrated pest management methods have all combined to push productivity down. The last factor is particularly crucial. Compared to other crops, cotton faces the most serious pest problem and the magnitude of damage caused on this count through the entire duration from the sowing to the picking has been the single most important factor in depressing productivity. In the past several years cotton has driven hundreds of farmers and their families to suicide because either the bollworm or the weather has affected the harvest and pushed them into a cyclical debt trap.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that cotton accounts for more than half the total money spent in India on pesticides. Given the scale of revenue involved, the competing drive for market dominance between two alternative technologies of pest control threatens to derail a dispassionate evaluation of genetically engineered seed. The powerful pesticide lobby in India sees the introduction of Bt cotton as a threat to its existence. The industry has been lobbying hard, sometimes on the side of environmentalists, to thwart the commercialisation of Bt cotton, so that the seed debate in India seems

today to be reduced to a choice between chemical pollution and genetic pollution. In reality, the debate encompasses a far greater range of issues involving ecologically-sustainable methods to deal with the pest problem. In this context, it is worth noting that there are pockets in India where organic cotton production has shown encouraging results and this points to a potentially optimal solution. However, proponents of the transgenic variety have not been deterred by such alternatives, preferring instead to churn out statistics about arable under proprietary seed. They claim that half the acreage under cotton plantation in the US has switched over to Bt cotton. Reportedly, China in 2000 had increased the area under GM cotton to 28 per cent of its total cotton acreage, a tenfold increase in two years. Countries like Argentina, South Africa and Mexico are also said to be following suit.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, argue that transgenic cotton makes neither environmental nor agronomic sense. They point out that there is overwhelming scientific evidence to suggest that with sustained cultivation of the Bt crop, resistance to the Bt toxin will develop. Over a period of time this could lead to the proliferation of resistant pests to the extent that Bt will no longer be effective against a majority of the targeted pest population. Though Bt cotton is derived from a naturally occurring soil bacterium, it is crystallised to enable its insertion into the plant. Thus Bt cotton is an insecticidal genetically engineered plant containing an insecticide produced in all parts of the plant during the entire life span of the crop. Pests and non-target insects will therefore be exposed to this pre-activated toxin for a long time, thereby increasing the risks of resistance development and harmful effects to non-target species. Environmental activists cite the case of the *Chrysoperla carnea*, or the green lacewing, which is a predatory species used in India under the Integrated Pest Management Programme to control bollworm. Bt maize led to increased mortality among the green lacewing. This risk to predatory species threatens to undermine modern pest management systems. In some regions in the US, it was found that between 1996 and 1998, the cotton bollworm acquired a tenfold increase in tolerance to the toxin found in Bt cotton. In China too the bollworm is reported to have developed early resistance to Bt.

Why environmentalists oppose GM seeds

- GM crops could cause genetic pollution by transferring their foreign genes to related plants. Pesticide resistant genes could turn weeds into 'superweeds;, and insect resistant genes could turn insects into super bugs both impossible to control without massive applications of chemicals.
- Given the fact that developing countries are hotspots of genetic diversity, transgenic crops pose a potential risk to the traditional wild varieties. For example Mexico, the centre of diversity for corn is threatened by GM variety being imported from the US.
- GM crops could have a devastating effect on native flora and fauna. Because such crops may have competitive advantage over natural wild plants the latter may be unable to survive.
- Food produced from some GM crops could severely undermine the treatment of human and animal disease. This is because many GM crops contain antibiotic resistant genes.
- GM food could increase the risk of allergies.

The Biotech bureaucracy

While a final verdict on the merits of the various approaches cannot be arrived at without systematically compiling and evaluating the entire corpus of evidence, there are enough credible instances to suggest that engineered seeds may have adverse consequences sufficient to merit concern and scientific examination. It is understandable, though not acceptable, that the biotech industry should brush aside these concerns to hawk their wares. What is rather more dubious is that institutions like the UNDP, masquerading behind supposedly neutral developmental agendas, have chosen, in the name of food security, to conduct themselves like the commission agents of private firms. When confronted with crusading 'biotech revolutionaries' who resort to every possible method, including getting mileage out of rural poverty and food insecurity, it does appear that third world governments have neither the will nor the mechanisms to rectify matters. Eight years ago India had introduced regulatory mechanisms pertaining to genetically modified organisms in the Environment Protection Act. As a result, the country now boasts a three tier mechanism made up of a web of committees whose roles and functions are overlapping at best and confusing at worst. This elaborate regulatory mechanism and its rules had no occasion to be tested in the past. Now, when the occasion has arisen very few in the bureaucracy have been able to handle it effectively. Let alone address the question of the efficacy of GM seeds, this so-called regulatory mechanism has been unable even to deal with the illegalities of the Bt cotton episode. With such mechanisms in place, the "world's largest democracy" is unlikely to be able to resist a corporate stranglehold on its agrarian economy.

Whither the Afghan war?


Zahir Shah, former king of Afghanistan.

After nearly a month of US-led military strikes in Afghanistan, the future of the country is less certain now than at any time since 1996. Does the US have a viable plan for ensuring stability after the bombs stop falling?

By ***Abbas Rashid***

After nearly a month of US-led military strikes in Afghanistan, the future of the country is less certain now than at any time since 1996. The Taliban emerged from Afghanistan's chaos after Soviet troops withdrew. Does the US have a viable plan for ensuring stability after the bombs stop falling?

The 'War against Terrorism' is not quite going the way it was planned. After the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington the United States responded with a number of immediate measures. It identified Osama Bin Laden and his network of terror as being responsible for the attacks. It then mobilised its formidable military machine in pursuit of the objective to "smoke 'em out, get 'em and bring 'em to justice", as President George W. Bush put it. Fairly early on, the objective of apprehending bin Laden was fused with the goal of removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Even though the US declined to publicly furnish proof against Bin Laden that would stand in a court of law, much of the world signalled its support for the drive to get him. Subsequently, the US Defense Secretary was reported to have said that Bin Laden may never be found. By that time the overriding objective had become the removal of the Taliban regime in Kabul.

This is, however, a task that is not as easy as it may have seemed. There is now increasing talk from Washington and London about how the Taliban are proving to be formidable foes. Given the track record of the Afghans, most recently against the erstwhile Soviet Union, this was not entirely unexpected. But the premise was that the Taliban are a highly oppressive regime and hence hugely unpopular. It was therefore felt that though they may seem to be in virtually complete control, the Taliban presides over a brittle structure of power that can be rapidly undermined with the right combination of force and incentives to powerful commanders to switch sides. US policy envisages that after the collapse of the Taliban regime, a broad-based government led by the former King Zahir Shah in a transitional role will be installed. The Northern Alliance is expected to be a key partner in this new dispensation.

Limping to the future

Doubtless, the Taliban have presided over what must be one of the most intolerant and oppressive regimes in the world. So, why is the plan not going entirely according to the script? For one thing, the US may have misread the nature of the popular resentment against the Taliban. Or, it could well be that the latter have had some success in persuading the largely Pashtoon-majority areas of southern Afghanistan that the new order effectively implies the rule of the Northern Alliance, with King Zahir Shah playing the role of an ineffective US puppet to provide the requisite legitimacy. The Pashtoons of the south have grim recollections of the time when the Northern Alliance ruled between 1992 and 1996. Ahmed Shah Massoud, the operational leader of the Alliance, was highly regarded for his many battles and brilliant outmanoeuvring of the Soviet forces during the war. But in peace he could not keep in check the rampaging forces of Alliance partners, like General Rashid Dostum. In Kabul and beyond, the memories are bitter.

But what of the other key player—former king, Zahir Shah? There is a wide-ranging consensus that he remains virtually the last hope for getting Afghanistan back on the rails. The king, who ruled Afghanistan for about 40 years, has in the perception of many Afghans a kind of historical legitimacy. If he were to call a representative Loya Jirga (tribal council), the basis for a new government could be put in place. But this is not a

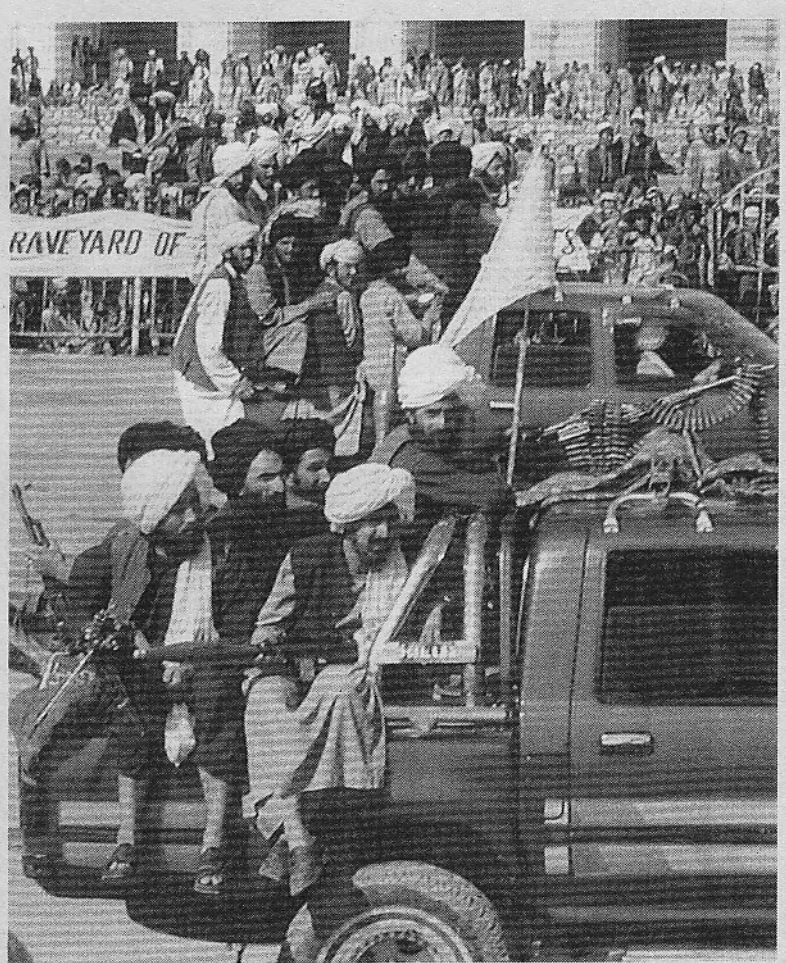
simple matter either. Ten years ago the Zahir Shah option was a more optimistic one. At that point, when Afghans looked back after more than a decade of being ravaged by war, Zahir Shah's reign seemed to them to have been something of a golden age. The king had not done much for his people by way of development but he had kept the peace. And peace had retrospectively come to acquire a very high premium among the Afghans. Though Afghanistan remained in the Soviet sphere of influence after the second world war, the king skilfully kept his distance from the Soviet state's ideology since that would have created unrest in his Muslim-majority population. It is important to remember that the king had not been deposed as a result of a popular movement, as in Iran, but was ousted in a coup in 1973 while on a vacation in Europe.

But ten years ago, the US and all the neighbours who are unanimous today in supporting Zahir Shah's candidature opposed it for different reasons. The US felt that he had, during his long reign, been far too close to the Soviet Union and that a more suitably inclined regime could be put in place in Kabul. Pakistan had its own favourite, Gulbaddin Hekmatyar, and so had no time to waste on Zahir Shah. Iran, given its bloody struggle against the monarchy at home, found the idea of restoring the king in Afghanistan repugnant. But now, despite this consensus on his candidature, why is their still such a problem?

A kingdom for the king?

At one level, the problem now is much the same as it was then. It is the personality of the king. He is an extremely cautious man. As before, he wants everything in place. He is unwilling to force the issue on the ground, because it entails taking risks of the kind he is averse to. In the cauldron that is Afghanistan today that may be unavoi-dable. At another level there is the change in circumstances. Zahir Shah's hoped-for return has now been preceded by a US-led campaign that has resulted in the killing of a large number of civilians, including women and children. This has obviously generated intense resentment among ordinary Afghans. The danger is that the king will now be perceived as being associated with the US camp. The Taliban are highlighting the connection, declaring that the king cannot come back to Kabul riding in on American tanks. The chilling episode of the well-known, pro-King, Afghan commander Abdul Haq's execu-tion by the Taliban in late October when he attempted to rally dissi-dent Afghan commanders against the Taliban may be indicative. In all likelihood he was betrayed.

The problem may also equally have something to do with the growing Afghan anger against outsiders and with the growing perception that the Taliban are possibly the lesser evil, a view that may be especially strong in the south and east of the country. It does not help either that the king is now seen to be actively engaged in negotiations with the Northern Alliance for a future broad-based dispensation. Turkey's initiative for working out the modalities of such collaboration will again be presented by the Taliban as being under US auspices, given that Turkey, though a Muslim country, is a member of NATO. The message will also be that while the king remains a figurehead, real power will be transferred to the Northern Alliance. On this score, too, the Taliban could end up being seen as the lesser evil by the Pashtoon majority. However, out of an array of bad choices, the former king remains, perhaps, the best available option in post-Taliban Afghanistan. But implementation of this plan will be a complex and problematic affair. In any case, what is absolutely essential is for the US, as well as the neighbouring countries, not least Pakistan, to refrain from seeking to impose their preferences with regard to the future regime



The Taliban militia in Kabul.

in Afghanistan. That has been, and will be, a recipe for disaster.

Winning battles, losing hearts

Three weeks of bombing may have knocked out most of the 'high-value' targets in a country that according to the Pentagon is not 'target-rich'. But this does not appear to have contributed to achieving the objective of generating pressure from a disgruntled populace to hasten the internal collapse of the Taliban regime. If anything, the Taliban appear to have been emboldened by their ability to survive the initial onslaught. The Northern Alliance has made little headway in taking Mazar-e-Sharif despite the bombing of the Taliban forward lines by US-led forces. Mullah Omar has challenged the international coalition to name one high-ranking Taliban leader that the campaign, so far, has managed to kill. The Taliban ambassador in Islamabad appears far more relaxed than when the war began and at his frequent press conferences he is prone to trade the occasional joke with the assembled correspondents.

It has not helped either that 'mistakes' in the bombing campaigns have been mounting. There are daily reports of civilians killed, smart bombs going astray and wiping out a whole village, Red Cross warehouses being repeatedly bombed and the like. The US-led high-altitude war has reached a stalemate of sorts with civilian casualties mounting and relatively little degradation of the Taliban ability to fight a deadly and protracted war on the ground. A key requirement to this end will be the continued support of the ordinary Afghans. Ironically, it seems that the bombing campaign, with what certainly appears to the Afghans as a callous disregard for civilian lives, may well have served to arrest the growing alienation among the ordinary Afghans for their oppressive rulers. The widespread mass protests in the Muslim world as well as in the West certainly serve to reinforce the view that the US-led coalition is essentially wrong in its relentless campaign of targeting one of the poorest countries of the world for an act in which no Afghan was directly involved.

In Pakistan protests, so far, have remained largely limited to demonstrations comprising by cadres of politico-religious parties such as the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI). But that may change as the campaign drags on. Civil society in Pakistan is beginning to register its concern. For the first time in Karachi, in the last week of October, doctors joined in to protest rising civilian casualties. Earlier, the Lahore High Court Bar protested. NGOs with no love lost for the Taliban have been holding peace demonstrations. So far the man on the street, while condemning US actions, has kept away from the demonstrations led by the extremist lobby. But in the absence of active mainstream political parties, he may end up bolstering their ranks. In any case, it is bound to be a source of encouragement for the Taliban that thousands of tribesmen from across the Durand Line in Pakistan are now ready to join them in their struggle against the foreign invader. Ironically, it is the Taliban which has asked them to desist with the assurance that they will be invited in, when needed. Apparently, the scarcity of food within Afghanistan is one consideration for putting the proffered help on hold.

The approach of winter

President Musharraf may have anticipated up to a point the fall-out in Pakistan of a protracted military campaign in neighbouring Afghanistan. Having gone along with the US because he saw no choice, he has nevertheless continued to emphasise the need to keep the military action "short and sharp". He has also called the civilian toll "excessive." But, the US has rejected the idea of a time frame and the daily bombing runs have continued. Similarly, there are differing views in the US administration about the wisdom of continuing military action during the month of Ramzan. Given US Secretary of State, Colin Powell's record during the Gulf War, it is interesting that he appears to have emerged as the dove to the hawk brigade led by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. In any case, the killing of innocent men women and children during this month of fasting will have a special resonance that will be used by the Taliban to illustrate the 'crusading' nature of the campaign.

More than anything else, however, it is the approaching winter and the developing humanitarian crisis that poses the greatest danger. According to UN agencies, nearly seven million Afghans, or nearly a third of the population inside Afghanistan, are at risk this winter owing to lack of adequate food and shelter. It is their belief that the food being dropped by the coalition forces does not amount to much more than a public-relations exercise. Any serious effort at providing adequate supplies has to be through a large number of trucks, and this is not possible until the bombing is stopped and some kind of an arrangement for the convoys to go through negotiated with the Taliban. Once snow begins to fall, which will be soon, many of the routes will be inaccessible and remain so through the winter months. In such a situation the death toll could climb dramatically with tens of thousands succumbing to the cold and hunger. This could unleash the kind of public anger in Pakistan and beyond that could have far-reaching repercussions.

The central argument of those who want the campaign to continue is that without the military action the Taliban cannot be dislodged. The Taliban, they argue, are now led by Bin Laden and his 'Arab legion' that, in effect, has hijacked an entire country. Afghanistan now cannot be rid of them without external intervention. There are, in other words, no easy choices. Nevertheless, continuing the relentless military campaign now runs the risk of creating a far bigger mess without quite resolving the one in Afghanistan. ▲

DHRUBA BASNET

The cycle of violence: A boy orphaned by the police cares for his siblings and bides his revenge.

Nepal's Maobaadi

by ***CK Lal***

Beginning or an end?

In a scene from *The Killing Terraces*, a documentary screened at the inaugural of Film South Asia 2001, director Dhurba Basnet captures the cold fury of a young boy, no more than ten or twelve. Orphaned by a 'war' that has claimed the lives of more than 2000 innocent Nepalis over last five years, the boy seethes with rage, and says to the camera that he wants to 'tear the heart out' of the policemen who killed his parents.

Even more than the savagery of words and the chill in the tone, it is the blazing face of the boy that sends shivers down the spine. The roots of hatred appear to have penetrated deep. When the so-called Peoples' War is over, healing would be an onerous process for all its victims. Violence brutalises the perpetrator and the sufferer alike. Recovery is slow, and proceeds in fits and starts.

This Dasain season, Maoist violence is on the ebb. But the fear that the tide may turn anytime is always there. After all, the war started almost without a warning when a faction of the then above-ground United Peoples Front submitted a charter of demands listed under 40 points to premier Sher Bahadur Deuba, and then took to guns (13 February, 1996) four days before the expiry of the deadline. Perhaps Pushpa Kamal Dahal (a.k.a. Comrade Prachanda) and Dr Babu Ram Bhattarai knew that their demands—a wish list actually—were unfulfilable in any case at such short notice given that the rot is so deep.

Demands in the list varied from the lofty (decentralisation in real terms) to the inane (inflation should be controlled) and from the rhetorical ("The cultural pollution of imperialists and expansionists should be stopped") to the very specific (Cars with Indian number plates should not be allowed to ply the roads of Nepal). The list is in itself a proof that the Maoists were never serious about those, because there is nothing in this list of demands that cannot be pursued through

peaceful political means. If anything, violence undermines the very cause that the Maoists say they espouse—a country mired in a civil war cannot devote itself to reforms with any seriousness.

It is this record of duplicity displayed by the Maoists in the past that raises doubts about their sincerity. The truce between the police and the Maoist guerrillas holds; talks continue to be held or planned even in this Dasain of year 2001, and relative calm reigns in the countryside. But the apprehension remains: will the Maoists abjure violence or is this unquiet peace just a temporary phase—one more lull before the storm? To date, the Maoists haven't budged an inch from their initial demands (scrapping of the present Constitution; strengthening of the 'republic', which they claim is already a reality; and formation of an interim government) and sporadic violence—like the recent killing of a Nepali Congress activist in Dang in the mid-western tarai—continues to mock the promises made by their leadership. Yet there is a hope that the war may come to an end sooner than later. If the fear springs from past experiences, hope in future has been raised by recent global events, particularly USA's war on terrorism being waged right in South Asia's attic, that is Afghanistan.

The ground beneath

Observers elsewhere in South Asia wonder why the Maoists' war spread so fast in Nepal, considering that the Peoples' War group or the Maoists' Communist Centre in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar have not been able to make much headway despite nearly three decades of continuous struggle. A quick review of Maoist insurgency in Nepal is perhaps necessary to understand why the violence is today on the wane, and why the 'war' may completely run out of steam anytime now.

The most facile explanation offered by the lazy intelligentsia for the rise of the Maobaadi is that all-encompassing expression: grinding poverty. With an explanation like that, it's impossible to go wrong. Poverty is almost always the original cause behind most social upheavals. But as the Nepali Congress Party's rising star Jay Prakash Prasad Gupta (once again a Minister for Information and Communication) argued in *Himal Khabarpatrika*: if deprivation were the sole reason behind the uprising, it would have taken place in districts like Bajura and Mugu that have much lower Human Development Index (0.173 and 0.147 respectively) than Sindhuli or Gorkha (0.295 and 0.308). Indeed, the causes of the wildfire insurgency are so complex that they cannot be explained in the catch phrases of political, social or economic disciplines. Insurgency is a product of the same socio-political process that has transformed Gupta from a struggling journalist to (in his eyes) a pragmatic politician who can nevertheless afford to fly to Paris on a "personal visit" for his Dasain vacation.

To be sure, political reasons are in themselves quite compelling. When Comrade Prachanda and Dr. Bhattarai took up the gun in the winter of 1996, they did not have many political options left. Their platform (The United People's Front) had been taken away by Comrade Lila Mani Pokharel in another one of those internecine political warfares for which leftists in South Asia are justly notorious, and their claim for recognition stood rejected by the Election Commission. Finding no room for manoeuvre and as a method of political survival, they announced a boycott of mid-term elections in 1994. From having been the leaders of third largest political party in the first parliament, they had found themselves out on the street, when the second one was convened and the Nepal became the first kingdom in the world to have a duly elected communist government. The minority government of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxists Leninist) led by Comrade Man Mohan Adhikary was short-lived, and after its fall a spurt of opportunistic coalitions between all shades of left, right and centre followed. Corruption, horse-trading and instability became the order of the day. The bourgeoisie looked at these formations with extreme distaste, and there was erosion in the credibility of all institutions of governance. Ironically, while political parties happily formed the most unlikely coalitions, there was complete disunity among them when it came to interpreting—and thereby protecting—the new Constitution of 1990. Thus, while Nepali Congress tried to drag the institution of constitutional monarchy back into activism, the CPN (UML) thought nothing of taking to the streets against the courts. Maoists looked quite principled in comparison actually.

Another powerful political cause for the rise of the Maobaadi was the fast mobilisation that has taken place in the countryside without its proper institutionalisation. While political activists emerged everywhere, the mainstream political parties did not pay enough attention to addressing the aspirations of their workers. Fearing that the procedural formalisation would curtail their discretionary powers in distributing the fish and loaf of opportunities, leaders of all political parties built coteries, thus alienating a large section of their own ground workers. They were ready for picking up by the Maoists.

The social reasons behind the quick spread of Maoism were equally powerful. Overnight, political parties transformed themselves into machines for maintaining the status quo of a graded and hierarchical society. The possibility of 'circulation' of elite was wilfully blocked as the power elite of Panchayat era changed colours and assumed charge in new avatars. Perhaps none symbolises this phenomenon as strongly as parliamentarian Govinda Bahadur Shah of Rukum-Jajarkot who discarded his yellow jacket of the Panchayat and donned the lily-white kurta of the Nepali Congress, antagonising a large section of followers of the party in the region, a significant proportion of them of the Magar ethnicity.

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 benign 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.

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Oddly, but perhaps not so on second thoughts, pragmatic politicians can don an injured look with relative ease—Shah looks more like a victim of circumstances rather than one of the myriad causes of the creation of terror in Dhurba Basnet's *The Killing Terraces*. The total neglect of Dalits and women continued under the democratic dispensation, making the locals wonder what after all was the difference from the dreaded days of Panchayat. Predictably, *janjatis* (ethnic communities), dalits, and women have formed the bulk of recruits for the Maoists' 'army'. Sadly, however, here too the higher echelons are bahun (brahmin) dominated, making one wonder at the truth in the saying: the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Then, of course, there were the economic compulsions of a dirt-poor country, that politicians like Gupta dismiss without pausing to examine their implications for social behaviour. Poverty turns into hopelessness when opportunities to better one's prospect become the monopoly of the ruling elite and cronies. It is then that any escape from the quagmire of desperation looks attractive in the first instance. As the donors poured in loans to strengthen democracy, overnight millionaires and destitutes were created almost simultaneously as conditions ruthlessly imposed by multilateral lending agencies led to a loss of jobs.

Withdrawal of subsidy under the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) had been sapping the energy of the Nepali economy for quite sometime before the dawn of democracy in 1990, but the rate of pauperisation of the peasantry grew as the government continued to reduce subsidies for farm inputs and cut jobs in the public sector in the name of rationalisation. With the media singing paeans in praise of globalisation, the prospect of prosperity looked tantalisingly close but turned out to be tauntingly distant to the youths of petty bourgeoisie.

CHANDRA SHEKHAR KARKI

Endless war: policemen killed in a Maoist attack in April.

The army of half-educated and fully unemployed was already radicalised by 'moderate' leftists earlier who had promised to deliver utopia but had failed to provide even clean government during their terms in Singha Durbar. Nothing short of guns could offer these alienated youths salvation. They became the frontline leaders of the Maoists—quoting the Great Helmsman even as they prepared their muzzle laden with gunpowder and pellet.

Then there is the landscape of Nepal that rises from slightly above mean sea level to the highest mountain range in the world within a distance of about 200 kilometres. Scattered settlements and inaccessible villages of a rugged terrain criss-crossed by mountainous rivers are tailor-made for hit-and-run tactics of guerrilla warfare. The civil police—recruited and trained to maintain law and order in populated areas—was ill suited to fight rebellion in such a setting. But due to an ambiguous provision of the Constitution that does not specify civilian control over the Royal Nepal Army in so many words, King Birenda refused to send in the troops to contain the insurgency for five years into what had become a civil war for all intent and purposes. Nepali police became one of the very police forces in all of the world to have faced the full wrath of an armed rebellion. The Nepal Police suffered heavy casualties, but ironically, it is this very tragedy that has helped isolate insurgents and improve the image of the men in blue. Long reviled as 'masters in the art of extortion' by the social elite of the country, and also correctly blamed for the initial bout of state terror that helped nourish the Maobaadis, the policeman has suddenly gained the halo of a martyr institution. The butt of social commentators' jokes are now the men in green of the Royal Nepal Army who do little more than stage parades and protect strategic installations, such as telephones, for a fee. It is this erosion in the respect for the RNA that may have prompted its junior officers into pressurising their top brass – representing old feudalism – which has now resulted in the partial mobilisation of the army in select districts of the country.

The sky above

Reports in the media that Maoist Supreme Comrade Prachanda travelled abroad on an Indian passport are not easy to prove, but the fact that eminent mainstream leftists like Comrade Madhav Nepal and Bamdev Gautam were received in audience by Comrade Prachanda in a 'safe-house' in Siliguri proved to those who were seeking proof that the Indian state was ambivalent towards the insurgents of Nepal, even if not exactly friendly. Perhaps some mandarins in the New Delhi establishment even saw in Comrade

Prachanda a lever in their dealings with Kathmandu, and it was only the risk of formation of a South Asian coalition of armed insurgents that has alerted them to the dangers of playing with fire.

The Narayanhiti Royal palace was no less irresolute about an insurgency that was ostensibly aimed at throwing it (the monarchy) into the dustbin of history. The palace establishment—or at least a section of it—saw the Maoists as tools for getting after the leaders of political parties who had made it powerless. Dr. Babu Ram Bhattarai publicly admitted to having a kind of an understanding with former prince Dhirendra, youngest of King Birendra's brothers. And it is not as far-fetched as it appears that Dhirendra's relatively harmless personage was used by certain other hard-line sections of the palace to cultivate the Maoists to spite the gains of the People's Movement of 1990. This is the likelihood that Ram Chandra Paudel, Home Minister until recently, hinted at when he talked about the 'ultimate pilgrimage sites' of Maoists.

These two elements—Indian interests and the interests of socio-military and palace elite of Nepal—have a sizeable clout, if not presence, in the private Nepali media. In the initial phases of insurgency, the media acted as an extension of the Maoist propaganda machine with the bonus that the national press was considered to be unbiased while the government-controlled media carried the stigma of partisanship. The press, with no more than a few exceptions, not only condoned the violence by the Maoists, they reported it in what can be interpreted as celebratory tones. A bit of this may have been out of fear, as premier Deuba (once again Prime Minister) recently alleged—after all, the government was not in a position to guarantee security to those that dared criticise the insurgency; but all the passion poured into defending the excesses of insurgents could not have come from the psychology of fear alone. Part of the explanation must also lie in the fascination that the middle-classes have for quick-fix solutions to problems faced by a society in transition.

Most of the journalists in the mainstream press represent the social profile of middle-level Maoist cadres: a petty bourgeoisie background that abhors democratic politics as 'soft' and worships the certainty of dictatorship of every kind. Many of these pioneers of insurgency reporting are too young to have experienced the futility of violence—they were not even born when Nepali Congress Party waged its self-destructive armed struggles in the sixties, or even when CPN(UML)'s 'elimination of class enemy' campaign was deftly utilised by Panchayat regime to attack all those opposed to the then system. The lack of experience of this reporting class could have been compensated by learning, but the quantitative jump in the press has not been matched by a qualitative enhancement in the knowledge and skills of media-persons. Consequently, the press willingly allowed itself to become the loyal handmaiden of insurgents bent upon subverting the very freedom that

DHRUBA BASNET

Studies in contrast: An infirm villager being carried for treatment.

the journalists were using to idolise the perpetrators of violence.

Even the West—epitomised by the United States and the United Kingdom—that today avows to fight 'any terrorism, anywhere', took a benign view of the Maoists. No less a person than Robin Cook came all the way to Kathmandu—via New Delhi—to strongly advise Singha Durbar that the 'political problem' should be resolved through talks. Under pressure from donors of all hues, the government hesitated from categorising Maoists as terrorists (and has not done so to date), and unwittingly condoned their acts of terror by forming, one after another, committees for talks even as insurgents massacred policemen on duty in cold-blood by the score in now infamous places such as Dunai and Naumule.

In this way, five years into the insurgency, organised violence became an accepted fact of life, from being an intolerable part of life. The only saving grace, if at all it can be called that, was that Nepal's Maoist insurgency was ideologically led, unlike the communal warfare of Sri Lanka, the jungle military of the Indian Northeast, or the criminal gangs of Karachi and Bombay. But as instances of extortion grew and standards of behaviour of Maoist cadres fell, an impression was created in the society that Maobaadis were no different from other run-of-the mill politicians except the fact that their cadre was more organised, more ruthless, and they had the power of the gun to settle all scores—political or otherwise. The advantage of instant justice that Maobaadis had promised turned out to be even more tyrannical than the slow pace of justice dispensed by conventional courts—in an extreme example, local cadres uprooted a jack-fruit tree when a case of its contested ownership was brought to the 'peoples court' run by Maobaadis.

There was dissatisfaction with the government and the society had lost hopes of finding a salvation in the success of Maoist insurgency. Hopelessness was rife when the curse of history visited upon the country as the immediate family of King Birendra was massacred in the carnage of Narayanhiti in the night of Friday, 1 June 2001. Nepalis showed a maturity that comes only

with the practice of democracy, and displayed caution and unity in the face of socio-political tragedy. Maobaadis propaganda war to cash on the enormity of the national grief was lost even before it started—no one wanted more uncertainty, and even Dr. Babu Ram Bhattarai's fertile imagination and erudite prose could not convince any one that the time was ripe for consolidating a 'republic'. To compound their challenge further, Maoists have suddenly found that their violent ways can no more be tolerated by an international community ranged behind United States of America in its War on Terrorism. In the new paradigm of political morality, one man's terrorist is another man's terrorist as well, and all kinds of militants have become expendable. Zero tolerance is the defining feature of *Algebra of Infinite Justice* in the eerily evocative expression of Arundhati Roy. The Maoists have nowhere to hide in the international arena at hand.

The end?

In the famous phrase of the Great Helmsman, guerrillas survive and flourish as long as they can swim in the river of public support. But the stream seems to be drying up as people tired of Maoists' extortion tactics are grouping up to fight the terror. And it is happening not just in the tarai from Sunsari to Banke districts, east to west, but deep in the hills in places like Panchthar and Ramechhap as well. In the Biruwagadhi of Parsa district in the central tarai, local inhabitants recently literally drove away the suspected Maoists and their sympathisers alike.

The ground beneath the feet of Maoists—the silent support of urban middle-class—has started to give way. It happened mainly because the Maoists scratched where it didn't itch, and ended up looking like torturers. The bourgeoisie had made peace with the private schools, and agreed to buy a status possession called 'quality education' for their kids at a price. The Maoists' threats of closing them down frightened the urban middle-class, and when the insurgents brought their forcible donation collection drives to professionals' door-steps in the capital city, its conscience-keepers were positively enraged. It's highly unlikely that *Kantipur Daily* was not aware of ransom notes that Maoists have been delivering at the offices of almost all big business houses in a routine manner for the past few years, but when they themselves received one after the Narayanhiti Massacre, they promptly reported it in their hugely popular daily newspaper. This innocuous event heralded nothing short of a tectonic shift in the way middle-class would thence onwards look at the insurgency.

Now, the Indian authorities, too, have been quick to disown Maoists. As a part of his ploy of staging a 'concert of democracy' against cross-border terrorism in India-held Kashmir, the urbane Foreign Minister of India Jaswant Singh declared Nepali Maoists as terrorists even while the government at home was

DHRUBA BASNET

Only the district headquarter is in government control in Rukum.

treating them as equals and holding political 'talks' with them. The damning of Maoists by the South Block was the proverbial last straw, even more damaging than the mobilisation of Indian forces along the Nepal-India border, demonstrably to protect the Hindi hinterland from Nepal's insurgents. Elements sympathetic to India inside Nepal have no reasons now to tolerate terrorists.

The Maoists were respected for a while by the churlish elite of Nepali society for whom anti-Indianism is the true essence of Nepali nationalism. But when these 'patriotic Nepalis' discovered that their idols were cursing the very pedestal on which they were safely ensconced—the safe houses of Siliguri, Siwan and Kanpur—they became incensed. The Maoists have been desecrating temples, opposing Sanskrit and issuing 'fatawas' against unacceptable social practices right from the beginning, but it's only now that the traditionalists have woken up to these attacks on their domain and gathered courage to speak out against it. The fear of Chief Vitalstatistix in the *Asterix Adventures* is proving to be true—the sky is indeed falling down upon the heads of Maoist warriors in Nepal.

Keeping Peace

Just as insurgencies start unexpectedly, peace too can befall purely by happenstance. This was one of the points that Professor Richard Rorty, the famousleftwing philosopher of the US academia, made recently while talking to a select gathering in Kathmandu in a different context. Making peace is often a game of waiting for that chance, and learning to seize the moment. That moment for Singha Durbar is now. The prospect for peace appears tantalisingly close. However, the challenges of keeping peace shall remain long after the leaders of Maoist insurgency have retired into respectable bourgeoisie obscurity. See how violence continues to rock Bihar decades after former Naxalites have taken up new identities and dug fresh roots as far afield as the academia of Pennsylvania and the low-cost housing of Patpargunj in New Delhi.

Draining the swamp is a necessary condition to fight the mosquito menace, but it's not sufficient in itself:

disinfecting the surroundings is an essential corollary. For the moment, the ground condition in the countryside has become hostile for the insurgents, but as long as they hold onto their guns, they will continue to pose a formidable challenge to peace. Disarming the insurgents as a part of peace process must be a non-negotiable condition.

One of the reasons behind the relatively swift spread of extremism in the hills of the mid-western region is the alienation of ethnic populations in districts like Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot. This is a region where promises were made, but never fulfilled. The Rapti Integrated Development Project—designed, financed and run by the Americans—bred a generation of youth fed on dreams but denied opportunities for realising them. While the elite immensely benefited from donors' munificence, the rest of the population was left looking with longing bordering on enmity. The poor of this region fell further into misery as recruitment into the British Gurkha corps was discontinued, opportunity for employment in the Indian Army diminished, and government investment in public sector infrastructure projects sharply declined. Taking up guns is a hard temptation to resist when there is little other option of fruitful employment. The dynamics of addressing peoples' desire for change differ from region to region, but a dire need for change in the status quo is common all over the country.

The political mainstream has to realise that insurgency is a dangerous tool for scoring points over each other. After all, the Maoists spread fastest when CPN (UML) looked on approvingly as the rebels ruthlessly killed Nepali Congress activists. But that changed soon enough, and political workers of other mainstream parties started to fall indiscriminately to insurgents bullets. Rhetoric—in the sense of using language to convince an opponent—is the cornerstone of bourgeoisie democracy. But, when guns start to speak, verbal communication gets silenced. To believe in the democratic process is to oppose violence without exception.

The Nepali media is still on the ascending side of the learning curve, and hope has to be placed on the maturity that seems to have come among the media-persons that have borne the brunt of Maoist violence—reporters held prisoners by Maoist cadres will no longer look approvingly at insurgents abducting innocents for ransom. Eulogising hate—be it of the class or communal variety—is a suicidal course for the independent media. It must act to enlarge the middle ground, not for some higher purpose, but for its own survival. It is as elementary as that, and it is strange how some people in the profession so easily fall for dangerous alternatives.

A political consensus must be developed to strengthen all organs of government—the Parliament, the judiciary as well as the executive. No establishment is ever free of attacks from desperate groups—the challenge lies in developing institutional mechanisms for dealing with and containing armed revolt of all kinds. After all, as it turns out, even Americans can not do without an Office of Homeland Security.

But it is the society's ability to redress the grievances of the dispossessed that truly tests its mettle. Contrary to the fiction of 'revolution of unfulfilled expectations' invented by the apologists of 'controlled democracy', masses in poor countries know the limitations of their governments only too well. People do not expect miracles; all they demand is justice—a just redistribution of a community's resources, an equality of opportunity for advancement, and a rule of law that is transparently sincere.

While democracy continues to be regarded as the least calamitous approach of achieving all political goals, democratic regimes need to realise that there are alternatives that promise quicker solutions at a price. Democracy, for all its virtues, need to constantly prove itself, and it needs to do so even more to the restive populace of countries where the disadvantaged outnumber the well-off classes by far. However sincerely one may like to believe otherwise, the benefits of democracy aren't self-evident to people who ask for a chance in the betterment of their living conditions.

There is urgent need of an attitudinal change in the leaders of all political parties of Nepal. Dominated by an elite steeped in the culture of 'all or nothing', the Nepali elite—irrespective of political affiliation—is prisoner to its feudal past. Such a past has instilled the will to dominate, producing a martial attitude that gives birth to the ruling culture. The most extreme attitude of a ruling culture is its unwillingness to share power with others. King Mahendra said it to BP Koirala in so many words: "Bishweshwar Babu, only one of us can remain. Either you run the country and I will stand aside. Or you leave it, and I will run the country." (*Atmabrittanta*, Himal Books).

Variations of this theme can be seen in controversies between parliament and the judiciary, the judiciary and the executive, and, most importantly, between the king and his prime minister. This attitude must be overcome to institutionalise peace in the country. Fortunately, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is extraordinarily pliant, but if ambiguities in the Constitution are not rectified with alacrity, the possibility of further confrontations between the two durbars—Narayanhiti and Singh Durbar—shall continue to haunt the polity. Prime Minster Deuba appears to be the man history needed at this moment in Nepal—rather than force a showdown, Deuba has a knack for making compromises and engineering deals. Beyond a point, such an approach can turn out to be counter-productive—for there is no alternative to facing tough issues—but at this juncture, Deuba's malleability is certainly an advantage.

Even after all this, the question of mainstreaming the ultras still remains: how to bring the youth that has been radicalised beyond belief—and taught to shoot


DHRUBA BASNET

Maoists commemorate martyrs.

first and talk later—back into peaceful politics? Unfortunately, there are no clear-cut answers beyond the platitude that time is the best healer. Policemen who have faced the fire may be itching for revenge. Youths orphaned by the mindless war may have lost the capacity to endure. Guerrilla commanders who have got used leading an easy life may be tempted to turn into minor warlords pursuing agendas of violence independent of the central command of the Maobaadi leadership. Chances that peace may not hold for long are always there, the most compelling of them being the rivalry between the political and military command of the insurgents. Peace belongs to politicians and once back into the limelight, Comrade Prachanda may feel threatened by his more articulate deputy Dr. Babu Ram Bhattarai. Reputed to be an organiser par excellence, Comrade Prachanda commands the undisputed obedience of all his cadres, but in the rough and tumble of democracy he may discover that Dr. Bhattarai's felicity with the written and spoken word are more worthy possessions.

Engineer-turned rebel commander Ram Bahadur Thapa, alias Comrade Badal, may realise that while the 'war' undeniably belonged to generals like him, politicians like Matrika Yadav have better prospects in electoral duels for office. These complexities would undoubtedly keep Maoists wary of any political settlement that the government may be capable or willing to make.

But the Maoist leadership must have learnt by now that the insurgency is fast losing steam, and they don't stand to gain anything by postponing a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Two years ago, Maobaadis' demand for a major constitutional overhaul looked imminently sensible, and even two months earlier, they could have easily got an interim government where they held sway. Now neither of the two seems possible, and their third demand of strengthening the so-called 'republic' does not have even a fighting chance any more. Not just Nepalis, even the world community has suddenly discovered the need of the anchoring role of the institution of monarchy in volatile societies like Afghanistan and Nepal.

For the government, too, the risk that the insurgency might break up into groups of feuding warlords looks so real that it seems to be willing to walk the extra mile with Maoist negotiators so that the group behind the insurgency remains united. When dealing with armed insurgency, divide and rule is not always the best policy, as the experiences of Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and even Kashmir to a certain extent have shown. But patience should not be allowed to last so long that it starts to look like indecision and plain dithering. It can turn the aggrieved sections of the population restive all over again—eager to take matters in their own hands. With each day of delay in resuming the talks, the risk of an escalation in violence, at least in the short term, increases. For the negotions to have any meaning, there must be a sense of urgency about it.

And then there is the rage of all those traumatised by the 'war'—thousands like the young child in *The Killing Terraces* scattered all over the country. The society has to show them that neither the sacrifices of the dead nor the suffering of the living have happened in vain. The Nepali society in general, and its democratic dispensation in particular—along with its 'king in parliament' form of governance— must demonstrate that changes in the status quo are possible through peaceful means, and that wielding guns runs contrary to the aims of enabling the masses.

Despite all the advances made in psephology and opinion surveys, political prediction is still nothing more than an informed exercise in crystal gazing. After five years, this has been a relatively peaceful Dasain. Will the peace endure? No one knows for sure. In the smog of apprehension that is enveloping the autumn air of Kathmandu, a thin layer of hope is clearly perceptible. But it may yet turn out to be an illusion of unfulfilled desires—who knows? One cannot catch mist over the lake in a fishing net and conserve the beauty for eternity.

A more sensible option is to savour the moment, and pray that it lasts; or that whatever comes next—a ray of hope in the sunshine from behind the clouds perhaps?—is as enchanting, if not more.

As Professor Rorty would put it: waiting for happenstance is the inalienable part of all human struggles. After enduring a spate of misfortunes over last two years—the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane, the Hrithik Roshan riots and the Narayanhiti massacre, to say nothing of natural calamities such as floods in the tarai, drought up in the mountains and landslides everywhere in the middle-hills—that seems to have put a question mark over the very survival of Nepali state, Nepal needs a break. It deserves a stroke of luck. And faith says that one always gets what she deserves.

Transparent donors and development dogma

An empirical indictment of donors who put bad money after 'good governance'. The example of Pakistan proves the point that aid agencies are a part of the problem, and not up to providing solutions.

by ***Aqil Shah***

In recent years, the donor-led chorus on good governance (i.e. reduced corruption) has been gathering unprecedented momentum. "Transparency" and "accountability", the twin mantras of this new orthodoxy, are being relentlessly pushed in developing countries as the ultimate remedies for all their socio-economic ills. Adhering to the "good governance" gospel, developing countries are repeatedly told, could get them a place in the hallowed halls of the "civilised, democratic" Western world.

Not unexpectedly, this new gospel has come with fantastic paraphernalia: global anti-corruption fora, good governance conferences, special governance policy units and fancy measurement indexes. On the surface, all the major interpretations of "governance" reflected in the ideologies and mandates of international aid agencies appear to critique mainstream international development policy. For neo-liberal and other proponents, the new emphasis on "good government" marks a decisive shift in development policy from unfettered market competition, on the one hand, and complete command and control, on the other, to "facilitative, enabling, participatory, incentive-based" policies. But all that glitters is not gold. Deeper insights and country experience with "governance reform packages" point to a thin disguising of the old wine of neo-liberal development prescriptions in the new bottle of governance. To decipher the real meaning, scope and impact of this new dogma on the course of political and socio-economic development in developing countries, however, one must delve into its intellectual origins.

From ddjustment to governance

By the late 1970s, the apparent failure of the statist models of industrial development in the Third World and the concomitant success of the "export oriented" Asian economies had bolstered a dominant neo-liberal consensus which squarely apportioned the responsibility for Third World underdevelopment on misguided and excessive government intervention in the economy. Hence the state had to be rolled back as it promoted rent-seeking opportunities by creating distortions in the market. The blanket solution: Structural Adjustment Loans (SALs) for "getting the prices right" through wholesale privatisation, trade liberalisation and deregulation. A decade of stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes under the auspices of the IMF and the World Bank, however, turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. Far from removing the so-called "market distortions", these policies worsened poverty and income distribution in many developing countries. Fortuitously for donors, this widespread disappointment with policy lending coincided with the end of the Cold War. With the rigid East–West ideological divide dissolved and strategic considerations ostensibly put on the back burner, it became possible for international aid agencies to pry into hitherto sensitive policy issues, besides laying the blame once again at the door of the aid receiving countries. Weak institutional capacity, corruption, lack of regulatory frameworks and the rule of law in these countries, it was forcefully argued, were primarily responsible for the failure of donor interventions. In other words, weak "governance" was the prime suspect preventing sustainable growth in the developing world.

The term "Good Governance" (later "Democratic Governance" and a legion of other variations) was coined to emphasise the normative aspects of donor interventions and to provide the unmistakable prerequisite, based on political and economic conditionalities, for aid allocation to developing countries. In other words, foreign aid was to be directed to countries that were willing to reform the state, that is, reduce corruption, democratise politics and liberalise the economy. Strong empirical evidence (pointing to the harmful effects of corruption and institutional ineffectiveness on investment and growth) was thrown in for good measure.

To say the least, this new 'universal' development consensus on "getting good government" has fundamentally altered the rules of engagement between donors and recipients. With their repackaged

prescriptions ranging from wholesale public sector reforms to fiscal decentralisation, financially hard-pressed developing countries have had to swallow one bitter pill after another in the name of governance reforms. But country evidence suggests that this new form of governance aid has further weakened governmental accountability, as governments are increasingly answerable for critical policy decisions to foreign donors rather than to the public. In aid dependent countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, this could undermine the development of a locally-rooted civil society as it short-circuits the evolution of democratic institutions by reducing the government's dependence on the public. Policy lending frequently aids political instability as it puts an extra premium on the control of the government, on the one hand, and forces governments to take politically volatile decisions under donor pressure, on the other.

The good governance agenda pushed vociferously by international aid agencies has placed heavily indebted developing countries at a severe disadvantage as most of these governments find their resources and energies devoted to fulfilling harsh policy conditionalities with little else to spare for allocation to social and human concerns. As these powerful donor agencies become the sole authority on financing development in developing countries, the excuse that issues like corruption are politically sensitive does not hold. Hence, the onus of bridging the glaring gap between the "one size fits all" good governance (i.e. less corrupt governments) discourse and its practice is on donors. But before any new policy prescriptions are churned out by yet another "expert review committee on reassessment of aid priorities", a good starting point will be to cut the self-important "good governance" rhetoric. It is one thing to pursue vested organisational interests, and quite shamefully another to be self-righteous about it. And while they are at it, donors might want to consider cleaning their own Augean stables first. At the height of the worst droughts in the history of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the head of a United Nations agency responsible for aid coordination and relief bought a brand new luxury Mercedes to celebrate his agency's spectacular failure in coordinating the relief operation.

Do more corrupt governments receive less aid?

Critical academic interpretations of aid notwithstanding, have donors even put their money where their mouths are? In other words, how much aid has gone to countries based on efficient governance, policy performance and the level of democratisation? Hardly any, if we are to believe empirical evidence. Two studies by the American National Bureau of Economic Research [Alesina and Dollar 1998; Alesina and Weder 1999] show clearly that despite the end of the Cold War, the direction of foreign aid is still largely dictated by political and strategic considerations, much more than by the economic needs, political dispensation and policy performance of recipient governments. There is also no evidence that less corrupt governments receive more bilateral or foreign aid. On the contrary, more corrupt governments, according to some measures of corruption and aid, receive more aid.

This empirical indictment of donor policies is clearly borne out by the appalling gap in the rhetoric and practice of international donor agencies. It is well known in political and academic circles that donor agencies fulfil their primary operational motive of timely budget disbursements through pre-packaged interventions regardless of the corruption or political repression of the government in power. Sensitive to the mood of the governments, donors typically avoid the need to seriously address issues like corruption or wasteful military spending by shrouding their programmes in confusing buzzwords.

While the role of donors in reducing corruption or rewarding good performance leaves a lot to be desired, many observer are voicing an equally valid concern: *who guards these guardians of reform*? Are aid agencies accountable and transparent in their own operations? In most cases, the answer is in the negative. The way in which donor agencies recycle aid by buying imported equipment and hiring expensive foreign consultants when local consultants can do the job equally well at half the price is just one example of the rot within. The rampant nepotism in recruitment policies, operational ineffectiveness, red tape, overlapping operations, centralised administrations and misplaced priorities are all damning indictments of those living in glass-houses, but ever-ready to throw stones.

Almost every development report (including the two

annual bibles from the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme) and governance conference on the donor circuit holds Third World governments responsible for corruption and inefficiency. From the much trumpeted *World Development Report 1994* (euphemistically titled: *Bringing the State Back In*) of the World Bank to the most recent International Anti-Corruption Experts Conference held in Prague, conspicuous by its absence is mention of corruption, sloth and malfeasance in donor agencies. But evidence from South Asia suggests that all is not well on the home front. Serious financial irregularities and management lapses are regularly reported in donor-funded programmes, even in situations where no one is really targeting them.

A recent internal UNDP audit report leaked to the Pakistani press found financial misappropriation of USD 2.4 million in the accounts of UNDP Pakistan for the year 2000. In another UNDP project on solid waste management worth more than USD 10 million, widespread irregularities were detected by the auditors, who also alleged that they were pressurised to 'fix' books by UNDP staff in Islamabad. In early 2001, the Auditor General of Pakistan reported the embezzlement of USD240 million in the World Bank-led multi-donor Social Action Programme in Pakistan. Ironically, the day the misappropriation was reported in the press, another headline reported Bank approval of a USD 700 million credit line to Pakistan. Across the expanse of the Subcontinent, in Bangladesh, a recent public audit of the UNDP Sustainable Environment Management programme (SEMP) pointed to serious misuse of project money besides "inadequate management policies leading to non-fulfilment of project objectives, particularly the main target groups (i.e. poor men and women) did not receive the benefits as the project authority could not show any record of the number of poor men and women so far selected, grouped and funded". Insiders say the corruption and mismanagement reported in the press is just the tip of the iceberg.

There are more twists to this sordid tale. Authorities in Pakistan have discovered how aid can be used as an arm-twister to dissuade them from pursuing corruption charges against foreign firms. In 1998, the Nawaz Sharif government initiated investigations into allegations of kickbacks and overpricing in power purchase agreements signed by the previous Bhutto government with mostly western independent power producers (IPPs). The allegations were so serious that the World Bank had to dispatch an investigation team to Pakistan. The political motives of the government's investigations notwithstanding, several IPPs later confessed to paying off senior officials and politicians to win these contracts. But instead of supporting the government's anti-corruption efforts, the IMF and several donor countries including the United States, Canada and Japan withheld aid and investment on the grounds that the IPP issue be resolved first.

The donor and the dictator

The backing of corrupt western firms by donor agencies pales in comparison to their unflinching support for a military dictatorship in Pakistan, one which has ironically violated all the core norms of "good democratic governance". When the army took over in 1999, international donors were caught in an existential dilemma. On the one hand, field officers in Pakistan were desperately looking for new "strategic governance interventions" to hold onto their earmarked funds and programmes. On the other, their governments had frozen aid programmes for obvious political reasons. In this delicate political situation, the military under Pervez Musharraf and its hired civilian guns used a cleverly crafted "devolution plan" to secure external acceptance for the regime's reform process. Devolution was music to the ears of field officers who convinced their bosses in Western capitals of the importance of donor money to finance the "bottom-up reconstruction" of Pakistan.

> At the height of the worst droughts in the history of Pakistan and Afghanistan, the head of a United Nations agency responsible for aid coordination and relief bought a brand new luxury Mercedes to celebrate his agency's spectacular failure in coordinating the relief operation.

Ironically, decentralisation of power became a donor obsession in a country where one General held in his grasp the offices of the President, the Chief Executive, the Chief of Army Staff, the Defence Minister and until recently that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As donors were enthusiastically engaged in building grassroots democracy from below, the military regime was destroying it from the top. Political rallies were banned, Parliament stood dissolved, the Constitution was put in abeyance and military officers were appointed to head almost every civilian institution. This was not all. The National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the army's draconian anti-corruption agency, was employed in a brazen witch-hunt targeting "corrupt" politicians opposed to the regime's illegitimate control of civilian affairs in the country. (And now, any thought of good governance is obviously thrown out the window in propping up Mursharraf on the Western home against Islamic fundamentalism.)

None of this "coercive, authoritarian, undemocratic" governance raised an eyebrow in the United Nations, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, CIDA, NORAD,

DFID, the Asia Foundation and a host of other donors, who shamelessly continued to chant the virtues of good governance, electoral democracy and empowerment, as the General President made himself comfortable. To a question I asked the head of a donor agency in Islamabad, on whether donors realised that the Musharraf regime was using them to gain international legitimacy, the blunt retort was: "It is not that donors do not know what the motives of the government in power are, it is just not our business. We do what our bosses and TORs (terms of reference) tell us." There could not have been a flimsier excuse for shirking responsibility from the very individual who would be the first to give lectures on accountability and transparency.

Amidst the donor euphoria over Pakistan's "last chance for reform", top aid agency officials and equally excited western diplomats were publicly heard making statements bordering on unabashed hypocrisy and blind naivete. "Pakistan needs a benevolent dictator", "Only the army can reform Pakistan", "Civilians are corrupt", "Devolution is the revolution Pakistan needed". Democracy and rule of law, they seemed to believe, was a luxury only the civilised West could afford. We were just not fit for it.

This enthusiasm was short-lived though. All the grand illusions of "grassroots empowerment" held by aid agencies were laid to rest in the graveyard of district elections held in July-August 2001. The army high command handed the franchise for district mayorships to the pro-army faction of the Pakistan Muslim League. Army officers were dispatched to each district with the mission to use the threat of corruption charges to coerce the union councillors, who formed the electoral college for the district mayor, into supporting the regime's favoured political groups. For a while, donors were ashen faced, embarrassed to even admit publicly they were supporting the military's devolution programme. But then 11 September happened. The Musharraf regime got a new lease of life from Washington and its 'democratic' allies. Aid agencies in Pakistan could not have asked for a better situation. Once the dust of the war in Afghanistan settles, and donors can resume business as usual, there will be more "children to save", more "poverty to alleviate", and more "power to devolve". In reality, this means new projects, bigger spending targets, more hardship allowances and numerous cushy jobs for kith and kin.

Cinema, Benegal and Reality

by **Nihal Rodrigo**

Shyam Benegal is one of the major personalities of the "new cinema" in India. His father gifted him a movie camera when he was twelve, which is when his interest in the cinema was kindled. He has a Master's in Economics and has worked in advertising. According to recent count, he has made 21 feature films, 45 documentaries (including the epic 53-hour documentary, Bharat Ek Khoj (the Discovery of India) and over 1000 commercial film-lets. Shabana Azmi, the late Smita Patil, Girish Karnad, Om Puri and Amrish Puri got their break in Benegal's films. In addition to several national and international awards for his films, Benegal has been recipient of the Indian Padma Shree and the Padma Bhusan. He was in Kathmandu in early October to chair the Jury of the Film South Asia festival of documentaries. Shyam Benegal took some time off to discuss his vision of the cinema, the responses his films have evoked, the relationship between film and literature and some aspects of the South Asian film market.

Benegal spoke of his concern for contemporary political and social issues and how most of his films reflected these concerns. His first feature film, *Ankur* (Seedling) in 1974, which introduced Shabana Azmi, dealt with social and gender discrimination in feudalistic society in rural India. *Manthan* (The churning) in 1976 dealt with social mobilisation and empowerment—concepts of the South Asian development dialogue—of rural dairy farmers and their struggle against exploitation.

Benegal conceded that the cinema or individual films were not capable of really effecting huge political and social changes in India or anywhere else. He was convinced, however, that the film was a powerful medium for "bringing to the fore, subjects which otherwise would be lost to public discourse. Cinema can give social urgency and highlight the need to deal with the plight of groups who have no lobbies. That is the primary thing politically and socially conscious cinema can do. You have to work towards an attitudinal change. This must be preceded by a change in perception. It won't happen with one film. It is a process."

The director has sought to reach out to audiences beyond those already conscious and aware – "people of the same feather" as Benegal described them. "Film must be engaging, engrossing to a very large number of people. Films must entertain. Popular acceptance and appeal is essential." *Ankur*, his first film, was commercially successful in India and did well in showings all over the world.

Ankur to Hari Bhari

Manthan was a unique film in more than one respect. Benegal explained the actual context of the film. In the 1970s, the movement to establish milk cooperatives had begun in Gujarat, spear-headed by Dr. Verghese Kurien of the Indian National Dairy Development Board and involving about half a million dairy farmers. Benegal himself had already made a documentary on the subject and gathered a great deal of research material. He had discussed with Dr. Kurien the possibility of making "a commercially viable fiction film which would also have an important real story to tell." Dr. Kurien had agreed and suggested that the dairy farmers themselves be the producers—i.e. financiers—of the film. "Each member of the milk cooperative", said Benegal, "half a million of them, contributed two rupees each. The funny thing is that not only was the film, therefore, produced by the farmers themselves, it was also popularised by them. Farmers travelled in lorries and buses from all over to see the film at the nearest town. It had a second usage as well. There were no video players then but with Super 8 and 16 mm portable projectors, spear-head teams went to villages in milk producing areas to engage them in dialogue as to how they could increase milk production, maximise their earnings and improve the breed of their cattle. The film was, therefore, very important to stimulate the discussions."

Benegal then made an observation which may be of some interest to scholars and to cine-historians: "The film was seen by more people than any single film made in India. It was shown in over 150,000 villages in addition to the cinema circuits. It was a springboard to

Benegal's best

Who were the film directors Shyam Benegal liked most? "My tastes are very catholic. Among the older American Directors, I too like John Ford. Among contemporary US Directors, Martin Scorsese and Coppola. In Japan, the great Directors Kurosawa and Ozu. In Italy, Fellini and Pasolini. In India, Satyajit Ray, of course, and in the popular cinema, Ritwik Ghatak. I like also in the popular Hindi cinema, Mehboob and Guru Dutt; in the popular Tamil cinema, Mani Ratnam. Also Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and Ritupano Ghose is a marvelous Bengali Director. With all these directors, you can hear their voice in their films."

develop new cooperatives all over India. 25 years later, today, in new areas, the film is still being used. In 1977, the Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai presented the film to the Soviet Union and to China where it was shown widely. The UNDP also took the film and showed it in different places in Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania after dubbing the sound-track into different languages from the original Hindi version." Benegal added modestly, "largely, the person behind all this who helped to promote the film was Dr. Kurien himself."

Susman (The Essence), made in 1986, dealt with what Benegal described as the "second largest trained human resource in India" - the handloom and textile workers. However, the film did not have the popularity and spread of *Manthan* but helped to bring to the surface an issue which involved such a large section of the population as well as a cottage industry and an art that were threatened. *Samar* (1998) was a comedy on caste prejudice which Benegal said "would make a lot of people uncomfortable and unhappy". Its commercial release has, however, been held up and Benegal is still agitating for its release.

The following year, the director made *Antarnaad* (Inner-voice), a film based on the teachings of Parwan Shastri, who lectured on interpretations of the Gita. According to Shastri, "The real cause of the vicious cycle of under-development was a lack of self-esteem" among marginalised people. This inhibits the emergence of their creativity, talent and capabilities. Benegal explained further that thousands of village communities in Gujarat and Maharastra had been transformed by the *Swadhyayi* concept, which shuns charity handouts. "Philanthropy is not their idea. The basic concept is that you create wealth by sharing: not by giving or selling your surplus but by sharing what you have. For example, in the family, when parents and children give, they are in effect sharing. *Antarnaad* promotes this concept, extending a familial relationship into a wider community into society."

MIN. BAJRACHARYA

Shyam Bengal (left) in converstaion with Nihal Rodrigo.

More recently, *Hari Bhari* (2000), which starred Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, took up the controversial issue of fertility and family planning. *Antarnaad* and *Hari Bhari* have had successful commercial runs and were films that touched many of the most relevant issues to South Asia's social and economic development. Shabana Azmi, who acted in many of Benegal's films, is now a member of the Indian Parliament and an important social activist. Benegal: "She has moved from her screen image to her real persona."

In *Manthan*, uniquely, producer and subject were in a sense one. But Benegal worked with the different Bollywood financiers who may not be interested in sponsoring films beyond the call of booty and did he face any restraints from them in making the films he liked to. "I have had several private producers, private individuals who were naturally concerned about earning money which they did. Producers know me. In no way can they push me around. I won't allow them to push me around."

The luxury of introspection

Given Benegal's reputation for making films which take on challenging social and political themes, was he comfortable with films which were introspective, and which probed deeply into the individual psyche? His reply: "Deep psychological inquiry is, to some extent, a middle-class luxury as far as cinema is concerned. This is particularly so for India, where there are so many larger, more pressing concerns around. I would not say the same was true of literature which is more personal and inwardly probing." In this context, he discussed the 1992 film *Suraj Ka Satwan Ghoda* (the Seven Horses of the Sun): "It is based on a Hindi literary classic of Dharamabeer Bharati with many interesting aspects in it. A young man tells three stories to define what love is. They are about three different women with whom he has had relationships, first as a pre-pubescent, than as an adolescent and thirdly as a mature adult. But all these relationships are happening at the same time, simultaneously. There is no time difference. He knows the three girls at the same time. As human beings, we have this inner psychology and a way of creating a self-image and behaviour with people at certain moments of that relation-

ship. This behaviour freezes in that position. For example, you sometimes behave with your father even in your adulthood as though you were still twelve years old. That film was a difficult exercise. Literature has the ability to deal with time and space in a way that cinema finds difficult to do. Cinema concretises the image. Symbols and emblems become very definite and concrete in film unlike in literature. Words are abstract, but when put together in literature, they have an associational context. Spaces between words are filled up by the reader in whom things are evoked through his own associations and imagination. Cinema does not always have that associational capability. The evocativeness of literature is very difficult to produce in cinema. In cinema, you see everything through the director's eye and that becomes totally subjective."

Benegal made the point that the documentary film was attracting filmmakers who had something to say – more than the feature film. He commented on the variety and range of films which were screened at the Film South Asia '01 documentary festival: "Documentaries by and large tend to deal with the real stuff of life, reality directly observed. Much of what you do in documentaries is not necessarily within your control. When you make a documentary *'about'* something—the word "about" is important here—you are not in the real thick of it. In fiction films, you can get into characters, into their motivation and into various things even though you are subjective. You bring an 'interiority' into the subject and to be able to do so gives you in fact a greater sense of reality than when you merely observe and reproduce reality. Film fictionalised from real life tends to give you great opportunities to present such a greater reality."

"How can one live

Shahjahan Babu's story seems fairly commonplace.

A young Bangladeshi man, he lived with his mother and sister in a modest house. A chance meeting with an acquaintance on a rickshaw, and then the fateful question, do you do anything?

"Not really... sometimes I write for the papers... sing, tutor." How much do you earn? "Three or four thousand Taka a month. My mother takes in some sewing." I work for a

My Migrant Soul
Bangladesh, 2000
Colour, Beta-SP/PAL, 35'
Bengali. Direction: Yasmine Kabir

reviewed by
Anagha Neelakantan

recruitment agency. If you work abroad, you will be able to bring back money.

This is how it began, according to the documentary *My Migrant Soul*. The idea cannot have been alien to Babu. In 1993, the year this conversation took place and Babu decided to go to Malaysia, over 240,000 Bangladeshis went to work abroad. But although he must have been aware of the possibility, for some reason Babu had not considered it until then. He decided he wanted to go. Again, some fairly commonplace things happened. In order to go, Babu needed to raise money for his passage and for the agency, Paradise International Travels, to arrange a job and the necessary papers. It might be fair to say that if Babu had this money—it varies between $500 and $1,500 in South Asia—chances are, he would not have needed to go abroad to work in the first place. So people who want to, or need to, work abroad, in the Gulf, in Malaysia or in Japan, borrow, sell kidneys, or mortgage their tiny dwellings. Babu was lucky. His mother had some land that she sold.

The day came for Babu to leave, and the young man, aware that it might be some time before he came back, did not eat the rich meal his mother had prepared, but asked instead for his "national dish"—fermented rice, onions and green chillies. Babu took the rickshaw to the agency from where he would be taken to the airport, telling his cousin, "I'm going abroad. If I live, I'll write the history of my travels. In Malaysia, I will write a poem about it. I've eaten the national dish and I'm taking the national vehicle."

Babu's mother, sister and little niece tell us all this. This was the last time they saw him. For about two years after he left, Babu communicated with them through letters and occasionally, tapes that he made for them, talking and singing. Initially, he even sent photographs that show a happy young man with some friends—they are all dressed in bright, clean clothes and the pictures resemble tourist shots. Over these, his sister talks about how she saw Babu boarding his flight with other workers from the agency, waving his handkerchief and wiping his eyes. "The workers were packed in like cargo in a box," she says, "that's how they were packed in."

In 1833, some 75 years after the matter started being discussed in public, Britain passed the Abolition

this way?"

of Slavery Act. But slave labour was gravely missed, particularly in sugarcane-growing colonies. So, some bright spark thought up the idea of indentured labour. The premise, like the one Babu was presented with, must have seemed illogical at some point: you pay someone in order to work. Perhaps in places where networks of patronage have a strong hold this does not seem terribly outrageous. Someone does you a favour and finds you a job, but with the understanding that as long as you hold the post you are in some kind of debt—perhaps your patron needs a favour that your position allows you to arrange.

But much like present-day Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia or Indians in the Gulf, indentured labourers from South Asia and West Africa went to work on sugar plantations in the South Pacific and the Caribbean with the understanding that although they had paid the recruiter, once they were abroad, to truly pay off their debt they had to work for a minimum of five years in conditions that differed little from those of the slave days. The sugar economy stayed alive, and Britain did fine, which meant the fledgling world economy could progress along its chosen path.

The imperial idea of indentured labour remains brightly illuminated as Asian economies from west to east continue to rely on the manufacturing sector to grow. This is pretty much what recruitment agencies do now. Blue-collar workers abroad often have their passports taken away for 'safekeeping' by the agency. Few are aware of their rights. In factories and on construction sites conditions could be so unsavoury that few locals would do the job for love or money. And in any case, foreign workers are cheaper and come with fewer liabilities.

My Migrant Soul is about one such very distinctive and heart-wrenching story. Director Yasmine Kabir could not have found a better protagonist for a documentary on migrant labour. Babu's family wants to tell his story, and Kabir obviously had enviable access to their world, but what makes this film so powerful is that Babu, obviously articulate, sensitive and intelligent, decided to send home tapes. His recordings add an immediacy to the film that few accounts narrated after the fact could match.

"Ma, I haven't told you, I'm in great trouble here. I lost the job at the factory." We start to hear Babu's taped voice playing over the footage of migrant workers doing back-breaking work at a construction site. Interspersed with these are accounts from his mother and sister about their anxiety for him, which soon turns to despair as Babu slowly reveals a little more of his ordeal each time. Babu's hesitant testimony is always accompanied by footage of other migrant workers in Malaysia in similar situations.

The story unfolds slowly, like a nightmare that sucks you in more powerfully the harder you resist. Babu has been separated from the other Bangladeshis he worked with and his documents have been taken away from him. He cannot work legally and so must take on whatever he gets—17-hour shifts on construction sites where there is no place to cook, only bricks to sleep on, and for a time, no salary. He thinks it will take him 20, even 30 years to earn back the money he spent to come to Malaysia. At other times he and his friends are unemployed for a couple of months, starving, because the little cash they had went to bribe policemen to leave them alone. Always there is fear and hunger. "How can one live this way," he asks once. "They took all the money I had, I don't repent that. What if they had taken us to jail? Ma, I am terrified of police brutality." Babu, clearly distressed, makes a catalogue of everything he has heard the police can do to you. He does not want to distress his mother, but she is his only connection with a world that is sane and, though difficult, possibly not as hostile as this one. "Who will be held accountable? Who?," he asks poignantly.

His mother and sister, now virtually reduced to living on the streets, occasionally go to the recruitment agency in Dhaka, where they are abused and told to leave. They realise Babu has been sent abroad not on his authentic passport but on a forged one. He himself is slowly realising what is going on. The idea of sending money home does not, cannot, enter his mind now. He is not just scared and depressed—he is consumed with guilt that he cannot even recover the money his mother raised to send him to Malaysia. The situation is so far from what he or his family had dreamed, and he is so unsettled, he asks a friend to 'verify' everything he says on the tape. The recruiting agency has their papers and is using them to what ends Babu does not know. He is now living at the ironically-named Paradise Hotel, run by the recruitment agency. He lives and works there behind bars and eats leftover scraps. Occasionally, he and people like him are sent out for terrible, short-lived jobs. "We work one month, then they sell us somewhere else, like in a marketplace...are they trading in us?"

After this, for a year, silence. No letter, no tape. Then comes the last tape. In every tape Babu has sent, he has accepted a little more, hoped for a little less. On this tape, he is near the end if his tether. "They trade in us to earn their living... and support their families. I also have family. Am I unclaimed?... Everything is lost for me (*cries*) if my life can't even be saved. What's the point? Because I'm already dead."

At the recruitment agency in Dhaka, the man responsible for this tells Babu's mother there is no way of knowing if it is indeed his voice on the tape. Babu is too busy, he implies, to implore his mother to ensure that no one ever gets themselves into this kind of situa-

tion. When she begs for her son's life, she is kicked out.

Eight months later, there is more deception. Babu's mother is given a photocopy of a ticket and told her son will be back "definitely on Friday. If not, on Monday." She keeps vigil at the airport for three days, watching other young men and women come home. Her son eventually arrives—in a coffin. Babu was in an immigration detention camp and died of "pneumonia with asphyxia."

Babu died, but his family lives with the trauma. His niece has strange dreams of him, in which snatches of the songs he sang on the tapes come alive, and that end with his drowning. His sister cannot bear to go anywhere without his coffin and for his mother, even the sight of the pen he left behind is painful. "I feel he still hasn't died," she says, looking at the camera blankly.

This is why *My Migrant Soul*, which won First Prize at October's Film South Asia 2001, is so successful: there is no narrator expounding on the problem of migrant labour. With testimonies like Babu's and those of his family members so cleverly cut in with current stills and footage of Bangladeshi migrant workers, the "issue" becomes, slowly, about a very basic question—under what conditions, and to what ends, are people expected to live and die.

The opening montage is arresting. In a recruitment office emblazoned with such homilies as "Honesty is the best policy" and the chillingly presumptuous warning "Time once lost cannot be regained", workers are being examined for defects and identifying marks as if they were microchips or fruit . Examination over, the uniformed labourers pack their bags and get on a bus to the airport. They are soon off, in tears, to provide some growing economy with the cheap labour it needs.

But Babu's story points to a basic lacuna: capital is free to flow from here to there in a moment, but labour, even if it appears to have the same mobility, cannot. What is happening to Bangladeshis in, say, Malaysia—the Malaysian government says that between 1993-1995, 64 people died in immigration detention camps, over half Bangladeshis—is not so different from what happens to Mexican workers in the US. The economy needs them to produce goods and provide some services for its own people, or, as is happening in Asia's 'tiger' economies, to also make them more global, more transnational—to work in the manufacturing sectors that feed into the global supply chains.

The rhetoric and, often, the

practice of law in many parts of the world are aimed at keeping exactly this kind of foreigner out, but the economy needs them and capital flows where their presence can be ensured. The movement of capital is the subject of endless legal and political debate and an increasing amount of facilitative legislation. On the other hand, migrant workers like Babu are in a curious position—their presence is noted, but unrecorded, the need for them is acknowledged, but they are not factored into planning or legislation.

At the end of the term of the contract, even a worker lucky enough to be in a legitimate job does not have it so easy. Because of their depresed wages, foreign workers often cannot repay the loans on which they have migrated, so they stay on illegally. The law, meanwhile, assumes that they simply vanish at the end of their term. There is no record of their presence and, since they work in the illegal economy, they do not have any rights. Which is when cases like that of Nepali Govinda Mainali become so fraught. Mainali went to Japan in 1994. Three years later, he was still there, working at an Indian restaurant. And then he was implicated in the murder of a senior economist who moonlighted as a sex worker. Mainali was illegally detained, tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. The case has been extremely controversial in Japan, with a number of lawyers and legal academics arguing that Mainali did not receive a fair trail because he is a foreigner and because he was illegal.

Even workers who migrate for work within nation states have few laws protecting them. For instance, workers today consitute the largest segment of the Indian population, and a great many of them are rural migrants working in the unorganised sector. In effect, they do not really exist in administrative eyes. So, when there are natural or other calamities, there is no accurate record of who has been affected or which families have lost a breadwinner. Migrant workers are simply not factored into relief efforts, and they fall between the cracks in any system of compensation

Babu asks more than once in the film whether this is any way for a human being to live. In 1914, a man called Totaram Sanadhya published an account in India of his experience of the indenture system. called *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, asking much the same question. The book was widely read and discussed with a good deal of outrage, and MK Gandhi, among others, was moved to write to the authorities in Fiji. Shortly thereafter, the system was dismantled. Without an account like Sanadhya's, the indentured system it would perhaps have dragged on in Fiji, undebated, until the Colonial Sugar Refining Company decided the practice was no longer profitable.

My Migrant Soul faces a far greater challenge in these cynical times, to rouse people about a phenomenon that seems so overreaching and authoritative, but the film is in its own way equally powerful. It needs to be seen.

A leader looks back

The late B.P. Koirala was a charismatic figure who shaped the history of Nepal with his indomitable will, fierce intellect and intense commitment to nationalism, democracy and socialism. His passing at the age of 68 years was most untimely as he died in harness, while combating an absolute monarchy and a feudal social order. Born in 1914 into a family of patriots, he learnt to defy the powerful from his father, Krishna Prasad, who was a very determined person. While collecting customs in the Indo-Nepal border for the Rana government, the elder Koirala once sent the rag-like clothes of the commoners to Prime Minister Chandra Shamshere, wrapped in a bundle with the request to inspect them in order to see the people's penury and misery. Obviously, he had to be punished for this insolence, and the whole family had to flee the motherland, while close relatives who stayed behind were jailed or suffered otherwise. Thus, from a life of comfort, the Koirala family was reduced to extreme poverty. Krishna Prasad eked out a meagre living as a street vendor, selling knickknacks in the trains of Calcutta and elsewhere. Despite the hardships, he refused to compromise with the prime minister. One of his sons, Harihar, died of cholera at a very young age for want of treatment.

These and other episodes in the life of the Koiralas in exile have been narrated by B.P. Koirala himself in this, his posthumous work, titled *Atmabrittanta*. The book belongs to the genre of conversational autobiography, as recounted to his friend Ganesh Raj Sharma, who was B.P.'s comrade in the struggle and his lawyer in the court. Sharma tape-recorded Koirala's testimony and later transcribed it. The transcript was published by him in Nepali in 1998, and this has now been translated into English by Kanak Mani Dixit. It is to the credit of Sharma that he has been able to prepare such a narrative from what must have been many sittings over a long period, on an old tape recorder, and at a time when B.P. Koirala's throat cancer was getting the better of him. Dixit has done a creditable job of translation, bringing the story smoothly into English.

Atmabrittanta: Late Life Recollections
By B.P. Koirala
(Compiled by Ganesh Raj Sharma
translated by Kanak Mani Dixit)
Himal Books, Kathmandu 2001
Pp. xvii+304
ISBN 99933 13 08 4, NRS 400

reviewed by Surendra Mohan

Unfortunately, the story stops at 1973 due to B.P.'s failing health, although B.P. Koirala, Nepal and the Nepali Congress went through several phases between then and 1982 when he passed away. There was, for instance, the hijacking of a Royal Nepal Airlines plane, an attempt at armed insurrection in the country, Koirala's return to Nepal and his prosecution for sedition, and the plebiscite of 1980 on the partyless system. These were all events in which B.P. was a guiding figure.

One looks wistfully at the developments in the 1990s when parliamentary democracy returned to Nepal, the Nepali Congress gained power, lost it owing to internal splits, was voted out and then returned to power, again. Would this agonising history of inner-party power struggle have been there if Koirala had been alive in that turbulent decade? Was it because regime after regime led by his comrades-in-arms, Bhattarai and Girija Prasad Koirala, upheld the status quo to such an extent that his passionate plea for land reforms, made in the 1950s, soon had to become the battle cry of the Maoists? Meanwhile, one would hope that the publication of the autobiography, in its original Nepali, has played some part in reminding the cadres of the two big parties, the Nepali Congres and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), and of the dreams of this great Nepali leader.

These "deathbed reminiscences" detail much of B.P.'s early years and the great difficulties the family passed through. In doing so, they highlight the situation that prevailed in the country. B.P. recounts his educational career, the influences on his young mind from the insurrectionary organisation, Anusheelan to Gandhi, Karl Marx and the democratic socialists. Thereby, he traversed the entire gamut of the thought that affected the first half of the twentieth century. Some of his childhood recollections from which he drew his first principles have also been recorded. For instance, one of his relatives left her husband owing to the latter's cowardice, ran away and stayed as a live-in with her sister's husband, and told B.P. that living with a spouse one did not love was *vyabhichar* and morally repugnant.

B.P., who was imprisoned by the British in 1930 on suspicion of being a terrorist, but released after four months for lack of evidence, was one of the earliest members of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the left bloc in the Indian National Congress (which susequently broke from the mother party to become the socialist party in north India and, in at least one state in south India, a unit of the Communist Party of India). The Indian socialist leader

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia and B.P. were very good friends. With Jaya Prakash Narayan, the relationship was at a personal level. A leading light of the party, Devendra Prasad Singh, who later became a member of the Indian parliament in 1960- 66, was his closest friend. B.P. was active in trade union work, and was arrested on several occasions on that count. Further, the CSP gave him the responsibility to organise its student wing. However, in 1939, he decided to wind up all his work in India and concentrate on democratising Nepal. But, after the Quit India struggle was launched in 1942, he was arrested when on a casual visit to India to see Devendra Prasad Singh and other friends.

B.P. was in jail from 1942 to 1945, during the Quit India struggle. However, Nepal was uppermost in his mind and he decided to form a political party in Nepal. *Atmabrittanta* describes in detail the birth and growth of the Nepali Congress and the struggles that it passed through. He acknowledges the support he received from Indian socialists and other leaders and describes his visit to Burma in 1947 to get support from socialists in that country. When in Nepal, he was arrested and kept in detention despite his poor health, Gandhiji intervened on his behalf and the Rana prime minister was forced to release him. B.P. also tells us about the sense of camaraderie that Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who went on to become the first president of the Indian republic, showed when they were together in jail. The Indian communists worked hard on him, but their denigration of Gandhi and the Congress Party's anti-imperialist struggle estranged him from them. B.P. writes that books by Dantwala and Masani helped him achieve ideological clarity. While in Benares, he came into contact with well-known Hindi litterateurs of the day and his stories started to be published in the *Hans* monthly, edited by Munshi Prem Chand. However, Surya Bikram Gyawali, the prominent Nepali writer, persuaded him to write in Nepali. That was how B.P. became an established name in Nepali fiction.

The struggle in Nepal started with a workers' strike in Biratnagar, led by G.P. Koirala. The Nepali army arrested six leaders of the strike, including B.P. They were taken to Kathmandu over trails that traversed the back of the country, and this helped the activist, who till then had concentrated on the eastern tarai plains, to convery their message to the people en route. It was also during this trip along the hill route from Dhankuta to the Kathmandu valley that B.P. witnessed the poverty of the people, which helped shape the bedrock of his economic programme for the country. He and his comrades suffered innumerable hardships in Nepali jails, and a time came when he was compelled to refuse to eat for weeks altogether. He was on the verge of death due to this fast, but would not accept a humiliating compromise. His mother also stood firmly behind him in this decision. Those five years of hardship between 1947 and 1952 were quite testing for all the freedom fighters. However, the flight of King Tribhuvan to India to escape the grip of the Ranas helped in enabling the Nepali Congress to participate in power.

What marks this book is B.P.'s bitter memories of the superiority complex of Indian leaders and diplomats who, at the point of political transition, thrust their will on Nepal and created a mixed regime of the Ranas and the Nepali Congress without consulting the parties concerned. B.P. became Home Minister and tackled various mini-revolts courageously. He even took on Bharat Shamshere, the leader of Gorkha League and when the latter's rowdies surrounded his residence, he kept a cool nerve and confronted the rioters head on. This was B.P.'s hallmark—firmness in the face of extreme crisis. He even forced the Prime Minister, Mohan Shamshere to resign. C.P.N. Sinha, then Indian Ambassador in Kathmandu, was out to support the Ranas, and at one point, B.P. was compelled to comment that Sinha should not think of Nepal as Muzaffarpur district, where Sinha was once chairman of the district board.

B.P. came to believe that the Indian leaders, including Nehru, did not want strong and independent minded leaders to emerge in Nepal. However, B.P. also admits to his own mistakes, such as when he went to Nehru to seek arms. Unable to meet him, he passed the message on to M.O. Mathai, Nehru's private secretary, which annoyed Nehru no end. Yet, inspite of the wilfulness of King Mahendra, and India's indifferent attitude, B.P. compelled the king to hold elections and that was how the Nepali Congress came to power in the general elections of 1959, with B.P. as prime minister. His efforts to introduce and implement land reforms and other progressive programmes provoked the feudal vested interests. Meanwhile, a king who saw power receding from his grasp decided to act. King Mahendra dissolved Parliament and jailed B.P. and other leaders. There was, says B.P., a love-hate relationship between Mahendra and him. The king appreciated B.P.'s intense nationalism, but not his democratic values. There were instances when he was offered power by use of insurrectionary methods by the bigwigs in the armed forces, but B.P. refused. He makes the point towards the end of the book that, perhaps he was a democrat and not a revolutionary. Once, as Home Minister, he had tamed, single-handed, rebels armed with weapons, yet, he was not so ruthless as to resort to any means. This was the Gandhian influence on B.P. Koirala.

In 1969-70, the people of East Pakistan rose in revolt against the rulers, and an insurrection started. B.P., who had collected arms to launch his own insurrection in Nepal, was asked by J.P. to give some of the weapons to the Shanti Bahini,

the freedom fighters of East Pakstan. He did, somewhat reluctantly. After that country became sovereign, its leaders could not muster the courage to express their gratitude to him publicly, worried about displeasing Indira Gandhi. B.P. had debated at length his decision to intervene in the affairs of a neighbouring country, and said that in case the peole were oppressed by an authoritarian regime, supporting their democratic struggle was correct and justified. B.P. also justified strongly the insurrectionary method employed by the Nepali Congress, for the same reason that it was a fight against an autocratic regime.

B.P. may have been distraught at Nehru's evolving attitude, but he was no less disillusioned with the Socialist International, whose leaders showed him great courtesy, but never moved beyond words when it came to supporting the cause and the struggle he espoused. He met the leaders of socialist parties in power, explained to them that the Nepali Congress was the one party capable of wresting power in Nepal, but he was told by these European socialist stalwarts that their eyes were fixed on Africa. One can only speculate that if socialist leaders had remained in power in Indonesia where the socialist leader Soetan Sjariar had become Prime Minister, or Burma, which had U Ba Swe as Prime Minister, quite possibly, B.P. would have found support from them. But, an insurmountable problem was the conduct of his own close colleagues, primarily his elder brother 'Thuldaju', Matrika Prasad Koirala, who was a very ambitious person but not a fighter. In the course of *Atmabrittanta*, he discusses the internal goings-on of the Nepali Congress and also makes deeply personal and illuminating observations on many political personalities of mid-twentieth century Nepal.

The most fascinating account, however, is about B.P.s marriage with Sushila, who was almost illiterate and very thin and apparently unattractive at the time, so much so that most people wondered why B.P. had married her. Yet, he taught her; and, as she grew, blossomed into a very pretty person and an accomplished artist. B.P. himself was a connoisseur of art, and I have a fond memory of meeting the couple in Vienna when B.P. was explaining to Sushila the meanings of the carvings on the walls of historical buildings there. The love and respect that the couple had for each other was something to admire. Moreover, those who had interacted with him frequently, as I did when he was in Delhi in exile, staying in Gulmohar Park, cannot forget B.P.'s splendid manners, his affection and generosity and the care that he took of the party workers who went to see him. Once he visited the office of the Socialist Party, sometime in early January 1974, when general elections in Uttar Pradesh were at hand. He had come to give a contribution of 25,000 rupees for the election fund. I said to him that he was himself in exile and had to find money to procure arms and sustain the workers of his party, but he was keen that as a fraternal gift, we accept the contribution.

B.P. and other leaders of the Nepali Congress were never averse to a negotiated settlement with the monarchy, and they kept extending a hand of co-operation. But, then, while monarchy was to be retained, there could be no compromise on the sovereign right of the people to govern themselves. On that, too, B.P. was committed. He was also extremely sensitive about the separate and sovereign identity of Nepal as a nation, and minced no words with Indian leaders and the officialdom on this score. Yet, it does not seem tht India learnt anything from these encounters with B.P. Koirala. Its leaders wanted such pliable figures as Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, who dissolved parliament and all political parties on the advice of Indira Gandhi. This was something B.P. abhorred, not only for its anti-democratic dimensions but also for the servility it showed to another country. △

The Globalisation of Hypocrisy

Call this the double standards decade, or century, or millennium. Or call it an unrecognisable transformation of regional geo-politics post-11 September. For decades, India spoke loftily from the United Nations rostrum about Gandhi, ahimsa, non-alignment. Its prime minister of today wrote teary-eyed poems in memory of the Hiroshima dead. And then, with Atalji firmly at the helm, India decides to build the Bomb in earnest. Overnight, diplomats, media analysts and apologist academics willingly change their tune and compete for outdated hawkishness. India used to rail against the Seventh Fleet and wanted the United States out of Diego Garcia, and now without batting an eyelid they offer all sorts of airstrips and support to the United States. Today, Diego Garcia is a fait accompli for the Pentagon, and not a peep out of South Block. As for the Mahatma, he is an embarrassment for those who want to globalise and go nuclear.

South Bottom or Foggy Block?

When the American ambassador to Nepal openly castigated the government earlier this year in the presence of the late King Birendra, chiding it for corruption - do you think he left some space for introspection? The ambassador's concern, like that of all good people, was Nepal's tardy development. But what of the fact that USAID had spent 50 years in Nepal (in fact, the occasion was to mark that milestone) as long as Nepal has been "developing". It must be mighty tempting to put all the blame of Nepal's underdevelopment on Nepali fatalism and corruption. You would have expected mature aid agencies to realise by now that pouring money into poverty is not going to reduce it. Perhaps there would be questions about why the breeding ground for Nepal's Maoists is actually the very region of the Rapti valley where USAID had its biggest integrated projects over the Panchayat decades.

Still on the subject of detached donors. There must be something to be said about the annual migration of the entire donor community out of the Subcontinent during the northern hemisphere summer. Why is it that the summer vacation comes above every other need of a developing country? The delays these cause in decision-making are almost as serious as the tardiness of our local bureaucracies.

When Royal Nepal Airlines bought its two Boeing 757 jets back deep in the Panchayat years, the kickback was allegedly divided up by the royals. The taking of the money was greed, but could the giving of it be considered corruption as well?

Double standards. It runs in the human family, and it is the first among the baser instincts because of its source in self-centricism, which is the stepping stone to hypocrisy. When the two planes rammed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, there could have been no reaction other than one of untrammelled, unqualified horror, and yet we all immediately had to have a 'position'. Barely had the towers collapsed in that cumulous of dust, when the time was still for ingesting the scale of the tragedy, we were already seeking a moral high ground and pointing at US policies which "explained" why people would do such acts against innocents. And, speaking of double standards, why would the Secretary of State of the bastion of free speech call on the Emir of Qatar to squelch Al Jazeera television, just because it was broadcasting uncomfortable footage?

Double standards is no monopoly of Foggy Bottom, and is equally practiced by, say, Nepal's Maoists. The chief ideologue of the underground party, which wants monarchy out and republicanism in, claimed as soon as the 1 June Royal massacre took place, that the Shah Dynasty had after all been a nationalist vanguard that had unified the country, and that they (the Maoists) had had a "working unity" with the late king. When the reference to unification created problems with the radical ethnic leadership because it considers that a conquest by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the chief ideologue was quickly willing to issue a 'correction' and take back his claim. That's not double standards or byprocrisy, it is lying. In broad daylight, and when everyone is watching.

Human hypocrisy will stay with us. And it will germinate and grow wherever power is accompanied by arrogance. The only way to counter it is transparency, independence and sunlight. Someone remind Jaswant Singh of Diego Garcia. Colin Powell of the First Amendment. The Americans of kickbacks for 757s. And Baburam Bhattarai of the Nepali "unification".

Kanak Dixit

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E-mail: annapurna.kathmandu@tajhotels.com
Website: www.taj-annapurna.com.np