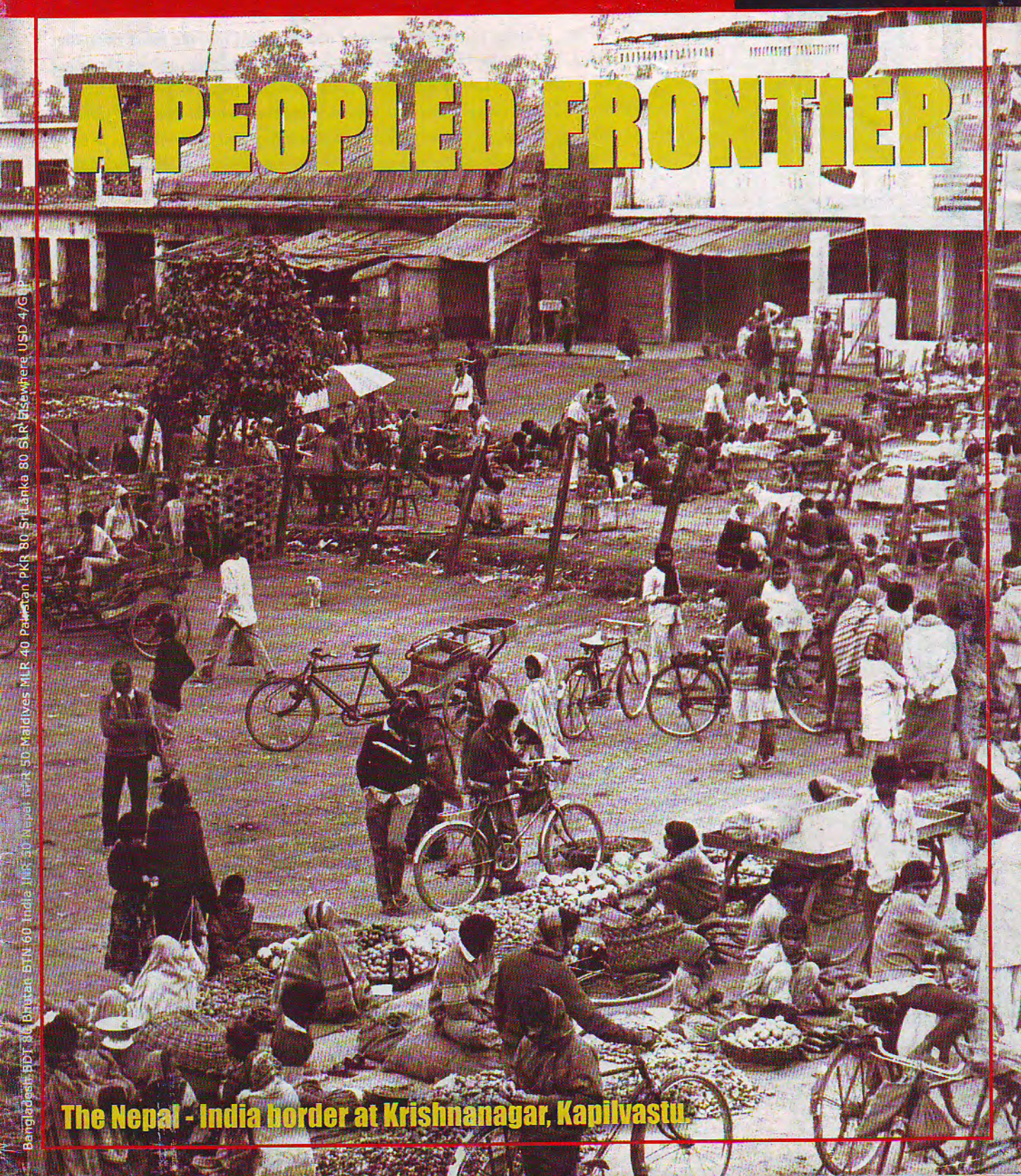
February 2002

HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN

- Kumaratunga on 'terrorism'
- Remembering Agha Shahid Ali
- WTO dissenters

A PEOPLED FRONTIER



The Nepal - India border at Krishnanagar, Kapilvastu.

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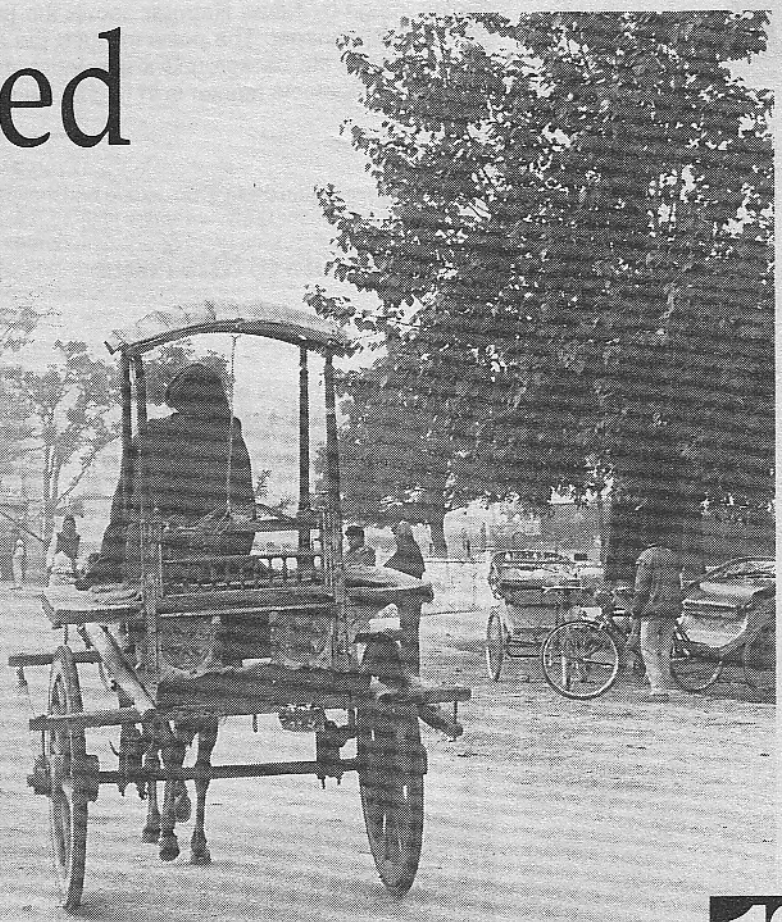
HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 15 No 2 February 2002

A peopled frontier

The Nepali Tarai, the newly-truncated Bihar and Uttar Pradesh together make up the densely populated heartland of South Asia that is incongrously neglected by both New Delhi and Kathmandu. A rennaissance of this 'Ganga Rectangle' is possible, with the awakening Nepali Tarai providing the dynamic energy.



Looking across the border from Nepalgunj.

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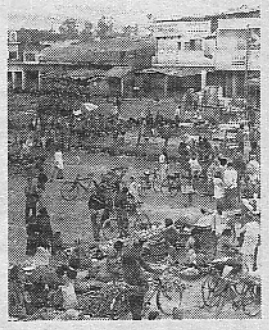

Cover image by **Bikas Rauniar** shows the India-Nepal border at Krishnanagar. The posts indicate the actual border; the houses in the background are in India and the foreground vegetable market is in Nepal. Design by **Bilash Rai**.

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WANTED

Strange though it may seem, *THE DALIT* is looking for a full-time dalit editor. A year ago Dalit Media Network had placed an advertisement in the Sunday edition of a national daily seeking a dalit editor for *The Dalit*. Only two non-dalits responded. We kept our search on through other channels, in vain. Finally, we decided to bring out the journal through a collective effort. But our search for the elusive dalit editor continues. If you think you will fit the bill, please write to us at:

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044-3716688/Fax:4741188 ambedkar@md4.vsnl.net.in

THE DALIT invites contribu tions and suggestions. Articles must not exceed 3,000 words. Crisp news analysis, good translations of poetry and prose, and art-work are particularly welcome. Contributors are encouraged to send suitable photos/ illustrations and the author's photo.

Since THE DALIT is only for private circulation and not yet a regitered publication, we solicit liberal donations.

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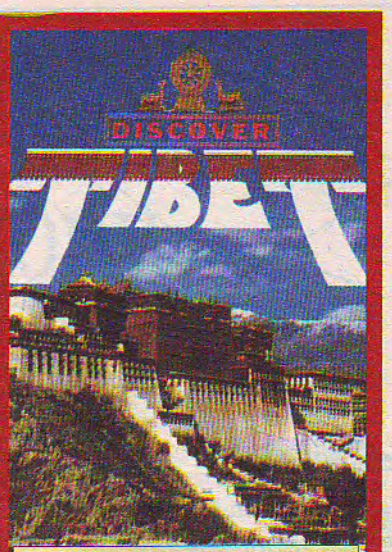

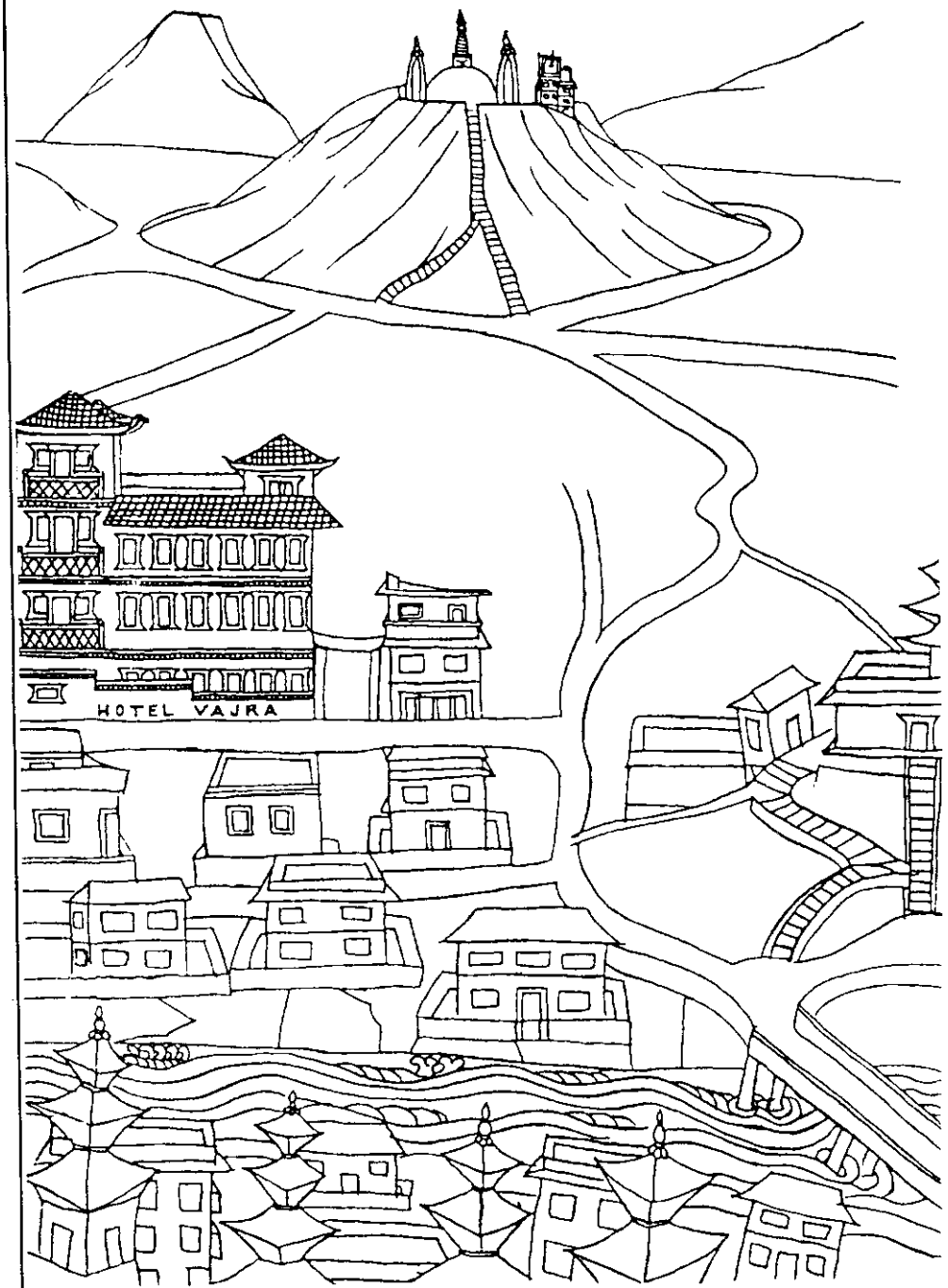

Vajra (literally-flash of lightning), is an artists' condominium, a transit home for many, providing a base during months of hibernation and creative inspiration. Its isolation, graphic splendour and peaceful ambience, make an ideal retreat from the clock of pressure.

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

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MUSLIM INDIA

The pain & the agony

I HAVE been familiar with the writings of Professsor Mushirul Hasan, eminent social historian, where he comes across as an intellectual and a humanitarian. He is also the same sensitive and brave human being who dared to oppose the ban on *The Satanic Verses*, and as a historian he has inspired newer generations of researchers with his writings on communalism, nationalism and secularism. Nowhere in his writings, does Prof. Hasan present himself as a 'Muslim'. So when I came across his piece reprinted from the *Indian Express* in the Voices section of Himal (December 2001, "Test for a citizen"), I was granted a small window into the scholar's personal/political sensitivities as a member of a 'minority' in the country that I happen to share with him as one from the 'majority' community. The article was hard-hitting without being aggressive, and revealed the pain and agony of Indian Muslims living under the constant suspicion of being pro-Pakistani, the disillusionment and weariness of time and again having to prove one's loyalties and regenerate patriotic fervour, particularly during times of political crises. The present is such a time, with yet-again heightened tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, and the region at the brink of war. Has anyone in power seriously considered the renewal yet again of the pain and agony of 11 percent of India's population?

This piece by Prof. Hasan reminds one of another article, written some 30 years ago, by another 'Muslim' academic, Professor Imtiaz Ahmad of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. That article, penned soon after the Bangladesh war of liberation of 1971, delved into how, despite the destiny of Indian Muslims being inextricably tied up with India, Pakistan has been a conspicuous factor in their continuing distress and insecurity and an obstacle to their integration into national society. Prof. Ahmad elaborated on how Pakistan enters the life of Indian Muslims in a variety of ways: "Even twenty-five years after the Partition, the stereotype of the Indian Muslim as a Pakistani expatriate, a fifth columnist, or simply as someone whose basic loyalties are outside the country persists and affects his life chances fundamentally. The stereotype is usually latent during normal times, but it comes up to the surface in times of crisis." During the series of India-Pakistan confrontations, Indian Muslims would find their homes watched closely by the otherwise friendly and cordial neighbours, as possible saboteurs. Even a dim ray of light emanating from their houses during blackouts would be interpreted as a signal for invading Pakistani pilots.

While conceding that the stereotype of the Indian Muslim as a Pakistani expatriate in the initial stages was founded in empirical fact and that there was some basis for its popularity in the attitude and behaviour, both overt and covert, of a large majority of Indian Muslims, Professor Ahmad wrote that, '...it should not mean that the early involvement, social and psychological, of the Indian Muslims with Pakistan should be regarded as a permanent feature of their ethos and orientations and the community as a whole should be condemned forever as disloyal to India." A series of changes had occurred during the previous quarter century after 1947 to affect these orientations and ethos, he concluded, and if stereotypes continued to persist in the view of the majority community, that was clearly due to the prejudices formed during the early years.

Clenched-teeth tolerance

It is not easy to brush aside sentiments expressed by two eminent Indian scholars in writings separated by nearly three decades, because taken together they indicate that there has been no change in the perception and situation of Indian Muslims in the long intervening years. How can this be, for a country that we like to hold up time and time again as the supreme symbol of democracy and equality in South Asia and in the world. Muslims and Hindus are indeed part of the 'Indian' social reality, but then every so often there is the jarring reminder that some Indians in India might be a little less equal than others. Without being patronising towards the Muslims of India, it is important to be sensitive to the fears, apprehensions and tensions that they suffer from, which the majority Hindus do not have to contend with.

The majority likes to see only two 'types' of Muslims in India: the Traitor and the Patriot. These stereotypical extremes remain applicable today. If a Haneef Mohammad cheers for the Pakistani cricket team at the Coca-Cola Series, why, he just may be clandestinely raising the Pakistani flag in the back streets of Jama Masjid in Old Delhi! At the opposite end of the spectrum was the Patriot, who earned his brownie points by (lately) joining the Bharatiya Janata Party, or pronouncing his utter disregard for the 'political' ambitions of his co-religionists, or his pathological dislike for beef. The Patriot loves to be patronised.

The majority community has been historically ambivalent towards the Muslims of the country. In the public realm, as the historian RC Majumdar put it, the majoritarian discourse, "ignoring the difference and estrangement between the two communities, invented slogans of Hindu-Muslim solidarity". Majumdar goes

on to lambast historians for encouraging the ideology of "fanciful fraternity", and he saw this as a calculated act. Indian historians had conspired with the Congress Party to create and sustain this myth, and in doing so, they had "abandoned standards of good-history writing. They were unable to tolerate history that mentioned facts incompatible with ideas of national integration." In the post-colonial era, though the public realm has reflected a growing concern with preservation of minority rights and equality of citizenship, the symbols of national identity that have been developed are overwhelmingly majoritarian. These are symbols the minorities have problems identifying with, but on the whole it is a fact that the public domain in India has been able to preserve itself as a site where all Indians were equal.

In the private realm, on the other hand, the legacy of Partition and the very existence of Pakistan has continued to colour and define the notion of 'the Muslim'. This is the site where a Muslim is "pro-Pakistan" or a "Fifth Columnist". Various competing and complementary versions of 'remembered' histories are put in place – histories of hatred and conflicts, lists of temples desecrated by 'Muslim' rulers, forced conversions, the Pakistan Movement, the Partition violence – all of which justified a clenched-teeth tolerance of the residue that failed to join their brethren in the Land of the Pure. The majority Hindus in immediate-postcolonial India felt that all matters had been settled on the blood-drenched fields of Bengal and Punjab. All debts of a shared history had been squared and, having been given a fair chance to "go away", those who stayed back would now have to do so on the terms of the majority community.

Thus, while constitutionally and in the public realm India was committed to secularism and multi-culturalism, the private arena remained cluttered with troublesome memories and mindsets that did not go away with the sweep of time. The little interaction which exists, has been hesitant, incomplete and sporadic. There have been sharp reversals and sudden withdrawals, a stuttering dialogue between the two communities.

The cultural and family linkages of many Indian Muslims with Pakistan continued to provide ammunition to the orthodox in Indian politics and in Hindu society who sought to portray Indian Muslims as a community that was irresponsible, aggressive, and sometimes outright anti-national. Even a perfectly reasonable disagreement could be interpreted as a deliberate assertion of enmity, and therefore, anti-national. The overwhelmingly Hindu political elite read almost all expressions of cultural identity in communal terms.

Roadmap

Historically, as elsewhere, in India Islam was generally embraced by the poorer and weaker sections of the population, mostly artisans and peasants. The clergy also came from the poorer sections, and, additionally, after colonisation the clergy became downgraded as it ceased to wield political power. Because of the further impoverishment following colonisation, and lacking leadership other than an increasingly insular 'priesthood' which reinforced insecurities, the Muslim masses developed a fear of modern methods and processes. So it is not difficult to understand why large sections of Muslims remained orthodox, traditional, unchanging, even fundamentalist.

This is a problem that has to be faced squarely by the Indian Muslim community and its leadership. But the larger problem in terms of community relations in India is the inability of the very-comfortable majority community to try and understand why the Muslims find themselves in this cul-de-sac, and how their own (majoritarian) attitudes have helped foster a beleagured mentality.

Admittedly, there are no easy answers or ways out. Shifting blame to a 'communal historiography', or 'the Partition' or 'the divide and rule policy' of the colonial masters, while explaining why and how relationships between communities turned sour, does not offer a roadmap for the future of community relations in India. A fundamental change that has taken place in Indian society at the turn of the century is the emergence of a new generation of Indian Muslims and Hindus born and raised in the years after independence. With a completely different historical experience and sense of belonging that does not carry much of the virulent baggage of communalism, it is a generation that has less stake in the resurrection of the past, more in building a secure future for itself. This new 'social capital' must be turned to the task of building confidences between the two communities in India and it is from here, not from the older "Partition" generation, that new voices, new suggestions must emerge.

The first Prime Minister of India had very perceptively pointed out that majoritarian communalism was the most dangerous form of community strife in the world, and this is what India has been landed with. It is with the post-Partition generation of the majority community that the greater responsibility for change lies. If the new generation in India is able to build a society where the minorities perceive themselves as safe and secure, then that will be a society to celebrate and popularise.

To quote Bhupen Hazarika, rennaissance man of Assam (my translation):

On a cold, cold night,
Let me lend voice
To the silent cries of fear
Of a minority community somewhere,
And be a warm cloak of security.

– *Anindita Dasgupta*

TIBET

THE LIMITS OF ADULATION

HAVE YOU noticed? The gun-toting Osama bin Laden has pushed the peaceable Dalai Lama into deep background. The 'Tibet cause' is presently in the doldrums as, next door, Afghanistan hogs the public's post-11 September attention. The entire gamut of geopolitics of South Asia (which by Himal's definition includes Tibet) has been turned upside down, as we can see in India's rush to embrace the United States' geopolitical agenda and Islamabad's crack down on those who would do *jihad* across Pakistani frontiers.

Over the course of this unsettled autumn and winter, the voice for Tibet has receded almost completely from the international arena. Since it is just a hop and a jump (Kashmir Valley and Ladakh) away from Afghanistan, you would have thought that some commentator might have drawn some conclusions for Tibet. Not so. Apparently, the perennial *ahimsa* of the Dalai Lama and the docility of the Tibetan refugeedom – not to mention Beijing's tight grip on Lhasa – are just not the stuff of headlines when newer and sexier issues like Islamic radicalism and 'global terrorism' engage policymakers from New York to New Delhi.

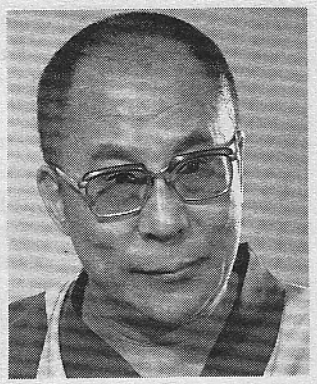
Of course, a reassessment by the policy-wallahs of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, of their world strategy was long overdue. Relying almost exclusively on the charisma and personality of Tenzin Gyatsho is not the way to win back independence, self-determination, autonomy, or even to manage a 'return', which we presume is what the Government-in-Exile wants. Perhaps the reality of refugeedom has become a little too comfortable for the *kalons* (ministers) of Dharamsala. After all, when one is the toast of Western capitals, one tends to forget that the Tibet cause is now almost entirely cultural rather than political. Organising the Dalai Lama's appointment book and travel itinerary (and traveling with him) is what the Government-in-Exile functionaries seem to love to do.

The Dalai Lama is ailing and in a hospital in Bombay, and we wish His Holiness a speedy recovery. Those in the exile community may wish to use this sobering moment to consider whether they *want* to have a political movement to wrest back some amount of control over Tibet's fate from the big men in Beijing. Is it worth considering the lives of the four to six million Tibetans within Tibet (depending on how you define the region) rather than the interests of the three lakhs or so in exile? If indeed the interests of the Tibetans within Tibet were to be considered the foremost concern of the Dalai Lama and the exile government, what would it have to do?

We have no ready answers, but do respectfully suggest that unsettled times are conducive to pushing through to a new reality. Clearly, Beijing is where Dharamshala needs to try to bring about some changes, given that: a) it is the PRC's intransigence that has kept everything on hold till now; and b) the only way ahead seems to be to try and whittle away at that intransigence. Clearly, there are limits to Western adulation, and those limits have probably been reached. The weak flame of Tibetan freedom or autonomy holds no political strength against the xenophobic windstorm of Han China, and informal chats at the White House, or addressing the Australian Parliament have limited value when Beijing is so unwilling to listen.

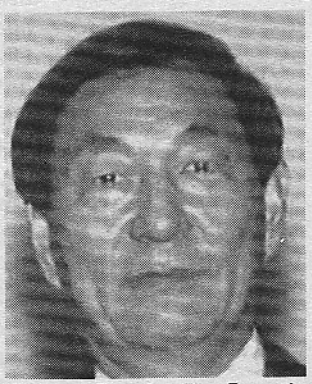
Beijing is rattled enough that it may be worth approaching at this time. The very government which went into extended rage when the Americans accidentally bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade or when an American AWAC strayed too close to Chinese territory, did not utter a peep recently when the Chinese presidential Boeing jet was wired for sound by the CIA before delivery. This inaction indicates a radical reversal in the geopolitical worldview at the topmost echelons in Beijing, something that should interest Tibetan strategists. Beijing is also increasingly concerned about the rising economic and political prowess of India, and this would have a bearing on the Tibet equation that could go either way.

More directly related to Tibet is the



The Dalai Lama

Osama bin Laden



Chinese Premier Zhu Rongzi

Ngawang Choephel

release by China, on 20 January, of the music scholar Ngawang Choephel, who had served six and a half years of an 18-year prison term on spying charges. "The Chinese have been looking for areas where they can improve relations (with the US)," says a San Fransisco-based human rights activist who had been lobbying for Choephel's release. The fact that China sees the release of Choephel as a friendly gesture towards Wash-ington in the midst of its antiterrorism campaign and a month before George W Bush visits Beijing reveals one secret: despite its repeated public rejection of the 'cause', Beijing does keep the Tibet agenda relatively high on its policy rack.

The Tibetan scholar's release is indeed a case for the effectiveness of lobbying in powerful Western capitals. Choephel was a prisoner of conscience on whose account the Chinese authorities received the largest number of letters from members of the US Congress. It is unlikely, however, that much more can be attained by using the tack of continu-ously courting the West to pressure Beijing. Under the changed post- 9/11 circumstances, the Dalai Lama and the Khashag, the executive branch of the Government-in-Exile, may again try to develop a direct line to Beijing. Dharamsala may also want to reassess what level of compromise is required to see the Dalai Lama back at the Potala, as a leader of the Tibetan flock within Tibet. We may find the Chinese as intransigent as ever. Then again, we may be surprised.

Colombo at peace? The prospect of attack is suddenly down to almost nil.

SRI LANKA

PREPARING AGAINST LOCALISED BREAKDOWN

THE EXTENSION of the month long ceasefires by the LTTE and the Colombo government was expected, and there was no reason for it to be other-wise. So far, the ceasefires have been diligently observed by the two sides in respect to the avoidance of physical clashes. This has brought enormous relief to the people living in the conflict areas, not to mention urban areas such as Colombo, where the tension caused by the prospect of a sudden attack has diminished to nearly zero. The parties to the conflict too have benefited. They are able to rest and recuperate from their years of fighting.

For the government in particular, the ceasefire has been of great importance. It is able to show that it has delivered results to the people and honoured one of its key election-time promises. The other problems that the government confronts, such as the rising cost of living and the power shortage, cannot be resolved in the short-term even if efficiently dealt with. Although the business climate has improved, it only paves the way for future investments and this takes time. For the LTTE, too, the ceasefire has been important. Apart from making the Tamil people happy, it can reduce the momentum of the international movement to ban it as a terrorist organisation.

However, the present ceasefire situation has a major weakness in that it continues to be based on the decisions taken unilaterally by the government and LTTE. The ceasefire is not one that has been mutually negotiated. This would mean that each party has given its own interpretation to what the ceasefire means, and so far there has been no joint agreement as to its meaning. This leaves room for potential misunderstanding and even deliberate exploitation by either side, or by a recalcitrant faction within it, to embarrass the other.

Therefore, maintaining the stability of the present ceasefire arrangement would be of utmost importance to the government,

LTTE and Sri Lankan people. The weakening of the economy, and society in general, caused by the past years of war and political mis-management can only be remedied in a situation of ceasefire or peace. Reports that the LTTE's chief negotiator Dr. Anton Balasingham has submitted proposals to the Norwegian facilitation team for maintaining the stability of the ceasefire are welcome in this context. His proposals apparently call for the segregation of areas of control, the setting up of neutral zones separating both sides, and rules of passage with regard to movement by personnel by either side to the other.

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Dr. Balasingham's proposals are important ones as international and Sri Lanka's own past experience with cease-fires would demonstrate. In the past month, there were two incidents that could have led to a localised breakdown of the ceasefire. A police vehicle with senior officers on board took a wrong turn and entered into LTTE-held territory in the east. The LTTE area leader accepted the policemen's story, treated them with courtesy and sent them on their way. On the other hand, the LTTE cadre could easily have fired on the police vehicle.

Likewise, earlier in the first month of ceasefire a group of armed LTTE cadre in uniform walked into an army checkpoint seeking to go through it on the grounds that they wished to visit their relatives in the government-held area. Once again the interaction between the two groups was cordial and the LTTE cadre turned back peaceably when their request was turned down. But it is also possible that an exchange of words could have escalated into an exchange of fire. The sight of armed LTTE cadre approaching them in itself could have led the soldiers to fire.

LOCALISED BREAKDOWNS

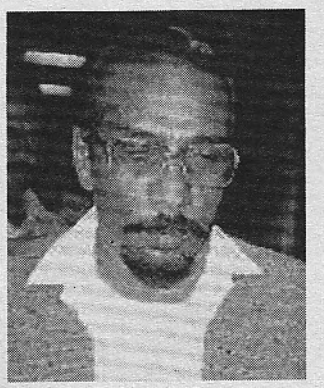
At present, it certainly appears that the top level leadership of both the government and LTTE are keen on keeping the ceasefire going and wish to promote the peace process. In his first policy statement to Parliament, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said that his government's aim was to "avoid action which would hinder the fruition of our hopes in making the ceasefire last." The same aim is also evident in Dr. Balasingham's proposals to the Norwegians. But it must be remembered that neither the government nor LTTE are homogeneous entities.

Within the government itself there are ministers who have publicly claimed in the past that there is no ethnic conflict in the country, only a problem of terrorism. The JVP and Sinhalese nationalist parties are protesting the concessions made to the LTTE, with the former planning a major campaign against the lifting of the ban on the LTTE until it renounces separatism and lays down its weapons. These strong trains of thought within a section of Sinhalese society could impact on individual soldiers at the front lines. In a crisis situation they can take actions their commanding officers have not ordered.

Likewise within LTTE ranks there are similar divisions. This is particularly marked in the case of recruitment. While the government nor the LTTE have ceased recruitment, the problem with the latter's is that a section of the insurgents, particularly in the east, is engaging in forced recruitment. LTTE commanders who are sufficiently hardline to engage in forcible recruitment during a ceasefire may also be willing to escalate any confrontational situation in which they find themselves.

After 18 years of war and bad faith on both sides maintaining peace on all fronts is likely to be difficult. There is danger of small-scale localised events suddenly spiralling out of control. If and when such localised break-downs occur it is imperative that the leadership of both the government and LTTE take immediate steps to prevent a spread. It is also important that media and civic leaders be prepared to exert a calming influence on the general population rather than mobilise communal tensions to the point that they fatally undermine the peace process. Society both north and south needs to be prepared to resist this danger and give their fullest cooperation to efforts to maintain the ceasefire.

– Jehan Perera



Dr. Anton Balasingham

Ranil Wickremesinghe

"Society both north and south needs to be prepared to resist this danger and give their fullest cooperation to efforts to maintain the ceasefire."

PAKISTAN

AIR ROUTE V500

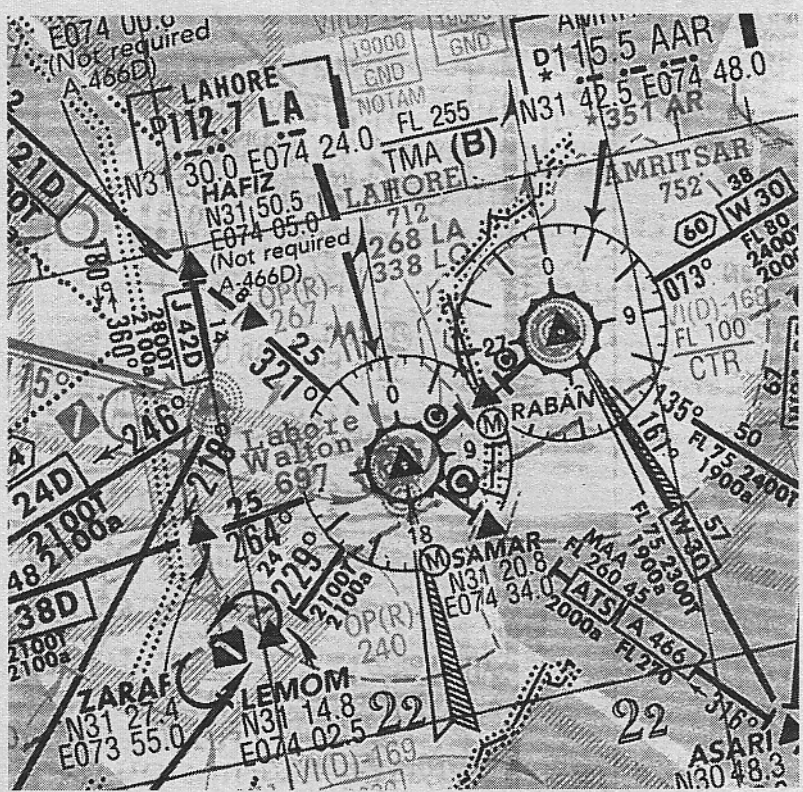
JUST WHAT is holding things up in the resumption of overflight rights for Indian and Pakistani airliners over each other's territories? We can see no conceivable reason for New Delhi, which started the tit-for-tat, to keep this ban. By making civil aviation a pawn in the geopolitical games it likes to play, India is showing the world how petty it can be. It is exporting its own insecurity. Pakistan loses out more because PIA flights to Bangkok, Manila and Tokyo have to go around India, whereas Air India can just skirt Pakistan on its European flights out of Delhi. If that is how victories are tallied between these two nattering neighbours, then South Asia is headed for some nasty patch of turbulence ahead.

It is not just Pakistan and India that are hit; PIA's four-weekly flights from Karachi and Islamabad to Kathmandu used to be a lifeline for Nepali workers headed to and from the Gulf. It was also an important link for European and North American budget tourists to Nepal and an important route used by all Pakistanis coming to the numerous regional meetings and seminars held in Kathmandu. What India gains by snapping this link and hurting Nepal and regionalism to boot, we haven't figured out yet.

General Musharraf had the right idea and thumbed his nose at the Indians by flying through China to Nepal for his historic handshake with Prime Minister Vajpayee at the SAARC Summit in Kathmandu in early January. Now, why can't PIA's flight planners establish a new air route and use it to fly to Kathmandu? After all, Airway V500 heading out of Islamabad over Chitral and on to waypoint Firuz, then overflying the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan into China is already being used on the first segment of PIA's Islamabad-Beijing route. All that needs to be done is that at some point in the Urumqi Flight Information Region (FIR) the Chinese hand over the aircraft to the Kunming FIR and make the plane take a heading towards Lhasa flying more or less parallel to the Tsang Po (Bramhaputra River) over the Tibetan Plateau. Then, just before overflying Xigatse, the flight makes a right turn heading 214 degrees to follow the standard twice-weekly Lhasa-Kathmandu route taken by China Southwest Flight 407. This would bring the aircraft into Kathmandu FIR between the Makalu and Kangchenjunga massifs over the Arun Valley, allowing it to check waypoint Tumlingtar (Tango-tango-romeo) at DME 100 from KTM. It will then turn on a radial 280-degree inbound for a 20 DME arc and a standard VOR-DME approach to runway 02 at Kathmandu airport.

What say, PIA? Want to try that out? The Chinese would have no problems. △

Reading a Jepsen pilot's map is all that is required to plan a new Islamabad-Kathmandu route via Tibet.



INDO-GANGETIC PLAIN

SHROUDED IN MASS MISERY

EVERY YEAR, about this time, we need to remind the leaders of society, academia and SAARC, about the Indo-Gangetic fog. Himal raised the matter a year ago ("Huddled masses, yearning for warmth", February 2001), and it should be repeated now, even though the prime ministers and presidents are probably not listening. This is truly a 'regional' problem.

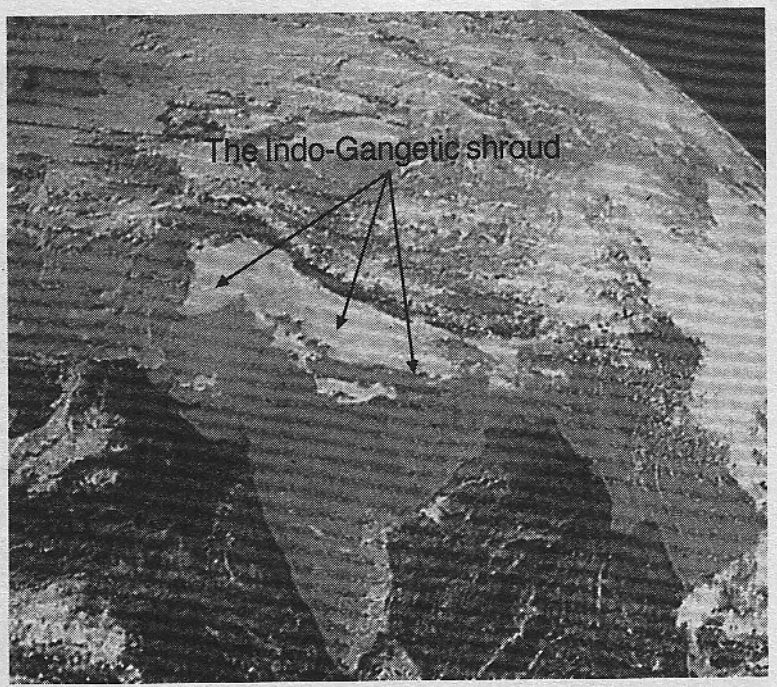
There is increased incidence of the fog in the plains of the Indus and Ganga, due to the expansion of embankments, dykes, barrages, irrigation canals – and eveything else that leaves more water lying around on the ground in the winter months than what is natural. When the air temperature drops, these water bodies release mists and fogs, which then hug the ground and do not disperse for days, weeks and, in bad winters, a month or more.

Fog is basically a cloud formed at ground level, and during these winter months they extend several hundred feet into the atmosphere. Above the fog, the winter sun shines, but its warmth cannot reach the huddled masses underneath. Just a few hundred feet up into Uttaranchal, Nepal or the Darjeeling and Bhutan hills, the sun shines bright and warm. But this is cold comfort for the plainsfolk.

The overall impact of this Indo-Gangetic fog on the population must account for the biggest incidence of mass misery in the modern world. With their living spaces and clothing geared more for the long hot summer of the plains, the poor and not-so-poor, from Lahore to Delhi to Patna to Guwahati, shiver in un-heated rooms wearing inadequate woolens as the ground and air turn frigid. In the poor visibility, the trains run late and planes are diverted. The potato crop dies in the fields, and bricks will not bake in the sun's absence.

Why doesn't anyone listen? To repeat from Himal of a year ago, "The largest mass of people any where in the world lead affected lives under the cloud in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, voiceless for being so many and so problematic." You could also add that South Asia's rulers and opinion-makers are now, increasingly, living in climate-controlled spaces and traveling around in winter in heated vehicles. Meanwhile, the social science hereabouts is weaker than ever before, so the connection between the frigidity of the Indo-Gangetic maidaan and the mass misery index are just not linked to the developmental interventions, such as canals and levees. It is an absence of imagination.

Let us hope that some physical scientists and social scientists wake up before long to prove this hypothesis right or wrong – that increased winter waterlogging is what leads to the Indo-Gangetic fog. The proliferation of irrigation canals introduce more water away from the rivers, to feed fields given over to multiple cropping. In addition, there are the embankments that have come up on every major river, to keep it 'trained'. The levees also hold back the water that would otherwise have joined the river's flow. With much more water available on the ground, the thickness and duration of the fog is extended. The sun does not breakthrough, which keeps the ground from heating up to dissipate the shroud.



"The overall impact of this Indo-Gangetic fog on the population must account for the biggest incidence mass misery in the modern world."

There were 154 km of embankments in Bihar in 1954. In 1997, the state had 3500 km of embankments, so you can imagine the increase in waterlogging and therefore the fog. Had they thought about this when they contemplated irrigation and embankments? Doubtful. Did they expect that the population of the Indo-Gangetic basin (and add some more from the Brahmaputra basin as well) that is affected by the fog would top 500 million? No.

500 million people, or a good portion of it, suffering the frigidity of the Indo-Gangetic fog. It is enough to want you to do something about it. But who will raise the question, when to question em-bankments is to question irrigation, which is to question development itself, which is nothing less than being anti-national?

Cultural flows across

South Asia's blurred cultural boundaries are being given sharp edges with frontiers full of patrolling soldiers, the raising of border security forces, and even barbed barricades and floodlights. As time passes, the cultural rivers on the two sides find their own separate courses and the divergence begins. Fortunately, there is one frontier of South Asia that has not yet succumbed to this need to irreparably separate, demarcate, define. The thousand-kilometre open frontier between Nepal and India is often decried in both countries as an abomination, for it is said to undercut Nepali sovereignty on the one hand and India's economic and political security on the other. However, this very lack of rigidity of the Nepal-India boundary is what makes it most natural and historically evolved. It reflects and nurtures the cultural sameness across the frontier, and could be a harbinger of the kind of frontier one would hope to see, for example, between India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh. The story hidden under the topsoil of the Ganga plains is that two countries can have an unbolted border, a peopled frontier where communities are neighbouring and friendly as they were meant to be in this part of the world. The border between the Nepal Tarai and Bihar/Uttar Pradesh provide the prototype for the other land frontiers of South Asia.

For being one of the most densely populated regions of the world, the rectangle which encompasses the northern bank of the Ganga all the way north to the Churay (Shiwalik) hills is the most neglected corner of South Asia. It is a region derided by the New Delhi intelligentsia as an unfathomable basket case and distrusted by Kathmandu's elites as a region that would challenge their national sovereignty. The illustrious history and the current sociology of the Ganga Rectangle is thought to count for nothing, and all South Asia loses as a result.

In this essay, a Kathmandu-based columnist who hails from Janakpur in Mithila, emphasises the links between the Nepal Tarai and the rest of the Ganga plains, and proposes that the Nepal Tarai has the cultural dynamism to lead the entire Ganga Rectangle out of its present cul-de-sac.

Text ***CK Lal,*** *pictures* ***Bikas Rauniar***

The very name 'Nepal' evokes the image of a country set amidst the majestic Himalayan peaks, where exotic valleys still harbour the serenity of the lost Shangri-La. Sold to the world by Western explorers and latter-day adventurers and travel writers, this portrayal of mountain exotica hides the fact that a considerable part of what constitutes the territory of Nepal is actually as flat as a table-top. This is the Nepal Tarai, a 15-20 km wide strip of plain that runs along the south of Nepal.

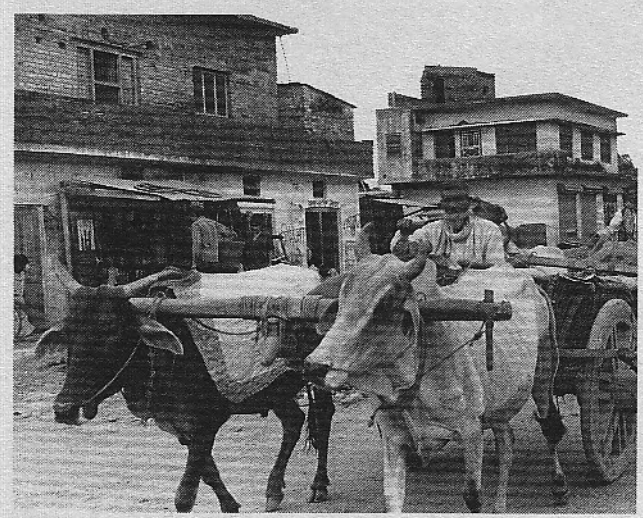
Despite its cultural, social and economic significance, however, the tarai receives scant attention. For the Nepali hill elite that would like to mould the country

a blurred boundary

after its image, the tarai is a region to be exploited -- its resources are useful but its people (not the newly migrated hill folk, but the indigenous tribes and the Madhesi of the plains) are a liability. Meanwhile, as far as the world is concerned, the tarai is merely an extension of the Ganga plain. Little is written about the tarai, and even the celebrated *People of Nepal* by the anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista is perfunctory about the region, preferring to focus on the mountains that till now have given Nepal its identity.

The demographic and economic trends, however, indicate that the tarai will no longer be the neglected front door of Nepal. With an overwhelming – and increasing – majority of the national population inhabiting the Nepali flatland, and the industrial and agricultural productivity of the country relying on it, the region cannot be ignored for long. This should draw the attention of the Kathmandu intelligentsia to what the tarai means for the country's future. This ought also to be a matter of some interest to the intelligentsia and planners in New Delhi, who could well be surprised by the Nepal Tarai's capacity to serve as an economic dynamo for the advancement of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) and northern Bihar, both densely populated and politically unstable backwaters that have been left behind by the Indian state and its modern economy.

Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh



Mahendranagar, western Nepal Tarai

Indeed, the wilful neglect of the tarai by Kathmandu Valley is repeated south of the border. In the grand tradition instituted by the British colonists, New Delhi's academics and bureaucrats are more or less united in characterising Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh together as the basketcase of mal-governance and economic deprivation. And for these neo-colonists of New Delhi, Nepal's tarai does not exist as a separate region either – it is simply regarded as an extension of the problematic Hindi belt. The blinkered view in both Kathmandu and New Delhi which refuses to acknowledge the dynamism of the past and future possibilities has permeated the intelligentsia of the cities of the region as well – the larger ones like Benaras, Lucknow and Patna or the smaller centres such as Gorakhpur, Muzzafarpur and Darbangha – to the extent that the region as a whole refuses seek its own economic, cultural and political release.

While the neglect of the region by the city-bred in Nepal and India is a reality, the people-to-people contact across the international boundary continue undiminished, unlike the boundary regions between India and Bangladesh and Pakistan, where these relations, as vibrant till just a few decades back, are beginning to dry up under the constant gaze of state supervision. The nature of life across this blurred South Asian Nepal-India boundary must be better understood, and the lessons of cultural flows across the tarai frontier need to be considered for their replicability elsewhere in South Asia and the world.

The cultural legacy of Madhyadesh

The setting of the tarai is grand. Vision extends to a horizon where one can see the blue sky bowing down to embrace the brown earth. Standing amidst the great expanses of rice paddies are the tall and somewhat ludicrous phallus-shaped boundary pillars between the two countries, erected more than a century ago with brick and lime mortar. During the dry season, the ten yard stretch of no-man's-land between the two countries is difficult to locate in many places. In populated areas, these strips are used to winnow grain, dry clothes or tether domestic animals in daytime. On summer evenings, *charpoy* string-beds are laid out in this peaceable frontier to catch the breeze. Indians and Nepali relatives and neighbours warm themselves around open hearths during the winter. Elsewhere, this strip is a common grazing ground, or serves as an open toilet for people whose citizenship papers may just as easily say 'Nepal' or 'India'.

The tarai begins where the stretch of Churay (Shiwalik) hills ends, and forms one geographical continuum with the rest of plains stretching south to the west-east flow of the Ganga. The ecological character of this region is determined by the great and temperamental rivers that emerge from the deep valleys of the Himalaya, carrying melted snow and monsoon discharge – the Kosi past Biratnagar, the Gandak (called Narayani upstream) which joins the Ganga right by Patna, and the Ghaghara (Karnali) in the west. Over geological time, till the time they were bound within embankments in the last few decades, these rivers deposited their bed-load on the flats, which is what makes this one of the most fertile regions in the world. It is a food-bowl that supports one of the most populous of habitats – one-twentieth of humanity live between the Jamuna and Teesta, between the Churay and the Ganga, in the Ganga Rectangle.

In sociological terms, this stretch of plains is the heartland of the Subcontinent. Its swath of forests were cleared and habitation begun with eastward migration of Indo-Aryan speaking people from the Indus basin. The forests first fell in the Doab (the basin between the Jamuna and Ganga), and over the centuries the march continued eastwards right across the North Ganga Plain before culminating in present-day Assam, where the Brahmaputra joins in from the north and east. Indigenous peoples of this region either got assimilated

into the emerging Indo-Aryan culture, or were forced further to the north, east and south.

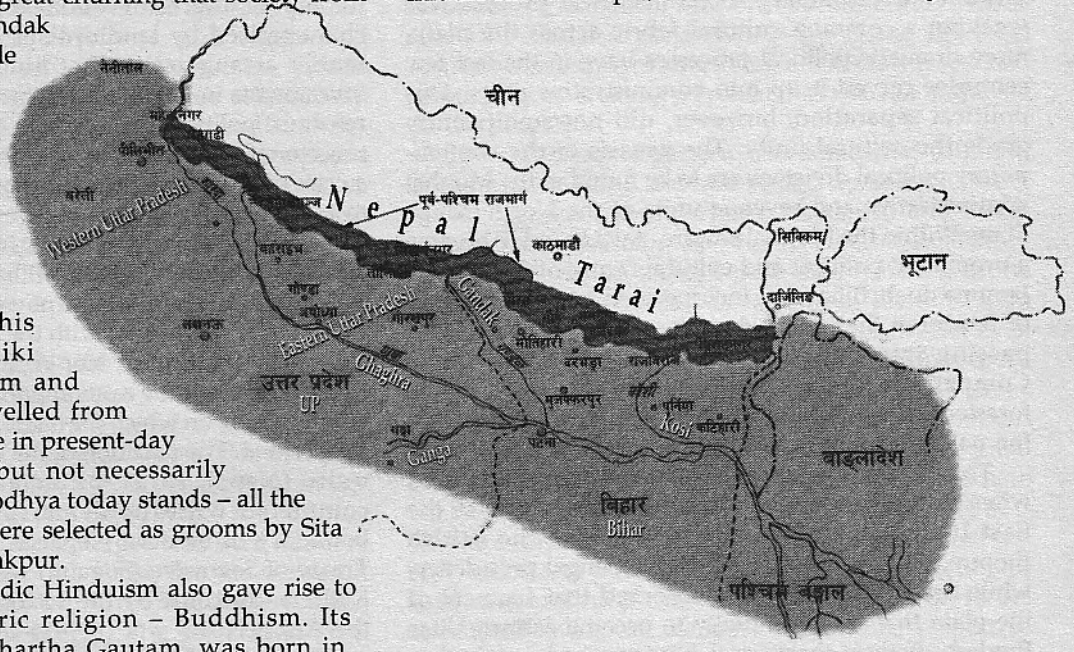
Greek, Persian, Chinese, Buddhist and Hindu sources have left us colourful and sometimes mythologised accounts of this region's ancient past in travelogues, narratives and stories. The point is not so much the exact veracity of the accounts as much as the broad identification of the extent of territory that partook of a common cultural heritage and process. The myths start with Manu, the Hindu lawgiver, who refers to the plains between Indraprastha in the west, Magadh in the east, the Shiwalik in the north and the Vindhya in the south as "Madhyadesh" — "the central country". And central it has been to the rise and fall of civilisations over the millennia. From the Alexandrine Greeks to the medieval Mughals, from imperial England to the revisionists of Akhanda Bharat, ideologues of every extreme hue have fought pitched battles on this great expanse in the belief that whoever got hold of the heart could ultimately end up controlling the body of India as well.

For the taraili people, the challenge will be to convince the Kathmandu elite that the surge in cultural flows does not weaken national loyalties – you cannot dilute oil with water... Cultural diversity is the strength of the Nepali state, not its weakness.

This populated, presently poverty-stricken expanse of the Ganga plain is thus one of the cradles of human civilisation, whose centrality is evident in both myth and history. Accounts of the past in stories such as those of the Mahabharat and Ramayan point to the existence of complex sedentary societies. Hindu scriptures portray the great churning that society from Mithila in the Kosi-Gandak basin to the Kirat people up in the high eastern mountains and the Khas in between underwent during the period of Indo-Aryan advance. They also indicate the shared cultural and ritual elements of this region. In the Valmiki Ramayan, Prince Ram and his four brothers travelled from Ayodhya – somewhere in present-day Uttar Pradesh (UP), but not necessarily where the town of Ayodhya today stands – all the way to Mithila, and were selected as grooms by Sita and her sisters in Janakpur.

This nursery of Vedic Hinduism also gave rise to another world-historic religion – Buddhism. Its founder, Prince Siddhartha Gautam, was born in Lumbini, fast by the present-day border in the central Nepal Tarai, and he acquired Buddhahood in the wild lands further south. The credit for the spread of Lord Buddha's teachings beyond the Ganga region and into the Indus region of the west, goes to the Shakyamuni's most powerful devotee, the Mauryan Emperor Ashok. Eventually, the struggle for supremacy between Hinduism and Buddhism was to take place in these very plains. If the apogee of the Mauryan empire was also the heyday of Subcontinental Buddhism, by the 4th century AD, under the patronage of the Gupta empire, Hinduism, refurbished and given its final doctrinal form by Shankaracharya's monistic *advaita vedanta* philosophy, made a strong come back after centuries of Buddhist dominance of these plains.

The inter-flows of culture within the region are also evident in the localised pantheons of Hinduism. The presiding deity of the Nepali House of Gorkhas was Guru Gorakhnath, an ascetic said to have been based in present-day Gorakhapur. True, the latter-day Shah and Rana rulers of Nepal hired hagiographers to trace their ancestry to obscure Rajput families on the fringe of Thar desert in Rajasthan in north-western India. One ruler even assumed the title "Bikram" from the Parmars of Ujjain on the slopes of the Vindhyas. But there could well be another side to the story. If the Shah family did not evolve from the Magar clans of the middle-hills of Nepal, then it could well be argued that



A Nepali news-magazine's view of the Ganga Rectangle.

they are descended from fleeing warrior castes from the region around Gorakhpur, escaping the political changes sweeping the Ganga maidaan during the Mughal period in Hindustan. This would explain why Gorakhnath is the presiding deity of the Gorkha principality, from where King Prithvi Narayan Shah emerged in the mid-1700s to conquer and consolidate the kingdom of Nepal.

Much before the Shahs, the Lichhavis from the plains as well as Karnats had progressed northward when pressed by circumstances in the plains. There, they mixed in with the culture of Kirats and Khasa, transformed them and themselves were transformed in the process. Ruling classes of Karnataka origin who established the once-prosperous principality of Simraungarh in what is now the Nepal Tarai, the Karnats ascended to Kathmandu Valley to become celebrated patrons of arts and craft as the Malla dynasty, which preceded the Shahs.

The free flow of people, goods and ideas within the vast plains as well as between the plains and the northern midhills continued over the centuries. The strip of sub-tropical jungle (known as the Charkoshe Jhadi) at the foot of the Churay hills did act as a barrier, but not enough to prevent the seepage of culture and commerce. The Charkoshe Jhadi also became a safe haven for aboriginals such as the Tharus, Kewats, Rautes and Santhals, pushed out as the civilisation of the sedentary cultivators took root everywhere. Over the centuries, these groups developed resistance to malaria, and established themselves in the deep forests of the tarai.

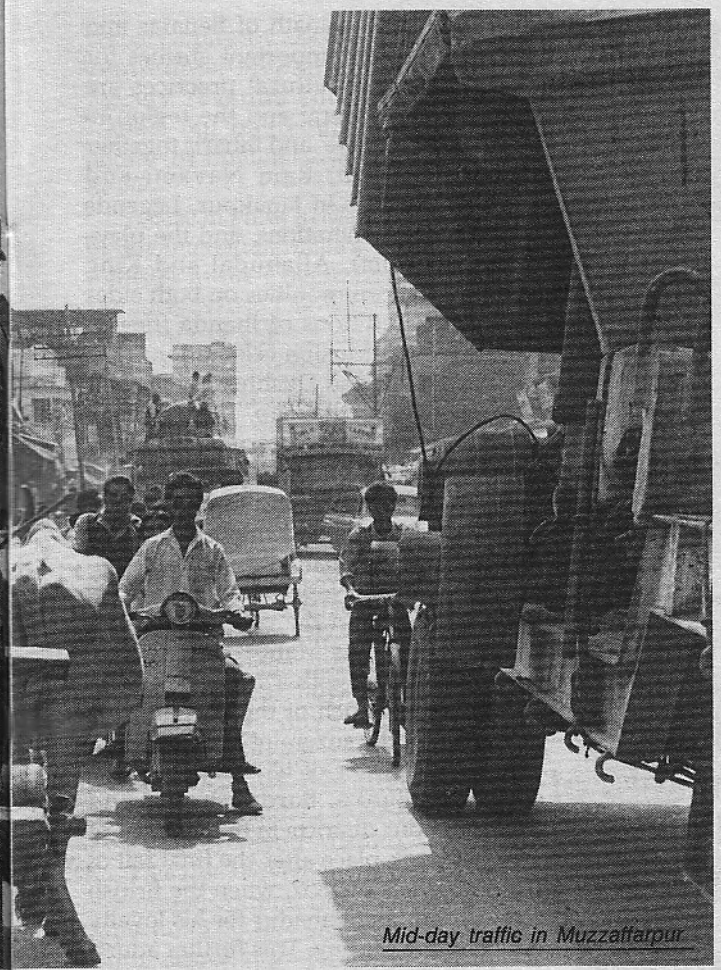
The divided plain

While an evolutionary social-historical process was weaving a common cultural fabric across the plain, more dramatic political processes have in the last few centuries carved it up into administrative units. This political separation, however, did not significantly erode the cultural unity. The genesis of the contemporary political divisions are to be found in the Mughal administrative and revenue units of the North Ganga Plain. Within the Mughal empire, Awadh in UP became a prominent political and cultural centre of the Ganga-Jamuna doab. Bihar was incorporated into the province of Bengal at the point when the *diwani* of Bengal was passing into the hands of the English East India Company in the mid-18th century. Meanwhile the forested northern tracts of the plain remained outside the pale of Mughal authority.

This division was replicated and then reinforced when power passed from the Mughal Empire to the East India Company and eventually to the British Empire. Bihar remained within the Bengal presidency, while the United Provinces absorbed that segment of the plain that was eventually to become eastern Uttar Pradesh. Both of these areas however had one feature in common – they came within the zamindari revenue system of the British, which was to provide the basis for feudal and semi-feudal relations in agriculture, characterised by landlordism, insecure tenancy and rentier arrangements that hindered yield-increasing investments in land and obstructed the emergence of a reformist politics. This set them on a different economic trajectory from that of, say, western Uttar Pradesh, where a class of independent peasant proprietors was allowed to take root. The different revenue collection systems were to have a lasting effect in forging the agrarian relations of eastern UP and Bihar.

The decline of Mughal power and the ascendancy of the British coincided with the rise of the Gorkhalis in the northern hills of Nepal. In the inevitable clash between the two the cannon prevailed over the khukuri and the plain, on which the battle took place, was further subdivided. The partition of the plain into three distinct units (Nepal Tarai, Bihar and eastern UP) was completed with the demarcation of the southern boundary of modern Nepal as it exists today by the Treaty of Segowlee (Sugauli) which was forced on the Kathmandu court by the victorious British following the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816.

The political and social bifurcation of the northern and southern parts of the plain was accentuated by the



Mid-day traffic in Muzzaffarpur

Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 against the political rule of the East India Company. This revolt of the Company's troops, joined by local chieftans, zamindars and disaffected elite, which reached its climax in the Awadh region, was the event that cemented the relationship between the sahibs of Company Bahadur and the Rana usurpers of Nepal. When the whole of the Ganga plains had risen in revolt, Jang Bahadur Rana rode down from Kathmandu into Lucknow at the head of a Gorkhali contingent and helped quell the mutiny. This brought the Gorkhalis closer to the British but alienated the indigenous Indian elites from the hill satraps.

Zamindars and neo-zamindars

However, despite the distribution of the north Ganga plain between three different political and administrative dispensations, each unit was, in demographic and socio-economic profiles, practically a mirror image of the other. The political process by which the agrarian structure of the Nepal tarai emerged was very different from that of east UP or north Bihar, but the net result was the same. For over a century, the Shah kings reigned while the Ranas ruled Nepal. The cultivated tarai bordering British dominion provided most of the revenue to the court of Kathmandu. This revenue was to increase several-fold as the Charkoshe Jhadi emerged as a source of timber for the sleepers of the rapidly expanding Indian Railways (*see page 34*).

The ruling class of Kathmandu wanted to populate the newly created clearings in order to further increase revenue, but the hill people chose to push eastwards toward Assam through the mid-hills instead of descending to the malarial plains. The demand for settlers was met by the peasantry fleeing the British oppression in Tirhut and Awadh, in today's Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, respectively. Pauperised people of eastern UP (formerly United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh) and Bihar crossed oceans in search of a better life and ended up as *girmitiya* labour in the plantations of Fiji, Trinidad and Mauritius. But quite a few simply walked across into Nepal—and straight into the exploitative arms of tarai *birtawals* – the courtiers of Kathmandu who were given large freehold parcels of recently-cleared forests for services rendered to the state. This gave rise to the class of neo-zamindars in the tarai.

Almost all land grantees in the tarai came from the peasant hill-stock. However, the fear of malaria kept them in the hills, and these absentee zamindars relied on local cultivators to extract the produce from the land. This helped develop a rentier mentality, and the hill landowners soon became an idle elite who lived off the labour of others even while despising them. This kind of disdain for the peasantry is most visible, even today, in the western tarai, where Jang Bahadur and his Rana descendants doled out parcels of land to Chhetri court faithfuls, poor Rana cousins, destitute Thakuri in-laws and sundry other Brahmin priests. The landowners used the brute power of the state machinery to enslave the local peasantry. As with the zamindars to the south, these neo-zamindars of the north indulged in the worst forms of feudal exploitation, pauperising the local Tharu farmers and turning them into kamaiya (bonded labour) slaves, creating a system that was not outlawed till the year 2000.

The colonisation pattern was somewhat different in the eastern tarai, but still ended up marginalising the indigenous people, Tharu, Rajbanshi and Sattar tribals. In the central tarai, where a civilisation (Tirhut, Mithila) flourished much before the formation of the Nepali state, title-holders of land from the hills were relatively more respectful towards the locals. But even here, the forest was cleared at a faster rate than it could be brought under cultivation by the local people alone, so the hill-elite encouraged in-migration from Bihar. Those who came over were mostly from the lower strata of society, more subservient to their masters, and so here too the hill land-owners got accustomed to lording it.

The common heritage of the divided plain does not end with the correspondence of their agrarian structures and rural classes. It extends as much to the communal and social compositions of their respective populations, their shared political heritage, the common threats facing their culture and their

marginalisation within mainstream society.

The erosion of the cultural base is perhaps the most visible aspect of the divided plain and language is one area where the loss is felt most acutely. Both Nepali as well as Hindi belong to the same family of languages, derived largely from Sanskrit. Both have drawn extensively from the Persian and Arabic influences of the Mughal court of Lucknow. Another similarity between these two 'official' languages is that both have grown at the expense of the local languages of the Ganga plain. But, despite the patronage extended to the official languages, on both sides people prefer their mother tongues to their 'official' language. On the Indian side, east to west, they speak Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi – languages that have been appropriated by Hindi zealots as different dialects (*boli*) of official Hindi. For long, these language have laboured under the domination of '*Khadi Boli* Hindi'. The state government of Bihar for a while recognised Maithili, but Laloo Yadav decided that it gave an unfair advantage to the Maithil Brahmins of North Bihar and therefore withdrew recognition. Bhojpuri and Awadhi, too, continue to languish.

Likewise, in Nepal the political power of the hill elites has ensured that the culture of the tarai has never been promoted by the state as part of the Nepali culture. The masterpieces of the great poet Vidyapati – poems based on the folk songs of Mithila – were composed as early as the 13th century, but the honour of being named the *Aadi Kavi* of Nepal (and not just of Nepali, as is the case in reality) goes to Bhanu Bhakta who came nearly six hundred years later.

"For things to prosper more culturally, the opinion-makers of Bihar and eastern UP need to realise that their cultural renaissance is possible only through a closer tie-up with their Sarhadiya brothers and sisters."

Bride & Bread

Partaking as they do of a common legacy of past achievement and present neglect, political boundaries cannot suffice to arrest the mutual traffic between the northern and southern plains. In the hills of Nepal, India is referred to as Muglan (land of the Mughals). The colloquial term for the territory 'beyond the border' in Mathili, Bhojpuri as well as in Awadhi, is *Magulan*. Conversely, the word for Nepal in Maithili is *Sarhad* – the frontier. It is a name well deserved, as the southern flank of Nepal truly is the frontier of the Ganga civilisation.

The circulation of culture is across the plains societies is an everyday phenomenon. Pilgrimages take people across the border both ways. The Mithila Parikrama – or the circumambulation of the ancient capital of Mithila – takes devotees to sites on both sides of the border in the completion of the pilgrimage. The Pashupathinath temple continues to attract devotees in hordes to Nepal while Bishwanath of Benaras and Baijnath of Bihar are two very important shrines for Nepali Hindus. Festivals and cultural practices are nearly identical in the Nepal Tarai and the region to the south. Lakhs of Nepali 'tarailis' and Biharis together attend the Vivaha Panchami, Ram Navami and Panchkoshi Parikrama festivals in Janakpur. Legends communicate values across generations, and the plays based on Ramayan (Ramlila), Allahudal and King Salhesh are common to the communities on both sides of the border, as are the traditions of Jhanda (flag of Hanuman) and Daha (a Shia Muslim celebration). The tarailis celebrate Holi, Diwali and Dushhera with their counterparts across the lines on the map. The temple of Chhinnamasta, near Rajbiraj in the eastern Nepal Tarai, is revered by all the people of the Kosi belt in Nepal and Bihar. For the Muslims of the tarai and the Ganga plains, the influence of dargahs and madrasas is not blocked a whit by the international boundary.

The Anglo-Nepal war that settled the boundary in the central tarai left districts such as Mahotari, Rautahat, Bara and Parsa with a sizeable Muslim population. Much of the Awadh tarai was under the suzerainty of Lucknow, and the transfer of territory in "*Naya Muluk*" (Banke, Bardia, Kailai and Kanchanpur districts in the far west of Nepal) took place after the final fall of the Mughals in 1857, when the British rewarded Jang Bahadur for his loyalty during the Mutiny. This further added to Nepal's muslim fold, a demographic category that is identical with Muslims across the boundary in India.

Many Muslim activists found temporary shelter in the tarai of '*Hindu rashtra*' Nepal in the wake of the communal riots that engulfed North India after the demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992. This prompted the RSS-inspired media to label madrasas in the Nepal Tarai as hotbeds of anti-India activity fuelled by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). In their characteristic zealousness, Hindu fundamentalists look suspiciously at every Nepali Muslim, and are appalled by the 'leniency shown by the Nepali state. It is a tribute to the tolerance of Hindus of the Nepal Tarai, however, that the propaganda war being waged by the radically politicised Hindus of India has failed to make a dent in their behaviour towards fellow Muslims.

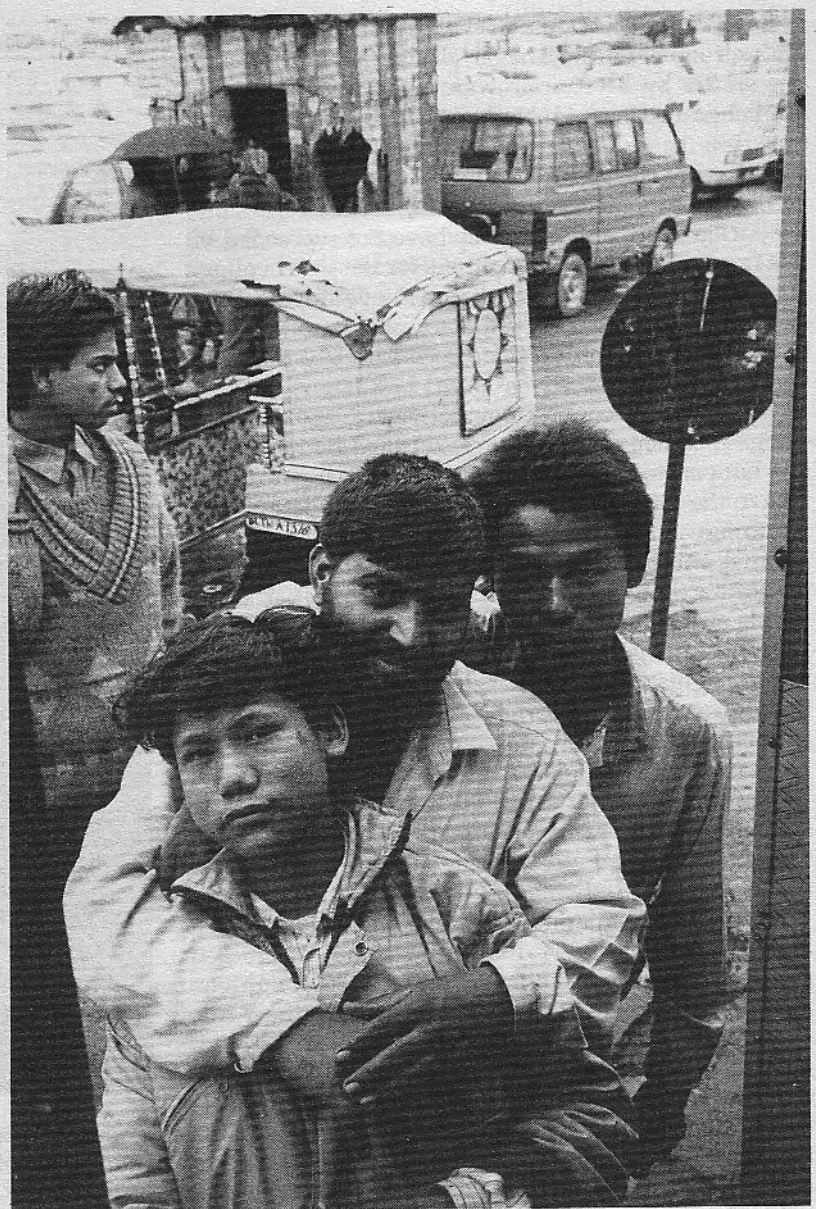
There was also a reverse flow of people from Nepal to the Indian part of the plain. Two kinds of taraili people have opted to go to Bihar and UP, one kind was the marginalised poor, from the lowest strata of society, exploited by the Nepali-speaking zamindars. The other kind of taraili were the very rich who wanted to gain

respectability by becoming full-fledged zamindars. Nepali zamindars were merely revenue contractors for the Ranas, but one could gain 'respectability' by buying small villages in Bihar or UP.

A case in point in Mahotari is the clan of Shyamanadan Mishra, India's foreign minister in the Charan Singh cabinet of the late 1970s. The Mishras had been residents of the Nepali zamindari of Pipra for over a century, and Shyamanandan's grandfather once went looking for a groom for his daughter, seeking some reputed Bhumihar families of Bihar. He was turned down because while the Mishras of Pipra, though very rich, were merely the subjects of the Ranas while the Bhumihars in Bihar were independent zamindars under the British. Incensed, he bought a huge zamindari bordering Nepal. This was how, in the contemporary period, one of his grandsons become a minister in India (Shyamanandan) while two others became ministers in Nepal (Bhadrakali Mishra and Ram Narayan Mishra).

This free movement of people within a common cultural region promoted not only political but also marital connections. Marriage across the border is common to this day, so much so that the tarai-centered Sadhbhavana Party's lawmaker Hridayesh Tripathi can justifiably point out that the relationship between the people of Bihar and UP on the one hand and tarailis on the other is that of *roti-beti* – bread and bride.

There is however a caveat to this account of similarities. There is between the northern and southern part of the plain a hierarchy of status. The attitude of the elites of UP and Bihar towards the 'tarailis' of Nepal has always been ambivalent. While they admired the 'purity' of Sarahadiyas, ruled as they were by Hindu kings (as opposed to being lorded over by Mughal vassals), these elites also viewed the Sarahadiyas as uncultured and uncivilised – in a phrase, country bumpkins. Thus, Bihari landlords happily gave their daughters in marriage to well-to-do Sarhadiya clans, but when it came to choosing brides they preferred to select among themselves. Such differences are the precursors of larger differences rooted in geopolitics and unequal relations between India and Nepal, some part of which at least has its base in cultural attitudes. Equally, they are the products of material stagnation and cultural erosion. Relegated societies need to invent differences of honour, status and lineage to retain a sense of self-worth, particularly if they happen to be legatees of an ancient civilisation. Clearly, the divided plain is in urgent need of some form of reintegration and revitalisation.



Nepali Bihari Bhai-Bhai at the Birgunj border.

Heart of heartland

Culture is not only what is it understood to be, it is also what one does. It has to be dynamic and fluid, and in the context of the Ganga Rectangle which encapsulates the currently separated Nepal Tarai, eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it has become necessary to give cultural flows an orientation towards the future. On both 'sides', a new generation is emerging that has not shared the shackles of either colonialism or despotism. For this generation, the fact that Fanishwar Nath Renu, the celebrated Hindi writer, spent his childhood in

Koirala Niwas (the house of the Nepali political family of the Koiralas) in Biratnagar, or the fact that the first few stories by BP Koirala were written in Hindi and published in *Hansa*, an influential literary journal of that time produced in Allahabad, has little, if any, significance. The political games played by Kathmandu and New Delhi are steadily pushing shared values into the background, although they have not succeeded on this frontier as they have in others for the sheer volume of cultural baggage that is shared. Nevertheless, these days there is more acrimony over, say, who takes the blame for the monsoon floods. Historically the point was moot.

The political connections between Nepal and the Ganga maidaan were of course dictated by more than just happenstance and the need for upward mobility. Due to the free movement of people, the emergence of anti-colonial mass politics in India inspired the struggle against the Rana oligarchy in Nepal. Since open political activity was not possible within Nepal, much of this struggle was based in India side of the plains. The fire of British Indian jails baptised most of the leading lights of the anti-Rana struggle. The venues for the convention of newborn Nepali political parties were Patna, Benaras, Begusharai and Darbhanga. When an armed insurgency against the Ranas was launched, weapons were collected in Bihar and transported to the border. New Delhi came into the picture only when the movement had already entered the final phase of negotiation and settlement.

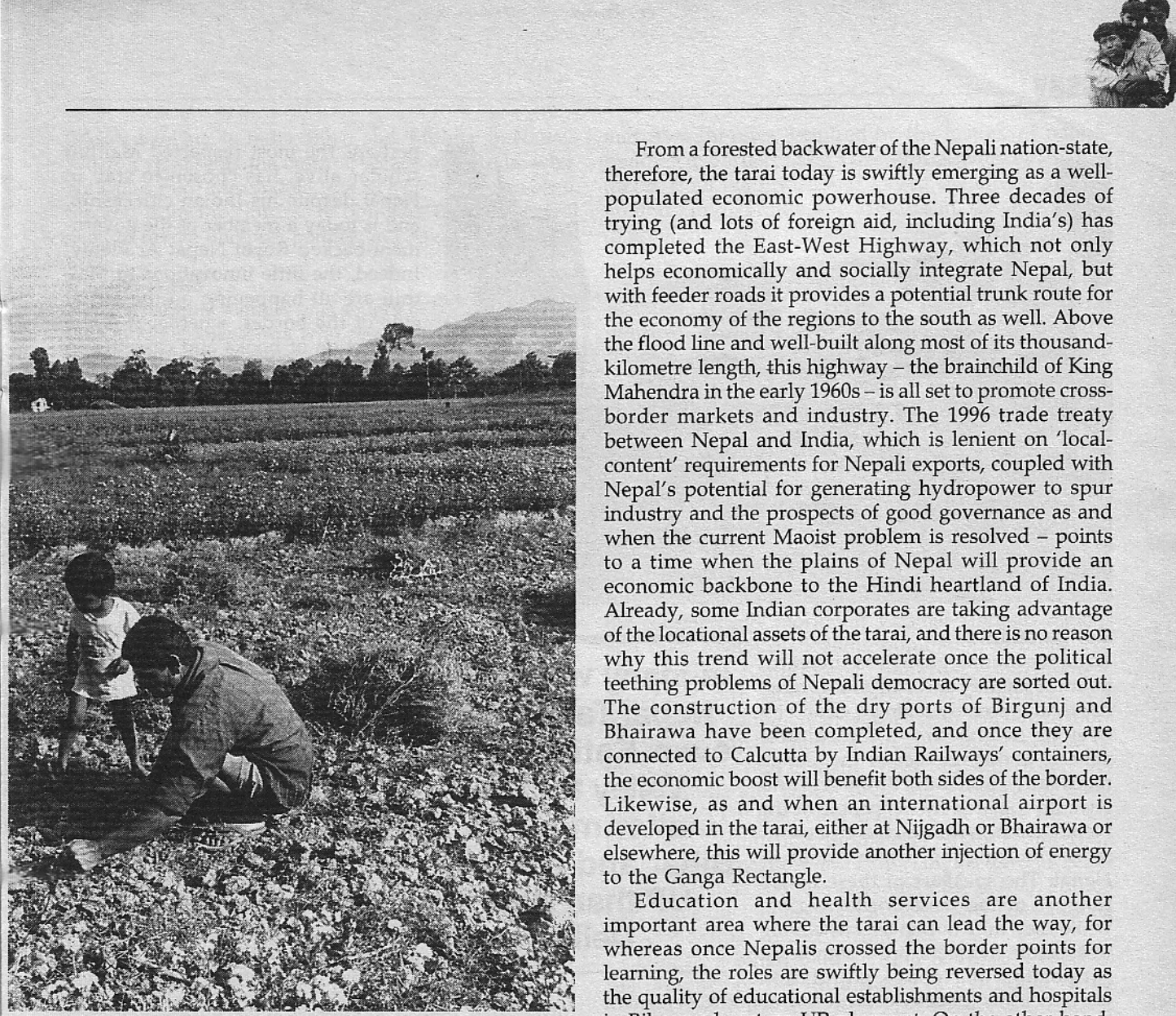
Nepal's first experiment with democracy lasted just about a decade (1951-1960) and the first elected parliament of the country survived barely eighteen months. Soon thereafter, King Mahendra's direct rule commenced and political parties were proscribed. Almost the entire leadership of the Nepali Congress was put behind bars. Once again, Bihar and UP became the springboard for the democratic struggle of Nepal as Nepali Congress leaders, as well as some Nepali communists, found refuge in Patna and Benaras. Not only did the highly political Koirala family reside in Bihar, exiled by the Rana regime in the 1920s, an entire generation of Nepali political leadership grew up in the border towns of Bihar and UP. Even in modern times, therefore, the myths and histories of people on both sides of the tarai border are inextricably intertwined. Mahatma Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narayan and Karpoori Thakur, of India, are equally respected in the Nepal Tarai. More recently, Laloo and Mulayam have been hailed as messiahs of Yadavs as much in Nepal as in Bihar and UP. This will come as news to Kathmandu's insular elites, who prefer to fly over the tarai, Bihar and eastern UP on their way to the power centre of Delhi, neglectful of the contributions of the plains to the making of the hill's polity.

In the Ganga Rectangle, the larger number of people by their tens of million inhabit of course eastern UP and Bihar. But if a cultural, economic and social revival

Fields in a former sal forest outside Mahendranagar.

is sought in this region, the very nature of the centralised Indian republic will not allow dynamic new energy to be generated in these regions. It is clear that the Nepalis of the tarai have to take the leadership to develop common flows into the future, which will benefit the larger fold. While the political establishment of India relies on the votes of this heart of the 'Hindi heartland', the region remains a neglected backwater left to wallow in its own underdevelopment and seeming incorrigibility. On the other hand, the Nepal Tarai is emerging as a dynamic region in its own right, and will before long will be creating economic reverberations along the entire Gangetic belt.

The Nepal Tarai has certain attributes that eminently qualify it to assume leadership in the development of the Ganga Rectangle. It constitutes 23 percent of Nepal's landmass, and today houses more than half of Nepal's population. There is still a lot of green cover remaining, however, of the jungle, which is a remnant of the dense woodlands that once stretched from the Jamuna to the Brahmaputra. The tarai is the food bowl



of Nepal, producing 70 percent of its rice and all kinds of cash crops including pulses, vegetables, tobacco, sugarcane and jute. Industrially, the tarai is even more important for the Nepali economy, as almost all consumer goods produced within the country are from factories that dot the tarai landscape. Out of about 60 towns of significant size, 40 are located in the tarai. Barring the Kathmandu and Pokhara valleys in the mid-hills, all other important urban settlements lie in the southern plains. Most crucially, even though only 20 out of 75 districts of Nepal fall in the tarai, together they send nearly half of all the lawmakers to the Lower House of the country's Parliament. These factors combine to give the Nepal Terai a potential preponderance and influence within Nepal, compared to eastern UP and northern Bihar's 'relegated' role within not only India, but also the states of UP and Bihar themselves. Not only New Delhi, but Lucknow and Patna can afford to neglect eastern UP and northern Bihar, whereas Kathmandu is required now to pay attention to the Nepal Terai even though it too has historically neglected it.

From a forested backwater of the Nepali nation-state, therefore, the tarai today is swiftly emerging as a well-populated economic powerhouse. Three decades of trying (and lots of foreign aid, including India's) has completed the East-West Highway, which not only helps economically and socially integrate Nepal, but with feeder roads it provides a potential trunk route for the economy of the regions to the south as well. Above the flood line and well-built along most of its thousand-kilometre length, this highway – the brainchild of King Mahendra in the early 1960s – is all set to promote cross-border markets and industry. The 1996 trade treaty between Nepal and India, which is lenient on 'local-content' requirements for Nepali exports, coupled with Nepal's potential for generating hydropower to spur industry and the prospects of good governance as and when the current Maoist problem is resolved – points to a time when the plains of Nepal will provide an economic backbone to the Hindi heartland of India. Already, some Indian corporates are taking advantage of the locational assets of the tarai, and there is no reason why this trend will not accelerate once the political teething problems of Nepali democracy are sorted out. The construction of the dry ports of Birgunj and Bhairawa have been completed, and once they are connected to Calcutta by Indian Railways' containers, the economic boost will benefit both sides of the border. Likewise, as and when an international airport is developed in the tarai, either at Nijgadh or Bhairawa or elsewhere, this will provide another injection of energy to the Ganga Rectangle.

Education and health services are another important area where the tarai can lead the way, for whereas once Nepalis crossed the border points for learning, the roles are swiftly being reversed today as the quality of educational establishments and hospitals in Bihar and eastern UP plummet. On the other hand, the Nepali hills are seeing a renaissance of sorts in private schooling that is all set to spread to the tarai. In the meantime, it is the complaint of hospital administrators right across the Nepal Tarai that they are being swamped by the demands of Biharis and UPites. The Nepal Eye Care Foundation, on an average, sees about 5,000 patients from across the border per day. This is a far cry from the days when Nepali patients used to go to Sitapur and Aligarh in UP for minor eye operations. A cancer hospital in Bharatpur in the inner tarai of central Nepal sees patients from large parts of Bihar and UP, and a large Indian-aided teaching hospital in Dharan in east Nepal sees patients from as far afield as Assam, West Bengal and Bihar. Since it will be difficult for Nepal to restrict access to such facilities on the basis of nationality – the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Kathmandu and New Delhi, for one, requires equal treatment of each other's citizens – there is clearly no way out for either side but to plan more of a future together.

Nepalgunj

Ganga culture

While economic growth is linked to political stability and will take its time, the tarai is already taking a clear lead over its neighbours in the cultural sphere. The languages of the Ganga maidaan – Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi – shared by the people of the Nepal Tarai, have started to benefit from the languages movement in Nepal. The speakers of these native tongues of the cross-border region, while they may not be overwhelming in absolute numbers, are a significant proportion of Nepal's population nevertheless – together constituting about 26 percent of the total (Maithili – 12 percent, Bhojpuri – 7 percent, Tharu – 5 percent, and Awadhi – 2 percent). Even though Maithili may now benefit from the formation of Jharkhand – as Maithili-speaking areas become politically more significant in a truncated Bihar – the Nepali Tarai will remain a more receptive ground for the advancement of these languages. Bhojpuri and Awadhi enjoy higher respectability in Nepal's Birgunj and Bhairawa than across the border in Motihari and Gorkhapur.

In many ways, the Nepal Tarai and even Kathmandu Valley today matter more for Bihar and eastern UP than New Delhi.

Due to the politics of numbers, the Nepali speakers of Parsa District or Deep Kumar Upadhyay of Kapilvastu District are proud to flaunt their Bhojpuri or Awadhi, while their counterparts across the border continue to try and gain respectability through using Hindi in Patna, Lucknow and New Delhi.

But, the Hindi spoken by the people of eastern UP and Bihar is the butt of jokes for Khadi Boli purists and Bollywood scriptwriters alike, but it continues to be the language for the upwardly in Bihar and eastern UP, even while there is a resurgence of mother tongues in the Nepal Tarai. Professor Dhireshwar Jha Dhirendra, perhaps the most respected Maithili scholar alive, has chosen to stay in Nepal despite his Indian citizenship, and is today a member of the government-backed Royal Nepal Academy. Indeed, the little innovations in Maithili are all happening on the Nepal side of the border, whether it is the production of books and cassettes in Maithila, or even CDs and films as has started. Though what is happening is hardly enough even, something similar is underway with Bhojpuri and Awadhi. Literatteurs of these languages find a relatively more free atmosphere in Nepal than in Bihar and UP.

Thus, today Janakpur, Rajbiraj and Simraungadh are better placed to promote Maithili culture than Darbhanga, Madhubani and Muzzaffarpur. Kalaiya and Birgunj have a more vibrant Bhojpuri flavour than the highly-criminalised Motihari. Lumbini and Kapilvastu hold the potential of becoming seats of Awadhi resurgence. But for things to prosper more culturally, the opinion-makers of Bihar and eastern UP need to realise that their cultural renaissance is possible only through a closer tie-up with their Sarhadiya brothers and sisters – who they have historically tended to revile as country bumpkins.

In cultural matters, it seems clear that the dynamism cannot come from Bihar or eastern UP. Thus, Nepal has released its FM radio airwaves to the public, and while there are many Nepali-language stations all over, there is already one which is broadcasting part-time in Awadhi. While Radio Nepal already airs news in Maithili and Bhojpuri on its short-wave bands, before long local FM radio based in Janakpur will be beaming local language programmes that can be caught all over the Mithila region. The same will be true of Bhojpuri. The fact that the two sides at the Birgunj-Raxaul border point have now been provided local telephone facility is another harbinger of closer interactions between the Nepal Tarai and neighbouring regions of the Ganga Plain.

Earlier, Maithili books by Hari Mohan Jha were big hits in the tarai, and these days the most active Maithili dramatist, Mahendra Malangiya, is based in Janakpur. Further consolidation of modern-day cultural linkages would lead to the publication of economically viable literary and news magazines in Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi. The people of the region should also capture their culture for their own benefit. To begin with, there is no point in calling the same school of painting

'Madhubani art' in India/Bihar and 'Mithila' in Nepal. When it represents the cultural legacy of Mithila, why not call it that? Meanwhile, just as Mithila art has been rescued from the clutches of oblivion, there is urgent need to revive Bhojpuri pottery and Awadhi weaves.

Oil and water

Nepal's national identity was sought to be built around the Gorkhali conquerors who established the Gorkhali state on the strength of their khukuri. This 'Nepali culture' is relatively young, hence very vibrant and assertive; but it is also insecure for the very same reason. In order to fortify its identity, it seeks to build walls around itself. The overwhelming results of opinion polls demanding "regulation" of the India-Nepal border are nothing but a reflection of this insecurity. But the statist-minded of Nepal will have to understand that those who are born Maithils will forever be Maithils regardless of their citizenship, be it Indian, Nepali, Canadian or Australian. The same is true for the remote neo-colonists of New Delhi or those somewhat closer in Lucknow or Patna. Cultural identities are deeper and stronger than political ties, and this unity of purpose needs to be exploited for mutual benefit by the people of Nepal and India, not denied or destroyed. For the taraili people, the challenge will be to convince the Kathmandu elite that the surge in cultural flows does not weaken national loyalties – you cannot dilute oil with water. They operate at separate levels and need to be treated as such. Cultural diversity is the strength of the Nepali state, not its weakness.

For the people of Bihar and UP living in the border region, it is important to realise that just as all their rivers flow down from Himalayas, the source of their cultural awakening may now lie in the Nepal Tarai. It may be politically expedient for New Delhi to brand all madrassas in the tarai as seats of Islamic extremism, but people on both sides of the border know that it is safer being a Muslim in 'Hindu' Nepal than it is in 'secular' Bihar or eastern UP. This is so because the dominant identity of people in Nepal is still cultural, while it has acquired communal and casteist overtones in India. The way to strengthen cultural identity is to make it more vibrant, and the tarai is well placed for the moment due to its enhanced place within Nepal to lead such a movement. In India, the New Delhi-centric intelligentsia would do well to look at the heart of the Hindi heartland and see how the nodes of its resurgence lie up north across the border in the Nepal Tarai.

Even for the Indian elite, the realisation must have dawned by now that the overarching national slogans of *"Mera Bharat Mahan"*, *"Garva se kaho hum Hindu hain"* and *"Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai"* cannot counter other deep-rooted identities like being the progeny of the mythical Yadu (Yadavs) or Parushram (the Bhumihar's Ranvir Sena). To weaken such parochialism, however, it is necessary to strengthen the more inclusive cultural identities in this region such as the Maithili, Bhojpuri and Awadhi ones. Inspired by the history of nation-building in Europe, India's freedom fighters copied their model from the British and forged the Indian identity around Hindi, Hindu and Hindustan, the thin veneer of secularism notwithstanding. This was a mistake, in the long term.

Cultural identities (nationalities) are to be seen as a resource; attempts at replacing them entirely with political citizenship will be fruitless, if not actually counter-productive. Strong nationalities give strength to citizenship in plural societies. People from both sides of the Indo-Nepal border have lived together, survived the vagaries of nature, and prospered by co-operating with each other. There is a need to make such ties stronger, rather than sacrifice them on the altar of statist nationalism.

The cultural awakening around Janakpur and Lumbini can lift the Mithila and Awadh regions from their present lassitude and depression. Industrial resurgence along the Birgunj-Butwal stretch can inspire the commercially moribund Vaishali-Motihari regions and their Bhojpuri-speaking population in Bihar. For places like Kishanganj, Saharasa, Darbhanga, Muzzaffarpur, Motihari, Siwan and Gorakhpaur, economic development in Nepal's tarai will have a more immediate impact than the progress in Cyberabad or the Silicon Plateau. In many ways, the Nepal Tarai and even Kathmandu Valley today matter more for Bihar and eastern UP than New Delhi. In the same way, the tarai (and Kathmandu, ultimately) cannot escape from the follies of Lucknow and Patna and needs to be better aware of trends and events south of the border. For too long, have the intelligentsia from the two sides looking to Delhi Durbar than at each other.

Dinkar, a Bihari poet, writing in Hindi, expresses his laments to the mountains in his poem titled "Addressed to the Himalaya". He, at least, understood the symbiotic link between the adjacent region. This is how Dinkar voices his anguish:

On your feet lies
Mithila delicate
Ask her where she lost
Her priceless heritage?

O Kapilvastu, Buddha's teachings
Where have they gone?
Tibet, Iran, Japan, China
Sermons reached, here forgotten?

Ask Vaishali's ruins,
Where is Lichhavi grandeur vanquished?
O gloomy Gandaki! speak
Where have poet Vidyapati's songs vanished?

"Violence is the womb of terrorism"


MIN BAJRACHARYA

Of all the speeches delivered by Heads of State at the Kathmandu SAARC Summit on 5 January, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's best penetrated the psychology of 'terrorism' and thoughtfully considered the obligation of society's leaders to address its causes. This was additionally significant because President Kumaratunga was the one leader among the seven gathered who had personally suffered injury from a bomber, and decades ago lost her husband to an assassin's bullet. Himal excerpts President Kumaratunga's address to the SAARC summit.

by ***Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga***

The most terrifying political development of the last three decades of the twentieth century in South Asia has been the rise of terrorist movements in almost every one of our nations, except perhaps, very happily, in Maldives and Bhutan. Every one of our nations has experienced the horror and pain of terrorist violence either emanating from within or from a neighbouring State.

We have to join hands, at least now, more honestly and with more dedication, to fight the wave of terrorist politics that is sweeping across our region. To do this, it may not be sufficient to say that we will hunt down the perpetrators of terror and their allies.

We must attempt to understand the deep-rooted causes of this most unnatural, de-humanising pheno- menon very specific to the 20th century — that is terrorism.

Someone once said, "hope betrayed transforms itself into bombs." I would add that "perceived injustice, if allowed to continue unresolved, would also transform itself, first into despair and then into violence." In today's context the demand for the rectification of injustice is with acts of violence, which by itself raises issues of ethics in terrorist violence

I think it was Leon Trotsky who once described the two emotions central to terrorism as being despair and vengeance. We need today to desperately study and understand the true causes of terrorism and terroristic movements, or for that matter any social upheavals within nations.

At this point it would be useful to remind ourselves that it is not terrorism nor terrorists that divided Ireland nor caused the Israel-Palestinian problem 50 odd years ago. They did not impose white rule in South Africa, nor did the terrorists overthrow the duly elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile. The terrorists did not separate India and Pakistan and create the tragedy of Kashmir as a buffer zone. To come closer home, neither did the LTTE nor the armed Tamil militants create the circumstances for the marginalisation of the minority communities of Sri Lanka.

Violence – social, political or physical, perpetrated by the State or the agents of the State against other States or its own peoples – is the womb of terrorism, humiliation its cradle and continued vengence by the State, becomes the mother's milk and nourishment for terrorism.

We need to look at the causes of modern day terrorism because it has become, in the past decades, the one single most terrifying factor in national and international politics. At long last, on the 11th September 2001, when terrorism struck at the heart of the developed world, the community of the rich and powerful countries woke up to the base, senseless, inhumanity of terrorism

We hope that at least this would make the whole world, the powerful and the not so powerful, and the least powerful, join hands together in the common realisation that the modern expression of frustration, of destroyed hopes will not be contained within the boundaries of one nation, but will spill over in the most horrendous and terrifying fashion, across the boun- daries of all nations to englobe the entire world.

The sense of newly-found freedom born with independence gave rise to many hopes and aspirations in all groups of the independent nation. An effective vision was required to weld together the separate sets of aspirations of each community, living freely and proudly with its own separate identity, which could co-exist symbiotically with the other entities, to compose a harmonious and united entirety - the Nation-State, a strong and stable one. The lack of such a vision had given rise in many countries to groups attempting to enforce, often by violent means, their own specific identities, ex-

pressed in various forms such as the demand for separate states, etc.

I believe most honestly and strongly that the most effective response to terrorism is to stop generating it. How should we do this? By finding solutions to the problems that cause terrorism.

In Sri Lanka we have had to face the challenges of a military conflict against an armed terrorist group for the past two decades. My first Government, elected in 1994, started the process of political negotiation to end the conflict, rather than solely employ military methods. We attempted to deal with the root causes of the problem, arising from the marginalisation of the Tamil and other minority communities of Sri Lanka. While we have not succeeded in ending the conflict, we have made much progress towards Peace.

I am happy to state that the new Government elected a few weeks ago is also taking action to continue the process. The recent election has provided a historic opportunity for the two major political parties of Sri Lanka, now both in Government, through the Presidency and the Cabinet, to evolve new systems of constructive co-habitation and collective action for the resolution of the separatist conflict.

I believe that it is time now for the world to stop and take stock - honestly and strongly. We cannot encourage and finance friendly terrorist organisations in one place and attempt to defeat others.

Double standards cannot work anymore, and will not resolve the long-standing problem of terrorism. The use of force directly by a State or through encouraging other terrorist movements to use violence against an enemy State or group, may temporarily curb a terrorist movement or the enemy. But these methods have proved to spread and intensify violence.

Today I believe that the challenge before us nationally and regionally, is to recognise terror and political violence as the main enemy of modern society. The main enemy of all that is just and decent, of all that humanity has built up through the centuries, to be respected and looked upon as civilisation.

But saying this will not be sufficient. It should lead urgently to identifying the causes for terrorism in each different State. Then begin within nations and together regionally and internationally, to find solutions to these causes, to alleviate the sufferings and the frustrations that have given rise to each terrorist movement.

The 20th century was our century, the century of our generation. It has bred and reaped the fruits of this great tragedy, which was on the one hand, the accelerated economic development, employing science and modern tech-nology, whilst ignoring its fallout on large sections of populations within nations, as well as on large areas of the world. △

Open Letter to General Pervez Musharraf on Freedom of Religion in Pakistan

We, the members of Pakistanis for Peace and Alternative Development - PPAD - an international group of scholars, professionals and activists welcome the act to abolish separate electorates for Religious Minorities in Pakistan. We see it as a small first step towards eradicating the causes of incipient religious fascism that has plagued Pakistan in the past decades and threatens to completely undo the State.

In fact the notion of a "Religious Minority" itself opens the door of potential abuse of the citizens considered to be members of a minority. A Nation-State does not have the prerogative to control the religious beliefs of an individual. Such measures only encourage hypocrisy and superficiality in matters of belief which remain the prerogative of an individual's conscience and very individual and private inner quests. We believe that all citizens of Pakistan ought to enjoy the same rights and privileges regardless of religion, race, ethnic origin, gender or sexual orientation.

Having dissolved separate electorates for religious minorities it is equally important to undo the Blasphemy Law, a vestige of the British Common Law which then was completely abused by the Muslim fanatics. The Blasphemy Law flies in the face of both the teachings of the Quran (Sura 2: Verse 256) and the UN convention on the freedom of belief and conscience. It promotes and condones an intolerance that is completely out of step with the current international community's value of religious freedom and inter-religious harmony from which Muslims as minorities in Western countries have greatly benefited.

Moreover, the requirement to make a declaration of one's belief on the application forms for the National Identity cards and passports is a disturbing and telltale sign of religious fascism which is reminiscent of the intimidating and humiliating imposition of identifying marks on the clothing of religious minorities. Since religious belief is a private matter of individual conscience the application forms for National Identity cards and passports ought to be revised to exclude the clauses that pertain to religious matters. △

-This letter was circulated in late January by a number of Pakistani scholars, activists and professionals.

The Souls of Brown and Black Folk

What the anti-WTO movement means and where it can go

Does the Western anti-WTO movement represent all the world's people who are affected by the international trading system? Probably not.

by ***Andrew Nash***

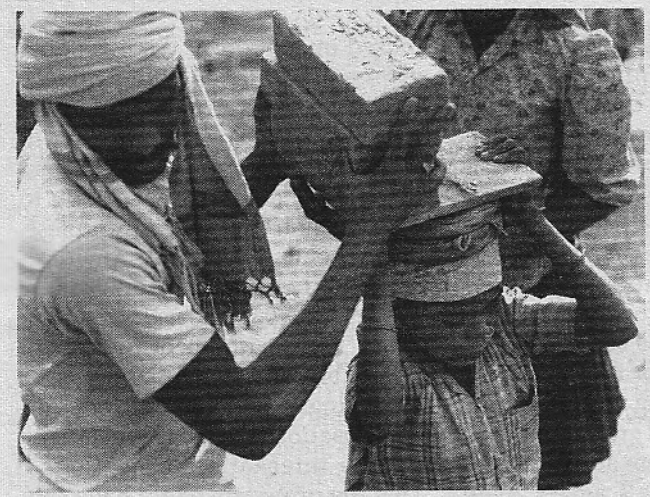
When anti-World Trade Organisation protesters took to the streets in Seattle more than two years ago, the confrontations made headlines around the world. Broadcast on television, the protests became a sort of live theatre, where a global audience watched ideological demonstration, police confrontation and looting unfold in a prosperous Western city. 'Seattle' itself became a term that brought together all the emotions that were supposed to be rallied against an organisation pushing through an international trading system that many see to be unfair for the world's poor. But where amidst a sea of white Americans were the world poor in the demonstrations? Where were the brown and black faces? And was throwing a rock at a Starbucks café or a McDonald's the proper response to a world economic system becoming increasingly rapacious?

The Seattle theatre which played itself out in November 1999 had a number of central actors, who surfaced later in Genoa and Davos and Quebec, but the most visible among them were the young participants who energised the protests. Visible, because that is what the television anchors found most appetising for ratings. Given centre stage by the media, these Seattle protesters were unusual for being predominantly young, white Americans, advocating policies supposedly benefiting developing countries. Retrospectively, these protestors seem to have been marching for a cause in which they held no personal stake. How much did they understand the impact of the system on a hill terrace farmer in Nepal, or a peasant along the Andhra Pradesh coast? By default, the students and dropouts at Seattle were stand-ins for the world's poor.

Protest movements usually have a sharply defined agenda – against a dam like Narmada or a war like Vietnam – but the anti-WTO movement is amorphous and without a clear solution (stop building the dam, bring back the troops) to the ills that are said to permeate the international trading system. The elimination or emasculation of one international organisation created to streamline world commerce would, in itself, have only a modest effect on the structure and flow of international trade. There are, truth be told, numerous eddies within the regulated flow of trade which would be of benefit to some third world nations while negatively affecting others. The challenge faced by the protesters – and by the WTO, for that matter – is to define the debate on globalisation in such as way that individual concerns can be addressed, even though the larger tide of globalisation might be unaffected.

The emerging and Western-dominated world economic system requires a variegated response, and there are obviously thinking people and active groups all over the world capable of mounting a challenge. But the costs and distances have kept these from being heard. Even from the third world, the more radical a standpoint the more the possibility of it being allowed a sound byte, while the moderate opposition is neglected. Regardless, as far as the mass public is concerned, the anti-WTO movement has been hijacked by the power of Western media's ability to focus the camera on the looters and rioters in Western cities. These young white protesters appear ignorant of the fact that the bulk of the miseries visited on the third world's poor is a result of malgovernance within the third world itself. While they do exist, the structural inequities of the world system are only part of the problem.

The Western anti-gloablisation protest movement, of which the anti-WTO movement is a part, has become the leading dissident movement in the United States and Europe. This is a romance which has caught the attention of the Western media, for too long deprived of 'in-house' protests while the rest of the (third) world goes up in flames. Thus, the camera turns on privileged kids fighting a fashionable and momentary war. Something more lasting is needed, and it has to



Who's bearing whose burden? A child labourer in Bihar and a protester being arrested in Seattle.

come from the countries and regions affected. Rather than be satisfied with the media attention received vicariously, groups around the world might move toward mounting a necessarily variegated response to the WTO. Fortunately, this seems to be the trend, as signified by the new means of protests adopted in some developing countries in the runup to the Doha ministerial meeting, held in Doha, the capital of Qatar, on 9-13 November 2001.

Ignominy to controversy

After World War II, the Western democracies tried to create an 'International Trade Organisation,' which was to be a global trade body. When this plan collapsed due to lack of support, 23 countries signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Despite its inauspicious beginnings, GATT had 125 members by the time of its close in 1995, and in less than five decades of operation it witnessed world trade grow by a factor of 14. Global exports increased, on average, by six percent annually. GATT closed shop in the mid-1990s to make way for the WTO, which has stronger adjudication and enforcement powers than its predecessor. The titles of the two schemes illustrate their essential differences; while GATT was only a "general agreement," the WTO is an organisation, with, in theory, power to mend member countries' laws and behaviour. It is this power – or perception of power – that makes the WTO controversial, because it is seen to infringe on national sovereignty, subvert human rights to the power of the dollar, and entrap developing countries in unfair trade arrangements.

In its five decades of existence, a protest movement never coalesced around GATT, although it took less than half a decade for the WTO's opponents to mobilise and be heard. Thus it was that the anti-WTO movement exploded onto the scene in November 1999 at the Third WTO Ministerial held in Seattle. Estimated at 40,000 people, the mostly-peaceful protest made headlines when a violent fringe caused property destruction and battled with police. While the events of the three-day conference were themselves controversial because of the WTO's failure to reach an agreement on a new round of trade negotiations, the legacy of Seattle became a matter of intense debate in its own right. For the WTO and its supporters, 'Seattle' represents a dangerous, anarchic outburst of violence. For the loose anti-WTO coalition, 'Seattle' embodies the spirit of global activism, even though the rioters got the bulk of the television coverage.

In North America, the anti-WTO protest movement is the odd stepchild of American dissident campaigns. Most successful protest movements in the United States have been founded on one of two principles: widely-held concern over a specific grievance, such as the Vietnam War and draft, or intense effort organised around the grievances of a specific sub-set of the general population, such as racial minorities, women or homosexuals. The anti-WTO movement conforms to neither of these two principles completely, but it appears to sample aspects of both into a new hybrid of social activism. Rather than uniting the general public around an issue or concentrating the efforts of one disaffected group, this movement brings together an eclectic amalgam of several groups individually committed to certain principles but small in their constituent numbers.

The catch-all criticism of the WTO among the activists is encapsulated in the declaration published by the World Forum on the WTO on 8 November, the eve of the Doha ministerial conference. In evaluating the seven years of the WTO's existence, the Forum charged that, "Developing countries faced huge losses in their economies and exchange. Protectionist measures in the countries of the global North remained an obstacle to the products of the South. Agriculture and food security was hit with tremendous losses and damage. The technolog-

ical divide between North and South became unprecedented, while barriers to the transfer of technology became stronger, and the workforce was barred from free movement."

Thus far, the issues that have energised the anti-WTO movement have been deflected by the media coverage of an extreme variant of the protests. The spectacular images of street confrontations broadcast from Seattle and subsequent meetings generated the best images for television, but these drew attention away from the issues at the core of the movement and de-legitimised the protesters in the minds of many viewers. In fact, the protest movement itself has become a subject of debate more than the original issues around which it coalesced, provoking criticisms within the movement of both the media coverage and the destructive fringe groups.

Anup Shah, who maintains a WTO watchdog web site, explains that the media coverage plays up the "sensationalism of the violent aspects of the protests, without really looking at the real issues." It could be said, in fact, that it was the Western media multinationals which gave anti-WTO activism a bad image by focusing on the rowdy violence – here at last was live coverage of white kids rioting, something that had not been seen on television since the Vietnam riots and Kent State. The power of the imagery of this anarchical attack on the bastions of Western capitalism completely swamped the issues that the majority of the activists were trying to address. The small, violent fringe grabbed the spotlight and the public's imagination, and the generalised perception of the anti-WTO movement got tainted by the disproportionate strength of a smaller lobby that is less attached to the concrete issues of trade and development.

Ultimately, the anti-WTO protest movement is perhaps better understood by its contradictions than by its unity. In reality, there is nothing substantial called the 'anti-WTO movement', even though we may use the term for convenience. There is only the convergence of other movements and the loose participation of independent activists on particular issues. There is, probably, no other cause that could unite the passions of the environmental, labour, child rights, agriculture, steel and poverty lobbies. But then each of these groups uses the movement as a vehicle for its own particular agenda, making it but a temporary umbrella for all groups to march under. Even so, there are some core issues on which all agree, even though these substantive issues have not received wide coverage.

The expectations of successive meetings after Seattle have had to do with the police preparedness to meet the protesters rather than the issues of the majority of activists – in Geneva and Quebec, and also at conferences organised for the G-8 (Davos) and the IMF (Washington, DC). This trend continued until Doha last November, when protesters largely stayed home.

In 2002, there is not a single broad-based Western protest movement directed at a political regime anywhere in the world.

Redifining the road

Even before 11 September, the anti-WTO protesters had faced a difficult challenge. The Fourth Ministerial Conference was scheduled to be held in November 2001 in Qatar, the quiet Shiekhdom in the Persian Gulf, which was nervous about the arrival of dissidents.

The September terror attacks in the US placed the Western anti-WTO movement in a difficult position. Particularly in the United States, popular sentiment was largely mobilised in support of the Bush government's policies, and outright criticism of government action on international issues became out of sync with the mood of the times. Some commentators even took to blaming anti-globalisation protesters for helping foster anti-American sentiment. As one commentator wrote in the *International Herald Tribune*, "the environment for violent acts is being fostered, wittingly or unwittingly, by many of the anti-globalisation protesters who now plague international meetings." That the protesters might have contributed to generating a mood hostile to the dominant symbols of American capitalism and military strength – the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon – committed the Western movement to walking a fine line between critiquing US policies on trade and commerce and appearing not to be disloyal to a bruised country.

Today, the Western anti-WTO protest movement is at a crossroads. Because it largely, though not exclusively, focuses on developing country issues, its resonance with the American and European public is relatively weak and becoming weaker as the Western economies falter and attention is focused more on security concerns. Concurrently, because it is based in the West, the predominantly 'Caucasian' protesters assume with increasing difficulty the odd role of claiming to speak on behalf of under-developed countries' populations. Thus, the movement faces the difficult twin challenges of defining itself from within and also defining itself from without.

Morning after Doha

In the 1980s, many multinational corporations faced protests organised by people who saw them as allies of global evil. For example, protesters aggressively targeted Chase Manhattan Bank because of its involvement with the apartheid regime of South Africa. When, in 1984, Chase downgraded Pretoria's credit rating, this was widely seen as a victory for the protesters,

although Chase officially maintained that the decision was made for strictly business reasons. The apartheid regime was the target of protesters, and Chase was simply a vehicle targeting PW Botha's brutal rule.

Today, the situation is quite different. Corporations and international bodies have themselves become the object of protesters' ire. In 2002, there is not a single broad-based Western protest movement directed at a political regime anywhere in the world (with the exception, perhaps, of the United States). No one is mobilising protesters against the excesses of governments in Sierre Leone, Iraq or Zimbabwe. Even China, site of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, fails to inspire Western protesters anymore. However, the list of corporations and international organisations that have recently faced protest movements just gets longer and longer: WTO, IMF, World Bank, Coca-Cola, Enron, McDonalds – and even entire industries – oil, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics. This shift from targetting regimes to focusing on companies and industries has much to do with the evaporation of the Cold War ideological confrontation coupled with the increasing power of independent capital.

The Western anti-WTO movement should be seen in this context. It is both an idealistic rejection of Third World victimisation as well an organic response to the perceived power of globalisation in Western life. The best characterisation of the rioting crowds might be that they are altruistically cynical – embittered and discontent with life in the comfortable West, the protesters take on the worthy causes of the developing world to march for and, by doing so, indirectly march for themselves.

Further, the irony of the anti-globalisation movement may be that it is itself founded on globalised assumptions. The global consciousness subscribed to by young Westerners builds on an assumption that all people are essentially interconnected and that individuals in different parts of the globe can assume responsibility for advocating change anywhere. Just as the anti-globalisation campaigns are loosely defined, if at all, the term 'anti-globalisation' itself is a misnomer for the movement. Protesters are not against globalisation, they are against certain aspects of globalisation while they support others.

The two primary challenges faced by the Western anti-WTO movement in the autumn of 2001 – limited access to the Doha Ministerial and an unsympathetic Western public – brought about two transformations, which may prove permanent. The first involved a diffusion of public protests from high-profile meeting places to smaller venues. In Europe, for example, thousands of protesters assembled in Berlin and Geneva to mark their disapproval of the WTO meetings in Doha. In North America, 'WTO Watch' organised a Cross-Canada Caravan to raise public awareness on trade issues. A subtle shift has also been evident in the language and argumentation of the anti-WTO movement so as to remain relevant in the context of the American security debate. The movement has become anti-war in some cases (particularly in Europe), and advocates have also stepped up arguments that the WTO's practices lead to developing country poverty, which in turn breeds resentment and militancy.

The WTO protests are both an idealistic rejection of Third World victimisation as well an organic response to the perceived power of globalisation in Western life.

The weakness of the anti-WTO movement as it stands, with its predominantly Western membership with relatively low levels of commitment, was clear in the lack of protests in Doha. True, the Qatari authorities promised to make life difficult for protestors, but that in itself need not have been a reason not to show up in Doha to carry a placard or to march the streets. The fact that the threat of a clampdown as well as a lack of media coverage led the protestors stayed home provoked many to argue that they had been playing to the gallery earlier, and that they had essentially just been taking advantage of the relative leniency of police forces in the West.

Perhaps the morning after Doha will breathe new life into the anti-WTO protest movement by, firstly, rescuing the protest from the rioters and the riot-fixation of the television channels. This will allow the issues-oriented protesting organisations and individuals the space they have been denied before this. Secondly, this focus of attention away from tear gas in the streets will hopefully lead to a conscientising campaign in the third world itself, where the negative impact of globalisation and a skewed world trading system is believed to be greatest. If it has to be fought, the globalised system as represented by the WTO has to be fought around the globe by the myriad stakeholder organisations and activists, rather than through an unrepresentative band of Western youth that are seen to be exorcising their own demons.

There are some indications that the anti-WTO campaign has indeed begun to move out of its Western-centricism and grow into a global movement. There appears to be increasing activism within developing countries on trade issues, as evidenced by the fact that the Doha conference became something of a political rallying point in India. Leftist activists took to the streets of New Delhi on 9 November to protest the WTO, and similar events were organised in Allahabad and Bangalore in late November after the

conclusion of the conference. Earlier in 2001, when the then-WTO Director General Michael Moore visited India, his effigy was reportedly burnt in 30 Indian cities. While such stacatto and reactive demonstrations do not in themselves add up to much, they indicate a trend that may anchor the movement in the developing world, and allow local activists to battle both the abuses of the international trading regime and their own leaders' cruel ineptitude. Over time, the anti-WTO movement – to be a truly global movement – would have to be made up of thousands of groups from around the world coming together to challenge the multiple and varied institutions that tend to exploit trade and commerce to the detriment of the world's poor. Beyond only international lenders, this would require the involvement of national politicians and technocrats.

The WTO is the latest institutional manifestation in a long line of trade pacts extending back to GATT, the failed International Trade Organisation and even bilateral trading agreements that are centuries old. As the world changes, so does the nature and flow of trade, and commensurate changes become necessary in the organisation of global commerce. Protest movements are also constantly changing, adjusting within and also transforming vis-a-vis their targets. The great protest movements of the 20th century – for Indian independence, American civil rights, and against apartheid – were all political causes. As the 21st century begins, it should perhaps give us pause that protest (at least in the West) has shifted decisively away from politics. With protesters now targeting economic centres of power instead of political ones, the implication is that corporations and lending institutions are perceived to be more powerful than nation-states. The WTO is at the intersection of politics, society, culture and economics, and it – and its opponents – will likely remain at the forefront for some time to come.

The scripted war

During the Afghan war, Western journalists failed to critically probe either US military policy or the complexities of the Taliban legacy in Afghanistan. The reporting suffered, and many important questions have yet to be asked.

by ***Rahimullah Yusufzai***

Barely had a group of international journalists reached Kandahar when Western reporters started receiving messages from their companies back home that the Pentagon was refusing to guarantee their security. They were told that the sooner they leave Kandahar, the better, because it was too risky for them to stay and work in the Taliban headquarters.

That same night American warplanes blitzed the city. The Taliban wasted no time in the morning to take journalists to the site of the bombing. Two bungalows in the Shahr-i-Nau locality had been bombed and survivors said over a dozen civilians were killed. One of the houses accommodated the offices of a mobile medical team, the other a family that had shifted there because it felt the area was safe from US bombing. The pictures of civilian destruction hit television screens and print media all over the world that day. This was just the kind of coverage the US wanted to avoid and understandably there was no bombing in Kandahar over the next three days due to the presence of international reporters in the city.

This was the second trip organised by the Taliban to show journalists the civilian casualties from US airstrikes. From 1 October to 2 November, the 26 television, radio and print reporters from several countries and media companies were shown city localities and villages hit by US bombs and missiles. They were also taken to the Mirwais Hospital, the city's main but hopelessly ill-equipped and under-staffed medical centre to meet those injured in the bombing. Among the injured was 62-year-old Sultan Bibi, one of the few survivors of the bombing that had targeted the two bungalows in Shahr-i-Nau. Saying that she had no money to buy medicines, the old, frail lady wept while narrating the loss of her two daughters and a daughter-in-law in the bombing. Lying in another ward was a heavily bandaged eight year-old boy who was said to have lost all his family members in another bombing raid in Kandahar.

During an earlier trip, the Taliban had taken a group of international reporters to the eastern city of Jalalabad and Khrum village in the Torghar mountain range. The village had been completely destroyed by US bombing and missile attacks after American pilots mistook it for an Osama bin Laden training camp. Taliban officials and survivors claimed about 200 villagers were killed in the attack. A visit to Jalalabad's main public hospital was heart-rending, as one saw badly wounded children who had been orphaned.

International reporting of the Khrum tragedy put the US government – which has consistently refused to acknowledge most of the

civilian casualties resulting from its war in Afghanistan – on the defensive. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld came up with a very unconvincing explanation when he alleged that the village contained tunnels in which ammunition was stored. This scribe and other reporters who visited Khrum knew that it was not true – the tunnel in question was one of the bomb shelters that were collectively built in almost every village in Afghanistan through the long years of the Afghan war. The bomb shelter turned into a vast communal grave for the Khrum villagers who took refuge in it that night from the US aerial strikes. According to the survivors, many of their kith and kin were buried under tons of debris in the shelter when it received a direct missile hit. The villagers said it was impossible for them to retrieve the bodies, as they lacked bulldozers or other mechanical equipment to remove the debris.

The US authorities did everything to stop any kind of media coverage that exposed bombing mistakes by American warplanes. When Pakistani policemen stopped our convoy of media vehicles on the outskirts of Peshawar on the way to Jalalabad, they said a US diplomat had waited there for hours to advise international reporters, especially Americans, not to undertake such a dangerous trip. The group was held up for about an hour and was allowed to proceed only after senior police officers reached the spot and personally inspected the convoy and its members. Encouraged by the positive media coverage, the Taliban arranged the second trip to Kandahar and were planning another one to Kabul before events overtook them and the city fell. It was a belated realisation on the part of the Taliban that an open media policy would have better served their cause. With over 1,000 journalists having applied for Afghan visas to the Taliban embassy in Islamabad at one stage, Ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef had a tough time trying to keep the journalists in good humour, while pleading unsuccessfully with his bosses in Kandahar to let reporters enter the country.

The Taliban were never on friendly terms with the media, particularly with Western journalists, and they did everything to frustrate international reporters and make it difficult for them to report from Afghanistan. Though the Taliban certainly had a valid point while complaining of the bias from Western journalists with preconceived notions about the situation in Afghanistan, they made little effort to put across their own version of events by allowing access to foreign media. Even in peaceful times, getting an Afghan visa was considered a major achievement and came bound with myriad restrictions: staying in

An American journalist in Afghanistan.

designated hotels, driving in state-owned Afghan tour vehicles and hiring international interpreters employed by the foreign ministry. There was a ban on taking pictures of living creatures, something that made it impossible for television crews to work. The ban was gradually relaxed when Taliban officials like foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawwakil started giving interviews on camera, but certain government functionaries, including those from the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, often referred to as the religious police, continued to crack down on anyone found taking pictures of human beings.

Though hopelessly ill-equipped to take on the Americans either militarily or in the media war, the Taliban were able to put the US authorities on the defensive by arranging two trips for international reporters to Jalalabad and Kandahar. The US, meanwhile, made every attempt to prevent such trips or frighten Western reporters into leaving Afghanistan and returning to the safety of Pakistan. The frantic messages that Western reporters received for three days in Kandahar from their companies in the US and UK were due to the Pentagon's refusal to guarantee their security from US aerial strikes. There were also instructions to the effect that the reporters should not drive in a convoy and refrain from venturing much outside Kandahar to avoid US bombing. Driving in the company of armed Taliban escorts was also to be discouraged because the Americans considered them a legitimate military target. The warnings coming out of Washington and London were so frequent that the group decided to leave Kandahar for Quetta after a three-day stay even though every reporter had been given an Afghan visa for one week. It was an obvious success for the Pentagon because the presence of independent journalists in a country being bombed day and night would hardly have served American interests.

As the Taliban were not very generous in giving visas, international reporters started flocking to those parts of northern Afghanistan controlled by the Northern Alliance. At one stage, there were 300-400 foreign journalists in the area, mostly in Shomali north of Kabul. There were not many stories to cover because the Northern Alliance troops, despite receiving new uniforms and arms from sources as diverse as Russia, Iran, India, Turkey, Tajikistan and the US, neither had the strength nor the will to launch an offensive on Kabul. It was only after intense US bombing that the Taliban frontlines crumbled, finally enabling the Northern Alliance forces to march on an undefended city. The reporting of the fall of Kabul left much to be desired. The spree of looting and killing that followed Kabul's fall to the Northern Alliance was not fully reported. The fact that

only Tajiks and other Persian speaking non-Pashtuns were welcoming the Northern Alliance fighters was never highlighted. One could not but help recall that the triumphant Taliban entry in Kabul in September 1996 was a day of rejoicing for the city's Pashtun population and mourning for the other ethnic groups. The ethnic divide in Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan on both occasions was so obvious that one was surprised that foreign reporters failed to notice it.

There have been other disturbing lapses by the media during the US war in Afghanistan. The story behind the massacre of Taliban and non-Afghan prisoners of war in Qala-i-Jangi fort in Mazar-i-Sharif following an uprising, has yet to be fully reported. It was the first instance in modern history that a prison was bombed by warplanes but US authorities have been insisting that it was the right thing to do in the circumstances. It seems the US is willing to turn a blind eye to the human rights abuses perpetrated by warlords such as Abdul Rasheed Dostum, Mohammed Qasim Faheem and others in the Northern Alliance as long as they do America's bidding and fight as proxies against the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other anti-US groups. The bombing and massacre of prisoners of war, mostly Pakistani Taliban, in two schools in Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz, the conduct of the military campaign in Tora Bora, the aerial strikes on villages in Paktia, Khost and Paktika provinces in which scores of civilians were killed, are all instances that need to be probed by the world bodies so that justice is done and those found guilty are held accountable.

Incidents such as the recent US bombing of tribal elders on their way to Kabul from Khost to felicitate Hamid Karzai on taking over as interim leader and American insistence that they were Al-Qaeda and Taliban officials, are a challenge for independent journalists because they remain the only credible source of information in such situations.

Mercifully, the media are able, at least for the time being, to work freely in the post-Taliban period and they ought to make the most of the available opportunity to report honestly on the US' conduct in its war in Afghanistan. The media will enable the world to decide whether the US has been able to eliminate terrorists holed up in Afghanistan, or whether the world's only superpower is committing state terrorism on the Afghan helpless. ∆

(This article originally appeared in Newsline *as "Muzzling the Media?")*

THE FULBRIGHT & THE EAST-WEST CENTER 2002 SCHOLARSHIP COMPETITION

The Commission for Educational Exchange between the United States and Nepal (USEF/Nepal) announces the 2002 competition for the Fulbright and the East-West Center (EWC) Scholarships. Those selected would begin their studies in the US beginning August-September, 2003. (a) The Fulbright program provides all expenses (including travel) for a Master's degree program of up to two years at selected U.S. universities, in any field except medicine, engineering or computer science. (b) the EWC scholarships of the University of Hawaii (UH) are available for Masters or doctoral-level study in any field offered at UH and cover all tuition and fees, but not travel expenses. Applicants for either program may be employees in any government or semi-government agency, private business, NGO or INGO.

General Requirements for Entering the Competition

All applicants must:

1. possess Nepali citizenship;
2. demonstrate in all post-intermediate degrees a minimum aggregate marks of: 56% for students in non-technical fields (humanities and social sciences), and 60% for students in science and technical fields. (The minimum requirements for students under the semester system are: 65% in non-technical fields; 70% in technical fields; or a Cumulative GPA of 3.5/4.0 in either field.)
3. have a high level of competence in speaking, reading and writing English. (Applicants who pass the first screening will be required to sit for an English test during the application process. The test requirement will be waived for those who have a valid TOEFL score of 213 or higher and have submitted copies of their score reports with their applications.)
4. be under 40 years of age as of the application filing deadline date (March 29, 2002);
5. possess either a four years bachelor's degree; or, if the bachelor's degree was of fewer than four years duration, then a masters degree is also required, such that the total number of years of formal education equals at least 16;
6. have at least three years (for men) or one year (for women) of post-bachelor's degree, full-time, professional work experience in an area directly relevant to the applicant's chosen field of study as of the application filing deadline date (March 29, 2002) and document this experience by letter(s) from employer(s) that verify applicant's position(s) and years of employment;
7. be in excellent health, as evidenced by a letter from a medical doctor; and
8. be eligible for a U.S. visa.

Note: Individuals holding master's degrees equivalent to a U.S. master's degree should not apply, nor should individuals who have previously resided in the United States for six months or more during the preceding five years.

(Applicants must submit *documentary evidence* for items No. 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7.)

Application Forms & Deadlines: Application forms and detailed information regarding the competition are available from the USEF/Nepal office at: the American Center in Gyaneshwor; the Ministry of Education; the National Planning Commission; the Rector's Office, Tribhuvan University; Kathmandu University Rector's Office; and with Campus Chiefs at out of the Valley degree campuses. ***Applications and information may also be accessed and downloaded from the Commission's website: www.fulbrightnepal.org.np.*** Application forms must be taken out from the USEF office or downloaded from the website by 4:00 p.m. Friday, March 15th, 2002. No applications will be given out after this date. Duplicate, hardcopy, completed applications must reach the Fulbright Commission (USEF) no later than 4:00 p.m. Friday, March 29th, 2002. Incomplete applications or applications received after this deadline will not be considered.

No Indian Railway = No India?

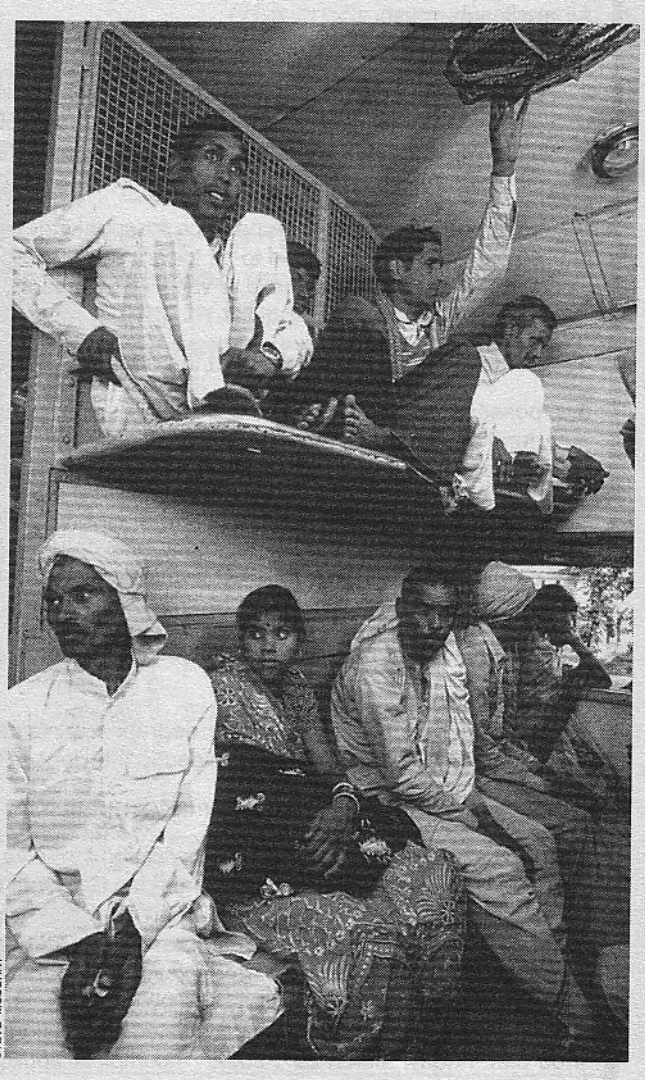
Imagining the Nation

How crucial were the railways to the making of modern India? How did the railways contribute to the emergence of the Indian state, nation and economy?

by ***Ian Kerr***

In the mid-1880s the Indian political figure Madhav Rao (successively diwan of the princely states of Travancore, 1858-1872, Indore, 1873-1875, and Baroda), exclaimed: "What a glorious change the railway has made to old and long neglected India." He asserted that "if India is to become a homogeneous nation, and is ever to achieve solidarity, it must be by means of Railways as a means of transport, and by means of the English language as a medium of communication". Roughly a century later in the 1980s, the late Madhavrao Scindia, then Minister of State for Railways, wrote: "Apart from indicating the milestones of its progress from Bori Bunder to the Metro Railway at Calcutta, from a colonial instrument to being a major artery of national life today, the history of our Railways will also depict the romantic story of our national striving for economic self-sufficiency, and the birth and growth of modern India". More recently, the homepage of Indian Railways' Internet site proclaimed proudly that "IR" brought people together.

What Madhav Rao believed was happening, Madhavrao a century later accepted as a fait accompli, and the powerful techno-bureaucrats of IR happily embraced in their never-ending struggle to justify IR's claim to a substantial share of the national budget. The railways, India's pre-eminent form of mass transportation, had contributed significantly to the creation and integration of the Indian nation. This is a claim, suitably qualified and nuanced, that finds support among more scholarly writers, and which is sympathetically endorsed here. Indeed, some historians have argued that without the development of a large network of railways, there would have been no India as we know it; in effect, no railways, no India. Perhaps so, or perhaps the assertion is misleading since the making of modern



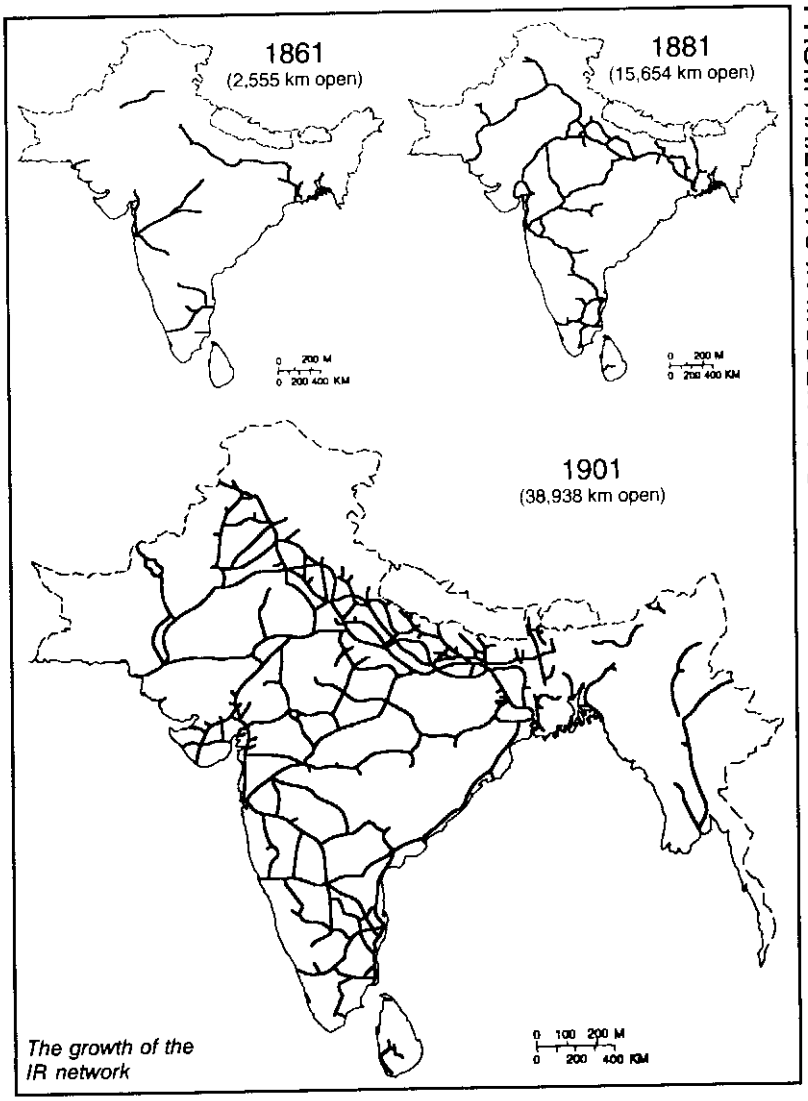
STEVE McCURRY

India would have unfolded very differently in the absence of railways, though it still would have unfolded.

Tracks to nationhood

It is clear that the railways were enormously consequential in the formation of the modern Indian state and nation in their present configuration. The widespread network of dependable, all-weather transportation provided by the railways did integrate aspects of South Asian life within regions and across the breadth of the Subcontinent. One example of this integration is found in the work of the economic historian John Hurd, who demonstrates the central role the railways played in fostering the emergence of national markets in food grains, such as wheat, rice and *jowar*, and non-food crops, such as cotton. This process accelerated from the early 1870s onward as the railway network expanded from 7,678 route kilometres in 1871 to 43,443 in 1905.

The railways of India were, and are, a large-scale technical system. The par ticular importance of a large-scale technical system – the source of its generalised importance well beyond the confines of what it is the large-scale system does (e.g., railways transport passengers and goods; electrical grids transmit a form of energy; telephone systems communicate the spoken and written word) – comes from the capacity of such a system to facilitate or sustain the functioning of many other systems. The railways of colonial India were infra-structural and structural. They became a giant enterprise but they also facilitated, sustained and linked much else, not only the commodity markets so single-mindedly studied by neoclassical economists, but many aspects of India's political economy and socio-cultural life.



The growth of the IR network

Pilgrimage, one of the oldest and most practiced aspects of South Asian socio-cultural life, was deeply affected by the speedy, mass transportation railways afforded. Railways, it can be said, add both mass and the masses to the practice of pilgrimage. More and more people – far more than the substantial numbers that already engaged in pilgrimage before the railway age – undertook pilgrimages, thanks to the railways.

Because of the greater ease and security of railway travel, many of these new pilgrims were women (regardless of the deplorable state of many pilgrim trains in the colonial era). Other additions came from the poorer strata, the masses, of Indian society for whom the quicker journey by train made pilgrimage possible in the interstices between demands for their labour. This became a widespread phenomenon that saw increases in numbers, not only at the periodic Kumbha Melas when millions were in attendance, but also at places like Tirupati or Tarakeswar to which, day in and day out, year after year, more pilgrims came.

"Railways, it can be said, add both mass and the masses to the practice of pilgrimage."

Railways came early to the Indian subcontinent– much earlier than to other parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa. By 1901, India had the world's fourth longest railway network (although exact ranking can be disputed) as measured by route miles in operation, a ranking the country still holds. Route mileage continued to increase and reached an impressive 72,002 km in 1947, the first year in which over one billion passengers were carried, with each passenger

travelling, on average, 57 km (total passenger kilometres exceeded 67 billion). In the same year, the last of the colonial era, net tonne kilometres of goods carried exceeded 41 billion. In 1993-94, some 45 years into independence, total passenger kilometres totalled 296 billion and total tonne-kilometres, 257 billion.

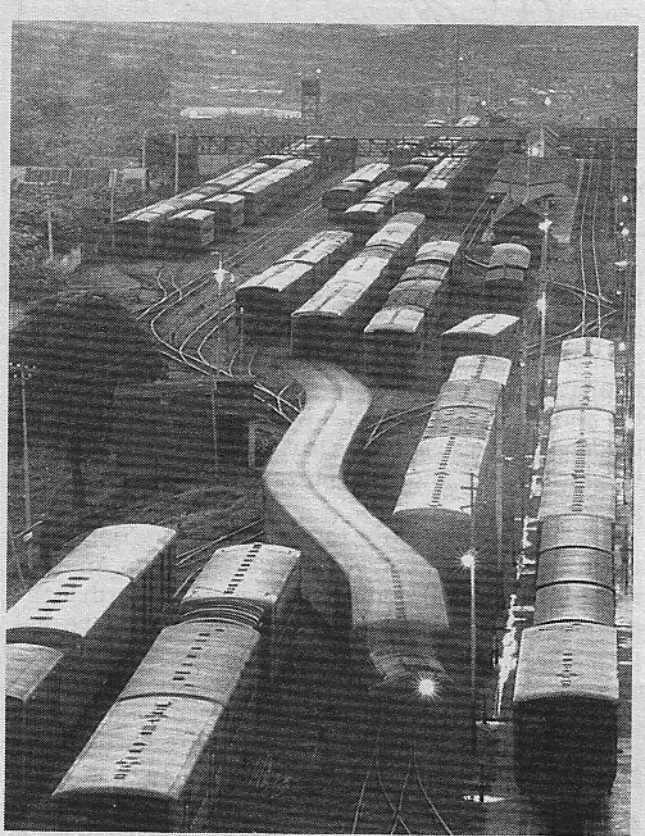
Colonial Birthright

The British realised early on the economic, military and administrative benefits railways would bring in strengthening colonial rule in India. Indeed, for many mid-19th century Britons, the railways were believed to be central to a progressive, British-imposed transformation of India. Thus, even before the advent of direct colonial rule, the decision was made in 1849 to build railways in India. The first short line, Bombay (Bori Bunder) to Thana, opened soon after in 1853. The influential and powerful Governor-General Lord Dalhousie (1848-1856), who led India's colonially-inspired leap into the railway age, claimed credit for having let loose in India the "great engines of social improvement, which sagacity and science of recent times had previously given to Western nations – mean Railways, uniform postage, and the Electric Telegraph." Ironically, many Indians did agree, then as they do today, with the great colonial proconsul.

> "Good travels at a snail's pace – it can, therefore have little to do with the railways."
>
> – *M.K. Gandhi*

MK Gandhi, of course, disagreed with this assessment, arguing that railways "propagate evil". He wrote in a memorable sentence that, "Good travels at a snail's pace – it can, therefore have little to do with the railways". The much-traveled Bholanauth Chunder rode a train out of Howrah in October of 1860 and soon after wrote that Hindus "look upon the railways as a marvel and a miracle – a novel incarnation for the regeneration of *Bharat-versh*". Something of this transformation, or at least the discourse of progressive transformation and the belief in it, is captured in the postal cover and stamp issued in the early 1950s to commemorate the centenary of railways in India. The postal cover represents a celebratory appropriation of the technological accomplishment of the colonial past to the projects of Indian national modernity – "the birth and growth of modern India" in Madhavrao Scindia's phrase.

There was nothing altruistic about the British imposition of a colonial railway system on South Asia, the British discourse of 'progress' notwithstanding. The railways were an instrument, perhaps the central element, of colonial rule and imperial capitalism. Railways strengthened the colonial state. Gandhi saw this more clearly than most, hence his forthright condemnation, but in so doing they facilitated the growth of an Indian state and hence an Indian nation, as they continue to do. An apt statement was made in this regard by the Polish statesman, Count Pilsudski, who said: "Nations do not make states and nationalisms, but the other way around". The two Raos and the IR website may have simplified a complex set of processes, but they were not fundamentally wrong.



STEVE MCCURRY

Chittagong station at dusk.

Network for a Nation

Until very recent times, railways were the primary vehicle of travel and social communication in India. IR knit India together and made it possible for Indians, in increasing numbers as the years passed, to imagine themselves as a possible unity, a possible nation (The railways played a smaller role in nation-state building processes in post-colonial Pakistan and Bangladesh than in the case of India, although they did assist the cause of Muslim nationalism before 1947 by facilitating travel and communication.)

Economic interchange and social communication, direct and indirect, was enormously increased by the railways. For example, the railway travels of the early opinion-makers reveal that they were among the first to imagine the national community. Diwan Madhav Rao's views were indirectly corroborated by the Bengali actress Binodini Das, who felt in the 1870s and 1880s

that travel outside of Bengal was like travel to a foreign land. She wrote about the relief she and her colleagues felt upon their return home after three months of travelling and performing "in the west" (which meant as far as Lahore), which she described as "foreign lands". Nevertheless, as with the Parsi theatre companies, rail transport helped to create a cross-regional stage for Bengali theatre companies. Much of India slowly became the stage upon which actors, actresses and audiences alike came to play shared parts, as did the 13,839 delegates who attended, largely by train one suspects, the annual meetings of the Indian National Congress between 1892 and 1909.

Information flows are essential to the imagining of the nation. If train travel made face-to-face contact with hitherto distant Indians possible, it also made the critical, on-going, indirect contact provided by the written word possible on a voluminous scale. Newspapers, books, pamphlets and journals were distributed on an increasingly large-scale, both regionally, in the vernacular languages of India (helping to strengthen regionalism), and crucially, for the nationalist elite, in English, the link language. The railways brought to the emerging national bourgeoisie much of their reading material just as it took them, or their letters, to other parts of India. The British took the distribution of the printed word seriously and continually worried about its potentially seditious effects.

Riding the Rails

However, the rosy, even triumphal, story of the appropriation of the colonial railway system to the projects of national modernity, and the integration that accompanied railway development, should not be confused with the growth of an equality of opportunity for most Indians. The railways of the Subcontinent, colonial and post-colonial, have been and remain instruments of capitalist development: combined yet uneven and unequal development, or what Elizabeth Whitcombe once labelled "expansion and induced imbalance". Development and underdevelopment go hand in hand with capital accumulation in one area, matched by an over-accumulation of labour in another.

Transport systems connect the polar sites of capitalist development. Improved transport (including road transport later on) made it easier for capital to obtain and exploit those usually employed as casual labourers – the circulating labour of the intermediate regime between agriculture and capital-intensive industry so well-examined in the writing of the anthropologist Jan Bremen, but whose roots go deep into the colonial railway age. However, labour also rode the rails from the third quarter of the 19th century onward to seek work in the emerging industrial sector of the economy. Men from the countryside of the Western Deccan went to the textile mills of Bombay. Others from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa went to the jute mills of greater Calcutta. Improved transportation integrated

STEVE MCCURRY

Approaching Calcutta.

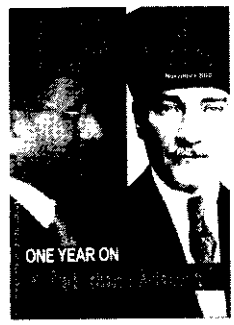
labour markets but, of course, that did not mean that labour got a fair share of the value it helped to create. At the beginning of the 21st century, only seven percent of India's labour force is in the so-called organised sector. The intermediate regime still predominates.

The full story of the consequences of the integrative effects of South Asian railways on state strengthening, on the national movement(s) and on subsequent nation-building activities has yet to be written. Academic investigative research must be made which situates the railways within a sequence of communication innovations: the telegraph, the telephone, the radio, the bus and lorry, the airplane, television and cyber-links. Nonetheless, the railways were and remain at the infrastructural core of what made it possible for the Indian state and economy, in colonial times and after 1947, to function as an increasingly integrated entity.

The closing decades of the 20th century saw India move increasingly from rail-dominated transport to road-dominated transport as measured by total passenger kilometres and total tonne-kilometres effected, although much road transport takes place over shorter distances (and is, in terms of India's environmental future, less energy-efficient and more polluting). The railways continue to integrate ever wider areas and do so with greater efficiency. While India has not become the "homogenous" nation that Madhav Rao envisioned more than a century ago, railroads remain part of the critical infrastructure on which the Indian state, nation and economy are built.

The month of the General

This new monthly column shall endeavour to look at South Asia in totality, as a region that is greater than the sum of its parts. For SOUTHASIASPHERE, political boundaries that divide the people of this region are facts, but what makes us all one is a more significant reality. Consequently, no member-country of SAARC gets a 'quota' in this column. 'Saarcy' will instead concentrate on issues, ideas and trends that affect us all in the region, for better or worse. Saarcy is a Nepali term for cobbler: the humble craftsman who repairs shoes, an untouchable in the hierarchy of caste-ridden Hindu society. The pseudonym perfectly suits a columnist who aims at nothing less than mending the shoes of readers' minds so that they can travel to what Kazi Nazrul Islam called the 'real' battlefield:



Himal's cover of November 2000 juxtaposing General Musharraf and Kemal Pasha Ataturk.

The heart is the battlefield
where Krishna sang the great Gita,
it is the field where the shepherd Magi made friends
with God.
This heart is the cave of meditation
where Buddha heard the call of humanity's deep distress
and renounced his throne.
In this retreat the darling son of Araby heard
the great call;
It is here that he sang the song divine that is the Quran.
I have not heard it wrong, friend—
there is no temple or Kaaba greater than this heart of man.

Interesting Times

These are interesting times for South Asia. So interesting in fact that Colin Powell, Tony Blair and Zhu Rongzi have all been here within a month. The much-postponed 11th Summit of Heads of State or Government of member countries of the SAARC finally did take place in the capital city of Nepal, a country going through a period of political emergency caused by rising Maoist insurgency. The possibility of the Tamil Tigers and the government of Sri Lanka returning to the negotiating table never looked brighter. The crisis of 9/11 across the seven seas seems to have brought the warring parties to their senses.

In Bangladesh, the issue of corruption is centre-stage (once again). The royal government of Bhutan is back to the questionable game of repopulating areas vacated by Lhotsampas with ethnic Bhutias. Not much is heard from Maldives, but presumably, the senior-most and only participant of all 11 SAARC Summits to date has his island pretty much under control. Meanwhile, Pakistan and India are back to their war games. Troop mobilisation on both sides of the Punjab border is of a magnitude that has not been seen since 1971, not even during the Kargil mini-war. The most dangerous region of the world is sitting on a powder keg, except that everyone is proceeding under the impression that it is business as usual. But of course, it is not, and the one person who has caught history by the scruff of its neck is, ironically, General Pervez Musharraf, the self-declared President of Pakistan. His address to the nation on 12 January made him look like a statesman with a vision that extends far beyond the Wagah border.

The millennium jihad

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, dreamt of a Pakistan where Muslims would be Muslims and Hindus would continue to practice their faith. Qaid-e-Azam believed that the question of a separate homeland for Muslim Indians was settled with the creation of Pakistan. But those who took power after him subverted secularism and enshrined the Holy Quran and the Sunnah as the guiding principles of state.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto appropriated the process of Islamisation after the eastern wing became an independent Bangladesh, and the wily feudal wanted to wield more control over whatever was left of his country. It was Bhutto who had the weekly off-day changed from Sunday to Friday. After hanging Bhutto, the dictator Zia-ul Haq got even bolder and introduced the Blasphemy Law (*see page 25*). The process of Islamisation continued with even more gusto as the think-tankers of United States groomed jihadis for the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Enforcement of the Shariat continued under successive governments and the Qaid's dream of a secular Pakistan almost died when Islamabad groomed the Taliban to take over Afghanistan. The Buddhas of Bamiyan fell as Islamabad watched, and theocracy became the hard reality of contemporary Pakistan.

General Musharraf used the excuse of American pressure to turn the heat on Pakistan's 'fundos' in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. But with his much-publicised address of 12 January, he has done nothing less than make Pakistan take an about-turn. Granted that his address was full of sound and fury about how "Kashmir runs in our blood", but the operative part of his statement said, in no uncertain terms: no support to fundamentalism inside the country, no encouragement to cross-border terrorism in the region and no more taking more pride in religious purity above material achievement. This was nothing short of a declaration of jihad – a millennium jihad to transform a country

that has remained a prisoner of history. General Musharraf in fact buried the two-nation theory for good with an about-turn on the very purpose of the existence of the Pakistani state: he took it back to the pledge that the Qaid had made to his people.

Considering the hold that fundamentalists continue to have on the poor masses of Pakistan, successful implementation of General Musharraf's attempt to de-Islamicise his country is far from a foregone conclusion. Over the years, hard-core Islamists have made considerable inroads even into Pakistan's defence forces, whose institutions consider themselves the guardians of the state. Opposition to the general's grand plans may now be muted, given the extant world political opinion, but time is short and there is no guarantee the tide will not turn inside his country.

This is the reason why General Musharraf needs India's support. Unfortunately, the decision-makers of New Delhi initially even failed to see the historic significance of General Musharraf's pledge. Put simply, the Delhi-born General Musharraf has done nothing less than concede ideological defeat. He is telling the world that his priority is the modernisation of Pakistan, not jihad against anyone anywhere. A leader of Sonia Gandhi's Congress realised the significance of the statement and declared in the *Asian Age* newspaper that General Musharraf was aiming to better Kemal Pasha. But even this leader 'chickened out' and refused to be named in the report. Such is the hold of Pakistan-phobia on the minds of Indian elite.

Better sense seems to have begun to prevail. The cub-Abdullah, India's junior minister in the Ministry of External Affairs, publicly aired his view that transformation of the Line of Control in Kashmir into an international border was a distinct possibility. Sindh-born 'Pakistani' Home Minister of India, the hawkish Lal Krishna Advani, changed his tired script of Akhanda Bharat and talked instead about the possibility of a loose federation of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, with each retaining its independence. These are incredible departures that indicates a light at the end of the tunnel.

Repercussions

Reversing the process of Islamisation in Pakistan will have its immediate impact on Bangladesh, a country that broke away to assert its linguistic and cultural identity rather than subsume them under religious unity. However, in Bangladesh too, the journey of fundamentalism has continued ever since independence.

The Constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 laid down the principle of secularism: it was declared a Peoples' Republic rather than an Islamic one. But as soon as Zia-ur Rahman assumed power after the assassination of Mujibur Rehman in August 1975, he got clauses related to secularism deleted. General Ershad, the next dictator along, introduced two key ideas – Rastra Dharma (Islam as state religion) and Masjid Kendrit Samaj (Mosque-based society) – to reinforce his control. Gulf money, support of overseas Bangladeshis and the leadership of the Bangladesh Defence Forces has given Islamisation a big push in the country that actually has elements of Hinduism in its typical Bangla culture.

A reversal for fundamentalism in Pakistan in the region can encourage the secular voices within Bangladesh. In countries like Sri Lanka and Nepal, the effect will not be that direct or marked, but Pakistan opting for the Malaysian way will create a different ideal for the Muslim youths of these smaller neighbouring countries. But the repercussions of one good act can be far-reaching. It may be too much to hope, but General Musharraf's resolve for modernisation rather than uniqueness may prompt even the king of Bhutan to roll back the soft form of ethnic cleansing that his regime has been engaged in for over a decade.

By far the most visible impact of General Musharraf's staying the course would be on India, where Pakistan has been made to look like a synonym of Islamic fundamentalism. Such propaganda by the formidable Indian publicity machine unites fundamentalist Hindus on the one hand and creates fresh recruits for militant Islamists on the other. The rise of a modern and secular Pakistan can help reduce the intensity of both these challenges at one go.

The future

From here, the future is uncertain for three reasons. The first is we do not know the ability of General Musharraf to follow through on his domestic turn-around strategy. The second concerns the amount of international support the general can manage to garner for his plans for modernisation of Pakistani thought. The third and most crucial element that can decide the fate of Pakistan's escape from fundamentalism is the attitude of India.

Indians need to give General Musharraf (and Pakistan) a chance to retreat with grace. However, this seems unlikely. The government in New Delhi is at this moment too insecure to take the bold step of toning down its anti-Pakistan rhetoric. The election in Uttar Pradesh is an important consideration, but the build-up of nationalism and the growing arrogance of the Indian upper-middle and middle-classes over the last decade forms the most sinister backdrop.

It is sad that this first South Asian column should end on such a gloomy note. But it is our unfortunate reality that we cannot resolve our own problems and have to look to Uncle Sam to prevail upon the decision-makers of the colonial twins to see reason. Just to conclude on a cheerful note, rebuilding of Afghanistan may soon start despite the warlords who have started reappearing on the streets of Kabul. South Asia has, however, at least seen the light at the end of the Salang tunnel.

Israel offers help to India to fight terror

SO ISRAEL offers help to India to fight terror. Am I to understand from this that Israel has been *successful* in fighting terror? But don't you think that the *hakims* of the Bharatiya Janata Party in New Delhi will see how incongruous it is that it is being offered assistance by the one state which has consistently pursued a policy that generates militancy (depopulation, collective punishment, denial of history). The Hindutva-vadis are thrilled down to their toes being back in a cosy relationship with Tel Aviv, and would love to emulate the Israeli actions against Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians vis-à-vis Pakistan on Kashmir. From being champions of the Palestinian cause, the Indian foreign policy has about-turned to a degree that New Delhi is now a bedfellow of Tel Aviv.

■

KABUL-NEW Delhi flights have been revived, with Ariane's Boeing 727s starting once-a-week trips. The Chinese have finally agreed, and New Delhi to Shanghai flights are also about to begin. Meanwhile, a New Delhi miffed at Pakistan, a week before the SAARC summit, banned PIA over-flights over its territory. While it may have hurt PIA, what this did was to strike a body blow to South Asian connectivity through the airways. PIA is no longer able to continue with its flights to Kathmandu and Dhaka. Is anyone complaining? Not loud enough.

■

ALTHOUGH THE exigencies may have been economic, the Sri Lankan government, deserves applause for having gone the other way in terms of regional connectivity. It has begun issuing visas on arrival to citizens of all other South Asian countries. This has been done in a bid to boost tourism at a time when there has been a great decline in South Asian tourism. This will, at the very least, revive Colombo's place as a premier meeting place for South Asian conclaves – seminars, workshops, conferences, what not. One reason that this role of South Asian hub had been taken over by Kathmandu was because Nepal has always given visas on arrival to all and sundry. Today, Nepal battles a Maoist insurgency, there is Emergency rule, and – who knows – seminarians may have tired of dinners in the Thamel tourist quarter and may be hankering for sea fish on Galle Face. Whatever, see you in Sri Lanka!

■

INDIA TODAY, as the magazine of the increasingly ultra-nationalist English-speaking middle class of hamara-Bharat-mahaan, in its latest editorial provides a window into the mind of this middle class – and how important for it that there is international recognition of 'India'. Not that a country as vast, and great, and democratic as India should feel the need to play to the Western Gallery, but play it does. And so the magazine writes that, "December 13 was an invitation to war", implying in so many words that the Islamabad government directed the attack on the Sansad Bhawan. Writes the editorial: "India is winning leaders (sic) and influencing nations – and sabotaging the political stereotypes of South Asia". The editors are "particularly satisfied" by India's record in global diplomacy. "India is (now) heard, its position is appreciated and nations are listening". Following Home Minister LK Advani's visit to Washington, where he made a "forceful expression of the national will", Washington as the "headquarters of the war against Islamic terrorism" endorsed the Indian position, exult *India Today's* editors.

■

"MUSHARRAF HAS this God-given gift of looking sincere even when he's lying through his teeth." That is television host Karan Thapar, quoted in *India Today*. Do the New Delhi powerful care that knowledgeable Pakistanis across the border, in Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi, see red when thus characterised? Not likely.

■

TO GO back to July and the Agra summit. The unplanned airing on STAR-TV of the tape of the breakfast meeting Gen. Musharraf hosted for Indian editors and channel bosses had a lot to do with the summit's collapse, but this fact has received little comment. From what is known, it was Prannoy Roy of STAR who saw a Pakistan Television camera filming the event, and realising the news value of the breakfast, convinced PTV staff to part with the tape for the rest of the morning. Roy walked over to the STAR TV studio nearby and directly aired the tape, even while the summit was continuing. The world saw General Musharraf, forceful, articulate and looking sincere. India considered this an attempt at sabotage even though it was an Indian channel that had shown some journalistic chutzpah in acquiring the tape. The summit rapidly went into decline.

■

THE OTHER factor of the Agra summit not sufficiently studied was the airtime that Pakistani commentators received on Indian satellite television, which, after all, governs the South Asian skies for the moment. While Indians may be blasé about this, more than one Pakistani jour-

nalist present at the SAARC summit in Kathmandu spoke of how Agra was a watershed event in terms of getting their point of view into the satellite programme. We live and learn. So, even if the Indian anchors give a wry and indulgent (and unbelieving) smile (if not a smirk) as the Pakistani journalists speak of Indian infidelities or when they raise the Kashmir issue, the fact remains that there is some interaction happening now on the airwaves.

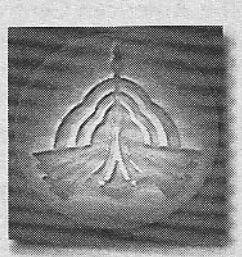
■

THE NEPALI royalty has yet to get up from the body blow it was given by the royal palace massacre conducted by Crown Prince Dipendra. The public remains sceptical, and those who are responsible for courageously addressing the issue of the royal palace massacre continue to back into the issue, referring to the fact of the massacre without getting into who seems to have done it. The books that come out similarly skirt the central issue of who perpetrated the massacre – and it all seems to be a matter of political correctness, of not being seen to be kind and sympathetic towards the feudalistic concept of 'royalty'. Meanwhile, the deployment of the Royal Nepal Army has brought the king into the centre-stage of national politics like never before, as it was only with his nod that the men in khaki agreed to be out there. But as and when the Maoists are tackled – and the sooner the better – the hope is that the state of emergency will be lifted and the expectations of royalty fulfilled. That it will remain far from the hurlyburly of politics and engage itself in the social, economic, education, cultural and public health arenas. We look forward to the day when the king, queen, crown prince or princess of Nepal can be seen joining, say, a rice harvest festival, the way Princess Maha Chakri of Sirindhorn is seen doing here in Bangkok a couple of months ago.

■

INDIAN OFFICIALS seem to be at their wits' end on what to do with this incorrigible general from across the Wagah border, who misses no opportunity to upstage the slow-moving Atal Behari Vajpayee. In Agra, he spoke extemporaneously to editors and channel bosses. At the SAARC summit, he went out of script and shook hands with Prime Minister Vajpayee. When he gave his speech to the nation on 12 January, Gen. Musharraf was reading off pages that were torn off a writing pad; you could see the serrated edges as they piled up next to him on the table, with Mohammed Ali Jinnah watching his every move over his right shoulder. Was that a deliberate, super-sophisticated attempt at looking informal, or was the presidente generallismo actually reading from a speech he had himself written on that notepad? Quite a few Indian commentators think the former, but I believe the latter. Also, I believe that the going in and out of Urdu to English, and the occasional eye-contact and extemporaneous lines during the speech, while indeed master strokes of public relations, were genuine.

■



NOW, THE commentators on Pakistani television who are trotted out to demolish Indian points of view of Subcontinental geopolitics are all respectable men and women. Some of them are extremely articulate. But what gets my goat is how there is no disagreement within the on-air panels on the broad issues related to, say, Kashmir, cross-border tension, and Pakistani policies. This becomes awfully boring after a while, a bunch of clearly intelligent people rambling on and on about India with nary any ability to introspect and see where Pakistan itself may have gone wrong. When, oh when, will there be a Pakistani private satellite channel which will carry independent Pakistani thought? Is that even possible?

■

'Kashmir is in blood of 1 billion Indians'

REGARDING THE haplessness of the official Indian response to General Musharraf's speech, there was one person who gave it as good as she got, and it was the grand and gracious Najma Heptullah, the Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabhya. Gen. Musharraf had rallied his Pakistani forces with the powerful statement, "Kashmir runs in our blood." Here was Dr. Heptullah's response, "If (Mu-sharraf) says that Kashmir is in his blood and it is in the blood of 150 million Pakistanis, then he should know that Kashmir is in the blood of one billion Indians." Great riposte!

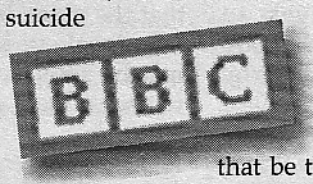
■

CONTINUING ON the matter of blood-soaked Kashmir, I would like to add Chettria Patrakar's own take on the issue. The fact is, Kashmir runs in the blood of both Indians *and* Pakistanis,

making up a total of 1.15 billion. It runs in the blood, truth be said, of all 1.3 billion South Asians. But remember, at the same time, and before anything else, that Kashmir runs in the blood of three million Kashmiris. As and when this understanding permeates the political sensibility of the political elites of all of South Asia, we will have solved our geopolitical problems and moved towards a future that is variegated yet unitary. South Asia will not progress in any other way.

■

TIME TO Blast the Beeb! Specifically, Nisha Pillai, news anchor at BBC World. On 25 January, a suicide bomber injured 16 Israelis while blowing himself up in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, a drive-by shooting in front of the American Centre in Calcutta had just killed four Bengali policemen. Over in Assam, Bodos had murdered 16 civilians near the Bhutanese border. But what did our Ms. Pillai do? She stayed live with the Jerusalem incident, going over and over tired positions of the Palestinians and (especially) the Israelis and playing and replaying the same limited footage n-number of times. What gives with the BBC, and why does it pander to the West so, even when it realises that South Asia is where it has perhaps its greatest viewership?



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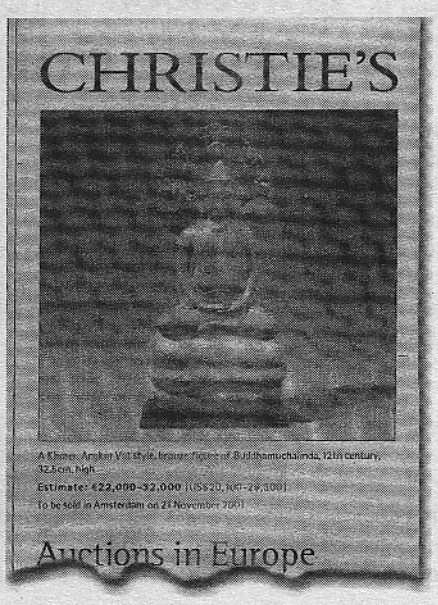
MEANTIME, WITHIN South Asia, of late the tilt of the Beeb (television at least) toward India has become a matter of strident criticism in Pakistan. Javed Jabbar, in a commentary on PTV, went so far as to call the BBC the Bharat Broadcasting Corporation. The tilt must come from the fact that television, as a very expensive medium, requires commercials, and it is only the Indian market which can sustain the BBC on air over South Asia. But what of ethics, sirs and madams? Here is what a Karachi journalist has to say: "No doubt about it, the Beeb is much kinder to India (as perceived here in Pk) than Pk – also, there's a lot of talk shows etc. hosted in India, by Indians that go on the BBC. NONE from Pk. Is that because there are no qualified people here, or because we don't know how to market ourselves?"

■

SAW THIS announcement, belatedly, in the *International Herald Tribune*, of a Christie's auction 17-23 November. The subjects are Magnificient Gold, Cameras, Fine Costume, Classic Arts and Crafts, Old Masters, Modern and Contemporary Art, and "Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art". The difference between all the others and the last subject, of course, is that almost all of the latter would be stolen art. Here, I am not off again on a West-bashing spree. Quite to the contrary, I think until and unless the local elites of the Himalaya, South Asia and Southeast Asia, rise up and organise – to protect their own deities and protest their debasement through auctioning by Christie's, Sotheby's , whomever – there is no sense in only railing against the auction houses of the West. Sadly, the Gandhar period pieces continue to vanish from Pakistani Punjab and Afghanistan, the Chola period art from South India, and all kinds of deities, friezes and artifacts from the Kathmandu Valley. Local sensitivity to the subject is almost nil. So expect Christie's to continue with its auction, and do not expect there to be any rallying cry among the NRIs, NRNs, NRPs, or whoever, to picket those auction houses. Oh, would not that be the day, when it happens!

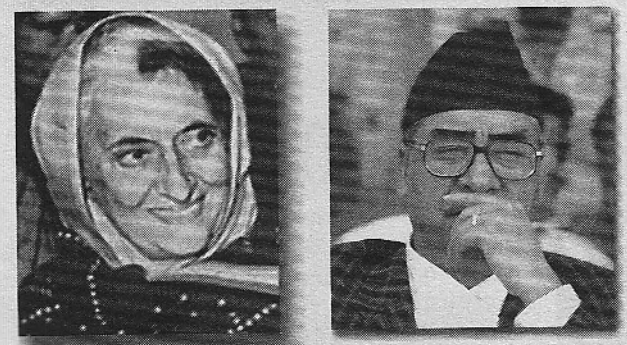


■

ONCE AGAIN, my Karachi correspondent: "There was a peace demonstration organised in Karachi on 18 January, and needless to say, the papers (*Dawn*, the *News*) only carried pictures of the women participants. This was a peaceful rally, as opposed to a nasty (dramatic) rally, in which people burn Atalji effigies. In those times, they don't mind carrying pix of men (such as the AFP photo printed in *Dawn* on 5 Jan). A peace rally has a chance of getting coverage only when police disrupts it, otherwise it is better to show a fist, burn effigies and generally act like goondas. When peace demonstrators have challenged photographers on their biases, their response is that we should understand their compulsions – having demonstrators in a sedate line does not make a good photo. Also, they are caught in their own rut of 'khawateen' pictures."

■

SPEAKING OF the state of Emergency in Nepal, it was astounding how the broadsheet dailies buckled under. Rather than promising to the public to stand up for objectivity and independence during the time of the Emergency, the publishers all had put out editorials promising the government all their support to fight the Maoist menace. While the sentiments may have been okay, it was not the job of the press to espouse them. Indeed, the very papers which have pandered to the Maoists for years through velvet glove treatment, overnight were terming them terrorists – *aatankabaadi* – without even the by-your-leave of inverted commas. Nepal, even under emergency, is not a police state – at least as far as the urban movers and shakers are concerned – but you would have thought so the way self-censorship came to rule the roost in the Kathmandu press. Few journal-



Whose Emergency? India's Indira Gandhi (left) and Nepal's Sher Bahadur Deuba.

ists were found willing to go out and report on the hinterland, and fewer publishers would print what they reported. One reason seems to be that everyone compares the Nepali Emergency to Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975-77, whereas Sher Bahadur Deuba's only professed aim is to tackle the Maoists and not to trample upon civil liberties in the process. The role of the press, under the circumstances, should have been to expand the envelope. Instead, it has allowed its own space to be constricted. Clearly, the much-ballyhooed advances made by the arrival of corporate press have limits to imagination and courage, and it was the reviled political tabloid press – long thought by the pundits to have outlived its usefulness – that has taken some sort of a stand, both vis-à-vis the Maoists and the government in these troubled times.

■

SO, NEHA Dhupla is Fa Femina Miss India Universe. Why did not Shruti Sharma, over to the left, not make it, and have to be satisfied with merely being Fa Femina Miss India World? Why, the colour of her epidermis, of course! After Smita Patel, there has not been one dusky beauty on the Indian screen, until Nandita Das, but both have to stick to alternative films. The day when someone like Ms. Sharma becomes Miss India Universe rather than Miss India World will mean that we are finally done with the skin-colour racism that hangs over South Asia like a shroud. But that day is as yet far, far away, given that the vision of beauty of our tens of millions of kids is presently defined by Western and Indian satellite television, for whom darkies remain unkosher, just as in South Asia's own racist past.

—Chhetria Patrakar

South Asia by the numbers

YEAR IN which SAARC passed a resolution pledging to eliminate poverty in South Asia by 2002: 1995.

Percentage of South Asians living in poverty (on less than one US dollar a day), according to the most recent UN Human Development Report: 35

Number of nuclear threats traded between India and Pakistan during the 1999 Kargil War: 13

Percentage of 2001 CIA-simulated wars between India and Pakistan that ended with nuclear strikes: 100

Number of South Asian monarchies: 2

Number of South Asian dictatorships: 1

Number of hits on Google.com for "Kashmir violence": 77,400

Number of hits on Google.com for "Tripura violence": 4,650

Ratio of civilians killed in Tripura to those killed in Kashmir in the last four years: 2:1

Number of times Atal Behari Vajpayee has been sworn in as India's leader: 3

Number of times Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has been sworn in a Maldives' leader: 5

Number of journalists arrested in 2000, according to Reporters Sans Frontières: 329

Number of journalists arrested in 2001: 489

Kilograms of cleaning powder purchased by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh for a fuction in Bangalore: 4,000

Date on which the Islamic News and Information Network (ININ) distributed an article protesting US airlines' policies for "outright bigotry": 3 January

Date on which ININ called "Hindoos", "nothing but filthy cow worshippers": 2 January

The Beloved Witness
Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001)

More than any other Kashmiri, Agha Shahid Ali captured the spirit of his land and his people with the power of his writing. Across a life that spanned five decades and ended too soon on 8 December, Agha Shahid transcended imposed identities and wrote with a simple morality about life and love and their various intersections in Kashmir. He died away from his home in an American hospital, but with the comfort of his immediate family.

Born in New Delhi on 4 February 1949, Agha Shahid grew up as a Muslim in Kashmir, and served as a poet-witness to the travails of the troubled land. He was educated at the University of Kashmir, Srinagar, and the University of Delhi, before earning a Ph.D. in English from Pennsylvania State University (1984) and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona (1985). A prolific writer, Agha Shahid published hundreds of poems in his lifetime, including such well-regarded collections as *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *In Memory of Begum Akhtar and Other Poems* (1979), and *Bone Sculpture* (1972). In addition to his creative work, Agha Shahid was also a celebrated scholar who specialised in the works of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In 1986, he published *T. S. Eliot as Editor*, and later translated Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems* (1992), and edited *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000).

A popular professor and friend to his students, Agha Shahid made a reputation early on for his knowledge of Hindustani music, Urdu verse, and the Modernist movement in Anglo-American poetry. While teaching at Hindu College in Delhi, he was much in demand throughout the Subcontinent, and he frequently visited other institutions to share his ideas and writings. He held teaching positions at the University of Delhi and, later, at many of the most prestigious universities in the United States.

In remembering him, his friend, the editor and publisher Rukun Advani, wrote, "We are all narcissists in some way, but Shahid had perfected the art of narcissism. He displayed it unashamedly and was universally loved for the abandon with which he could be so unabashedly and coyly full of himself. He was just so disconcertingly free of pretence in this respect, so entirely unique just for this reason." Advani recalls a conversation with Agha Shahid in which the poet faced the inevitability of death. "I don't want immortality through my works," Agha Shahid said. "I want immortality by not dying."

Agha Shahid published many fine works, but he wrote no truer words than in his 1987 poem "Stationary," which was published in his volume, *The Half-Inch Himalayas:*

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
in great sheets, reams
of silver handmade by you.
The night is your cottage industry now,
the day is your brisk emporium.
The world is full of paper.

Write to me.

SNOWMEN

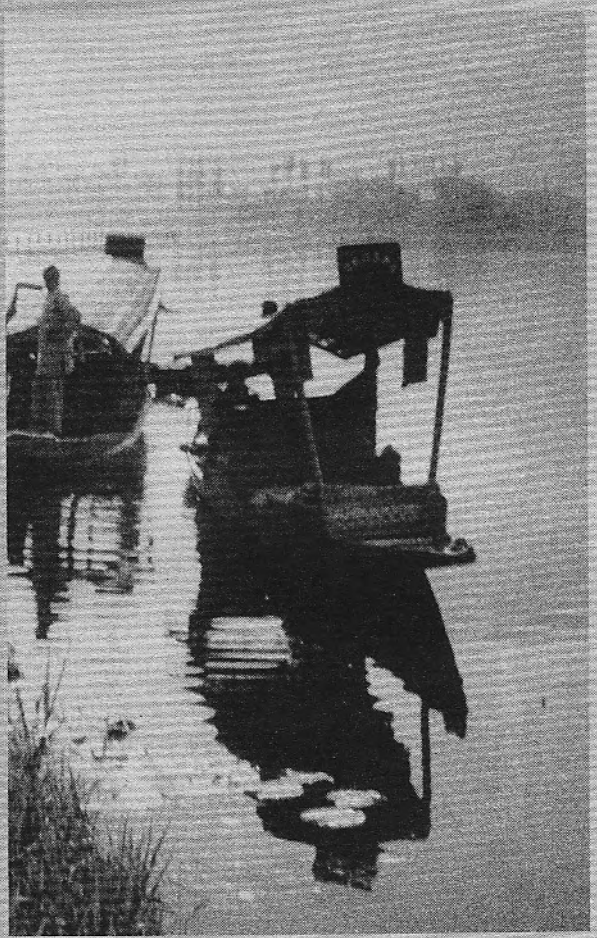
My ancestor, a man
of Himalayan snow,
came to Kashmir from Samarkand,
carrying a bag
of whale bones:
heirlooms from sea funerals.
His skeleton
carved from glaciers, his breath
arctic,
he froze women in his embrace.
His wife thawed into stony water,
her old age a clear
evaporation.

This heirloom,
his skeleton under my skin, passed
from son to grandson,
generations of snowmen on my back.
They tap every year on my window,
their voices hushed to ice.

No, they won't let me out of winter,
and I've promised myself,
even if I'm the last snowman,
that I'll ride into spring
on their melting shoulders.

From an interview with Agha Shaid Ali conducted by Rehan Ansari and Rajinderpal S. Pal, carried in Himal in March 1998:

"I approached the poem "Snowmen", from which these lines are taken as an immediate sensuous apprehension. It was later that I thought of its feminist implications. There are two things hidden in that poem. One is a poem by Wallace Stevens called "The Snowmen". If you read it you won't see the connection but it is there for me. The other is a scene that has haunted me for a long time from Wuthering Heights. The narrator is staying at Heathcliff's house because there has been a terrible storm and the ghost of Katherine knocks on the window. She says, "I'm cold. Let me in". He opens the window and the glass breaks somehow. He takes the hand of the ghost and rubs it against the glass and there is blood. It's an amazing scene. Talk about magical realism. People think about that novel and they want neat answers. [Bronte's] whole enterprise is that there are no neat answers. But to provide you with a neat answer: I'm thinking about my ancestry and the lost women in this ancestry who we never hear about. I know everything about my father, his father, his father's father and so on for nine generations. But I know nothing before my grandmother. So I'm trying to find these lost women. These are difficult questions, there are no neat answers. You can have a feminist construct when you read that poem."



From the same interview:

"Rain has had a profound impact on me, as I'm sure it has had on many people. My mother is from Lucknow. Kashmir, as one of my poems says, has four clearly defined seasons. They truly have a three months' winter, a three-month spring, summer and autumn. On the first of September you can really sense a nip in the air. You can start to see the elements of change, that autumn is coming.

"I had heard a lot of classical ragas that revolve around the monsoons. When I would hear these ragas and my mother would talk about the monsoons, and the romance of it, I had no way of knowing what that was about. That the rain [could be] such a positive feature, that people long for the rain to cool the atmosphere, and that that's the season lovers can't bear separation. Also this incredible music, these ragas that deal with the monsoons.

"We have rain in Kashmir, which sometimes leads to floods, but it does not have quite the same feeling as rain in Delhi has. When I went to Delhi for the first time in summer, in July, and I saw these rains, I [saw] a very romantic season and could see why you would want to be in the arms of your lover. Then when I went to Arizona there was this flood. I arrived and there was rain for two weeks. It was unusual in the desert and they called it monsoons. There were some deaths that occurred during that time. When I was putting this book together, I had this image of three women. I had this painting someone had given me which had these three women of the desert holding chili peppers. The idea of three women, three sisters, seems so central to various myths. Strangely enough I haven't found it in Hindu myth. You have it in Greek, in Scandinavian myth, you have it in Chekhov and Shakespeare and so on.

"The concept of the trinity occurs in so many cultures. Rushdie's *Shame* has it, but he surely got it from Western myth. He Pakistanised or Indianised it. The three sisters, when asked "Who's my father?" by the child they have raised, assume the shape of the three monkeys: see no evil, speak no evil, and hear no evil. Wonderfully funny stuff. At a personal level the rain brings so much memory back to me, especially of some very important love relationships I have had. The rain is also very important culturally, mythically, anthro-pologically, ecologically. It is the rain that brings a city back to memory, and makes it memorable, and these three women are the preservers of memory."

The Environmentalist

by ***Ajaya Dixit***

I do not remember how I received India's first *State of Environment Report* published by the Centre for Science and Environment. Going through the content of the report, which went deep into the environmental crisis overtaking the continent-sized mass of India, it was obviously important to find out, "Who is Anil Agarwal?" Stereotype would have him as a trader, but here was a scientist, communicating complex ideas in a simple and effective style. Then came CSE's second report, which covered many aspects of water development that engineers and social scientists alike were not sensitive to.

Anil visited Kathmandu before the 1992 Rio Summit to deliver a talk on global climate change, and he ferociously questioned the iniquitous nature of the debate and the processes of negotiations. He knew his subject well. He ended his talk saying, "I sound angry, because I am angry." His forceful style and commitment did not diminish even as he battled a cancer he knew was bringing life to an end. After watching him berate Mr. Bush and Mr. Blair regarding their position on global climate change in Star TV early this year, knowing people in the far corners of South Asia would have said, "This is our Anil!"

Anil Agarwal

Once there was a South Asian...

Besides floods and forests and ground water and rural self-help, once he got hit by cancer Anil typically turned his personal tragedy to a learning experience for the rest. He homed in on the carcinogens in our modern lives, and provided seminal research on pollution, pesticides and fertilisers. Internationally, he was a strident voice on equity on global environmental issues. It was he and the CSE that introduced the concept of per capita pollution allowance in the climate change debate, stating famously, "Every human being has an equal right to the atmosphere. Industrialised countries have used up more than they have the right to, by pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial revolution."

As someone dedicated to science, people and environment, Anil Agarwal was not just an Indian. He was the quintessential South Asian or Subcontinental, who thought not of nationalism but the quality of people's lives. His work was relevant to people everywhere, across India's expanse but also in the neighbouring countries. This was the reason why, even as the SAARC summit met to discuss the most narrow-focused, state-centric agendas in Kathmandu in early January, some of us got together to put out a condolence announcement in the Kathmandu Post, saying, "Once there was a South Asian..."

Anil's devotion to simplifying science and make it accessible to all was a crusade. Take for example, the *Third State of the Environmental Report*, which focused on floods. The report presents how and why floods came to be disasters, and how one might respond to disaster mitigation differently than how the technocrats and engineers would have it. Of course, colour graphics would have made the presentation more effective. Then came the next report, titled Dying Wisdom, which not only set a new standard in presentation and style, but also single-handedly made rainwater harvesting a subject of concern and debate. If today the Groundwater Development Board in India brings out public notices in newspapers asking New Delhi's residents to tap their roof water and feed into wells, it was primarily the result of the work by Anil and his able colleagues at CSE.

Indeed, CSE created the space for the so many idealistic young men and women to pursue the understanding of the environmental issues in India. Many who joined the 'crusade' to bring out the state of the environment reports continue to contribute to India's public life — Kalpana Sharma, Ravi Chopra, Sunita Narain, Dhunu Roy, Himansu Thakkar and many others who are at the forefront of environment discourse in India. No nation-statism among this lot.

Behind the angry and arrogant environmentalist that was his public face, was a sensitive human being. Once, sharing a meal in Stockholm, I asked Anil why he had not chosen a corporate career like so many of IIT (Kanpur) graduates such as him. "Our college was detached even from its physical surroundings. I did not want my life to detached from my society."

Early on his career, he confronted the Herculean task of sensitising an insular national bureaucracy. The best way he could contribute to bridge that gap was by making knowledge accessible, available and understandable. He set high standards, academically and professionally, for himself and those around him. Unlike so many who cry fashionably in the wilderness, Anil also made the effort to work with the 'establishment' in India. Ever the scientist, his goal was always to see that the people received succor and the environment saved. He therefore had no politically correct ideological agenda keeping him from working with government, for example. As the powerful entity that rules our lives, if necessary we have to go with the bureucrats and politicians to bring change.

As he was battling the third attack of cancer, I had asked him why he did not come to Kathmandu more often. *"Woh upar wala mere ko bulata rahata hai, kya karun, ana to chahata hun,"* he replied (I would like to come, but the person upstairs keeps calling me.) A few months later, Anil had departed.

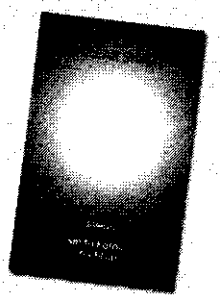
In the Wake of the Tests

Whether you are stridently anti-nuclear, or "anti-nuclear but faint of heart," this book is for you.

As war-clouds have gathered yet again above South Asia after the 13 December attack on the Indian Parliament, and as the prospects sooner or later of a nuclear confrontation grow larger, this volume on the Indian and Pakistani decisions to test and deploy nuclear weapons is a timely contribution. Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian, two well-known South Asian academics-activists, have produced a useful anti-nuclear handbook, and something much more than that. This handsome, portable volume is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand what happened in May 1998, when India and Pakistan tested a series of nuclear weapons, and what the consequences of those fateful decisions may have. Indeed, as the two countries joust and threaten retaliation and counter-retaliation, it seems clear enough that we are living one of the consequences of those momentous, flawed decisions. For all the talk of peace and stability attendant on going nuclear, this is the third crisis since 1998 (the Kargil war, the hijacking of IC 814 and 13 December).

Out of the Nuclear Shadow is not just one of the best collections of anti-nuclear writings ever assembled, it is also a rare political document. The many distinguished contributors, some of whom are household names in the region if not internationally, do not stop at a critique of the Indian and Pakistani tests and the two nuclear weapons programmes. Their net is cast wider, on the larger question of what the tests tell us about contemporary state and society in South Asia and the broader issues of international relations.

Whether or not you agree with the anti-nuclear positions held by the contributors, there is the pleasure of engaging in the passionate, intelligent, critical writing by some of the best known public intellectuals of the Subcontinent. Where else can you get, in one place, Mahatma Gandhi, Eqbal Ahmed, Rajni Kothari, Beena Sarwar, IA Rahman, Praful Bidwai, Amartya Sen, Tanika Sarkar, Surendra Gadekar, Anand Patwardhan, Kumkun Sangari, Shiv Vishwanathan, Ashis Nandy, Aijaz Ahmad, Zafarullah Khan, T Jayaraman, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Achin Vanaik, Lalita Ramdas, AH Nayar, Bittu Sehgal, and Amulya Reddy?



Out of the Nuclear Shadow
Edited by Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian
Palgrave Press, 2002
ISBN 1 84277 058 6
pp 400, USD 69.95

reviewed by Kanti Bajpai

A concerned citizen would find one more reason to invest in this fine volume: a full 150 pages are devoted to anti-nuclear statements by groups from across the region (including the smaller countries of South Asia), six evocative poems, an excellent, largely non-partisan bibliography (including references to pro-nuclear writings), and a list of films, peace organisations and websites. Those who want more information, alternative perspectives, and a way of getting involved in anti-nuclear and other peace initiatives will find no better resource.

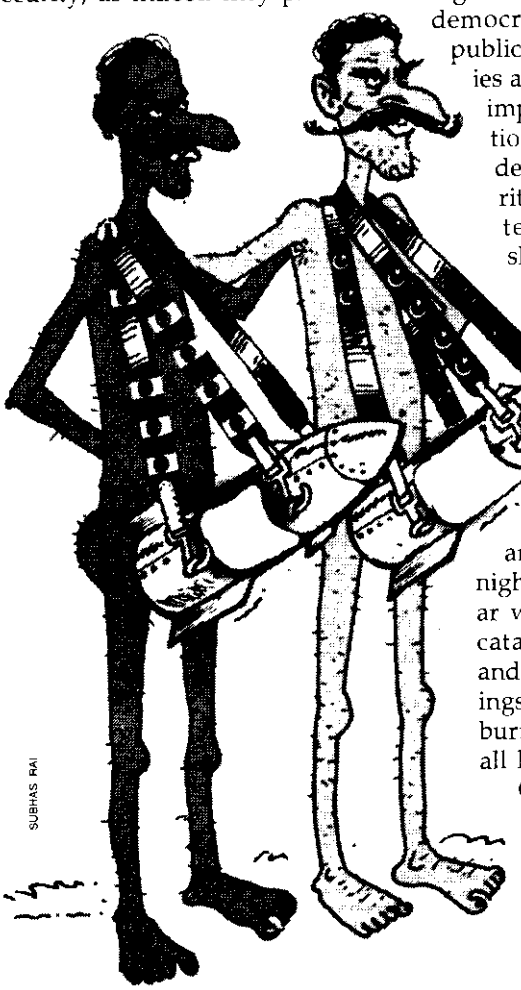
The volume consists, in the main, of thirty or so essays of varying length, some spectacularly well known such as "The End of Imagination" by Arundhati Roy; some written in the immediate shocking aftermath of the tests (Eqbal Ahmed, Aijaz Ahmad); some written up to two years later, such as Amartya Sen's "India and the Bomb". Virtually all of the pieces published here are reprints or revisions of earlier articles: putting them all together is a contribution to the anti-nuclear struggle in and of itself. Those who are anti-nuclear but faint of heart, or who falter now and then, should draw sustenance from the fact that the best minds and spirits of the region are unequivocally and forthrightly against these terrible weapons. Those who are published here may themselves be surprised by the quantity and quality of what was written in the wake of the tests. The efforts of Princeton scholar Zia Mian and Delhi-based environmentalist Smitu Kothari thus help to create a new, virtual community of novelists, poets, social and natural scientists, journalists and activists, all bound by concern for nuclear weaponisation.

What is the message of the book? Clearly, it is ranged against the testing, development, deployment, and use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. Everyone here, either explicitly or implicitly, is for complete nuclear disarmament by both India and Pakistan and also by the other nuclear powers. No one sees any merit in the arguments of nuclear deterrence. Even Amartya Sen's essay, easily the least polemical in the volume, in the end must be read as being anti-deterrent. On the other hand, there are no Polyannas here. No one thinks that the Indian and Pakistani programmes can be easily stopped and dismantled, or that the Subcontinental addiction to

nuclear weapons can be overcome in the near future. Nor do any of the contributors believe that global nuclear disarmament is around the corner. No one is predicting immediate nuclear war either: there are no irresponsible alarmists here. As for building an anti-nuclear movement, there is a goodly sense that this will be an arduous tome which will encounter great resistance. There is passionate, critical intensity in many of the essays and a cool, analytical sensibility in others. There are no fanciful, wide-eyed agitators; no one is trivial or innocent.

What will readers learn from these various essays? They will learn that there is a whole range of military, economic, political, moral and existential reasons for opposing nuclear weapons. Militarily, it can be shown that nuclear weapons produce more insecurity than security, as indeed they produced in the India-Pakistan standoff after 13 December, and that deterrence is an edifice that must eventually fail. Economically, they will learn of the toll nuclear weapons extract from economic growth and development. Politically, they will learn that atomic decisions affect domestic institutions and the cut and thrust of ideological contests, that they threaten democracy and accountability in public life; they militarise societies and debase science; and they impoverish our notions of nationalism – in sum, that these decisions are not merely security choices in the national interest. Morally, this book shows that nuclear weapons are an abomination as no other weapons have been historically, and that even deterrence, which is the threat to use nuclear weapons, is objectionable. Lastly, they will learn that nuclear weapons are an existential nightmare, for any use of nuclear weapons will be a physical catastrophe, one that will kill and maim millions of human beings, destroy their societies, and burn and poison the world for all living beings.

Atomic decisions affect domestic institutions, threaten democracy and accountability, militarise societies and debase science.



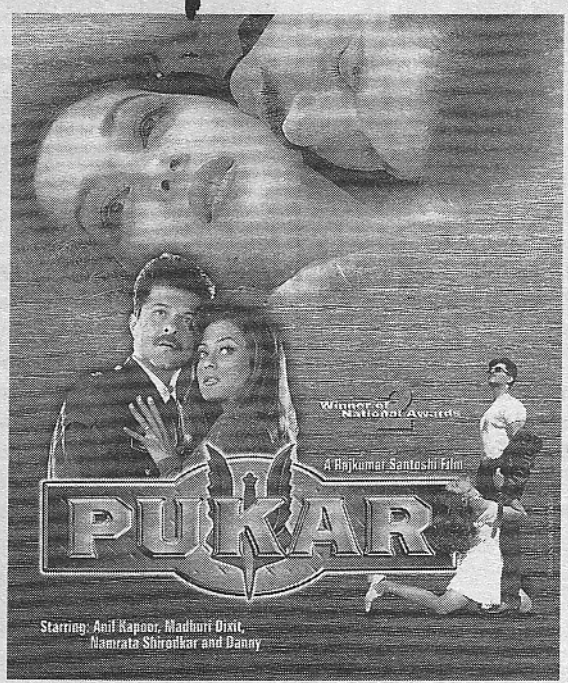
SUBHAS RAI

Could the anthology have been better than it is? At 500 pages, it is a large volume already. Nevertheless, there are gaps that could have been filled. For instance, it would have been useful to include at least a couple of pieces by non-South Asians, such as an independent-minded Chinese scholar, someone from Japan, and from the West. A former general or admiral making the case for the uselessness of nuclear weapons would have been a tactical gain for the collection. Admiral L. Ramdas from India could have written just such a piece, or the American, Lee Butler (the volume does have a statement by retired South Asian generals, but it is too hortatory to be very useful). Third, the collection lacks a good, exclusive essay on the prospects of global disarmament. Fourth, *Out of the Nuclear Shadow* needed an essay that struggles with the difficulties and contradictions that will have to be faced by and within the anti-nuclear movements in both India and Pakistan (the two movements are unlikely to face the same hur- dles). Comparisons with the US and European cases, or Japan, would have enlivened such an essay. Fifth, there are some personal favourites missing from the volume, especially the pieces by Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, and Rustom Bharucha in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Also, an extract from Amitav Ghosh's *New Yorker* article (and later book, *Countdown?*) would have been useful. If memory serves, Ramchandra Guha had an interesting commentary on the tests as well. Finally, a question: was there nothing in Hindi or the other vernacular languages worth reprinting?

These minor reservations notwithstanding, *Out of the Nuclear Shadow* is a terrific addition to the growing archive of sophisticated and critical-minded works on South Asian nuclearisation. Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian have done Indians, Pakistanis and all South Asians a service by publishing this selection. Anyone who cares about war and peace and democracy and the welfare of a billion and a half people should surely buy this anthology.

Rescripting Pukar

Here is an ad for *Pukar*, a Bollywood blockbuster I have *not* seen. Cast: Anil Kapoor, Madhuri Dixit, Namrata Shirodkar, Danny Dengzongpa. Going by the poster, the plot must involve Anil Kapoor as an upright military officer, possibly an Indian Air Force guy. So why is he seen nuzzling Madhuri on the one hand and embracing Namrata on the other picture? As even today's 'farwaard' heroes cannot be allowed to two-time, therein must lie the key to the plot. Here, then, is my suggested storyline for *Pukar*:



Anil goes on a mission against Pakistan (it is no longer necessary in these *Gadar*-ridden times to be coy about identifying Pakistan as the enemy). Now if he had not returned, then it would have been his best friend (Akshay? Aamir? Sanjeev?) who would have become pally with his girl-friend, and there would be a real rumpus when Anil turns up at the wedding, head swathed in bandages. But there are two *ladies* here in the poster and the lone Anil, so *kuch aur twist hei*. (Danny does not count as a sideline lover, but more of that later). So what could it be? Ah yes, Anil is indeed shot down by enemy fire, but survives but with near-total memory loss. He forgets Madhuri and develops ardour for Namrata and marries her before you can say 'Gnat'. The rapidly developing plot has Madhuri walking morosely down the Mall in Shimla (or by the Brahmaputra promenade in Guwahati, though this is unlikely), and espies the honeymooning couple. Slight problem — if Anil and Namrata were not already married in this evolving script, she could have died conveniently so that the film ends with Madhuri and Anil walking into the Shimla fog. Okay...so when Anil sees Madhuri, his past comes flooding back. Being a smart guy, he can see he has a problem. The frame is frozen, Namrata and Madhuri face off. Namrata is the more modern and hence dis-likable of the two (see how her upturned head is dangerously close to the hero's pelvic area). She shrugs and leads Anil away. Madhuri, the *sati savitri*, pulls her achkan to her face, sobs, and then fade to... The narration is stuck once more. We just have to kill one lady if this movie is to end, and those of us in the lower stall are getting restive for the lack of action. Let us quickly bring in Danny. For his Genghis Khan looks, Danny of Sikkim has been railroaded more than once to play the part of the ISI-supported mujahid-insurgent-infiltrator, all bald head and pulsating blood vessels. Who cares that the average mujahid looks more like Atal Behari Vajpayee than the sinister Genghis. So, Danny storms the Shimla Mall, AK-47 blazing, mowing down good citizens. Why is he doing this? He is after Anil. Why is he after Anil? Because Anil is India's best fighter pilot, stupid. And Danny is envious of Anil's great hair, which not only does his skull proud but sprouts with abandone on his chest, back and shoulders. As Danny sprays the Mall with his Kalashnikov, Anil does a double back-flip which lands him right up on the clocktower, whence he swoops down on Danny and gives him the Hindi film-clinch used by all stars since Dilip Kumar gave it to Dara Singh in *Mughal-e-Azam*. More pulsating veins and bulging eyes before Danny gives up his ghost. A great ending to *Pukar*, you might think. But we still have two actresses alive. Think. Madhuri has already seen her best days and is nicely married to an NRI daktarsaab in real life, plus her tummy has begun to sag a wee bit. Shall we? We could have her fall off a cliff, but then that would leave Anil morose for the rest of his life and would not do in a Hindi film. Having her meet with an opportune death-dealing accident on the highway down to Chandigarh? Uh-huh. Only if we retroactively identify her as an ISI agent 'sent over' to eliminate Anil can there be an appropriate denouement. Sent over to dispatch the hero, she falls in love with him instead and was unable to pull the trigger. All problems are thus resolved. Danny is dead. For the secret agent Madhuri, there can be no death in combat, only the ignominy of suicide. So (and let us get this over with quickly) she comes up to Anil, confesses that she is ISI. She says, "Anil, I am ISI". But Anil is in a forgiving mood and reaches out to her, but behind Madhuri is a gaping void, a cliff that has suddenly presented itself. She leans back, and that's it. Namrata and Anil trudge off into the Shimla fog.
Great script. Mmm hmmm...

Kanak Dixit

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