March 2002

HIMAL

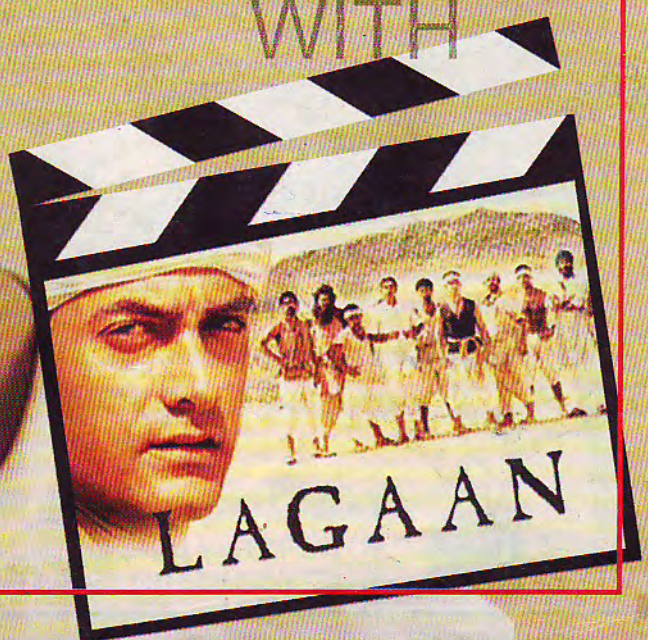
SOUTH ASIAN

The price of power

Island of hope

Sikkim's sardar

WHAT'S UP WITH



Indra

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

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

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

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HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

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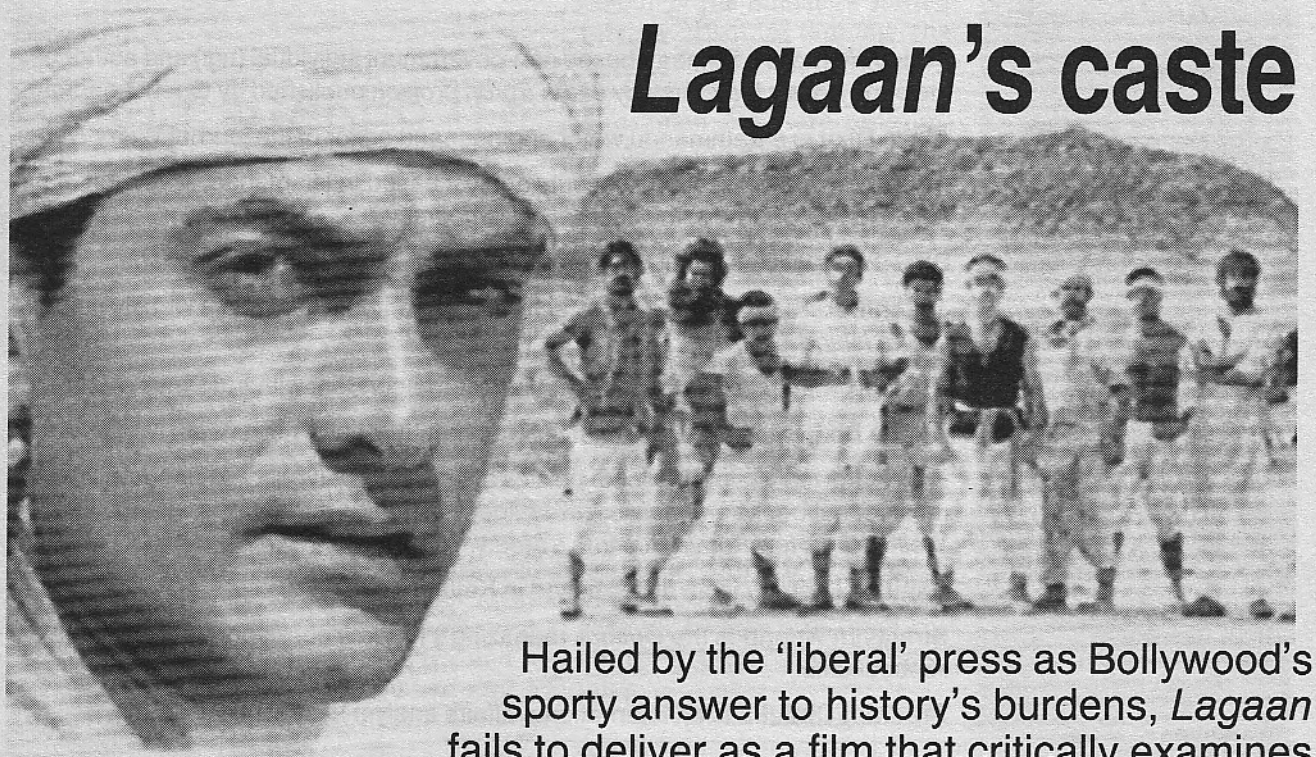
Lagaan's caste



Hailed by the 'liberal' press as Bollywood's sporty answer to history's burdens, *Lagaan* fails to deliver as a film that critically examines the complicated legacies of caste and gender. More to the point, its – and South Asia's – obesession with cricket speaks volumes about a region that has yet to reach an honest self-definition accessible to all.

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SOUTH ASIAN

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Cover design by **Navin Joshi.**

SRI LANKA

SANITY STAKES ITS CLAIM

WE HADN'T seen the leader of the Tamil Tigers, Prabhakaran, since 1989 when we watched him at a Jaffna football field addressing a large crowd euphoric about impending peace. The Indian Peace-keeping Force had just arrived, and we remember Prabhakaran being a small man dwarfed by his swarthy bodyguards, giving a speech in a squeaky voice. One of the world's most ruthless militant leaders was not the most charismatic.

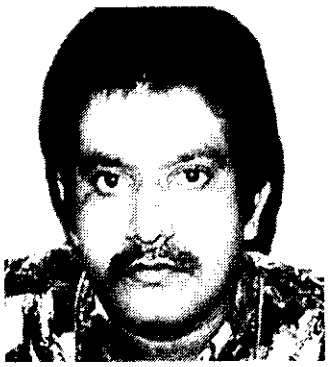
As it turned out, Prabhakaran soon turned his claymore mines on the IPKF, causing such heavy casualties and forcing the Indian Army to retreat ignominously. But Prabhakaran was a man harbouring long-term grudges, and it wasn't over for him. By 1993 he had sent a Tigress suicide bomber to kill Rajiv Gandhi, the architect of the IPKF.

Last month we watched Prabhakaran in a safari suit signing the Norwegian brokered MOU which had earlier been signed separately by the country's new prime minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe. Except for his jowls, Prabhakaran looked none the worse for a decade of jungle living.

Wonder what was going through his head, if anything, as he signed the document. Were the 75,000 Sri Lankans killed (many of them by his forces in terrorist attacks) worth it if he was willing to give up his demand for a separate Tamil homeland anyway? Ultimately, what was the sense of the suffering of the families of those ripped apart in bus bombs in Central Colombo, novice monks gunned down in a bus in Anuradhapura, the thousands of rival Tamil militants who the Tigers tortured and killed in an even more gruesome manner than they killed their Sinhalese enemies?

Provided the Norwegian initiative is successful, and let's hope it is, there are several lessons learnt from this entire tragedy. The first, of course, must be the responsibility of a majority community. The roots of this conflict go back to post-indepdendence Ceylon when the Sinhalese thought they needed to redress perceived favouritism by British colonials of the Tamil minority. Electoral pandering to the majority voters was too tempting for politicians from the mainstream political parties, and a succession of laws weighted in favour of the Sinhalese started raising disquiet among the Tamils. Among these: favouring the Sinhala language, making Buddhism the state religion, changing the country's name to Sri Lanka and even putting a little "Sri" sign on all car number plates.

The grievances piled up, the state battled and brutally subdued a Marxist JVP uprising in the south, the protectionist Sri Lanka Freedom Party lost elections and the United National Party returned to power in 1975 with the slogan of turning Sri Lanka into another Singapore. Things went well for a while, but in the north Tamil militancy was gathering strength and the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983 changed everything.



Prabakaran, then and now.

The rest is too tragic to recount. Suffice it to say that a country poised to make an economic leap forward to catch up with south-east Asian tigers squandered its potential as well as the dramatic gains it had made in education and health since independence.

Today, there is hope again. Just when we thought the UNP and Peoples Alliance cohabitation was unworkable, it seems to have turned out to be the reason why the peace initiative was successful. The constituency for peace among Sri Lankans is now too large for the politicians to ignore. President Chandrika Bandaranaike, still smarting from her electoral defeat, will be tempted to put a spanner in the works-mainly because the UNP is going to take the credit for restoring peace. That would mean making the same mistake all over again.

> The constituency for peace among Sri Lankans is now too large for the politicians to ignore.

Ranil Wickremasinghe is a survivor, one of the last remaining of JR Jayewardene's young turks who was not assassinated by Tamil suicide bombers. He is determined to restore peace, and needs to be given the chance. The road ahead will not be easy – waging peace will be more difficult than continuing the ruinous war.

– Kunda Dixit

SRI LANKA

ISLAND OF PEACE (AND HOPE)

THE MAIN feature in the Norwegian-drafted Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and LTTE leader Velupillai Prabakaran in March is the indefinite ceasefire agreement. It calls for a two-week notice being given by either party prior to termination of the ceasefire. This clause is likely to assuage apprehensions regarding the possibility of a surprise attack by either side. In the past, it has always been the LTTE that ended ceasefires with surprise attacks. On this occasion, with the Norwegians and, indeed, the entire diplomatic community in Sri Lanka keenly watching the peace process, the chances of such repeat performances are considerably reduced.

President Kumaratunga must be persuaded to cooperate in the peace process that has just been restarted.

On the other hand, there are a couple of serious problems with the ceasefire agreement. The first deals with the government's ability to interdict LTTE re-supplies, which could lead to a possible unraveling of the peace process. The government's position is that the MOU permits the Sri Lankan armed forces to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, though without engaging in offensive military operations against the LTTE. Apprehending unauthorised vessels entering Sri Lankan territorial waters, by this reasoning, would be self-defence. But the Tigers' reasoning can be expected to be different.

Just a few days before the signing of the agreement, there was a major clash at sea between the Navy and the Sea Tigers. The LTTE's version was that the navy fired on the Sea Tigers while training, whereas Colombo claimed that the rebel flotilla had fired first while the navy was approaching it to check for gun-running. The MOU fails to address this type of problem, thus presenting a potential flashpoint which could unravel the ceasefire. It is noteworthy, however, that both the government and the insurgent leadership chose not to press this naval encounter to propaganda advantage. This indicates that both sides are determined to pursue the peace option, even though no doubt each has a fallback option firmly in place.

There is no doubt that the emplacement of a new government in December is what has precipitated this dramatic political evolution in Sri Lanka. It is obvious that the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe rejects any overt strategy of politically or militarily marginalising the LTTE. Indeed, it appears prepared to work with and through the LTTE. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and the ministers who have been deployed in the peace process have stated publicly that an end to the war is a precondition for resolving the country's economic and other problems.

There is some apprehension that if the present MOU is an outcome of the government's one-sided need, then it puts the LTTE in the driver's seat and the insurgents may be merely biding time to strike when the opportunity presents itself. Those skeptical of the LTTE's motives attribute its willingness to go with the peace process to international pressures unleashed after 11 September and the United States' war against terrorism. On the other hand, we need to remember that the insurgents had indicated their desire to engage with an administration led by Mr Wickremesinghe long before the events of 11 September. For at least two years prior to that fateful day – including during the presidential elections of 1999 and the general elections of 2000 – the LTTE had showed clear preference to work with Mr. Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

It must be said that the overall track record of the previous Chandrika Kumaratunga government was not strong on seeking constructive engagement with the LTTE. On the contrary, its objective was to marginalise the LTTE through a two-pronged politico-military strategy. The unwillingness of President Kumaratunga to work with the government in the run-up to the present ceasefire, too, indicates her continuing reservations about working with the LTTE for peace.

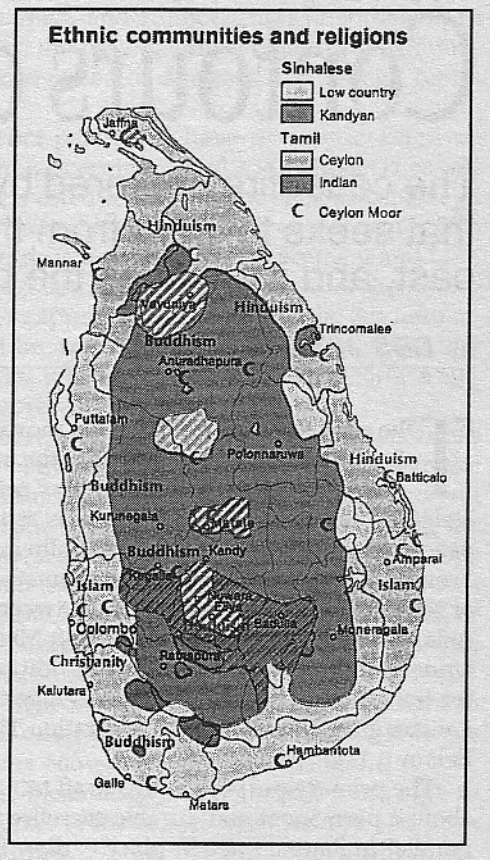
The second problematic area in the MOU, therefore, is the government's inability to obtain bipartisan support for it. The prime minister had invited President Kumaratunga to co-sign the MOU with him, but she

refused to do so on the plea that she had was unaware of the contents of the agreement until after the LTTE leader had already signed it. Given the nature of the insurgency in Sri Lanka – one which touches the people's deep-rooted psyche itself – and the high stakes, a bipartisan policy towards the peace process remains essential. There must not be division between the two major political parties on the matter of a ceasefire meant to lead to peace. Civil society organisations that gave their whole-hearted support to the former government in its own peace initiatives, and the international community as well, need to do all they can to persuade the President and her party to cooperate in the peace process that has just been re-started.

President Kumaratunga's refusal to co-sign is a negative signal if there was one. On the one hand, her instincts as a combative politician are to not wish the new government to succeed where she so clearly failed – to Mr. Wickremesinghe would go then the mantle of peacemaker. On the other hand, the president is also acutely aware that the people at large support a genuine peace process. Mrs. Kumaratunga perhaps understands that it is too early to conclusively reject the peace process as one that will not lead to a permanent peace.

The spoiler in the peace process already out on the field is the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has been opposing the Norwegian-facilitated peace process since the very beginning. Quite unconcerned that the MOU consolidates the ceasefire, the JVP has been engaging in a massive poster campaign against it, charging that is paves the way for a handover of the Northeast, together with its Sinhalese and Muslim inhabitants, to the LTTE. However, lacking a mass base, the JVP has not been able to mobilise the crowds. Any alliance with the Mrs. Kumaratunga's People's Alliance in opposition to the MOU during the local government elections scheduled for 20 March would therefore be a great opportunity to the JVP. All eyes are therefore on the PA.

There is a third problematic aspect that the MOU must contend with, and that concerns the Muslim community in the east. Using the opportunities provided by the ceasefire to enter into government-controlled territory over the last couple of months, the LTTE has been extorting millions of rupees from the Muslims, even kidnapping them for the purpose. The LTTE has thus succeeded in creating a rift between itself and a community that constitutes at least a third of the population of the east. This is likely to complicate future political negotiations regarding the unit up for devolution. It would be understable if the Muslims balk at being put under the rule of those who so mistreated them.



The MOU does state in general terms that abduction, extortion and harassment of the civilian population is not permitted. It further states in its preamble that the Muslim population is one of the groups that are not directly a party to the conflict but who are suffering its consequences. It goes onto say that the provisions of the MOU regarding the security of civilians and their property apply to all inhabitants. Apart from the MOU, however, the matter of Muslim disenchantment with a possible formula is something the civic organisations and international interlocutors must pay particular attention to.

More than two decades ago, sections of the Tamil community took to arms in the pursuit of their right to self-determination after facing oppression from the majority Sinhalese. Today, the Tamil people and those who seek to represent them must recognise that in turn oppress minorities living in areas that they numerically and militarily dominate. It is not improbable that in the interests of preserving good relations with the LTTE, both the government and Norwegian facilitators will soft pedal the LTTE abuses. National and international groups must take this matter up with both the government and LTTE to ensure that all people benefit from the signing of the MOU.

– Jehan Perera

Contours of a ceasefire draft

The ceasefire brokered by the Oslo diplomats is a practical document that seeks to learn from the specific Sri Lankan experience of the past, and it provides the best chance for peace yet.

by ***DBS JEYARAJ***

The road to peace in Sri Lanka moved significantly forward on 7 February with the arrival of Norwegian deputy foreign affairs minister Vidar Helgesen to Colombo. Helgesen was at the helm of a peace delegation including Erik Solheim and Kjirste Tromsdal, two top Norwegian diplomats. The product of their hectic shuttle diplomacy between Europe and Asia was a tangible document, a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) outlining conditions and rules for the ceasefire that was ultimately signed by the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The primary purpose of this draft MOU was to bring about a permanent and durable ceasefire to replace the parallel unilateral ones in place earlier. Both the LTTE and Government had adhered to unilaterally declared cessations of hostility separately, extended on a monthly basis and applicable to land-based activity alone. The Norwegian focus was to harmonise the situation and evolve a structured and comprehensive ceasefire covering all types of land-, sea- and air-based activity in addition to related issues.

The peacemaker: Vidar Helgesen

The draft was formulated after active consultation with both parties. Although the 'form' belonged to Norway, the 'content' was that of the Sri Lankan government and LTTE. The Norwegians had dutifully incorporated all suggestions, proposals and amendments put forward by both sides in the document after the expected intense debate and discussion. Proposals that emanated during discussions with President Kumaratunga and former Foreign Affairs minister Lakshman Kadirgamar were also relied upon.

The Norwegians also drew extensively from input provided by officials and diplomats from countries committed to a lasting peace in Sri Lanka. India, in particular, was regularly consulted and informed of the progress achieved.

Peace plan

The primary purpose of the seven-page MOU is to ensure a stable and structured ceasefire. The initial idea of a time-bound ceasefire for one year was shelved, giving way to an open-ended arrangement. Both sides are expected to set in motion certain measures from the day of the ceasefire. The measures would be conducted on a reciprocal, staggered basis with one condition being predicated on implementation of the other.

These conditions and deadlines are not expected to be problematic as both sides have already commenced unilateral efforts in implementing some of them already. Two noteworthy examples are the requirement of lifting the economic embargo on the government side and the opening of the A-9 highway or Jaffna-Kandy road by the LTTE.

The ceasefire is applicable to land-, sea- and air-based activity. To summarise generally, the armed forces cannot launch assault operations, shelling, aerial and naval bombardment, cordon and search operations, arbitrary arrests, and so on. The LTTE cannot conduct operations such as frontal assaults, suicide strikes or explosive attacks in the entire island, including Colombo. They are also debarred from actions such as political assassinations. Likewise, the government may not allow its deep penetration units known as 'Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols' to target LTTE leaders.

The application of the ceasefire in the air and sea will help the Tamil fisherfolk greatly. These unfortunate people have been deprived of their traditional livelihood because of the government's concern with protecting its naval installations, vessels and aircraft from sea-based Tamil Tiger attacks. With the ceasefire coming into force, the rationale for the fishing ban is gone. The LTTE is specifically forbidden to conduct over or undersea strikes at marine or airborne targets.

A vital aspect of the MOU is the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), a mechanism designed to monitor the ceasefire and, more importantly, to prevent its unexpected collapse. A crucial feature of SLMM is its capacity to function as a dispute-solving reconciliatory mechanism. The panel's emphasis would not be that of detecting violations, accepting violation complaints or

reprimanding offenders. Rather, the focus would be conflict resolution – as complaints are received or violations detected, the committee will delve into the matter and arrive at amicable settlements. The Monitoring commission is mandated with authority to take prompt and "immediate action on complaints made by either party, to inquire into and assist in the settlement of any dispute". The idea is to resolve prickly issues at the lowest possible level without allowing them to escalate.

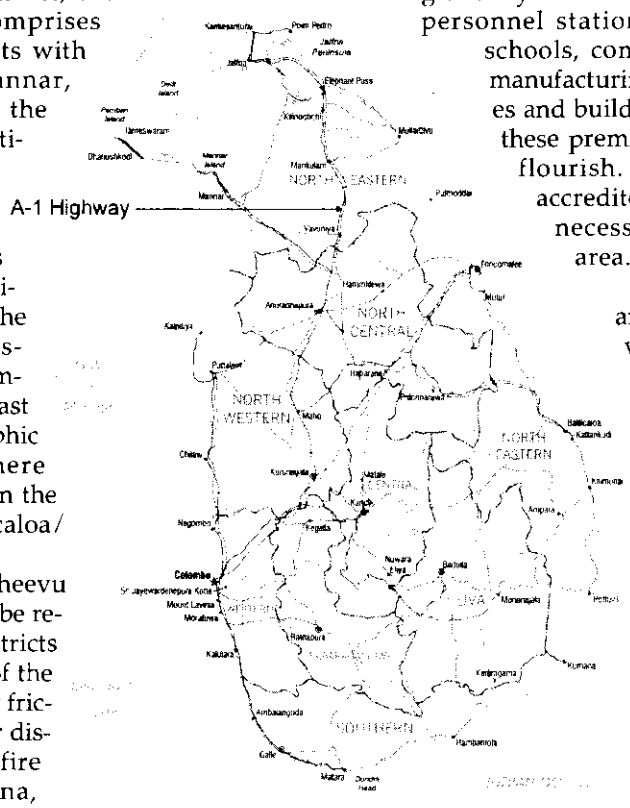
It will not be possible for either party to take offence over an issue and break off from the ceasefire easily and quickly. A minimum of 14 days notice of such intention and reasons must be given to the panel. Following the guidelines of the MOU, the monitors will inquire into the reasons and attempt as far as possible to address grievances, thereby preventing a collapse. At least in theory, breakdowns over trivial issues, as happened in the past, are now less likely.

Geography of Peace

The monitoring panel will be broken up into six separate de-centralised units for functional purposes. All the units, described as 'advisory', will be integrated and coordinated by a central regulating committee whose head will report to the Norwegian government. A Norwegian national with extensive knowledge and experience of Sri Lanka will head the monitoring mission. The mission will have offices in Colombo and Mallavi in the Tiger-controlled territory.

The main theatre of conflict, the Northeastern Province, comprises eight administrative districts with Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitheevu in the North and Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Amparai (or Digamadulla as it is known now in the East). The ceasefire envisages these eight districts being reduced to six for monitoring purposes. In the East, the Batticaloa and Amparai districts will be treated as one composite district, which is at least in part a reflection of geographic considerations. Hence, there would only be two districts in the East: Trincomalee and Batticaloa/Amparai.

In the North, the Mullaitheevu and Kilinochchi districts will be regarded as one unit. Both districts are under near-total control of the LTTE, which reduces scope for friction. The North will have four districts for purposes of ceasefire monitoring, namely Jaffna, Mannar, Vavuniya and Kilinochchi/Mullaitheevu. In all six districts, the truce-monitoring advisory committees will be comprised of domestic and foreign representatives.



Each district panel will have two representatives each from the government and LTTE sides. These 24 persons are expected to be eminent persons capable of discharging their duties without fear or favour. The ceasefire MOU does not name the government and LTTE representatives. Both sides are free to choose their nominees subject to approval by the other side. Additionally, there will be international representatives heading the committees. It is likely that there will be only a single foreign representative in most districts.

The ceasefire envisages clearly demarcated zones of control by both parties, which would in effect freeze the current status quo of territorial control. There will be a "buffer zone" of at least 600 metres separating the respective forward defence lines. Movement of troops and cadres into this 'no-man's-land' is allowed up to a maximum of 100 metres from their respective lines of control. By the terms of the agreement, both sides will, however, exercise restraint even if this dividing line is crossed by a wide margin. Both sides have the right to fire upon the other side, however, if the violation is deemed serious enough to anticipate danger.

There was, incidentally, no demand by the LTTE to get security forces to move back to earlier pre-war positions or withdraw completely from the Tamil areas. The troops, however, will be required to relocate only gradually to facilitate normalcy. Thus security personnel stationed in places of worship, schools, community centres and halls, manufacturing plants, government offices and buildings, etc. will have to vacate these premises as civilian life begins to flourish. They will be relocated to accredited military venues, but not necessarily withdrawn from the area.

The controls exercised by the armed forces and LTTE over civilians are expected to be reduced – if not relaxed totally – as normal life returns. Codes of conduct will be introduced for both sides to follow in order to maximise civilian safeguards and rights. The present draft bars both sides from engaging in hostile acts against the civilian population. Some acts specified are "torture, intimidation, abduction, extortion and harassment".

The MOU contains regu-

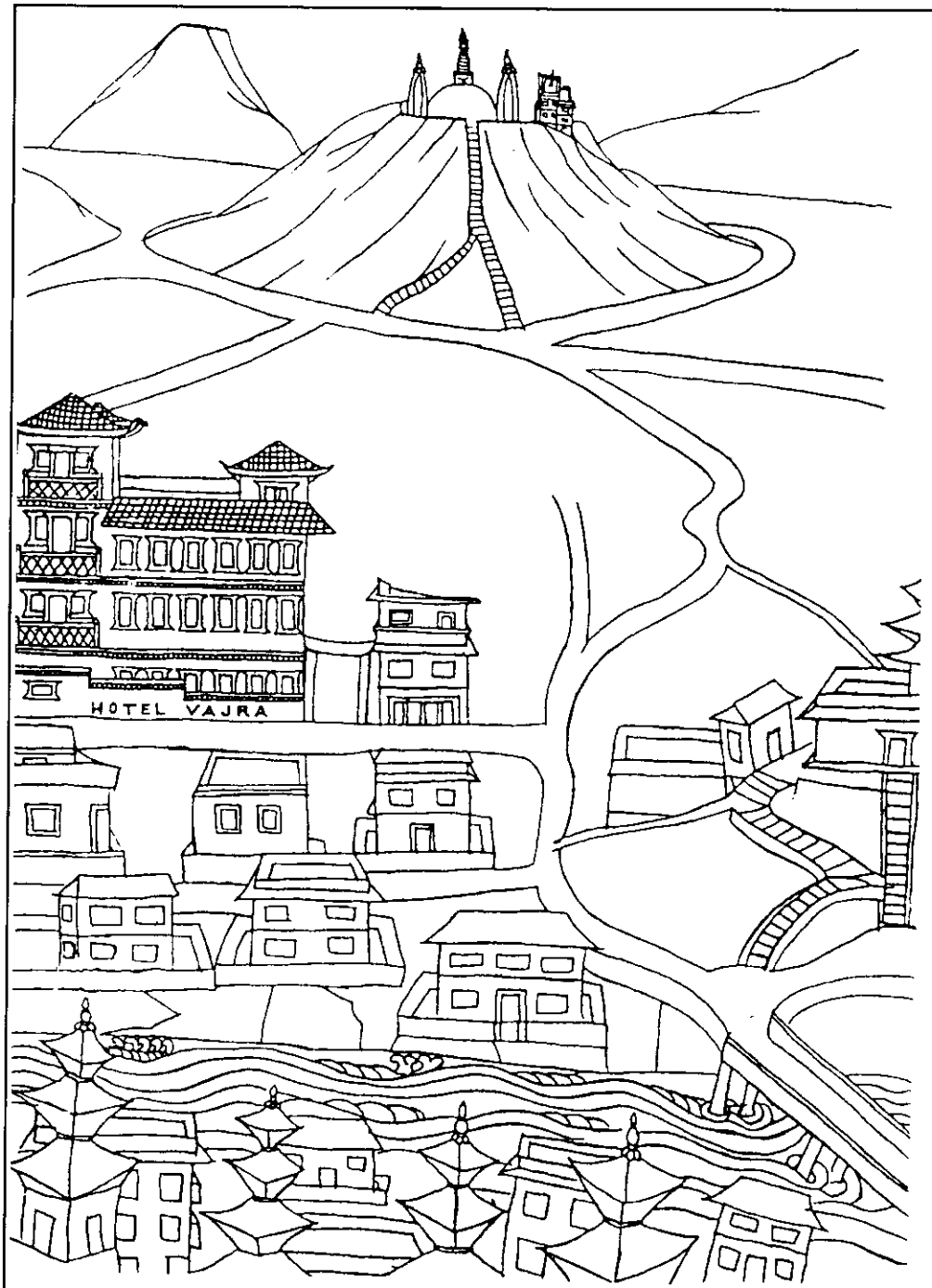
lations that guarantee freedom of movement of cadres and troops from either side into the other area of control. An important requirement in this regard is prior permission. The LTTE will allow unarmed security personnel free movement in its sphere of control and the Tigers are required to open the A-9 highway within 30 days of the ceasefire coming into force and to enable unarmed troops right of passage within 60 days. This is expected to be a boon for soldiers proceeding to and from their homes on leave. Till now, this is a problem that has presented a major logistical problem for the armed forces, causing much anxiety among the soldiers. Similarly, LTTE cadres as individual combatants – unarmed and out of uniform – are to be allowed to visit friends and relatives living in areas of control of the other party, on a restricted basis.

There is also no restriction on recruitment, or on the acquisition of arms by either side. The agreement allows both sides to recruit exclusively for the purpose of maintaining force strength and status as they were before 24 December, which was when the current parallel ceasefire came into effect. Thus, both the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE are free to recruit and train. The Tigers have stated that they will recruit volunteers over 17 years of age for administrative and political purposes.

As far as arms acquisition is concerned, there are two viewpoints. One is that the navy be allowed to engage in 'defensive action' by intercepting suspicious vessels that could be transporting arms to the LTTE. The general provision in the draft about the Sri Lankan armed forces having the right to perform their legitimate task of "safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Sri Lanka is invoked in this connection. Colombo is emphasing this and the need to restrict fishing rights. The LTTE naturally opposes this and wants unrestricted marine movement during the ceasefire.

Both sides have the right to fire upon the other side, if the violation is deemed serious enough to anticipate danger.

The fact is that with or without specific clauses, both sides will be engaged in enhancing their arsenals. Attempting to dwell too much on this aspect can distort the chief objectives of the ceasefire and convert it merely into a coast-patrolling exercises. The hope is that both sides will be realistic enough to accept the inevitable. A stable ceasefire could alter the climate so drastically that such recourse to arms in the future may be negated. Additionally, the emphasis on reconstruction and development will affect priorities.



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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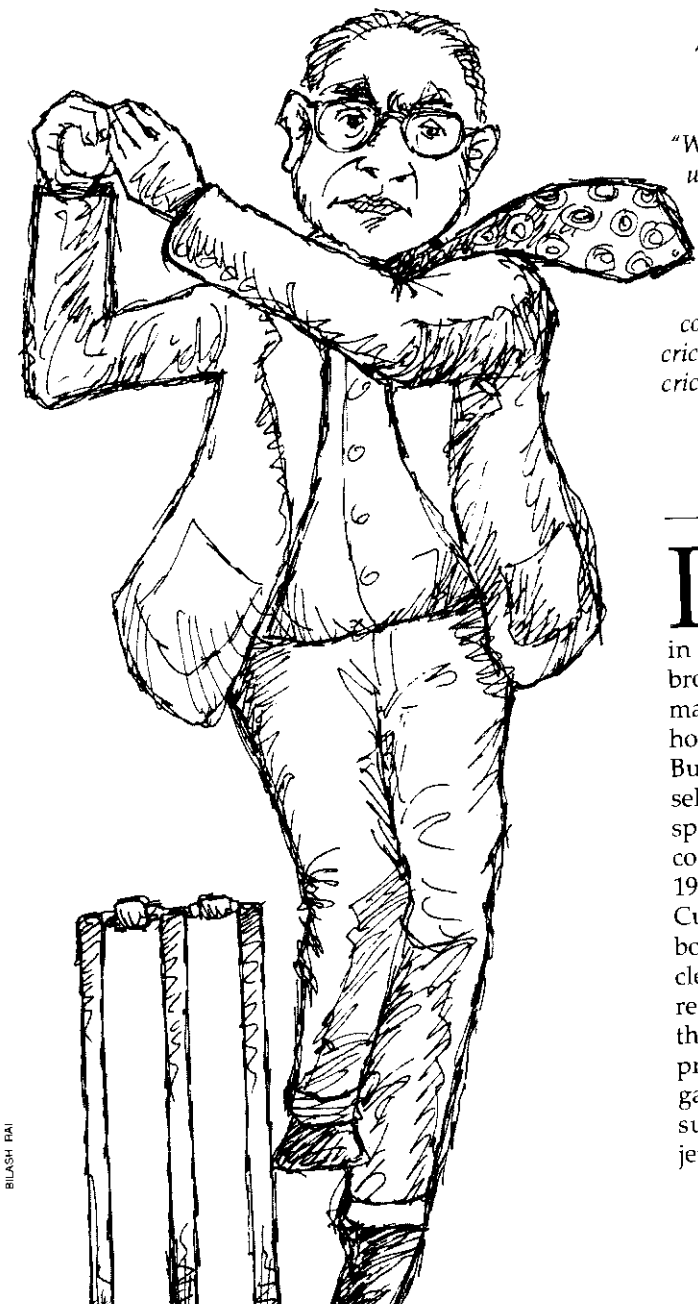
Eating with Our Fingers, Watching Hindi Cinema and Consuming Cricket

by **Siriyavan Anand**



BILASH RAI

"Caste devitalises a man. It is a process of sterilisation."
–Dr BR Ambedkar, Philosophy of Hinduism

"Why all this hullagulla about some remarks and f words used. So what's the big deal? As though Indians are the holy saints without abusive words. Actually Indians are the most racist people on earth. India is the only country where we have schedule caste system. Is this not racism??? We have Bungis and untouchables. Who has coined these names? The very Indians brahmans who play cricket and want to be treated with respect. Piss on you all cricketers of India."

– A posting at an Indian Express email discussion forum on 'racism'
(http://www.indiaexpress.com/news/sports/cricket/20011120-1.html).

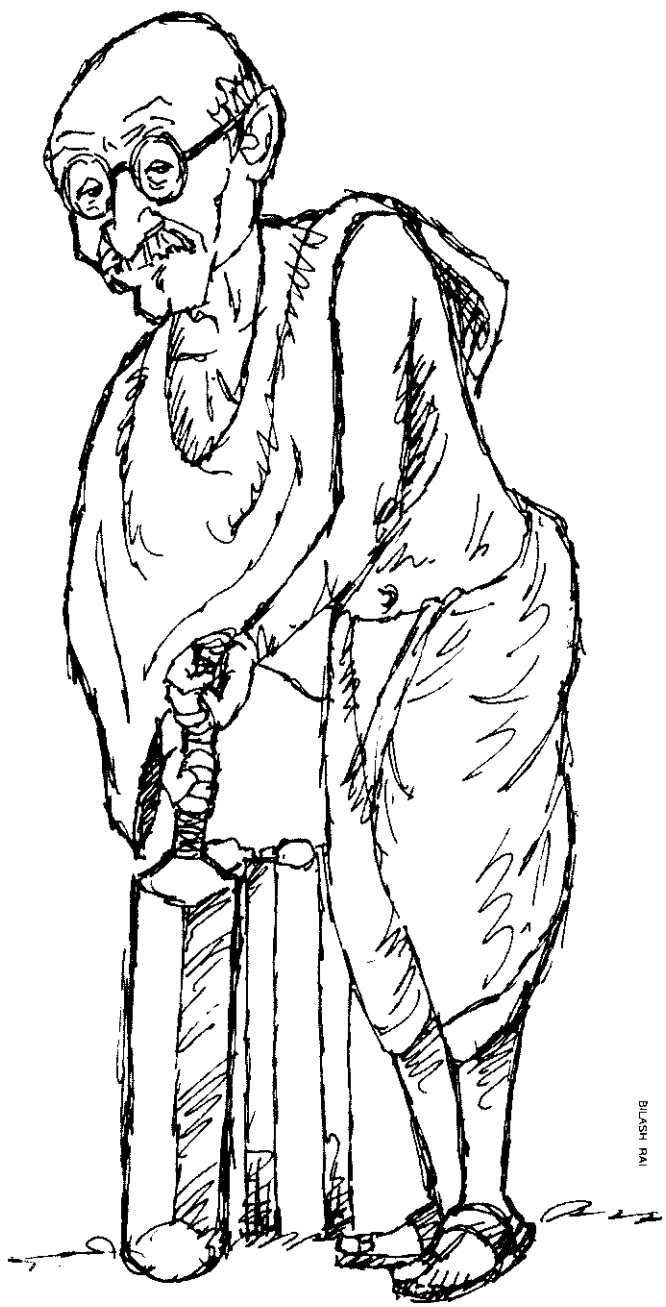
India is a billion-weak nation thirsting for truly international sporting glory. Every four years, the fact that Olympic success eludes India is lamented in public fora. Karnam Malleswari's weightlifting bronze in the 2000 Olympics, PT Usha's almost-bronze many Olympics ago and fading memories of the men's hockey team's successive golds offer little consolation. But the last two decades have seen a phenomenal hard-sell of cricket. Though cricket is truly an uninternational sport — played by hardly 12 nations, all of them former colonies of the British empire — India's success in the 1983 World Cup, followed by the hosting of the Reliance Cup in the Subcontinent, and the subsequent television boom spurred by the policy of 'liberalisation' (a very clever word), corporate sponsorship and subsidisation, resulted in cricket effectively being marketed as the game that mattered. Cricket, like popular cinema, became a product of mass consumption, especially after one-day games became a regular fixture. More physical sports such as hockey and football have been effectively jettisoned for 'the gentleman's game'.

The celebration and success of the movie *Lagaan* as a nice little good-vs-evil, David-vs-Goliath tale must be understood in this context. *Lagaan* has won an Oscar nod for inclusion in the 'best foreign film' lineup. After a year of hype and accolades in the Indian media and deft packaging for select Western festival circuits and in Hollywood, producer-actor Aamir Khan seems to have almost pulled off what he set out to achieve.

About the same time that *Lagaan*'s nomination for the Oscar made news, Indian newspapers and television channels devoted more than the usual space to some unusual cricket news. In Madras, Karnataka had won the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank Corporation National Cricket Championship for the Blind, defeating Delhi. A 'liberal-secular' newspaper which has no qualms calling itself *The Hindu* (February 13-14, 2002) extensively reported the tournament and even carried two-column pictures. Tamil television channels covered it as the 'soft story' of the day in their news bulletins. It looks like the World Cup for the Blind will be hosted by Madras in December 2002. Some multinational corporation, driven by late-capitalist guilt and the 'we-care' spirit, might sponsor that event too.

As I begin this, I feel weighed down by the burden of addressing (the 'liberal'?) readers of *Himal* on the regressiveness of a film like *Lagaan*, and even more weighed down by the prospect of convincing them that cricket in India has been a truly casteist game — a game best suited to Hinduism. Burdened, because even those most critical of overriding nationalism jump with joy when their national team wins. In fact, as a friend points out "apart from eating with our fingers, unfortunately both cricket and Hindi films unite South Asians". For a Subcontinent that so obsessively watches cricket and Hindi cinema, *Lagaan* offers cinema-as-cricket and cricket-as-cinema. In the Hyderabad of mid-1990s, as a university-bound hostelite watching a one-day match in the common room I saw all groups and communities 'cheering for India'. Telugu-speaking Dalits, Oriyas, Malayalis, brahmans, Kannadigas, M.Tech students alike would all come in identifiable gangs, reserve seats, and be 'united' by cricket even if they had battles to fight outside the common room. The other programmes that drew huge collective viewership were film song-countdowns in Hindi and Telugu.

To understand the vulgarity of *Lagaan* one needs be alive to *who* actually plays cricket in India, even as the myth is fabricated that everybody can participate in the game — you open a can of Coke and a sixer materialises or a wicket falls, so you keep consuming Coke for the team and the nation's good, as Aishwarya Rai leads by example during commercial breaks between overs. Even as direct participation in cricket seems an impossibility for most Indians — one half of the population, women, are effectively excluded — it encourages them to become consumers of the game irrespective of their caste, class, gender and religion. You consume cricket like Aishwarya consumes Coke in the advertisement. Quite the same happens with cinema produced in Madras or Bombay. Even when the hero — be it Rajinikant, MG Ramachandran, Chiranjeevi or Aamir Khan — is on most occasions discoursing against the Dalits, OBCs, women and Muslims ('subalterns'), there are millions of fans from these very groups who identify with their filmic presence: consumption, with the illusion of participation. And, in a nation of one billion only 14 can make it to the 'national' team. Yet, during a one-day match even the poor who cannot afford a TV, or when they can, are unable anyway to afford the pay channel that beams the match, congregate outside electronics shops and watch the game even as pockets get picked. *Lagaan*, which partakes of and perpetuates this folklore of cricket as universal social solvent, lends itself very eminently to a 'casteist' reading precisely because of its thematic inflections and its choice of things to celebrate and suppress.



BILASH RAI

The 'brahamanical' game: Indian fielders appealing.

Lagaan: Millennial *Purana*

Lagaan is like one of those many Hindu 'puranas', literally 'stories of old', which have scant regard for historicity, and which in fact revel in their ahistoricity. Puranas are mostly brahman-written mythologies that dwell upon the imagined feats and lore of brahmanical gods and goddesses. Like all else in brahmanic Hinduism's self-representation, puranas excel in obfuscation and myth-making — all towards keeping the (aryan-vedic) caste and patriarchal status quo intact. *Lagaan* is one such purana of the new millennium, an accretion to the quintessentially brahmanic myth-making tradition. That *Lagaan*'s story and direction are by a brahman (Ashutosh Gowariker) is not incidental, though a Muslim (Aamir Khan) parades as the most public face of the film.

Set in 1893, *Lagaan* is the story of how the residents of Champaner, a village in Awadh (modern Uttar Pradesh), master the game of cricket in three months and defeat the British cantonment team. The wager is that the British would not impose tax (*lagaan*) for the next three years if Champaner wins the match; if it loses, the entire province should pay a triple levy. Approaching cricket as the white man's pompous version of *gilli-danda*, the Champaner XI wins the game under the leadership of Bhuvan (Aamir Khan) aided by a 'fair-minded' white lady (Elizabeth, sister of villainous British officer Russell who challenges Bhuvan).

Lagaan is being celebrated by secularists, nationalists, subalternists, leftists, pseudo-secularists, BJPites, academics, critics and filmgoers alike. Columnists and academicians distanced themselves from the loud and jingoistic *Gadar* and tested their analytical abilities on the subtleties of *Lagaan*. (The film has generated three articles, and counting, in *Economic and Political Weekly*.) Profiling Aamir Khan soon after the Oscar call, *The Indian Express* (17 February, 2002) said *Lagaan* "won the battle of the imagination in a way *Gadar* didn't". The film, "brimming with nationalism and the charm of cricket", was the right one for the Oscars, the report said. In post-Hindutva India, *Lagaan* (unlike *Gadar*) seems to offer the liberal-secular brigade something to cheer about.

Fretting over the prolonged marginalisation of "the rural" and "the peasantry" in Hindi cinema, Sudhanva Deshpande in a recent *Himal* article ('Hindi Films: The Rise of the Consumable Hero', August 2001) sees hope in *Lagaan*. Deshpande looks for "the banished peasant" in Hindi cinema of 1980s and 1990s and nostalgically mourns the absence of "the rural or urban labouring classes dancing and singing with the hero(ine)". He concludes, "This is why Aamir Khan's home production, *Lagaan*, is so refreshing". (And it is Sunny Deol-*Gadar* which makes him run into the arms of Aamir Khan, who, never mind, may well have campaigned for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh had he not been busy with the Oscar lobbying.) As if the rural/the peasantry was ever portrayed in all its feudal and casteist-patriarchal ugliness by Hindi cinema from 1950s to 1970s. In this framework, anything rural seems to be desirable from a class perspective. Hence we can forgive the fact that women have to bear the markers of rurality and 'tradition': "Hindi cinema has never been naturalistic, so there is no point complaining that the girls look anything but peasant. But today, the heroes do not have any peasantry watching their passage".

Deshpande also selectively forgets the utterly feudal *leitmotif* that is not just confined to Hindi, but also extends to Telugu and Tamil cinema as well: where the very-rural hero (played with masculine aggression by MGR, Sivaji Ganesan, Rajinikant, Vijaykanth, Akkineni Nageswar Rao, NT Rama Rao, Chiranjeevi, Balakrishna and other worthies) is pitted against the urban-educated heroine dressed in 'trendy, tight' clothes. Invariably, she rides a car, confronts the bullock cart-driving hero, abuses him in English in the presence of his and her friends, but ultimately (after some songs and dances) is tamed/rescued and ends up in the final frame in a sari, touching the feet of her husband and the in-laws. (Alternatively, in case the male character is a city-bred 'modern' and the female rural/rustic, she is raped by the man. The man would be the villain, and the 'victimised' woman the hero's sister who, 'unable to bear the shame commits suicide'; or, if the film is 'progressive', the hero ensures that his sister marries the now-sheepish rapist after making him see reason in a macho way.) This trend has continued till the 1990s down south, and even Govinda as *Coolie No. 1* (a remake of a Telugu 1990s film starring Venkatesh and Tabu), whom Deshpande celebrates for his "proletarian image" teaches the pride (*guroor*)-filled heroine a lesson, tames her, puts her in her place. In such a reading, Manmohan Desai becomes "the original postmodernist Bombay director, with a thorough (and often delightful) contempt for logic and meaning". Just as much as all Hindu mythologies are the first magical-realist texts (we did it all first/it is all in the vedas). Marquez and Lyotard can take a walk.

Coming back to *Lagaan*, it is not such a great hit in box-office terms. "In industry lingo it is an A-class hit", reports the *Indian Express*, meaning its popularity is confined to metros and urban pockets. (I watched it reluctantly in December 2001 in Madras, some six months after it was released. It was playing only morning-show in a cinema which accommodates about 180 people, but whose cheapest ticket is Rs 80.) Deshpande notes that "the economics of film production has altered dramatically, and those who now account for the profits of the industry are simply not interested in watching sweaty peasantry. Why then, has *Lagaan* succeeded? It must have been the cricket theme which, as in real life, manages to unite passions across classes and international borders." But this modern Gandhian purana is dangerous as far Dalits and women are concerned.

Take Champaner, the village from where our caste-Hindu hero Bhuvan leads the banner of revolt. For a long stretch in the film, Champaner — where men wear kurtas and vests ordered fresh (by Oscar-winning Bhanu Athaiya) from the nearest Khadi Gramodyog Bhandar and women are dressed in ethnic Rajasthani colours (starched spotless white if they happen to be widows) — is presented as some caste-free utopia. There is religion of course: temple rituals, the Radha-Krishna myth, some *namaz*-doing Muslims with fez caps, and the visiting Sardarji.

Suddenly, when Bhuvan's team is training under the supervision of the white *mlechcha* woman, we spot Kachra, the untouchable, standing on the margins — literally — as the ball rolls before him. Bhuvan asks Kachra to throw the ball back. A petrified Kachra, with a small broom in his right hand, his left hand handicapped, is sweating. Hero Bhuvan goads him to throw the ball, and Kachra does it with his disabled left hand. The ball spins wildly. Bhuvan is terribly impressed and wants to rope Kachra in as the eleventh man they have been looking for. Predictably, the entire village from *mukhiya* (chief) to *vaid* (doctor) to *jyotish* (astrologer) opposes the move to induct an *achchut* (untouchable). They say: fight the British with a silly game if you please, but don't commit *dharam-bhrasht* (sacrilege). Meaning, keep your hands off religion, kid. When the British tread on your toes, you can justifiably fight them, but practices like untouchability are legacies not to be questioned. Surprisingly, while Kachra poses a problem, being tutored in the game by a *mlechcha* white woman (Elizabeth) is not problematic.

Bhuvan assumes the reformer's role and launches into a speech, saying even Bhagwan Ram had eaten the fore-bitten fruit of Sabari and that he had decried untouchability. While most versions of the *Ramayana* refer to the episode where Rama beheads the shudra Sambhuka for daring to recite the vedas despite being ordered to stop, in Ashutosh Gowarikar's 2001 recall of the tale there is selective forgetting. From being an upholder of the patriarchal caste system, Rama refigures here as someone who was against caste discrimination. This is of a piece with even apparently progressive elements in modern India refusing to reckon with caste. In fact, at the intellectual level there is an effort to defend 'good Hinduism' vis-à-vis the 'bad Hinduism' (*Hindutva*) of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its affiliates. In this defence of 'good Hinduism' by a range of intellectuals (explicitly by Ashis Nandy and implicitly by 'left-secular-liberal' anti-BJP voices) an issue like caste never figures, and when it does, caste has something to do with others — OBCs to Dalits. Caste is not something that you have, since it is always what others embody. In such a reconstruction, Gandhian *ramarajya* and Gandhi's Rama continue to be defended by even communist ideologues like AB Bardhan (Member of Parliament) in the context of the Babri Masjid demolition. Thus, in a Communist Party of India booklet, 'Sangh Parivar's Hindutva Versus The Real Hindu Ethos' (December 1992), Bardhan, immediately after noting that 6 December is Ambedkar's death anniversary, quotes Dasarath (Rama's father in *Ramayana*):

> *"Raghukul reet sada chali aaye*
> *pran jaaye par vachan na jaaye"*
> (This is the eternal law of the Raghu clan. Life may be forfeit, but never the word once given.)

Rama honoured his pledge to the letter, says Bardhan, who then accuses RSS-VHP-BJP Rama-*bhaktas* of not behaving like Rama, goes on to refer to Golwalkar (former chief of the RSS) as *"Guruji"*, approvingly quotes Vivekananda, and invokes "Gandhiji's" *sanatana dharma*, and even Sardar Patel and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

To understand the vulgarity of *Lagaan* one needs be alive to *who* actually plays cricket in India, even as the myth is fabricated that everybody can participate in the game

Selling good Hinduism and its decencies is more than just a passing issue in the film and a gauge of its significance is that the sequence following Kachra's entry is the only moment where an *internal* problem forces a confrontation in the film. All other flimic confrontations are with the *external* Other — the white, British male. Here again, Bhuvan effects a selective reordering of the mythic past (Rama is no historical figure anyway) in quite the same way that AB Bardhan defends 'Gandhi's Rama' as opposed to the Rama of LK Advani (the BJP leader who led the *rath yatra* that some years later culminated in the demolition of the Babri mosque). It was in a similar vein that Gandhi,

Thus far and no further: Kissing is 'jootha'.

when confronted by a well-read Ambedkar who threw the book(s) at him, defended both the caste system and Rama in a personalised interpretation, and in fact swore to establish ramarajya — a Dalit's and woman's nightmare — again a selective imagining of the past which dodges issues like caste and patriarchy. (See the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate on *Annihilation of Caste* in Vol. 1 of Ambedkar's *Writings and Speeches*.)

In the *Lagaan* purana, since wasting too much time on the Dalit's token entry would be futile, the villagers are easily won over by Bhuvan's falsified invocation of the *maryada purushottam* ('ideal superman', as Rama is referred to fondly). Besides sounding apologetic, the Dalit here is wordless; almost as if he is also dumb. The subaltern cannot speak. Totally stripped of agency, Kachra (in Hindustani, it also means waste or garbage) has to simply follow caste-Hindu Bhuvan's words. He never exercises a choice. Kachra — someone *excluded* from every other social-cultural-religious aspect of village life — is never asked whether he would like to be *included* in such a game. It is not clear whether this Dalit, portrayed so pathetically, is even aware of why the game is being played.

Till the introduction of this Dalit character, Dalits and, indeed, caste never figures in the cinematic village. The brahman is conspicuous by his absence, except as the priest in the background with no dialogue. In fact, no character seems to be caste-marked in the pristine village — the Gandhian ideal. It is only Kachra who bears the burden of caste identity. From the raja to Bhuvan we are not made aware of anybody's caste. Now, do the untouchables of Champaner live in separate quarters? Who are the other untouchables in the village? (There can't be just one!) Do they approve of Kachra being part of the team? The rest of the villagers — Bhuvan, Lakha and others — are constantly referred to as 'farmers/peasants' who own land (though they are never shown participating in any farmerly activity). Hence the lagaan (double, triple levy, whatever) affects them. But what about the landless and rightless untouchables? How does the lagaan, or the cricket match that will liberate Champaner and Awadh from this burden, affect the Dalits? What is the problem that Dalits have with the white coloniser-state? Are not their problems more linked to the caste-colonialism sustained by the raja and the caste Hindus of the village?

Gandhian concepts are liberally sprinkled in the film. In the scene where Bhuvan is introduced, he is shown trying to save a deer from falling prey to the British officer's bullets. In 1893, in a village untouched by the material aspects of modernity and modern notions of conservation, we have reason enough to believe that venison could be eaten by villagers too. It is not as if deer were not killed by anyone till the white sahibs went on *shikaar* (hunting for sport) expeditions. Just as you wonder if the local raja would not have indulged in similar hunting adventures, the construct of the caste-unmarked villager upholding vegetarianism and *ahimsa* (non-violence) lays the ground for a later scene where the raja espouses veggie power. In a scene where Captain Russell (once again) plays the arrogant white man who challenges an effete raja to eat meat, the latter refuses on the ground that it would be against his religious beliefs. If the raja eats the meat, the lagaan (tax) would be waived, says Russell. Whoever has heard of vegetarian kings in late-19th century? But as in other convenient obfuscations of caste in the film, the raja never identifies himself as 'kshatriya'. His vegetarianism and his tendency to avoid violence simply mean a double-tax burden on the peasants.

The forcible inclusion of the Dalit-Kachra in the team also comes across as a Gandhian moment. While Ambedkar was a votary of the 'direct action' method – where Dalits would physically assert their civic rights and democratise public spaces, even if this resulted in temporary violence – Gandhi wanted caste Hindus to feel remorse and guilt and thus voluntarily ask the untouchables to participate in the general village life — from accessing brahmanic temples to water tanks. (See Ambedkar's 'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables', Volume 9, *Writings and Speeches*). In *Lagaan* this translates into caste Hindus, led by Bhuvan, repenting their casteism in a sudden moment of awakening. The *vaid*, an elderly character who initially opposes Kachra's entry, thanks Bhuvan for 'opening their eyes'. This scene lends credence to the much-repeated journalistic inanity: that cricket is a religion in India, and that cricket unites the nation (acknowledging by default that there are a thousand factors that actually divide the nation!).

Disability and untouchability

Irrespective of the result of the game and Kachra's performance in it, the status of Dalits will remain the same. Bhuvan's impassioned plea to the 'village elders' is limited to Kachra's inclusion in the team — and this is decided by accident — and is not about the larger social exclusion of the untouchables. What comes across

as being most obnoxious is that after all the drama over Kachra's inclusion, we are told that he is a good spinner not because of ability, but because of his *dis*-ability. The token Dalit is further Dalitised. When Kachra wants to throw the ball with his 'normal' hand, know-all Bhuvan insists he use the disabled hand. Kachra's being an untouchable is hardly significant; his disability is. Kachra's talent is not based on merit, the will to excel or the determination to defeat an enemy, like Bhuvan's is. It, like untouchability, comes with birth. And it is Bhuvan who discovers this 'innate' talent. Kachra knows nothing.

Kachra's character is supposed to be based on Baloo Palwankar, the first world-class spinner the country produced (1910s, 1920s). Baloo, a left-armer, was a Dalit, and an inspiration to the young Ambedkar. Baloo, however, went on to become a Congressman, was member of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, and part of the Gandhian team that forced Ambedkar to sign the Poona Pact. (The pact by which Ambedkar gave up his demand of separate electorates for Dalits following an indefinite fast undertaken by Gandhi.) Baloo later went on to contest an election against Ambedkar. But *Lagaan* is an insult to Baloo and Dalits in general. The way *Lagaan* manipulates Kachra is representative of how mainstream society, histories, and nationalisms have dealt with Dalits. It is also reflective of how cricket has dealt with Dalits. Independence India has produced not one Dalit cricketer. (Vinod Ganpat Kambli and Doddanarasiah Ganesh, both with short-lived careers, are being talked about as the only post-1947 Dalit cricketers but Kanadiga friends inform me that Ganesh could be a backward caste 'gowda' and Kambli, it appears, is from a fisherman caste and technically not Scheduled Caste.)

It is not as if cricketers have had not had deformities. There have been spinners such as India's BS Chandrasekhar, Australia's John Gleeson (called the mystery spinner by the Englishmen) and Sri Lanka's best-known non-Sinhala player, Muthiah Muralitharan who have had deformities — Chandra was stricken by polio in childhood and both Gleeson and Murali have congenitally bent elbows. But, the juxtaposition of disability and untouchability is very disturbing.

Such a rationalising of a Dalit's ability, coming as it does in the post-Mandal post-'liberalisation' phase where the brahmanical/statist mood is pronouncedly anti-affirmative action, is an ontological and epistemological assault on Dalits and disabled people. It makes a mockery of Dalit 'merit'. Not only is an untouchable forced into the team on caste-Hindu terms, his ability is seriously undermined by his lack of self-control over his talent. Kachra spins the ball not because he knows how to, but because his (polio-afflicted?) hand is 'not normal'. Normally, Dalits are not talented. But Kachra's inclusion gets celebrated as 'a triumph of meritocracy' (Boria Majumdar, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1-7 September, 2001). This is just salt in the wound.

Would *Lagaan* sans Kachra-the-handicapped-Dalit have made it less of a success or the great film it is supposed to be? Since there have anyway been only two alleged Dalits in post-British Indian cricket, would the absence of Kachra have made a difference to the script? Despite the Dalit issue figuring in the World Conference Against Racism at Durban last September, the generally racist Oscar committee is unlikely to have heard of it; but it is these little clever touches that make *Lagaan* what it is. According to Tamil filmmaker Rajiv Menon and cricket historian Majumdar (*EPW*), *Lagaan* is supposed to herald the arrival of the Dalit in Hindi cinema. For the first time, a Dalit is being positively portrayed in colour cinema, they feel. It is the acknowledgement of caste (in passing) and its negotiation/accommodation on casteist/brahmanic terms that makes *Lagaan* the darling of the liberal-seculars. Moreover, it is Kachra's socially and physically disabled presence that offers an ideal foil to Bhuvan's sheer physicality (well-toned body, clean-shaven looks, a doting girlfriend, and overall leadership qualities). *Lagaan* had to have a Dalit. But it also had to make his talent a congenital physical problem.

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At the end of the one-hour forty-two minute climax of the film, and of the cricket match in it, Kachra with a bat presents an abject picture: someone utterly useless to the team when it matters (while he is not using his disabled arm to turn the old ball). Since both Bollywood cinema and Hindu puranas thrive on the miraculous and the fantastic, we could have had the disabled Kachra pulling off a six of the last ball. But the Dalit cannot be given such definitive history-making agency. Such things are best left to caste Hindus. By sheer accident, a no-ball and a single result in hero-Bhuvan taking control to hoist the winning six.

Kachra's derogatory inclusion is not the only token moment in the film. There are many such concerning women. When Bhuvan's team is preparing for the match ahead, heroine Gauri (essayed by Gracy Singh) keeps pestering the players to eat. She is unaware of being the frivolous woman who does not understand the significance of the match. (Though in another, earlier scene she offers the sole moral support to Bhuvan when he is beleaguered.) The white woman Elizabeth knows better. Gauri also shows other typical female behavioural traits established in the tradition of Hindu mythologies and epics — jealousy, envy, pettiness, the ability to sing and dance, make good food, pine — all reinforced by popular cinema. The women of the village contribute to the game by sewing up pads and gloves and other cricketing paraphernalia. And of course they cook, serve food,

and cheer the home team. If indeed the film offers several Bakhtinian moments of inversion — unconventional bowling action, dress and general behaviour considered unsuitable to the game, and finally the fantastic triumph of the oppressed (if you will) possible only in the sporting arena and not in politics — why are such inversions and role reversals not genuinely extended to women and Dalits? Why could we not have had a *Lagaan* where a few talented women — someone who can bowl because of her skill in keeping the birds away from the drying grain in the courtyard with well-aimed stones, and some other who invents the sweep shot from endless practice in sweeping the house, and a third who makes an excellent slip fielder because she catches all that a drunk husband throws at her, and suchlike — too entered the team?

This is where caste and patriarchy limit the filmic imagination. And *Lagaan* becomes a 'success'. Aamir plays the true macho male who teases his obvious object of romantic love – the classic village belle. Bhuvan's Rama-like character has shades of the mythic Krishna too. While Gauri is alive to the sexual tension between Bhuvan and Elizabeth – who even expresses it – the hero is blissfully unaware of these dynamics though he sings of himself as Kanha (the folksy Krishna) in the song *Radha Kaise Na Jale?* In yet another of those token moments, Elizabeth, besides her crush on Bhuvan, is shown developing respect for local traditions — she stealthily participates in the Holi celebrations, prays at the village temple, and even applies *sindoor* on her forehead.

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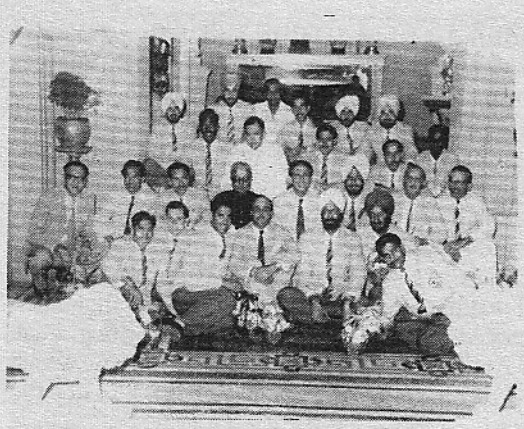
Lagaan, while claiming to recreate a piece of imagined history, ends up being yet another clever brahmanical tale that offers no progressive relief. But for a genuine understanding of how *Lagaan* uses cricket, and how a Dalit is abused by *Lagaan*'s cricket we need to look at cricket in India, and sport as such, with a caste lens.

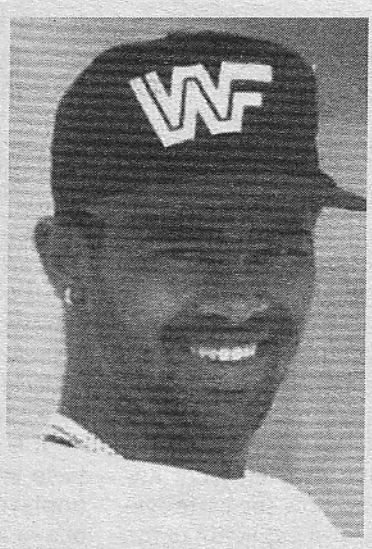
Cricket, brahmanism, bodies

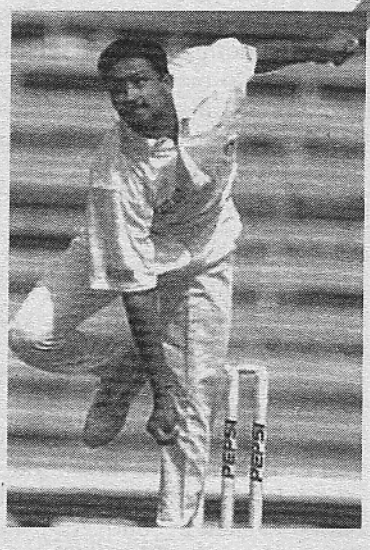
Who really plays cricket in India? I am not a historian of the game, but it does not require much disciplinary training to infer that cricket is a game that best suits brahmanical tastes and bodies, and that there has been a preponderance of brahman cricket players at the national level. Bored princes and Parsis bent on mimicking the white sahibs might have been the first to take to the game in the Subcontinent, and we eventually had the Bombay Pentagular (communal cricket as it was called till 1946, where teams called Hindus, Mohammedans, Parsis, Europeans and Rest played each other), but post-1947 it has been a game monopolised by brahmans and brahmanical castes. Little wonder Ashis Nandy, chronicler of modern Hinduism who dedicated one of his books to VD Savarkar, thinks cricket is a game naturally suited to Hinduism. Some commentators see cricket as truly vedantic. As Nandy has it, it is less Victorian/British and more Indian/Hindu.

Maybe we need to take this considered view seriously. Compared to other modern team sports such as hockey or football, cricket hardly involves much physical activity. A cricketer can stay put in one place for a long time. Even a fast bowler expends energy in short spells and cools off at the boundary. Besides, fast bowlers are not what India is known for, except for Kapil Dev, a meat-eating jat. We do not need too much statistical backing to assert that Indian cricketers have excellent personal records at the expense of the team. Sachin Tendulkar might top the batting averages in test and one-day cricket, but as a team India would be in some low-down position. The more Sachin scores centuries, the less India wins — to be precise, only two centuries of Sachin's ten result in an Indian test win. (In a February 2002 *Wisden* list of 100 all-time best one-day innings, Sachin, who has more one-day runs than anyone else, figures in the 23rd place.) Such a strange statistic is unlikely to be available in say, hockey: Dhanraj Pillay scoring the maximum goals during a tournament and the team being in the dumps.

No sport will tolerate such neglect of bodies as cricket in India. Take Sunil Gavaskar or Gundappa Vishwanath, conservative brahmans both, who could not have afforded their brahman priest-like paunches and dormant slip-fielding if they had been playing a more physical game like hockey. Not surprisingly, hockey, which has been called 'the de jure national game' of India (cricket being the de facto national game post-1983), has drawn players predominantly from Dalit, adivasi, OBC, Muslim and Sikh communities. (India's most celebrated hockey player, Dhyan Chand, though, was a brahman who joined the First Brahman Regiment at Delhi in 1922 as a 'sepoy'.) Moreover, a game like cricket involves a colossal waste of time. Historically, it was a sport only the leisured class could indulge in. Before the advent of the one-day form, which purists continue to smirk at, it would a take a full six days for a match to be played (rest day included). At the end of it, in many cases there is not even a result to show for the time spent. Spectators too must have surplus time on their hands — one must be able to waste five whole workdays on a test match. Even in the result-oriented one-day format, a whole day needs to be spared (even to watch the game on television). But such has been the craze for cricket, that for the recent one-day fixture at Madras between India







Above: The 1956 Indian field hockey Olympic team, which won the country's sixth consecutive gold. Right: Vinod Kambli smiles, Anil Kumble bowls.

and the visiting England team, the local government declared a public holiday to enable its citizens to watch the match. Such gestures have of course become common.

In sharp contrast, a hockey match is likely to yield results in about two hours. And despite the Indian hockey team's recent wonderful performances, the game is never likely to recapture the public imagination. Most important, Dhanraj, Thirumavalavan, Dilip Tirkey, Jude Menezes, Lazarus Balra or Pargat Singh are unlikely to win the confidence of the publicity managers of Pepsi or Coke. They are also unlikely candidates for promoting credit cards (Add to this the fact that cricket players tend to be a fairer lot compared to hockey players. And TV and cinema have always promoted an Indian brand of racism that excludes the darker-looking majority).

This marginalisation also owes to the social backgrounds of hockey players, and they are unlikely to make much headway in brahman-dominated cricket. After the monopoly of Maharashtra brahmans in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s saw Karnataka send in its brahman pack of Anil Kumble, Sunil Joshi, Rahul Dravid, Javagal Srinath (dubbed 'the world's fastest vegetarian bowler') and Venkatesh Prasad (a fast bowler who runs all the way only to off-spin the ball). Dodda Ganesh and David Johnson were their non-brahman contemporaries whose careers, not surprisingly, were short-lived. While Johnson played just one international match, Ganesh did hang around for some time. Sunil Joshi persisted longer than Ganesh, but the four other Karnataka brahmans have been mainstays in the 'national eleven'. There have been several occasions when up to nine out of eleven players have been brahmans in the team. Let me substantiate this with a quote by Shekhar Gupta, editor, *Indian Express*: "Harbhajan is seen as the fighting new Indian, non-English speaking, definitely non-brahman (in a team usually boasting 8 of them) and not from Bombay or Bangalore, the nurseries of Indian cricket, but from a small town in Punjab from where most immigrants to Britain come. So you know where that never-say-die spirit of the Southhall Sikh comes from" (26 March, 2001).

Having too many brahmans means that you play the game a little too softly, and mostly for yourself. Let's get a Gupta sound-byte again: "After he [Alan Donald] bowled the heart out of this, the so-called best batting line-up in the world, at Port Elizabeth in December 1992, he said the Indians were nice guys. But they were not very good at fighting. 'They don't want to handle pace. They hit a few shots and then get out,' he said. This team lost twice in Australia, South Africa, West Indies, and England and at home to both Pakistan and South Africa. They lost even the old label of tigers at home. They were not prepared for close finishes, cracked up in crunch matches and were so easily overawed by the rivals' aggressive body language. There was no other reason for them to lose to Pakistan at Madras and Calcutta (1999) and to South Africa at Bombay and Bangalore last year."

Harbhajans and Kamblis are exceptions. We are not going to see cricket at the national level being taken over by meat-eating Dalits, Muslims and Sikhs and some much-needed team spirit ushered in. But how does a game, which I argue is inherently brahmanical, and which draws upon such a small social base, continue to hijack the nation's imagination? In most modern nation-states, sport has been one area which marginalised groups have used to showcase their talent. Be it Maradona or Pele, Mike Tyson or Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan, or in more recent times the fantastic success of Venus and Serena Williams in a game dominated by the rich whites, or the several athletics successes from poor African nations, or the case of gymnasts from East European nations, sport has been an avenue for making one's way up from slums and ghettoes to podiums. But in India, the caste system forecloses such possibilities. While we have academic studies by African-American scholars comparing basketball and jazz as truly black sites of creative expression, in India we cannot even posit something

like a Dalit/unbrahman sport (though the very thought of a sport dominated by brahamans sounds funny). We are forced to merely record how many Dalits ever got into the 'Indian eleven'. It almost becomes the same as looking at how many Dalits sing Carnatic music or dance the Bharatanatyam.

The hegemony of cricket in India not only eclipses other team sports like hockey, but makes the media, state and the public very quickly dump and forget a Malleswari or a Limba Ram (a well-known adivasi archer of the mid-1990s). But invoking caste and casteism in sport begs the question: if cricket is a game where unfit brahman men simply amble along, why is it that in other modern sports nonbrahman Indian men and women seem to lag behind? Why does Olympic glory seem to be a larger subcontinental problem? For answers, I suggest that we understand how the caste system, prevalent in South Asia, and most explicitly in the Subcontinent, could possibly disable the emergence and formation of 'bodies' that could physically rise up to competition from the best. This might seem quite a 'racist' and politically/scientifically wrong proposition to make, but consider what Ambedkar wrote some seven decades ago:

> "If caste is eugenic, what sort of a race of men should it have produced? Physically speaking the Hindus are a C_3 people. They are a race of pygmies and dwarfs stunted in stature and wanting in stamina. It is a nation 9/10ths of which is declared to be unfit for military service. This shows that the Caste System does not embody the eugenics of modern scientists. It is a social system which embodies the arrogance and selfishness of a perverse section of the Hindus who were superior enough in social status to set it in fashion and who had authority to force it on their inferiors." (*Annihilation of Caste*, 1936.)

The statement might seem crude and reductionist, but if an entire population was forced to breed for some 2000 years within extremely restrictive patriarchal sub-caste specificities, the theoretical possibility of choosing mates is drastically reduced and there is extensive sub-caste inbreeding. And we are talking about a situation where even today a Tamil-brahman, more specifically a vadakalai-iyyengar of a particular gotra (now figure that out!), does not look for a mate in an equivalent sub-caste grouping in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh or Karnataka. In fact, the socially mobile Tamil-brahman even if s/he is in Delhi/Bombay or Detroit seeks an alliance only in the sub-caste and sub-group, sub-region-wise suitable sub-community. Since the category of caste has been abandoned in censuses vis-à-vis caste Hindus, we have data only on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Dalits and adivasis) who officially account for 4685 communities. With this figure, we can imagine how many sub-castes and sub-communities there might be among the rest of the 77.5 per cent population. Even if we do not take into consideration adivasis, in a country where couples marrying outside caste are forced to commit suicide (as in many much-highlighted cases in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana), there are strictures against inter-marriage in all caste-bound communities. To suggest that such massive forced inbreeding is likely to produce weak bodies, in Ambedkar words "a nation 9/10ths of which is declared to be unfit for military service", is not too wild I hope.

It is such a context — where a billion bodies cannot yield a single Olympic gold — that results in a much-unplayed game like cricket becoming the preoccupation of a caste-ridden nation. In the parent country, England, cricket is hardly the most popular game, football being the game that matters. However, English cricket today, led by a Madras-born Muslim, is more ethnically representative and balanced than perhaps any other, though there are fewer blacks and more Asians now. While Indian cricket is dogged by casteism, in South Africa cricket practises racism by omission: some 15 years after the nation formally gave up apartheid, there have been few black players. Ditto for Zimbabwe. In both these African nations, football remains the basic male sporting pas-time. In Australia (or New Zealand), the game does enjoy popularity but this nation equally keenly follows other sports, and has even yielded an aboriginal Olympic gold medallist in Cathy Freeman. It is in the Subcontinent that we seem so fixated on cricket. And caste.

Fluff like *Lagaan* and false icons like Sachin are the best that cinema and cricket can throw up; their worst — match-fixing and *Gadar*.

India/Bollywood produces films like *Lagaan* because it patronises a game like cricket. And cricket rules because the brahmanical caste system, with is bedrock as inequality, continues to grip India. Much of the obsession/addiction to cricket can be understood if we understand the popularity of cinema in India, which produces a phenomenal 1000-odd movies a year. (India also plays more one-day matches than any other country.) Popular cinema in India, be it from Bollywood or Kollywood (as Tamil filmdom is called), which began its career by retelling brahmanic-Hindu mythologies, continues to be a major site which sustains and nurtures the caste system and the brahmanical social order. While Valentine's Day comes to be celebrated in select urban pockets, only post-Hindutva – and it is repressive Hindutva which finds this unacceptable – not many question the consensus over the continuing ban on kissing in Indian cinema.

Cultural studies scholars have extensively deli-

Caste profile of one team each from 1970s/ 80s/ 90s

THE B-TEAMS...

The 1996 Indian team that played England in the Birmingham test. Only the skipper, Azharuddin, is a non-Hindu. All others are brahman/ 'upper' caste.

V Rathour ('upper' caste)
A Jadeja ('upper' caste)
SV Manjrekar (brahman)
SR Tendulkar (brahman)
M Azharuddin (Muslim, captain)
NR Mongia ('upper' caste)
SB Joshi (brahman)
A Kumble (brahman)
J Srinath (brahman)
PL Mhambrey ('upper' caste)
BKV Prasad (brahman)

The 1982 team that played England at Lord's. All players except Kirmani are brahman/'upper' caste.

SM Gavaskar (brahman)
GAHM Parkar ('upper' caste)
DB Vengsarkar (brahman)
GR Viswanath (brahman)
Yashpal Sharma (brahman)
O Malhotra ('upper' caste)
N Kapil Dev (jat)
RJ Shastri (brahman)
SMH Kirmani (Muslim)
S Madan Lal (brahman)
DR Doshi (brahman)

The 1978 team that played West Indies in the Bombay test. Kirmani and Bedi are non-Hindus. All others are brahman / 'upper' caste.

SM Gavaskar (brahman)
CPS Chauhan ('upper' caste)
M Amarnath ('upper' caste)
GR Viswanath (brahman)
DB Vengsarkar (brahman)
SMH Kirmani (Muslim)
N Kapil Dev (jat)
KD Ghavri ('upper' caste)
S Venkataraghavan (brahman)
BS Bedi (Sikh)
BS Chandrasekhar (brahman)

So, an average of 6 brahmans per team. Brahmans constitute about 3 per cent of the Indian population.

To top it all, the ideal brahman selectors' delight:

Sunil Manohar Gavaskar
Krishnamachari Srikkanth
Gundappa Vishwanath
Sachin Tendulkar
Dilp B Vengsarkar
Ravi J Shastri
Sadanand Vishwanath
Javagal Srinath
Madan Lal
S Venkataraghavan
Anil Kumble
12th man: L Sivaramakrishnan
Reserves: Rahul Dravid, Saurav Ganguly

berated on why kissing and sex scenes are almost self-censored in India. They would benefit by looking for answers in caste taboos. Caste-conscious Hindus are extremely touchy about *jootha* (contact through saliva, *yechchal* in Tamil) and kissing can be the most despicable jootha act. And you certainly cannot indulge in it publicly. While Hindi films celebrate the act of the wife eating the leftovers in the husband's plate, even married couples cannot kiss on screen. Before saying "All this in the land of Khajuraho and Kamasutra", we must remember that more than these two Ks, it is the strictures in *Brahma Purana* and *Shiva Purana* — which encourage only coital/reproductive sex, quite like the older Gandhi did — that caste Hindus take seriously (see Sudhir Kakar's *Intimate Relations*, 1989).

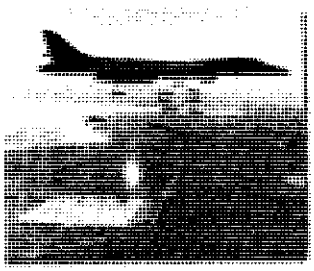
If even kissing and making love have to be seen as subversive in popular cinema, one may well understand why nothing really subversive is possible in this genre. Yet, cinema has emerged as the most popular cultural form in post-British India as much has cricket has emerged as the most popular sport. Both cinema and cricket in their banyan-like existence have prevented the growth of anything under their unhealthy shadows. Fluff like *Lagaan* and false icons like Sachin are the best that these institutions can throw up; their worst — match-fixing and *Gadar*.

(Author's note: Some of the reflections on cinema were triggered by a conversation with Ravikumar, President, PUCL Tamil Nadu-Pondicherry. I owe the point on disability and cricket players to NU Abhilash, researching cricket in the UK, who also helped compile the teams. By way of clarification on the quote at the beginning of the essay, Ambedkar, like other male writers of his time, uses 'man' in the generic sense to refer to all of humankind and not in the sexual/masculine sense)

MUGGERS SNATCHED some 2500 Geography textbooks printed for Class IX by the National Curriculum Textbook Board from Dhaka's Banglabazar last month. The *Daily Star* reports that, "the muggers swooped on a rickshaw van carrying the 2500 books when it reached near Kibria Book House in the area of Naya Paltan." The newspaper adds that the 'plaintiff', one Tofail Khan, "apprehended that such incidents could hamper smooth and timely distribution of textbooks among the students." Chhetria Patrakar will grant you that that is indeed the case – the heist will definitely hamper the smooth and timely distribution of Geography books, at the very least. But we should be happy for what these 'muggers' saw fit to steal. Shows a value placed on school textbooks in Bangladesh, don't you think, that they should be the target of robbery? I'll take book robbers any day rather that lousy textbooks with no demand.

■

WONDER IF the naval officers who pressed the button to send cruise missiles whoosing on their way to Afghanistan, or the bomber pilots swooping low over Afghan terrain raining ordnance, ever thought of the terrorised civilians down below? Maybe, some day, they will write their memoirs and refer to the twinge of conscience they had – and perhaps this report by Carlotta Gall of the *New York Times* will make them introspect earlier rather than later. On an October night, 17 children, three women and a man driving the tractor they were on, died at Tirinkot village as they tried to flee the bombing of their homes. The youngest to die was but a year-and-half – and the oldest, a mother of 25, whose three children also perished. Here is a piece of the report:



"I saw a flash in the sky, and the planes came very low so we turned out the lights of the tractor," Ms. Radigul said in an interview in the courtyard of her home in this village, a mile west of Tirin Kot. "We were so afraid. We thought they were going to hit us. There was no time to get off. I do not remember anything about the bomb but it was a great misery and sorry for us."

It was the children sitting in the front end of the trailer who bore the brunt of the attack, survivors said. Jamilia, 25, a sister-in-law of Mr. Qadratullah who was carrying her 1-year-old son, Ashiqullah, in her arms, survived because she was sitting at the back. But in the front, her three other children, Ghaziullah, 7, Muzlifa, 6, and Waheedullah, 5, died. "I never saw them again," she said.

Gulfari, 16, Mr. Qudratullah's sister, was splattered with blood and body parts. "I was completely blinded," she said in a whisper, covering her face with a green shawl. "When I put my hand up I felt blood. It was like meat, and I threw it away. I could not see anything. My brother took me from the trailer and cleaned my eyes."

The report goes on to say that villagers worked in darkness trying to save the victims still alive, not daring to light lamps. They were brought together in a guest room, but soon another wave of planes came by and bombed the house. "The attack killed everyone who was still alive in the guest room flinging their bodies yards away or burying them in the rubble..." One of the survivors told the reporter, "The Americans always say they can see the smallest thing on the ground, so then they can see women and children."

■

INDIAN INTELLECTUALISM continues its nosedive, and the litmus test is the list of the new members of the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), which *tehelka.com* calls a "rollcall of unknowns" with BJP (and even RSS) tilt. Let us just take the case of N.S. Rajaram, the new head of the Council, who is a historian with dubious record accused, among other things, of having faked the discovery of a Harrappan period seal. His scholarly output is said to be limited to four or five articles on the Indus Valley Civilisation which are not even accepted as scholarly works. Rajaram believes that Aryans are the natives of India, and that Muslims are 'foreigners'.

■

FROM THIMPHU, Bhutanese astrologers predict in the pages of Kuensel that the Year of the Water Horse will be "a propitious year for kings, their subjects, and children." Well, that pretty much takes care of everyone in Bhutan, and I am glad that they will not have an annus horriblus like their neighbours in Nepal. Now hear this: "There will be good rainfall with increased crop production." That too is welcome. "Disputes among smaller countries and communities will be amicably settled and friendship strengthened in the year ahead." Now, we need to define 'small' here. Given the size of behemoth India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, only Bhutan and Nepal would be considered countries of diminutive size, would you not say? So, then, here we have it on good authority of the Dratshang Lhentshog's datho (astrology book) that Nepal and Bhutan will solve their problems (Lhotshampa refugees) in the Year of the Water Horse. Is this a trial balloon being put out by Thimpu's diplomats or what? Sure hope it is. (Incidentally, the datho also predicts that people in larger countries will face difficult times, with poverty, conflict and the outbreak of animal diseases. Ouch!)

■

HAS ANYBODY noticed? The US Congress placed conditions on assistance to India regarding the use of Dalit scavenger labour. This was with regard to the funds earmarked for the World Bank's soft-loan affiliate, the Internatoinal Development Association,

TITLE IV—MULTILATERAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE

INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT FACILITY

The conference agreement appropriates $100,500,000 for the Global Environment Facility instead of $82,500,000 as proposed by the House and $109,500,000 as proposed by the Senate.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

The conference agreement appropriates $792,400,000 instead of $803,400,000 as proposed by the House and $775,000,000 as proposed by the Senate. The managers have included modified language as proposed by the Senate, regarding instructions to the U.S. executive director to the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to vote against water or sewage projects in India that do not prohibit the use of scavenger labor. The House did not address this matter. Manual scavenging is a particular occupation in India only for Dalits or "untouchables" that entails waste collection and disposal through primitive and squalid means. Over 500,000 Dalits in India are employed as manual scavengers, and Dalits who seek to avoid this demeaning and unhealthy labor are often denied other jobs. India is one of the largest borrowers from the World Bank with over $11 billion in IBRD loans in 2001, some of which fund government sanitation programs. Given that the Indian government haa banned manual scavenging, once these laws are implemented there would be other employment opportunities for Dalits. The managers urge the IBRD to work with the Indian government to improve the economic and social status of Dalits.

and the relevant passage from the fiscal year 2002 US Congressional Conference Report on Foreign Operations Appropriations is reproduced alongside.

■

WILL OUR South Asian editordom sit up and listen to this one?! This edition of mediafile has a bias for reports from the United States, and you may ask why. Because, as someone said at a workshop in Delhi recently, the US too has willy-nilly become a South Asian power of late. Anyone who bombs in South Asia (Afghanistan is South Asia) is a South Asian power, don't you think? So it is natural to focus in on a power that calls so much of the shots in the Subcontinent today. So, hear this. The defense ministry of the United States – also known as the Pentagon – "is developing plans to provide news items, possibly even false ones, to foreign media organisations as part of a new effort to influence public sentiment and policy makers in both friendly and unfriendly countries." What a wacky country – not only do they plan to sneak stories into our newspapers, they tell us about it! An Office of Strategic Influence has been set up with a hefty budget to get cracking. Reports the *NYT*, "The new office has begun circulating classified proposals calling for aggressive campaigns that use not only the foreign media and the Internet, but also covert operations." The guy running this outfit is Brig. Gen. Simon P. Worden of the US Air Force. One of his plans calls for planting news items in the foreign media (us!) through outside concerns that might not have obvious ties to the Pentagon. The good general envisions a broad mission, ranging from "black" campaigns that use disinformation and other cover activities to "white" public affairs output that relies on truthful news releases. "It goes from the blackest of black programs to the whitest of white," a senior Pentagon official said. Shudder, shudder! However, a 27 February *NYT* report said that defence secretary donald rumsfeld was cancelling the plans after less than a month of operation. My only question is this: Was Rumsfeld's reversal true, or is this just a false news item?

■

I KNOW you have heard this one before. The CNN.com site for Europe and Asia (there are others to criticise as well) had as its top news for 18 February: "Two killed

Post-Modern Camelot

V.T. Patel, Vice Chancellor of Pondicherry Univeristy, and Sri Asiananda, Professor of Philosophy of a university ('IOU') in The Netherlands wrote a piece in *The Hindu* which looks suspiciously like suggestions for a peaceful future in South Asia, but I will be damned if I can understand what it is that they are saying. Maybe this is how we will achieve peace in our lifetime – confuse people so that they forget to press the nuclear trigger. Philsophers will do the trick – spin a web of words and ideas that no one understands. But everybody nods sagely, and the Kashmir dispute is resolved!

When we are able to overcome the Kashmir dispute and our Partition wound, the Subcontinent emerges as one of the geopolitical corner stones comparable only to the European Union. Such a South Asian Home ipso facto flows into an Asian Peace order balancing the Sino-Nipponic Houses to the North, and the Arab-Islamic House of West Asia, ultimately paving way towards a more confederative United Nations, which ipso facto is cooperative and concordant post-nuclear Global Peace Order. We are indeed mindful of our national mood against internationalizing Kashmir. Our hawks blame the doves for their paranoiac fear and incapacity to physically withstanding the crisis through, the doves blame the hawks by bringing in the witness of history and human folly and fallibility as exemplified in the world wars and Cold War of the passing century. If Kashmir is spared of being the boiling point of Sarajevo, much of it is thanks to watchful international eyes. Like the Berlin Wall, Kashmir for us is the warning and admonition of healing the subcontinent and healing the planet for spiritual rebirth. From Sarajevo to 13 December 2001, history has completed a barbarous cycle. If we do not guide it towards the millennial vision of its post-nuclear Global Peace Order, the twenty-first century will slump back against to its own Sarajevo and Hiroshima. We believe it is India's world historical hour. A Pax Indica of the Spirit must now guide the course of history and geopolitics, no less also of a Pax Americana of Hope. Their joining hands leads towards a Post-Modern Project Camelot, the end of which could alone be a millennial and post-nuclear Global Peace Order.

near Israeli army base". Only down below, beneath 'Business' and 'War Against Terror' in 'More From CNN.com', was the news that more than 130 Nepali security forces had been massacred by Maoist rebels in western Nepal. But wait a minute. Before I criticise CNN, should you wait a minute to see how the Nepali press covered the carnage? Moderate headlines on the day after, and after perfunctory reportage the following day, the story is out-of-mind and out-of-sight by the third day. Death, massacres, executions by Maoists have become commonplace as far as the Nepali press is concerned. Wonder what will happen if/when the killings enter the comfortable, cozy vale of Kathmandu. Will there then be more 'sensitivity'?

■

SINCE NO one is doing media monitoring, and since the Indian National English Press is by far the most important journalistic entity in the Subcon, I will dare do a critique of the headlines of one day's output. Firstly, the conclusion: While we are waylaid into thinking that the New Delhi papers have a liberal and even a non-establishment perspective because they occasionally carry a dissident view in the op-ed pages, the fact is that the newspapers are completely given over to the state when it comes to reporting on matters of geopolitical significance. And so it was on 14 February, when all the papers were headlining Presidente Generalissimo Pervez Musharraf meeting with George W. Bush at the White House. The statist tone of the largest-selling newspapers was distressing; these papers seem to feel no need to take a stance that is different from a 'South Block' stance or a 'national viewpoint'. Critical thinking, which has of course been given up by large areas of India's academia, just like the rest of us, is also seen to be lacking in the frontpage of the Indian National English Press of 14 February. Just check the *Times of India* of that day with its lead story, whose language reflects the glee with which the reporter filed his story and the relish with which the editor let the words stand:

S scoffs at
lusharraf's
iarge on
idia N-test

Chidanand Rajghatta of the *Times of India*:

"Evocative of an errant schoolboy appearing before a headmaster, Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf stepped up to his meeting Wednesday with US president George Bush by recriminating against India, including new allegations that New Delhi might have conducted clandestine nuclear tests.

"Musharraf's charges, cited without evidence or substantiation, found no traction with the Bush administration, which dismissed them without consideration. Instead, Washington is poised to grill him about the action he has taken to live up to his landmark January 12 speech in which he renounced terrorism in all its form."

■

FORTUNATELY, ALL is not lost. Whereas the TOI report implied that Musharraf got little of a hearing in Washington, there were others less prone to exaggeration and sucking up to establishmentarian power. Wrote the *Indian Express*, "It was payback time for America tonight, as President Bush echoed General Musharraf's comments on the need for India and Pakistan to return to dialogue and said bluntly that both sides should 'get to the table'. [Musharraf's] meeting with President Bush meant he had completed his journey from pariah to a 'friend' of the US."

Similarly sober coverage was reflected in the pages of *The Hindu* and *The Statesman*. The lesson I draw? The smaller your circulation or the further you are from Delhi, the less 'statist' is your copy.

■

I HAD not thought of it till I saw the jacket cover of Anand Patwardhan's latest documentary (*Jang aur Aman—War & Peace*) – that Hindi films out of Bombay have more or less stopped giving their credits in Urdu. I wonder when that trend started. In any case, to remind you of old times, here is a the cover image from the Patwardhan film, which uses all three scripts.

■

AND THAT is hardly enough on Anand Patwardhan. I will read for you the info on *Jang aur Aman*, for this film deserves as much publicity as possible so the maximum number of people get to see it all over in these disturbed times. Here it is:

"Filmed over three tumultuous years in India, Pakistan, Japan and the USA – beginning with nuclear tests in the Subcontinent in 1998 and culminating in the 2001 attack on America, War & Peace/Jang aur Aman is an epic documentary journey of peace activism in the face of global militarism and war. Dramatically framed by the murder of Mahatma Gandhi fifty years ago, the film argues that religious fundamentalism and "patriotism" are two sides of the same coin. The film slips seamlessly from a description of homemade jingoism to focus on how an aggressive United States has become a role model, its doctrine of 'Might is Right' only too well-absorbed by aspiring Third World elites. As we enter the 21st century, war has become perennial, enemies are re-invented, economies are inextricably tied to the production and sale of weapons and in the moral wastelands of the world, memories of Gandhi seems like a mirage that never was, created by our thirst for peace and our very distance from it."
(The film is three hours long, and the website is www.patwardhan.com.)

■

NICE THAT someone has held up a finger at the Indian Writers in English (IWE), the (mostly) self-ap-

pointed representatives of India who strut the stage (mostly) pandering to the Western demand for oriental exotica. The ICCR organised a gathering of overseas Writers of Indian Origin, and it became by all accounts an opportunity to question their ability to speak for India. *Outlook*, bless its editors, carried a cover story where the luminaries of the vernacular tongues (Sunil Gangopadhyay, Mahasweta Devi, Dilip Chitre ...) questioned the very raison d'etre of IWE. No doubt about it, those who write in the local tongues are more 'real', more 'honest', and their work is more 'meaningful' for us locals. On the other hand, there is one point that did not come up in this battle between the

venacular authors and English writers. Presently, IWE achieve fame and fortune because they are discovered in the West on the reflected glory of which they achieve fame in South Asia. So, here is Chhetria Patrakar's suggestion—it is time that authors writing in English in India/South Asia become discovered in India/South Asia first. Only then should they gain fame and fortune overseas. This is the way it should be, and it is only then that these writings will be meaningful to us, and at the same time our reality would get across to 'them'. Presently, it is a make-believe reality that we are reading as our own.

—Chhetria Patrakar

THE NEW York Times's Douglas Jehl, reporting on Ahmed Omar Sheikh, the former student of the London School of Economics and suspected abductor of American journalist Daniel Pearl, goes into the netherworld where the Inter-Services Intelligence of Pakistan functions. Excerpts:

Military and intelligence officials disclosed that a Pakistani intelligence officer, Abdullah, played a key role in nurturing the Jaish after its formation in 2000. Brig. Abdullah was among those pushed aside late last year as Gen. Musharraf began his shake-up of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Sheikh told a Pakistani court earlier this month and American and Pakistani interrogators that he helped kidnap Pearl. But his statements raised as many question as they answered. Did he act with accomplices and, if so, was a former Pakistani police official among them, as some say? Was someone giving orders to him? If so, why have they not been apprehended? Why was Sheikh allowed to turn himself in to a former ISI official on February 5, and why did the local police issue misleading statements for a week indicating that he was still at large?

The intelligence agency's past actions indicate that its interests – or, at a minimum, those of former officials – have often dovetailed with the interests of Pearl's kidnappers, as reflected in their original demands. New disclosures of links between Sheikh and two recently-dismissed agency officials only intensify suspicions about the ISI's role in this case.

When Sheikh was freed from an Indian prison in 1999, he and two other freed prisoners became affiliated with the Jaish. It was one of the several militant groups with close links to Pakistani intelligence, particularly Brig. Abdullah, who headed the ISI's Kashmir department. All this raises a delicate issue for Gen. Musharraf and also for the United States, which has forged a much closer relationship with Pakistan since September 11...

After the Societ Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the onset of a guerrilla war in Kashmir gave the agency a politically more potent reason for its being – as the force to nurture a guerrilla conflict against India, through the proxy of militant Islamic groups.

The U.S. Government grew increasingly concerned about the activities of its former partner. That year, in a confidential letter to Nawaz Sharif, then Pakistan's Prime Minister, President George Bush Sr. quietly warned that he might have to declare Pakistan a terrorist state if the cross-border attacks on India, paid for and orchestrated by the ISI, did not cease, according to a former Pakistani official who said he had seen the letter.

The rise of the Taliban only added to that Paksitani-American gulf. While the U.S. soured on the force, Pakistan, through its intelligence agency, helped sustain it, solidifying links built on kinship, Islamic solidarity and longstanding personal and institutional allegiance. Similar ties were being forged with various militant groups based in Pakistan, who were recruiting young Muslim men to join them.

The New York Times

Even as he pledges to find the rest of the kidnappers, Gen. Musharraf is pursuing a broader crackdown on militants, promised in January, with 2000 arrests announced so far. The purpose is to rein in the Islamic extremist organizations that Pakistan had condoned or supported over the years. And within the ISI, he has begun what military and intelligence officials describe as a major purge, including the effective dismantling of the Kashmir and Afghanistan Cels.

One of the first to go, according to those officers, was Brig. Abdullah, head of the Kashmir cell who helped forge ties with the Jaish and, those officers assert, helped facilitate Sheikh's frequent travels between Afghanistan and Pakistan, his anscestral home.

The overlapping of the crackdown, the intelligence purge and [Daniel] Pearl's murder have added to the mystery surrounding the crime, including the question of whether it might have been carried out with the knowledge or support of current or former Pakistani intelligence officials.

Enron in India

Power in Power out

The making and unmaking of the Dabhol project

by ***Abhay Mehta***

In 1991, a minority Congress government, applaud ed by the ringmasters of the neo-liberal circus, embarked on the wholesale liberalisation of the Indian economy. In many respects it was a wholesale enterprise in the literal sense of the term, as the managers of the political-economy hawked public assets and prospects to private promoters on terms and through procedures that, in any realistic assessment, call to mind the bargains of middle-men with no interest in the merchandise after the profit has been fetched.

If the pre-liberalisation period was the time of crony capital, the decade of liberalisation saw the emergence of the crony state. The announcement of economic deregulation, ostensibly in the interest of attracting greater private, particularly foreign, participation in the economy, and, by extension, of introducing market efficiency, was followed by a series of clandestine measures by the custodians of this crony state that, to the detriment of both productive investment and efficient markets, simply rearranged the country to the convenience of corporations.

Much of what transpired was a breach of mandated procedures and responsibilities, sound judgement, and the established proprieties of the public sphere. Good faith concerned only the secretive parties to the transaction — the 'divesting' state and the 'investing' corporate — to the exclusion of the general public. And while this loot of public property and the exchequer was going on, glorified town criers sermonised about fiscal discipline, the regulatory role of the state, the efficient virtues of private capital and miscellaneous market truths. Intellectuals stampeding across the policy divide echoed the refrain and sustained a crescendo that drowned dissent. Given the secrecies of the process, why things transpired the way they did must, for the moment, remain an imponderable. But how they did happen is best illustrated by a simple recapitulation of Enron's success in undermining both the state and market in India.

Until its recent dramatic global collapse, Enron's investment in the power sector was widely advertised by publicists of India's new dispensation as the largest influx of foreign funds into an Indian project and as conclusive evidence of the validity of the new economics. Unfortunately, the compulsions of cronyism and the pretensions of the 'efficient' argument are reciprocally exclusive matters. Productive efficiency and private profit are not necessarily the same thing. Even taking all the claims made on its behalf at face value, Enron's venture constituted neither a market operation nor an inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI). If anything, it exemplified the opposite — the largest outflow of foreign exchange and the subversion of all that is reasonable in regulation, private capital and the market. Most of all, it taxed the logical faculties.

Terms of endearment

Enron came to India on 17 June 1992 and within 72 hours had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB), the public sector utility responsible for power distribution in the state. The MoU specified that MSEB would for 20 years buy electricity from Enron, which would build, own and operate (but not transfer) a plant of about 2000-2400 megawatts (MW) (nominal) capacity. The power station, to be set up near Dabhol about 300 km south of Bombay, was to run on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) and was to be introduced in two phases. Eighteen months later, this agreement was to crystallise into a contract between the Board and Enron Corporation's Indian subsidiary, the Dabhol Power Corporation (DPC).

The Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) signed in December 1993 contained the financial and legal dimensions of the transaction between the sole supplier DPC and the sole purchaser MSEB. The only redeeming feature of this document was that it pertained only to the first phase of the project for the supply of 695 MW of power. Among the striking aspects of the PPA was that MSEB would at the then-prevailing dollar-rupee rate (since payments to DPC were linked to the dollar rate) make an annual payment to the DPC of USD 430 million irrespective of whether it drew all the 695 MW of power or not. Under the terms of the agreement, MSEB had promised to pay not just for the purchase of electricity but also for the Dabhol plant's total electrical generating

capacity and fuel. The PPA also exempted the DPC from sales tax or duties on electricity and offered income tax concessions and an extendable tax holiday through 1998, the year in which the plant was to commence operations. Even more intriguingly, in addition to these benefits and guaranteed returns the PPA allowed DPC to make a sizeable margin in the event of delays in construction or shortfall in capacity. The document also permitted DPC to make an annual fuel management charge of USD 2.5 million on MSEB.

Since the capital cost, whose precise extent remained undisclosed, was not the ceiling, costs could and did increase in the absence of a cap on capital expenditure. More importantly, the variables used in calculating the capital recovery charge included the dollar to rupee ratio, the rate of Indian inflation, the rate of US inflation, the US labour inflation index and the US materials inflation index. As a consequence, between 1993 and 1998, on account of just one of these variables — the dollar-rupee valuation — capacity charges increased by nearly 40 percent. Quite predictably, the PPA, containing as it did so many deviations from the standard norms governing power transactions, was treated as a 'top-secret' document and neither DPC nor MSEB was willing to make it public. Effectively, retail consumers of power were being asked to pay an inordinately high tariff without being informed of its basis. According to DPC, this 'sensitive' agreement was such a closely guarded secret because "in a competitive environment, a power purchase agreement (PPA) is the one document that affords companies an edge over other players in the field". Ironically, the question of the "competitive market" simply did not arise, since the DPC had not secured the contract in open bidding and in any case the monopolist was selling to the monopsonist; all its output was being purchased by just one customer, the MSEB.

To ensure that there would be no loss to 'Enron's investments' in the event that MSEB failed to fulfil its demanding financial obligations to the DPC, the Congress administration in Maharashtra, in its capacity then as a caretaker government, signed a guarantee on 10 February, 1994 to "irrevocably and unconditionally" pay "any and every sum of money" which MSEB owed to the DPC under the PPA. The total contingent liabilities assumed on account of this guarantee at the then prevailing exchange rate of INR 36 to the dollar added up to the staggering sum of 35 billion US dollars. With a depreciating rupee the total contingent liabilities would only mount. This guarantee was further guaranteed by the Government of India (GoI) through a tripartite agreement involving the Government of Maharashtra (GoM), GoI and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Enron had made a failsafe 'investment' that entailed no risk whatsoever.

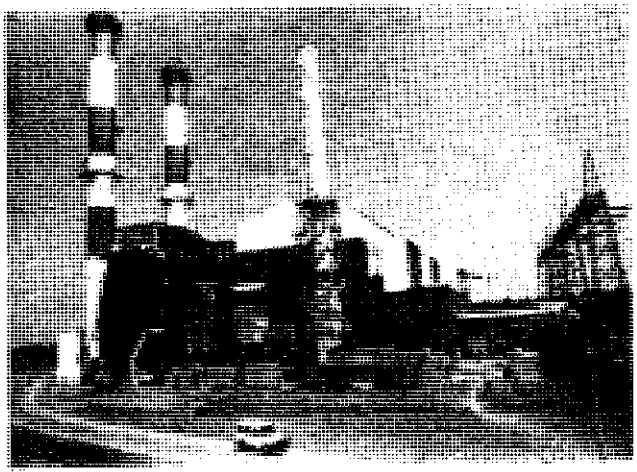
A little over a year after the acceptance of the PPA by all the concerned authorities, the terms of the agreement ran into local political difficulties. The Shiv Sena

The BJP came to power for 13 days in 1996 and signed over the government's assets to Enron as collateral for the Dabhol project.

and Bharatiya Janata Party coalition, which came to power in Maharashtra in early 1995, declared the project closed in August of the same year, on the ground that it had been conceived in fraud and transacted in secret. It went a step further and declared that the matter was not open to further negotiation with Enron after a state cabinet sub-committee's report concluded that previous negotiations were conducted with the "sole objective" of ensuring that Enron was "not displeased", in circumstances that "lack[ed] transparency", in violation of "standard and well-tested norms of propriety for public organisations", and involving "several unseen factors and forces [that] worked to get Enron what it wanted". This was the first and only explicit admission from within the insulated interiors of the state that the conduct of business involved lapses of so serious a magnitude as to warrant the invalidation of contract.

Enigmas of reversal

This ought to have brought matters to a satisfactory conclusion, at least from a larger national perspective. It did not, and to comprehend such illogical denouements, the intrigues of Indian politics have to be reck-



Dabhol, Maharashtra

oned with. Exactly three months after the annulment, Rebecca Mark of Enron met the leader of the party heading the coalition government in Maharashtra. What transpired then still remains a matter of speculation, but, within the week, the state government had reversed its earlier decision and constituted a renegotiation committee mandated to discuss Phase One (the scrapped project) and Phase Two (which had till then been optional). Within two weeks the committee renegotiated the deal. An ultra-nationalist state government that was so vociferously opposed to doing business with Enron for a 'mere' 695 MW of power on account of its adverse consequences to the state and the nation, had with astonishing haste not only recanted its position, but also, by way of expiation, enlarged the ambit of the contract to include the much larger second phase.

MSEB was left now with no option but to absorb, irrespective of the actual level of consumer demand, over 2000 MW of the most expensive power in the world, year- on- year for 20 years, at a minimum annual cost of USD 1400 million. A government of the two most 'patriotic' parties in the country had, in a matter of two weeks, handed over the largest commercial contract in the history of India, involving minimum total payment of 35 billion US dollars, to a private company, the combined generating output of all whose plants the world over did not add up to the output of this single supply-line to a single public utility in a single state. If this is travesty then India clearly has a limitless flair for it: this extravagant contract was made cast iron a few months later in the most devious manner possible and at no less a level than the highest executive decision-making body of the country.

Precedent had already inverted the principle of assurance. Enron, to whose exclusive benefit the contract was, and which, within the terms of the contract, bore no financial risk, had nevertheless to be indemnified against risk. The counter-guarantees that had lapsed, when the old contract was superseded by the new agreement, required renewal. In May 1996, a minority BJP-Shiv Sena government (the same combination that was in power in Maharashtra) assumed office at the centre, after the general elections of the same year, and was asked to demonstrate its majority in two weeks. Though this government, which lasted 13 days, failed, despite persuasion and inducement, to secure the confidence of Parliament it clearly managed, through spectacular benevolence, to secure the gratitude of Enron. Its last act, on the last day of its misbegotten existence, with Parliament repeatedly reminding it of its minority status, was to convene for "lunch", just prior to tendering its own resignation, and, in flagrant violation of all parliamentary norms, extend a sovereign guarantee to Enron on behalf of the Republic of India, staking all its assets, save military and diplomatic, as surety for the payments due to the Dabhol Power Corporation by the Maharashtra State Electricity Board. The future of India is sometimes settled in decidedly casual ways, even when 'heartland' nationalists are at the helm. All it takes is a USD 2000 million investment and a little bit to spare for sundry expenses.

Inexplicable calculus

A single investment for an 18 percent increment in one state's electricity generation capacity underwritten against all the assets of the entire country must surely have been perched on many flimsy fundamentals, and involved violations of the law so extensive as to bring with it the foreknowledge of 'post facto, extra-contractual' risks. It is as well to examine some of these, if only to get an idea of the anatomy of decision-making in this part of the world.

Given adequate monetary inputs, juridical laws are obviated easily enough, but economic laws cannot be bribed into making investments and expenditures productive. The Enron project was based on inverted economic fundamentals and the most cogent criticism of this was made by the World Bank in 1993. To elucidate the Bank's position it is necessary to digress briefly into some basic aspects of the demand and supply of power.

Since electricity qua electricity cannot be stored, its generation must depend on demand, which varies according to more or less predictable short- to medium-term patterns of constant and peak hour demand. Much of the electricity shortage in India arises from the failure of installed capacity to meet peak hour demand. Hence, the bulk of new power sector investments is normally geared to either replacing depreciated capacity or increasing capacity to meet intermediate and peak period demands. Investment involves an appropriate combination of technologies to ensure an efficient grid that is at all times prepared to modulate its supply to match this variable demand. In India, which has adequate stocks of coal, constant demand is met by coal-fired thermal stations which produce relatively cheaper energy but take longer to come on-line (roughly two weeks from a cold start) and has greater thermodynamic inefficiencies. These plants, being constantly on-line,

are called base-load plants. Hydroelectric and gas-fired plants are costlier to build and run, but are more fuel efficient and can come on-line at relatively short notice and hence are ideal for meeting sudden surges in demand. The economics of power supply is such that a grid must have an ideal ratio of capacities in the different modes so that idling costs are minimised and excess of capacity over constant demand is not of an order or type that will detract from the financial viability of the grid.

The arrival of Enron in Maharashtra did precisely that, as the World Bank's analysis of the project so categorically pointed out. The Bank, in response to GoI's request to finance the project, noted that there would be no option but to "run the plant in base-load" on account of its operational design. Consequently, while it would help increase the load in peak periods, it would also "displace lower cost coal-fired generation in off-peak periods. Operating the Dabhol plant as a base-load station would "worsen the already existing imbalance between base-load generation (mainly coal) and peak-to-intermediate load generation (mainly hydro supplemented by natural gas in combined cycle generation). There would be surplus power in off-peak periods." As a result, the Bank pointed out, MSEB would incur grave financial losses. Given the existing and projected availability of lower-cost coal-fired base-load generation during off-peak periods, combined cycle stations of the kind designed at Dabhol are economically attractive mainly in intermediate load service. The Bank, therefore, advised "modifications in the project design and size as well as in the PPA" to take advantage of this. On the issue of the "cost and value of LNG power" the Bank's report concluded that consumers would not neither be willing nor able to pay the price of power being purchased from Enron. Therefore, its "standard project economic analysis" argued "the project is not viable".

> Since the PPA could not be brought into conformity with the law, the law had to be made consistent with the PPA.

On other and related matters, the Bank unequivocally dismissed MSEB's projection of an increase in demand of 2100 MW by 1997, exactly the amount to be generated by the Dabhol plant at roughly the time that it was due to start generating. Besides, the stipulations of MSEB's power operations indicated that the project would add more capacity than needed to meet this projected load growth in 1998. Most significantly, the Bank's report argued that the "implementation of the project would place a significant long-term claim on India's foreign exchange resources" with the "estimated annual fuel cost" being about USD 500 million, "subject to escalation".

It is worth noting in passing that the reforms that enabled the Enron investment were ostensibly prompted in the first instance by a foreign exchange crisis. A related point of interest is that about the time that government of India was signing away its assets to Enron, the government of Pakistan cancelled a PPA with Enron for a USD 670 million, 782 MW residual-oil fuelled power plant as it found the cost of the project prohibitive. The tariff in that instance was actually lower than the Dabhol tariff!

Bonfire of violations

For a fraud of such proportions to be so easily perpetrated, both the parties to the contract and many others had to collude in violating the law. The law, as amended in 1991 to increase private participation in the power sector, provided a set of generous terms by which electricity from private plants could be sold to the state electricity boards, (SEBs) and prescribed procedures that were considerably more lax than Enron would have encountered in the US. Power could be sold on a cost-plus basis, ie, after accounting for all costs and a reasonable rate of return. A 16 percent return on the equity investment was assured by law. It also lays out certain procedures for proposals involving capital expenditure above a certain value. The generating company has to submit to the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), the statutory body that verifies the techno-economic feasibility of projects, a detailed scheme which includes revenue details (and therefore tariffs), the financing arrangements, the costing of the project, the need for extra electricity supply and the generation estimate, among other relevant particulars. Before submitting the scheme, it is to be notified and advertised to enable the public to make representations for a period of two months. Further, a generating company can enter into a contract only to sell the electricity that it actually generates and not its generating capacity. It is also required to maintain substations and main transmission lines and to follow the directions of the purchasing SEB to ensure integrated operations. And, importantly, the primary factors determining the sale price of power to the SEB are the capital cost of the project and the financial package. The project on receiving techno-economic clearance has also to recieve environmental clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) after being examined by an Environmental Assesment Committee (EAC).

The Enron power purchase agreement was made in violation of the procedural provisions, and the terms of the contract more or less explicitly renounced the regulatory law. The notification to the public was misleading and representations either opposing or seeking modifications to the project were not entertained (under pressure from the CEA, the DPC eventually admitted to receiving 34 representations, of which the state government claimed to have responded to 37 of them!),

and the land for the project was acquired by arbitrary executive order. The MoEF granted environmental clearance even before the evaluating body had submitted its report. A range of executive and political luminaries brought enormous pressure to bear on the CEA, which was the only institution, other than the World Bank to raise doubts about the economic viability of the project. The CEA eventually gave only a technical clearance, as against the mandated techno-economic clearance, as by then all concerned had agreed that the financial aspects would be examined and cleared at other levels.

The MSEB had to build, at its own cost, the 400 KV transmission lines from the plant to its load centres, besides also surrendering its right to inspect the power station and the fuel tanks. The contract unambiguously barred the board from exercising its "statutory power to require DPC to perform the duties of generating companies" as set out in the Electricity Supply Act, "any exercise of the said act" being deemed "to be a change in law". Operationally, the MSEB was reduced to a non-entity. As far as the financial aspects of the project were concerned, the ceiling cost was undefined, the capital expenditure on the plant was not declared, the tariff figures were discrepant at various points, the difference between the permitted annual outflow of foreign exchange and the actual minimum outflow was of the order of 40 percent in the first year itself, and the return on equity, on an inflated project cost, was 32 percent as against the permissible limit of 16 percent.

To be fair to Enron, these violations of the law were consistent with its stated position. After a study conducted by its lawyer, Adrian Montague, a partner in the English firm Linkletters and Paines, the company, in a note called "The Problems Concerning the Application of the Indian Electricity Acts" addressed to the Power Ministry and other related organisations, conveyed its acute displeasure with Indian laws. It, among other things, strongly resented its activities being regulated; it did not want to follow the directions of the operational authority; it did not care much for the dispute resolution process; it did not approve of tariff controls, it was unhappy with the existing allocation of judicial functions and it had strong objections to the enforcement of provisions requiring it to operate and maintain the power station "in the most efficient and economical manner". Consequently, government of India was asked to change the laws to suit the company's tastes. Since the PPA could not be brought into conformity with the law, the law had to be made consistent with the PPA. The breach of law by the document would be retrospectively rectified since the state government had, in the light of Enron's instructions, approached the central government to make the necessary amendments. Enron also decided that any dispute arising out of the contract would lie within the exclusive jurisdiction of English courts. It is just an incidental point that until then, Indian law had been good enough to govern the creation and operation of over 60,000MW of capacity.

Enron's antipathy to regulation is entirely understandable. It is the enthusiasm of the regulators to abdicate their responsibilities that requires explanation. Clearly, Enron had an enormous capacity for persuasion, and enjoyed an unparalleled reach within the state apparatus. Its project had, from the very beginning, the support of practically the entire political-executive complex, and this despite the doubts expressed by the World Bank. It was the beneficiary of interventions by two chief ministers of Maharashtra, the leaders of two of the most virulently nationalists parties in the country and of successive central governments, each opposed to the other, but all united in their concern for the company. The MSEB was, to the exclusion of its statutory duties, solely concerned with doing things "acceptable to foreign promoters" going so far as to project an estimated growth of electricity that amounted to exactly the quantum to be generated by the Dabhol plant. The Ministry of Power strenuously exerted itself to ensure that the CEA would not hold back clearance. At one stage, salaries to the CEA were withheld. The Foreign Investment Promotion Board, a body that has no statutory locus standi in the matter, assumed the functions of the CEA to endorse the financial aspects of the deal. The Finance Secretary made fictitious statements about the cost of power and compared it favourably with other imaginary projects of a "similar nature" in Maharashtra .

When, despite these 'personnel resources' at its command, the project did run into difficulties, the company was able to mobilise an impressive array of international supporters. In 1995, when the project was temporarily cancelled, its progress was being monitored by the then US President's Chief of Staff in close coordination with the US Ambassador to India, Frank Wisner, who, interestingly enough, joined Enron as a director the day after he completed his diplomatic term. The US Energy Secretary publicly warned India that "Failure to honour the agreements between the project partners and the various Indian governments will jeopardise not only the Dabhol project but also most, if not all, of the other private power projects proposed for international financing". Seeing Enron's plight, even the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kenneth Clarke, on a visit to India, was moved to issue a few polite threats.

Return of *res judicata*

For sheer corporate charisma there is no other equivalent instance, considering the number of senior functionaries of the state who were willing to lie under oath to two of the highest courts in India, which in their turn were prepared, despite compelling evidence of mala fides, to preserve the sanctity of the contract. The history of litigation pertaining to the project is indicative. A 1994 writ petition challenging the legality of land acquisition for the project and pleading for resettlement was dismissed by the Bombay High Court. A

Enron's glamour girl Rebecca Mark takes a spin around Bombay waters (top). Manmohan Singh was Finance Minister when liberalisation was introduced and the deal was clinched.

subsequent writ, in the same year and before the same court, challenging the contract itself was dismissed on the ground that there was " total transparency" at every stage of the negotiations and that nothing was done secretly. This ruling was to have an adverse impact on all further attempts to seek redressal, as the principle of *res judicata* (whereby an issue between two parties, once decided by court, will not be eligible for retrial at the instance of the same litigating parties) was invoked, without due consideration of its applicability, both by Enron's counsels and by the high court to disregard a petition already admitted in court against the renegotiated contract .

The petition, filed in the Bombay High Court in 1996 by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions and this writer, was declared tenable before a single judge bench by the well-respected Justice Srikrishna. In response to a memorandum submitted to the chief justice of the High Court in his chambers by the counsel for Enron DPC and GoM, the petition was mysteriously transferred by an office order of the court, overriding a judicial decision, to a division bench led by the same Lordship who had dismissed the first petition of 1994. Predictably, *res judicata* triumphed to Enron's advantage.

The bench, even while observing that the contract was shrouded in secrecy and that Enron had conquered much more than it did earlier, dismissed the petition in December 1996. A few months later, the Supreme Court of India, in one of its strangest decisions to date, (and there have been many), barred any argument on the issues raised by the High Court's ruling and the supporting documentary evidence furnished by the petitioners. It deleted all but one of the respondents from the case, including the government of India, the CEA and Enron, limited the scope of judicial review to the changing positions of the Government of Maharashtra, and appointed an *amicus curiae* to help the court. Even the restricted issue left to be adjudicated is still pending. Enron's triumph was final. Judicial review too had failed to resist the charms that so many others had succumbed to. Eventually, it was left to the marketplace to undo the anomaly that the combined might of state and capital had contrived.

The appropriate conclusion

In all this there is a recurring question that remains unanswered: how did what is widely regarded as the most powerful and organised state in South Asia so willingly participate in a scheme to defraud itself? More to the point, how did what is known to be one of the slowest and most unresponsive bureaucracies and judiciaries in the world proceed with such speed to process Enron's requirements? The rules of evidence do not easily admit certitudes. But there is an interesting piece of information whose bearing or the lack of it on the project will depend entirely on whether one is disposed to a reasonable inference or a generous attitude. In 1995, Linda Powers, an Enron employee, in her sworn testimony to the US House Committee on Appropriations, said "Working though this process [of the evolution of Enron's Dabhol project] has given the Indian authorities a real and concrete understanding of the kinds of legal and policy changes needed in India, and has given Indian banks a real and concrete understanding of sound project lending practices. Moreover, our company spent an enormous amount of its own money—approximately $20 million—on this *education* and project development process alone, *not including any project cost*".

Among those thus educated, the MSEB by early 2001 had to default on payments on pain of bankruptcy, and two financial institutions, the Industrial Development Bank of India and the Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India, which were so assiduously instructed in the science of "sound project lending", have had their net worth wiped out. The reader is free to draw the appropriate conclusion.

Enron in Nepal

The upstart multinational and the Himalayan kingdom

by ***Ajaya Dixit***

From politicians to policy-makers and intellectuals to bureaucrats in Nepal, the news of Enron's arrival could not have come at a better time. In 1995 the World Bank, castigated by Nepali social auditors for its poor projects economics, had pulled out of the 201 MW Arun III hydropower project. One year on, the Nepali Parliament had ratified by a two-thirds majority the controversial "Integrated Treaty on Mahakali", albeit with four conditions that reinterpreted the provision made in the original treaty (see Himal, April 2001). It was in such 'volatile' circumstances that the Texan giant Enron, having just secured a contract to operate the first phase of the Dhabol Thermal Power Plant in Maharashtra sought a license to build the 10,800 MW Karnali-Chisapani hydropower project in the country's west — long regarded as a site to make a mega dam to deliver mega dollars. A "prestigious" energy company had shown confidence in the government of the Himalayan Kingdom. For believers, the proposal was motherhood and apple pie; only the misguided and the malign would question it.

Enron's proposal followed Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's visit to India in February 1996. During the course of this visit, the concerned secretaries of Nepal and India signed the Power Trade Agreement in Bombay. Immediately thereafter, Nepal's suave Water Resource Minister, Pasupati Sumshere Rana, speaking to Indian businessmen, invited foreign investors to develop Nepal's hydropower. Said he, "you can pick from the shelf whether you want a 10 MW or 10,000 MW project". Enron, with no track record of building a single hydropower project anywhere in the world, opted for the mighty 10,800 MW Karnali hydropower project. And in typical Enron fashion, it did not make its approach through the formal channel, the Electricity Development Centre that is authorised to issue licenses, but forwarded its application through the Prime Minister's Office.

The company's 1996 proposal aimed to sell power to Xian in China, roughly 2500 km away across the Himalayas from the Chisapani dam site. This was only a ploy to co-opt Nepali politicians who swallowed this impractical idea, hook, line and sinker. The promised fiscal utopia to Nepal: the government would make USD 70 to 130 million annually over the first 15 years. This figure was hypothetical because the only legal instrument of that period, the 1992 Hydropower Policy, stipulated a two percent royalty on the sale price per unit of electricity. In this case, there was not even a buyer, let alone any decision on sale price. Even more absurd was the proposal to sell the output to China, which had never expressed any desire to buy power from Nepal. India, though interested in the Karnali-Chisapani, the Pancheswar and other high dams, had not stated the price it was willing to pay.

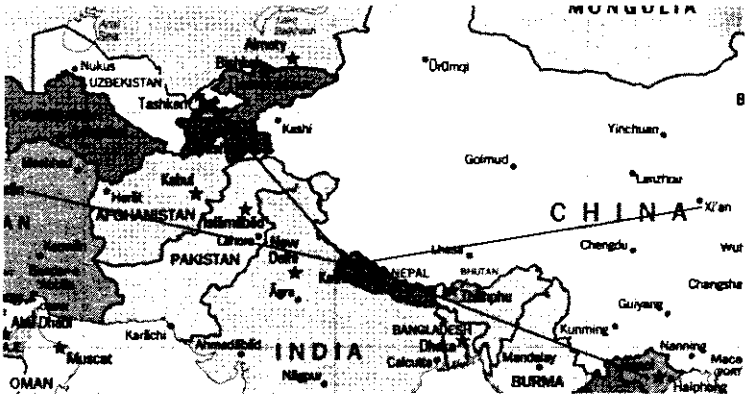
The Karnali project would dam the Karnali River at Chisapani gorge where it emerges into the plain from the Himalayan mountains. Conceived initially in the early 1960s, the project passed through various incarnations until Himalayan Power Consultants (HPC) prepared its latest design. This version has a 270 m high rock fill dam that would permanently inundate Nepal's valley in the mid-west to create a 20 billion cubic metre capacity reservoir. This water, regulated through the turbines, would generate 10,800 MW of peak power.

The regulated water would be able to provide additional irrigation benefits to command areas in Uttar Pradesh, which HPC calculated could generate a revenue of USD 416 million annually. The irrigation benefit was not part of Enron's proposal, which focused only hydropower. Sharing irrigation and other benefits is an unresolved issue between Nepal and India.

What incentives led the company to solicit license for the mammoth hydro-project in the Himalaya? Whether it was consumed by its own hype or by some other purely monetary instinct is moot. What was more important was the sheer scale of constraints the company seemingly failed to consider. For one, it had overlooked the physical uncertainties of a project of this size, the first of its kind in these mountains, including the high social, environment and economic costs. The project's reservoir would inundate about 339 square km of land and directly displace 60,000 people. Fur-

thermore, the company also seemed to have overlooked the project's political dimensions — the uncertain state of the country's politics in the aftermath of treaty on Mahakali River, and Article 126 of Nepal's Constitution. This provision required any agreement involving natural resources, and the distribution of their uses, to be ratified by a majority of two thirds of the members of both Houses of Parliament present at a joint sitting.

Considering the unanimity of opinion on the merits of the project among a wide and influential cross section of the Nepali decision-and-opinion-making classes, it was left to dissenting civil society groups in the country to raise questions and concerns. These concerns were not purely local. Questions of a similar nature were being posed in international quarters as well. Enron, however, did not heed these questions.



Nepal's axis of power: Enron claimed Nepal could export power to Xi'an, a mere 2408 km from the Chisapani gorge. Why stop there? It's a 'short' distance to Tashkent (2097 km), Hanoi (2207 km) and Tehran (3306 km).

When it sought the license, three water projects in South Asia, conceived under the aegis of the World Bank – Arun III (Nepal), Sardar Sarovar Project (India) and Flood Action Plan (Bangladesh) – had emerged at the centre of a major controversy. The Bank withdrew from all three, triggering serious questions about the approach to water development. Faith in the benefits of large water project thus could no longer innocently be sustained when even an institution as orthodox as the World Bank had begun to accommodate opinion critical of large dams. Given the changing climate of opinion, the Karnali-Chisapani project could not have been insulated from some of these difficult questions, even if the Nepali government and Enron wanted to.

But as the Dhabol deal had demonstrated, the company displayed complete disregard for logic and the voice of circumspection. Leave alone civil society groups who dissented, the Central Electricity Authority in New Delhi had argued against the power purchase rate that Enron sought at Dhabol. Even the World Bank had warned that the rate was untenable for the Maharastra State Electricity Board. Compared to Enron, the World Bank appeared benign. It could be forced to respond to criticism, as the formation on World Commission on Dams showed, but not the behemoth. Enron's actions on the ground were real, but its presence highly ephemeral.

If the company was motivated by the thought of securing a lucrative deal of the kind it had clinched in Dhabol, the possibility of it materialising was remote. Perhaps, as in other instances in other countries, Enron may have been supremely confident of moulding opinion to suit its ends, despite Nepal's cantakerous politics and active civil society in the hydropower sector. But even with manipulation, profit would be remote: there were hard financial realities to be dealt with. Even if all the physical, political and social constraints were overcome, the project would have taken, at a minimum, almost fifteen years to complete. The revenue stream to fill its coffers would not commence until then.

Neither Enron nor the Kathmandu government paid attention to uncertainties and risks. In the euphoria of an imminent construction of a large project by a multinational giant there were no takers for contrary opinion. The only question from within the government came from the Water Resources Minister, Pasupati Sumsher Rana, but even his disinclination to award the license to Enron rested more on procedural grounds than on paradigmatic or philosophical differences.

This partiality for gigantic projects has a long pedigree in Nepal. Since 1950, when Nepal began interacting with 'modern' world, the philosophy of building high dams in the Himlaya for the export of power to earn revenue captured popular and bureaucratic imagination alike. The focus on high dams is based on the western United States-model (large-scale supply-guided projects, and public subsidy) and its irrelevance to Nepal was never considered. The energy produced by such projects was meant to enhance economic linkages in the western US states of California, Idaho and Montana and not for export. In Nepal, such projects are conceived of as technological artifacts in the same vein, with the difference that they are dedicated to export-based end-use. Yet after 50 years, this grand conception has yielded electricity to only 15 percent of the people. Donor funded hydropower projects have given Nepalis expensive tariffs, even as the investments in developing these projects make little contribution to the local economy.

It is only Nepal's disorganised and unstable politics that saved the country from such a potentially disastrous investment decision. And murky politics was eventually what led to Enron's exit without the license it sought. The company's proposal was made when Nepal's first coalition government was in power in 1996. A year and a half later, Nepal was still governed by a coalition. When politics became so unpredictable as to prevent 'rational' forecasts on all the corollary 'investments' necessary for a project of this size, Enron withdrew

unilaterally, perhaps the only recorded instance ever of the upstart multinational conceding defeat. It takes an unruly polity to exasperate a behemoth. To put a face-saving gloss on this retreat, Enron declared that the "regional market for power may be insufficient at this time for us to continue our development efforts".

Enron's defeat, as it turned out, was both temporary and costly for Nepal. In the short period that the company was around it inflicted damages of a fundamental nature on Nepal's body politic. The democratic foundation of the polity was undermined as political parties of all ideological persuasions, by lobbying for Enron, vied with each other to invite on themselves a crisis of legitimacy. Enron had practically assumed the status of political talisman. It was, therefore but natural that Girija Prasad Koirala, who was just assuming office at the head of a new coalition government, took the news of Enron's withdrawal rather badly. He treated it as a grave a grave political setback since a potential investor's exit coincided with his assumption of office. His first act in office was therefore to actually request Enron to reconsider its decision.

Ever the obliging investor, Enron, despite the absence of a "regional market for power", responded positively, saying it was still interested in Karnali-Chisapani. How it chose to deal with the absent regional market was neither questioned nor explained. This time around, there was one serious critic from within the government. Sailaja Acharya, long-time political agitator of the Congress Party and at that time the Water Resources Minister in the Koirala cabinet, was the only person within the administration and in the entire political establishment to take note of both the risks and the unresolved issue of downstream benefits. Minister Acharya asked her secretary to write to the company asking it to wait until Nepal resolved with India the question of downstream water rights arising from the Mahakali Treaty and the Pancheswar project.

What was a considered and reasoned position by the minister became embroiled in the convolutions of domestic politics. Rather than examine the merits or demerits of her position, the debate focused on the minister's supposed motives. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Adhikari (of the mainstream left, no less) went so far as to accuse Acharya of cold-shouldering Enron and declared in Parliament that "he would make this an issue". The Nepali Congress Central Committee directed the government to ignore the minister's objections and commence negotiations with the company. The larger practical issue did not get the attention it merited. Simply put, could an economy with a national budget of USD 1 billion be in a position to take up simultaneously two high dams, Pancheshwar and Karnali-Chisapani, that required an investment in excess of 10 billion dollars?

Ideological differences, the essence of multi-party democracy, became more or less notional. For all practical purposes, at least on the Enron issue, the ideological denomination of parties became symbolic markers to merely distinguish distinct groups of similar people. Every political actor of every major party believed that Enron would do the needful and negotiate with India on the outstanding and unresolved issues arising from the Mahakali treaty and other water-sharing and power-related matters, including the issue of downstream benefits. A senior leader of one of the parties echoed this expectation to this baffled writer, "Enron would bargain with India, on behalf of Nepal". The illusory salvation from Nepal's woes had all but arrived. The Karnali project's regulated water flow would benefit downstream India, and the formula on how India would pay for this significant benefit was something for the two governments together, and not Enron, to decide. This was practically an abdication of the responsibilities regarding Nepal's sovereignty under the multinational's umbrella.

At that stage, it had already been evident that profit, profit and profit was the company's sole motive. But those in power in Nepal refused to even listen. The dealings of Enron's leaders even while the company came crashing down showed that profit was only for themselves and not even their shareholders; they did not represent any nation, community or value. In Nepal, the middle ground politics where philosophical differences could be contested began to get evaporated.

Nepal's present crisis of governance and the political vacuum in the country could be attributed to the death of the country's middle ground politics in the mid-1990s and which in turn is partially the result of the total reliance on an inappropriate development model that united the political spectrum. The nation's social and political realities had necessitated a cautious and prudent approach to create a competitive, but regulated market and simultaneous efforts to ensure that large sections of the population still in the informal sector were not left out in its wake.

From the *panchayat* era, which ended in 1990, Nepal's development was equated with export-driven power projects. In the time of democracy the definition of development remained unchanged. Politics had eroded itself in the pursuit of one policy to the exclusion of all other considerations. Nobody in power paused to reflect on why and how a private company with track record of raking unjustified profit, would help lift the country's economy. If hubris escaped nemesis a second time around, it was not through acumen but happenstance. Enron just happened to collapse in time.

Lessons

Enron's saga has several lessons relevant for the Glocal (local and global). At the local level, the company's first stint in Nepal was damaging. The company's proposal should have surprised all: how would a project of such magnitude be build in a country with a weak economic

base, institutional capacity and deteriorating political context. No nationalism here, it is the bare and simple truth. Also the company did not have a track record of building hydropower plants. Perhaps smart executives wanted to project a façade of work ethos and professionalism as the cornerstones of their corporate existence. So it seemed, until the later months of 2001. The company's appearance was totally deceptive.

At its core Enron was a corporate mirage created to fool the public while its unscrupulous leaders enriched themselves by shafting shareholders even while the company came crashing down. The company's answer to every problem was to bulldoze its way through using financial and political clout. Its managers were told to "go out there and secure". They did that by flouting all the rules of the game. Questions were swept under the carpet. And the political establishments of both India and Nepal bent over backwards to accommodate it's illegitimate demands. The company just could not have continued. Enron imploded like a house of cards under the weight of its own hubris.

In Nepal, did those in the parliament really believe what they said? Did they understand the implications? Were they trying to look nice, and be politically correct? At best, perhaps each was trying to be nice. At worst, they just refused to learn the things they did not know. Fortunately, thanks to its murky politics the country was saved from signing the multibillion-dollar project involving a counter guarantee to Enron. Its failure should be a boon in disguise in terms of the lessons; avoid hype, rebuild the lost political middle-ground, and make the effort to build the nation's institutions.

How would one characterise Enron's activities? It was simply *bhrastachar* (practices unbecoming of its *dharma*). The market, within which the company functioned, is a necessary institution because that is where innovations and creativity flourish. The market is an equaliser: for the right price markets make no distinction between a millionaire and a commoner. Markets, however, need regulation. The market too has its *dharma*; competition, fair play and risk taking. Enron flouted *dharma* by violating all three. The company s ultimate in hubris was the vulgarity of hoping to convert everything into a commodity. The first was energy, water was to be the next, where would it have ended if it were still around; the sea, air, weather?

Enron's leaders were not accountable to its shareholders or principals. Its leadership was concerned more with managing stock prices, and profiting from it rather than managing the company by securing legitimate business. The fiasco shows that not all is well with global corporate governance. How would accountability through appropriatet checks and balances be achieved? How many others are out there doctoring their books?

The experience also underscores the importance of building and maintaining strong social auditing capacities in all societies. Cautionary voices were raised against Enron's hype in Nepal, but they were labeled anti-developmental. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the role of the US media and civil society vis-à-vis the company's foray in South Asia. The Wall Street Journal considered Enron's decision to pull out of Nepal the biggest debacle for the Himalayan Kingdom. Apart from this comment, which clearly reflected poor judgment, no questions were raised. If they had been raised, the company's many improprieties would perhaps been exposed early on and the unpleasant surprises could have been avoided.

This oversight on the part of social auditors in the US particularly and the West generally can be traced to the post-1990 global hype, dominated by visual images, the internet and a techno-fanatical mindset. Consequently, companies like Enron got a lot of mileage out of the dot.com hype: its CEO once even suggested that the company was "virtually" integrated. For the average American getting over Monica Lewinski, Enron's collapse, in the words of Robert Hersh of Resource for Future (RFF), came as a "conceptual inverse".

The modern world operates on the rationality of using information for evidence and the logic of reasoning. Simply put, educated individuals would make 'rational' decisions within the professional boundary thus set. The connivance of Enron's leadership and its financial auditor has seriously undermined this concept of rationality, raising questions about professionalism, contract and *bhrastachar*. In Enron's case, at least in its Dhabol deal, *bhrastachar* was a contractual element. The emphasis on achievement seemed to make even malpractice, momentarily at least, the pinnacle of professionalism. When it collapsed, Enron tarnished both the self-image and the ethics of the market. Enron's failure should be the catalyst for rethinking many comfortable assumptions.

The saving grace is that Enron was a US company. Imperfect though they may be Western societies have in place some sort of in-built mechanisms of checks and balances – a legal system, an active media and civil society groups contesting power. More robust and secure arrangements need to be put in place, not just in the West, but also in developing countries. The question of checks and restraints, however, should not be a one-time response because the restraining techniques and instruments become inadequate in responding to emerging challenges. How will impropriety be identified and differentiated from financial innovations?

The key is societal balance of power. As per its principles, this balance needs to be maintained between three active institutional sectors. The process consists of ensuring space at all levels (from a rural hamlet of a developing country, to the state and global corporations of the political and financial centres of gravity) for a genuine market that is open and competitive, egalitarian social auditors with transparent volunteerism, and honest regulation that is not driven by hubris or rent seeking propensities on the part of the state.

Enron and others in Pakistan

High energy collisions

by ***Khaleeq Kiani***

The ground for private participation in Pakistan's power generation capacity was laid in 1988 when the government, then run by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), forecast that capacity would have to be augmented by about 9000 megawatts (MW) by 198. The government argued that since the public sector could only contribute 4000 MW of this additional capacity, the remaining would have to come from the private sector.

Following this projection the government announced an incentive-oriented energy policy in 1994, to attract direct private in the power sector, which till then consisted of two state-owned electricity utilities — the Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) responsible for distribution to the whole of Pakistan except Karachi, which was serviced by the Karachi Electricity Supply Corporation (KESC). The government's initiative was encouraged by the World Bank , which guided the government though the privatisation process.

The Bank involved itself directly in project financing and established two funds. The first was the USD 1.3 billion Private Sector Energy Development Fund (PSEDF), which provided long-term project finance at almost a fixed rate of interest. The other was the Long Term Credit Facility (LTCF), administered by the National Development Finance Corporation (NDFC), was established to provide long term subordinated debt financing upto 23 years. The World Bank and the Export-Import Bank of Japan (Jexim) contributed USD 400 million each to the LTCF. Other bilateral agencies together contributed over USD 600 million.

To attract private promoters the government's 1994 energy policy offered lenient tariff terms without international competitive bidding or negotiations on tariff. The government invited 131 international companies to explore investment possibilities, of which 82 companies were issued letters of interest (LoI) to install about 18,662 MW of capacity against a total demand of around 2,000-4,000 MW. Of these, 34 companies were issue letters of support (LoS) for a total capacity of 8,340 MW. Within two years deals were finalised with 19 independent power producers (IPPs) for 3,158 MW generation capacity. These new projects involved over 70 foreign investors and creditors.

The privatisation exercise soon ran into rough weather and within two years the government and the IPPs were engaged in bitter recrimination, primarily on the tariff issue. For the last three-and-a-half years, until very recently, Pakistan's power sector was mired in controversy and the entire experience has not only exposed the business practices of donor institutions, creditors and foreign powers, but also highlighted the technical and crisis management shortcomings of Pakistani authorities. The bureaucracy accustomed to archaic laws and methods, had to negotiate with slick technical professionals, lawyers and economists of multinational corporations, and fell prey to their shrewd business tactics.

The privatisation programme faced problems at the planning, policy, institutional and operational levels. At the planning level, both the projected growth rate of the economy and the concomitant increase in electricity requirement were grossly exaggerated. In effect the government was promoting excess capacity. According to the Private Power and Infrastructure Board (PPIB), set up to process IPP applications, the original requirement was only about 1500 MW, but LoS were issued for 8340 MW. At the institutional level, one of the fundamental problems was that the loan facilities established by the Bank were found wanting. In purely technical terms, the NDFC failed to administer the loans due to professional inadequacy. It was also insolvent and depended on the LTCF for liquidity, a weakness the Bank seems to have overlooked. The Bank also failed to notice substantial asset/liability mismatches in the LTCF, which could have been partially offset through conversion to a single currency loan. In reality, the outline for the future of the LTCF was vague and did not have a suitable structure or a timeline for implementation.

The other institutional weakness was the crisis that Wapda confronted. Wapda, which was to purchase the power from private generators, was never involved directly in the policy preparation, and the tariff and investment negotiation. All decisions were imposed on it. Though Wapda was in a fairly sound position when the policy was introduced, within a short while it was in dire financial straits. Several factors contributed to the deterioration of its performance, as a result of which it faced difficulties in meeting its obligations to IPPs. These included the tariff arrangements, that worked to the suppliers advantage, a purchase price indexed to the US dollar, a 45 percent devaluation of the Pakistan rupee, a decline in electricity demand due

to low economic growth and high tariffs, poor collection rates from government customers (who represent 30 percent of Wapda sales), widening tariff cross-subsidies that affected industrial and commercial consumers who switched over to their own power generation.

A third institutional aspect of the crisis was that the chief 'patron' of the privatisation programme, the World Bank, had its credibility tarnished when a couple of its senior officials were accused of financial impropriety by the Pakistan government. One of them was taken to court for malfeasance during the implementation of a 235 MW thermal power project in Pakistan. In the World Bank's own words: "the bank acted like a promoter representing sponsors, lenders and government. In hindsight, Bank involvement went far beyond what was prudent for a development banker and exposed the Bank to conflicts of interest and reputational risk."

The Bank's view of the problems with the privatisation programme was expressed in one of its reports. On the overall implementation of the programme it said, "There were management shortcomings during preparation, appraisal and early supervision of the projects. The responsible managers were too closely involved in promoting projects and senior management failed to pursue adequate quality assurances and ignored warning signs. Early supervision was entrusted to loosely managed long term consultants."

A problem of policy

In reality there were other deficiencies that contributed to the crisis of privatisation. The main problem was at the policy and implementation level. In its keenness to attract investment the government overlooked several safeguards in its energy policy. Investors were free to select the fuel, technology and location for their power plants. This encouraged the setting up of plants based on imported fuel, thereby affecting the balance of payment environment adversely. Plant locations were not the most economically advantageous to the purchaser and consumer. Plants located at remote distances from the national grid required long transmission lines that increased the burden of investment and respo sibility on Wapda. The costs this entailed for Wapda were passed through to the consumer in the tariff. On top of that, the costs and tariffs were linked to the US consumer price index and all payments were to be made in foreign exchange. The World Bank noted: "The levelised tariff recommended under the 1994 policy at 6.5 cents/kWh for the first ten years increased to 8.6 cents per kWh". The selection criteria under the 1994 policy enabled the implementation of many subprojects which were not consistent with the least-cost expansion programme.

The policy did not provide an incentive for IPPs to reduce costs. Hence the tariff for virtually every IPP reached the ceiling set under the policy regardless of the technology that was being employed. This resulted in relatively high project costs with a high proportion of "soft-costs" in both project development and financing. In addition, the incentive guarantees proved to be too generous and this was reflected in the overwhelming response from the private sector to the power policy. And, although the government had intended to review the bulk tariff annually, it never did so. Besides, the mix of private generation and public sector transmission and distribution rendered the power sector vulnerable to financial shocks and external developments, such as changes in fuel prices that increased from Rs 2,200 per ton to a staggering Rs 12,000 in about eight years.

The pace of the privatisation programme was also faster than the restructuring of Wapda and the creation of a suitable regulatory system. It was only in 1997 that the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra) was put in place, but by the time it came in, all the IPPs with whom contracts had been finalised were excluded from its domain mainly because most of the projects had either been completed by that time or were nearing completion. Consequently, regulation and monitoring did not extend to investments already in place. In effect, Nepra had no private investment to monitor since, by this time the power sector controversy had reached such proportions as to discourage prospective new investors.

The power surplus situation that emerged from the new policy was compounded by economic recession which reduced the demand for power consumption. This surplus was more disastrous than scarcity as power rates almost doubled and unnecessarily increased Wapda's fixed capacity payment obligation and placed a burden on country's forex reserves. At one stage Pakistani reserves ebbed to a mere USD 400 million. Foreign debt service obligations related to IPPs averaged at USD 500 million per annum, in addition to the foreign exchange cost of imported fuel, operation and maintenance costs and repatriation of profits. The situation deteriorated to a point where Pakistan failed to clear around USD 3.7 billion IPP debt to international creditors. In sum, the government was exposed to large contingent liabilities backed by sovereign guarantees.

The net consequences of such arrangements manifested themselves fairly early. The payments by Wapda to IPPs reached a staggering PKR 83 billion in 1999 and further to 105 billion in 2001, as non-payment of electricity bills by the public sector consumers coupled with widespread theft -- around 42 percent -- placed an enormous strain on the utility's financial capacity. Wapda's total income had increased from Rs 90 billion in 1997 to Rs 156 billion in 2000-01. Of that, Rs 105 billion was paid to IPPs in 2001. By this time, the consumer's end tariff had risen from an average of Rs 1.40 per unit to Rs 3.51.

With Wapda being subject to a very high burden and the consumer being exposed to very high tariffs, the power sector developments became a political issue. The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) adopted it as an election slogan in the 1996 general elections and

announced its intention of cancel the deals, alleging that the Pakistan Peoples Party had been the beneficiary of kickbacks and commissions in the power sector deals. On coming to power, the PML government asked IPPs to reduce their tariff by 25 to 35 per cent. Backed by powerful creditors around the world particularly the US, UK, Japan, and Germany, the IPPs refused to oblige. In November 1997, the PML government formally cancelled letters of support (LoS) of 15 IPPs with whom deals had not been finalised. On 27 March, 1998, the PML government formally announced that it would not continue with the re maining deals as they were not in the national interest.

The crisis deepens

This was the beginning of the crisis and in the 42 months that it dragged on, five federal ministers, seven federal power secretaries, five chairmen of Wapda and 13 government committees on independent power producers, besides investigation and accountability agencies have been changed. Institutions like NDFC and PPIB and Wapda Private Power Organisation (WPPO) were subject to considerable political interference. They also suffered a high staff turnover at the managerial level. Key experts in NDFC and PPIB joined IPPs for higher salaries. This resulted in an interesting situation. People involved in policy making joined IPPs, rejoined the government in various committees and task forces to renegotiate tariffs with IPPs, and in some cases, officials employed by IPPs joined the government in various capacities. Conflict of interests ruled the day. As the newspapers reported, in one particular incident, a former employee of an IPP joined Wapda as a consultant and asked the management of his former IPP to pay him USD 10 million to get the project exonerated from corruption allegations and to renegotiate a suitable tariff. How many projects involved similar tactics is anybody's guess.

The controversy reached its climax when the government announced the termination of nine agreements on 27 June, 1998. The then Ehtesab (accountability) Bureau chief began interrogating IPP officials, including those of the 1292 MW Hubco project, the largest private power project in Pakistan. The Law Ministry introduced the "Eradication of Corrupt Business Practices Ordinance 1998" to move cases against IPPs. In all, given the position taken by government agencies and the international consortium of investors and lenders, there was no real progress towards a solution. After the fall of the civil government in October 1999, the military authorities carried on negotiations with the remaining IPPs. President Musharraf termed the dispute with IPPs an "unnecessary entanglement" and sought a report within 30 days of resolving the issue. The Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz and the Wapda chief finalised agreements with seven new IPPs in early 2000 and announced that six existing ones, most of them US-based, did not require revision in tariff rates. This was obviously under US pressure.

This, however, was a piecemeal solution and hence did not satisfy 'international' opinion. Besides, the case of Hubco, the largest private project, was still pending. Hubco became the centrepiece of the dispute and was of serious concern to General Pervez Musharraf as the US, UK, Japan, the IMF and the World Bank mounted sustained pressure on the Pakistan government. President Musharraf intervened personally on more than one occasion to demand a solution. The problem with the government authorities was that they could not adopt a uniform stand. For one, the ministry of water and power was sidelined on all major issues. To make matters worse, the two-member committee, consisting of the Finance Minister and the Wapda Chairman, was often working at cross-purposes when it came to Hubco negotiations, with the latter insisting that he would not allow a foreign company to ride roughshod over the country's interests. Eventually Musharraf had to involve himself personally by meeting Hubco's board of directors in New York in September 2001. The issues that rocked Pakistan seemed to be a replay of the crisis surrounding Enron's Dhabol power project in India.

In hindsight, the projects while being highly innovative, were also high risk ventures that later turned out to have numerous shortcomings. These weaknesses included an inadequate analysis of the IPPs' impact on Wapda's finances, inadequate review of the government's thermal power policy, which might have revealed the need to limit the amount of new capacity, inadequate emphasis on the social consequences and affordability of private power generation and the absence of technical specialists to focus on the implementation and choice of technology by IPPs. Ironically, the World Bank, evaluating the power programme in Pakistan, concluded that it was a success. According to it: "The physical targets set out under the two projects (PSEDF and LTCF) have largely been achieved resulting in investments totaling some $5 billion". Unfortunately, all the so called achievements in terms of investment accrued only to international investors backed by the World Bank, and all the negative outcomes devolved on the people of Pakistan. As even the Bank was forced to concede, the outcome was "unsatisfactory as the related economic, financial, institutional and technical aspects fell short of expectations and, therefore, negatively affected the development outcome".

The power sector in South Asia has seen unusual convulsions, and some strange regulatory, business and investment practices. As a sector that affects both ordinary consumers and large institutional users, it can have transitive effects throughout the economy. It has taken close to a decade for the crises to brew, develop and subside. What is not clear is whether the lessons of the crisis have been absorbed. Until that happens, more of the same is all that is in store.

"NO PARTY DOMINANT" India's New Political System

As the recent round of elections to the legislative assemblies of four states in India reconfirm the decline of the dominant-party system, it is time to reflect on its implications and on the possible mechanics of the multi-party arrangement that has replaced it.

by ***Robin Jeffrey***

Once upon a time, when independent India was young and "security" meant whether there were enough snacks for the crowds who visited the prime minister on his birthday, political scientists talked about a "dominant-party system." It was their way of trying to sum up how India's unprecedented experiment in government worked.

What needed explaining by the early 1960s was a system that had carried out three national general elections, bringing more voters to polling booths than anywhere before in history. It was a system that regularly elected the same party to government both nationally and in most of its federal units. Yet it was a system in which rival parties survived and occasionally won state elections. It was not a one-party state as most of the ex-colonial world was becoming. It was not a totalitarian state, as Nazi Germany had been, the Soviet Union was and the People's Republic of China was trying to be. And it was not the Democrats-and-Republicans, Labour-and-Conservatives, two-party system that English speakers were familiar with.

The Congress Party seemed to embody many of India's peculiarities, and in those days of bipolar struggles between Free Worlds and Evil Empires, it was difficult to contemplate what would happen to India without "one-party dominance." How could such a disparate entity — such a functioning anarchy — endure without a dominant party? The dominant party provided the umbrella under which representatives of various regional interests could shelter, fight, fall out, come back, but, on the whole, resolve difference. Under a strong Prime Minister, the dominant party kept the Indian ship of state from breaking up in the high seas of poverty, class conflict, caste divisions, language rivalry, religious animosity and all the rest.

It is approaching 13 years since the "dominant party system" died in 1989 and, even allowing for its delayed burial in the elections of 1996, it is time to think about what sort of "a system" has replaced it. What should we call it? A "no party dominant" system? An "alliance system"? Or is it "a system" at all? Is it simply, as some columnists suggest, Badmash (scoundrel) Raj?

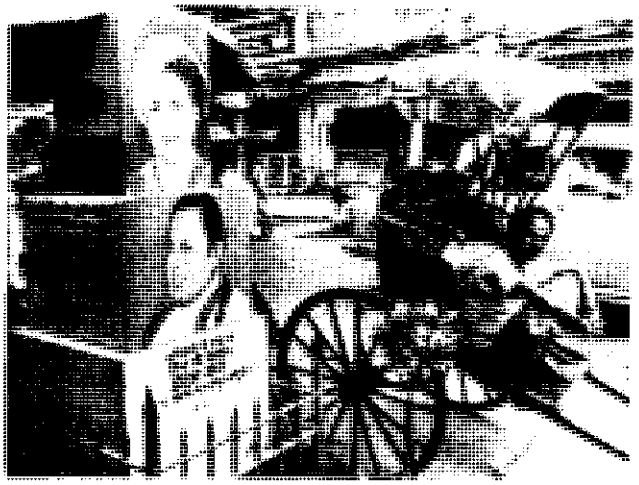
Three features of politics since 1989 stand out: minority or coalition governments at the centre, state governments unaffiliated to and at odds with the core central-government party and the rise of independent state chief ministers, unbeholden to central authority.

First, minority or coalition governments at the centre. Since 1996, no party has come within an elephant's trumpet of securing an absolute majority in the national parliament. No party is likely to in the foreseeable future. Even the Narasimha Rao government of 1991-6 failed to command a majority in its own right, and its great lingering scandal, the alleged bribery of MPs from Jharkhand in 1993, stemmed from the need to line up the votes in a delicately balanced Lok Sabha. Since 1989, MPs in the Lok Sabha have regularly made and unmade prime ministers, most dramatically in the double-cross of Devi Lal (a prime ministerial aspirant) in 1989 and the fall of the VP Singh government in 1990.

This instability is no doubt a cause of apprehension and dismay for organisations seeking firm, fast-moving and predictable policy-making. Such instability also troubled the analysts who explored the "dominant-party system" in the 1960s. Without an established party at the centre, with strong links in the regions, how could the Indian state survive in a democratic form? Would the end be balkanisation or Bolshevism?

But it has not gone that way. Bolshevism is no longer a likely option. And the Balkans balkanised before anyone else and the old Soviet Union followed them. The Indian state, on the other hand, looks a better bet to survive in its present form for another generation than most members of the United Nations.

Part of the explanation for the way coalition politics have seeped through India in the 1990s lies in the growing experience of politicians with the requirements of



After the deaths of Indira and Rajiv, the Congress suffered a decline in fortunes.

survival. That experience began most noticeably in the chaotic collapses of governments around the Indian states after the elections of 1967. Coalitions rose and fell constantly between 1967 and 1970, and this process provided action-research for shrewd politicians. From 1970, ways of — and reasons for — overcoming the "Aya Ram Gaya Ram"temptation (the politics of defection) became apparent. The most striking model came from Kerala, as "models" often do.

Kerala, and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin of which it was partly made up, experienced about a dozen different elected governments between 1947 and 1970. None went its full term, and minorities, coalitions and hung assemblies were the rule.

Out of this experience in 1970 came the *aviyal mantrisabha* - the mixed-vegetables ministry - headed by C Achutha Menon (1913-91) of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which held only a fraction of the legislative seats. Yet this ministry, improvising and straining, survived not only its full term but, because of the "emergency," till 1977 when its constituents won re-election. Since then, Kerala's record of governments that go the full term is probably better than that of most 'ndian states; Kerala's governments are always coalitions.

A number of features contributed to the transformation in Kerala. Twenty years of disastrous making and unmaking of governments led many politicians to recognise the personal dangers of falling governments and exasperated voters. Politicians stood to lose their perks — the phones, houses, cars and jobs — every time the great electoral wheel-of-fortune was spun. By 1970 a lot more Kerala politicians, given the chance to bring down a ministry, were calculating the benefits of becoming a minister in a new government against the risks of being thrown out in a new election. They had good reason to be apprehensive. Frustrated voters were realising that one of their few powers was the power to vote against candidates they did not like, often those who had recently had their noses in the nectar-trough of office.

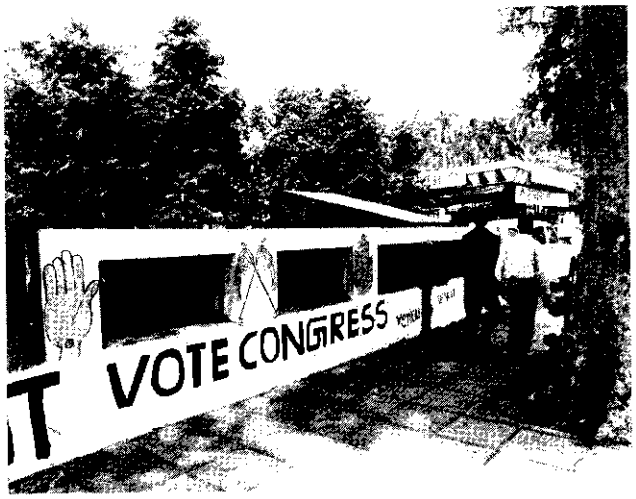
Politicians and parties in Kerala acquired a generation of experience. They became practised in the mechanisms, and better able to identify the personalities, that might make coalitions work. The proud and inflexible Pattom A Thanu Pillai (1885-1970), who had been a notable feature of Kerala politics since 1938, gave way to the low-key, scholarly lawyer, Achutha Menon, everyone's uncle. The latter, let it be known, had a bad heart and that the coalition needed him more than he needed the chief minister's chair. It was a bluff no one was ready to call. Kerala's two-alliance system was born, and the state has had fiercely competitive, but relatively predictable and stable governments, since.

Parallels with India in the 1990s are easy to see. The alliances and coalitions that began with the Janata government in 1977 and accelerated after 1989 began to instill discretion in ambitious legislators. They acquired skills in consultation and committees that had been forced on Kerala from the 1960s. And in Atal Bihari Vajpayee, now much mellowed from the fiery chauvinist of 30 years before, they found a plausible uncle. Vajpayee, too, was said to know how to play the "do you *really* want me to resign?" card.

Given such experience, coalitions at the centre proved not only necessary but possible to form and sustain. The coalition has thus become an essential feature of the "no party dominant" system.

The second feature of Indian politics since 1989 is the fact that *governments in the states often are led by parties* different *from the major party in the central government.* After the state elections in February 2002, for example, BJP chief minsters survive in only a handful of the 28 states. In many states, moreover, a two-alliance system has taken shape, again in ways similar to Kerala 30 years ago. Around core parties, smaller groups and leaders cluster. In the "Aya Ram Gaya Ram" days 30 years ago, the rules were still being invented, politicians were discovering what was workable and desirable, and for many MLAs, it was a case of making hay while the fields were still theirs.

MLAs are still practised hay-makers, but many states have developed their own sets of implicit rules within which canny MLAs see the wisdom of working. The ability to run coalitions that hold together means that central governments have difficulty finding pretexts to invoke the second most famous article of the constitution — 356 or President's Rule, the replacement of a state government by central authority. (Article 370 on Kashmir must hold the prize for the most famous article). Delicately poised coalitions at the centre are even less likely to be capable of casual meddling in states. And, indeed, tails can wag dogs: state parties can make life difficult for central coalitions. Until the end of 1997, President's Rule had been invoked about 100 times, and just under half of the occasions occurred when Indira Gandhi was Prime Minister — 16 out of 50 years. Since1989, the opportunities and inclinations have been



notably fewer. Strong, state-based parties and leaders now are a common feature of India's political hayfields, and to overthrow them from New Delhi is not something to be done lightly.

Relatedly, *a third feature* of the "no party dominant" system is the *re-emergence of "big" Chief Ministers*. "Re-emergence" is the right word, because in the 1960s, it was often lamented that the growing power of overmighty state leaders threatened the future of India — people like Pratap Singh Khairon of Punjab, K Kamaraj of Tamil Nadu, Mohanlal Sukhadia of Rajasthan, PC Ghosh of West Bengal, S Nijalingappa of Karnataka, etc. In some ways, Indira Gandhi was a product of this logic: fearing such potential rivals, she set out to behead them. For a generation after her 1971 election victory, independent chief ministers were unwelcome and rare.

The chief minister-in-a-parachute is still a device that Congress and BJP at the centre like to deploy when they can. But such parachutists, even if they were to displace local heavyweights in states like Madhya Pradesh, Kerala or elsewhere, would have every chance of leading the party to disaster in the next election. State voters are like state leaders with genuine muscle; fancy boys and girls dropped down from New Delhi don't play well at the polls.

Free-wheeling chief ministers, with their own local support base, are the essence of the "no dominant party" system. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu from 1967 foreshadowed a condition that became common and embedded in the 1990s. Chief ministers like K Karunanidhi, J Jayalalithaa (Tamil Nadu), NT Rama Rao, Chandrababu Naidu (Andhra Pradesh), Jyoti Basu (West Bengal), Laloo Prasad Yadav (Bihar), Digvijay Singh (Madhya Pradesh), or Prakash Singh Badal (Punjab) may not embody the selfless qualities required for sainthood, but their local power bases and ability to act independently of New Delhi are unquestionable.

Indeed, they sometimes have the capacity to act *on* New Delhi — the very quality that was thought to be growing perniciously among chief ministers in the 1960s. Since 1989 the capacity has grown for some state leaders (eg, Jayalalithaa or Chandrababu Naidu) to threaten the central government by instructing their parties' Members of Parliament how to vote in the Lok Sabha. This is a striking contrast to the imposed chief ministers who symbolised Indira Gandhi's insecurity.

The paradox is neat. Indira Gandhi in 1971 looked enviably secure, yet she felt the need to meddle constantly in the states. Since 1989, however, every Indian prime minister has been decidedly insecure and has largely left the states alone. And on the whole the Indian polity is more, not less, stable for the practice.

On the positive side, the emancipation of states means that their governments respond to local issues and concerns. The creation of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal in 2000 characterises this assertion of local social forces and the perceived need to placate them. Similarly, governments in Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, to consider just three, act independently of New Delhi and often make New Delhi listen to them.

Indeed, some would argue that Kerala's asset from the 1950s was its two-alliance system. It embedded competitive politics and required parties to respond constantly to the demands of articulate, organised voters. Direction from the centre was fruitless in the face of such local electoral vitality.

But the states'' sensitivity to their own peoples also has negative consequences. Economists regularly refer to the fiscal irresponsibility and bankruptcy of the states. In striving to please the voters, state governments institute populist schemes that offer no prospect of a return on investment and drive states into paralysing debt. This does nothing to solve the long-term problem of providing well-being for the vast, poorly-off majority of citizens. Democracy, responsive governments and sensitive symbolism are admirable; but as they said in the 1960s, "Freedom begins with breakfast."

In the 1960s, it was feared that overmighty chief ministers and powerful state governments would provide the breeding ground for secession. But the experience of a "no party dominant" system suggests otherwise. On the whole, large states, with strong linguistic and cultural identities, are firmly hinged to India. The link is made by a "national bourgeoisie" (for want of a better term) of business and military people, public servants and politicians who have both an economic and emotional investment in something called "India." At the same time, they enjoy being movers and shakers in their particular state. In 1999, such people produced a national response to the Kargil war that gave 21st-century meaning to the 19th-century word, "chauvinism."

A "no party dominant" system is the product of a number of ingredients. First, people of significantly different cultures (dialect, language, caste, religion, appearance, etc), whose forebears had little chance to be part of political decision-making now demand and get

a voice. They do so because of expanded literacy and communications — schools, roads, auto vehicles, newspapers, telephones and television. Second, the crucial issues of politics, as with the reading of daily newspapers, are close to home. Thus we see the flourishing of regional political parties espousing close-to-home causes. Third, the diversity of India means that no workable social aggregation is numerically dominant. Fourth, the development of a genuinely national bourgeoisie, which at the same time has its roots deeply and proudly in its region, underwrites the idea of India, yet provides lifeblood to regional political parties. (Consider the role of the Telugu newspaper *Eenadu* over the past 20 years in the fortunes of the Telugu Desam Party).

From this mixture, the "no party dominant" system emerges. Ideology sometimes provides part of the substance of each core party (eg, in Kerala or West Bengal), but in states like Tamil Nadu, long-standing rivalries between leaders seem more potent as the focus. The two aspirants to be "national parties," the Congress and the BJP, now must behave like fast-food franchisers. They sell their brand to local agents, who choose to accept, reject, bargain or change sides on the basis of local conditions — whether political fried chicken or deep-dish pizza looks a better bet in their territory.

The essential element of the "no party dominant" system is of course India's federation itself and the attractive arenas it provides for distributing resources and occupying ambitious people. Up till now, federalism has usually enabled the social diversity lying within Indian borders to find acceptable political expression. As sections of society become aware of their disadvantages and possibilities, they have found it possible to create parties for their concerns — or to make existing parties take them up. (In the days of "one-party dominance," such social manifestations were fewer and were often willingly coopted by the Congress Party).

In a number of states, experience has led to the evolution of two-alliance systems. But no single party dominates, and to survive, rival alliances must woo allies with concrete rewards and the blandishments of electorally effective leaders — "uncles" not "parachutists."

A "no party dominant" system has capacities for absorbing social movements and presiding over popularly driven, social change. Politically, this is not a bad recipe for minimising the harm human beings can do to each other. But economically, when a third of a country's population barely lives, and more than a half do not live well, is it enough? Does a "no party dominant" system carry with it, in its inescapable populism, the seeds of its own destruction through economic collapse?

With the General towards a Martial Democracy

There is more to General Musharraf's pro-West, anti-mullah stance than meets the eye. He seeks the overseas blessings to keep Pakistani democracy at bay.

by ***Aqil Shah***

Marking Pakistan's fifty-fourth Independence Day on 14 August 2001, Chief of Army Staff and self-appointed President Pervez Musharraf unrolled a figurative "roadmap to democracy" that called for his military regime to oversee elections for the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate in October 2002. Musharraf proudly told his audience, a gathering of mayors elected under the military's local-government plan, "today I have fulfilled one of my major promises: to hold elections within the time frame given by the Supreme Court". In May 2000, the Court had upheld Musharraf's coup as legitimate under the doctrine of state necessity, provided that elections were held within three years of the takeover.

Soon after, the 11 September attacks put Pakistan squarely in the frontline of the US-led 'war on terror'. General Musharraf allied himself closely with the anti-terrorist coalition that the United States was building, thereby securing international acceptance for his bloodless putsch of October 1999 against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Much to his delight, even token international pressure for a return to civilian rule rapidly faded. 'Democratic' leaders from the United States and Europe descended on Islamabad to pay him homage for siding with the civilised world against the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

Gen. Musharraf and his handpicked economic managers have hoped that the government, facing financial hemorrhage due to the war on its north-western frontier and a massive military mobilisation by India on its eastern flank, would receive substantial economic benefits in return for supporting the US. While the precise nature of the bailout that the Bush administration is offering is not clear, the general is not doing too badly. More International Monetary Fund loans are on the way; Washington has removed sanctions that were imposed after Pakistan followed India with its test of nuclear weapons in 1998; and also lifted were the so-called democracy sanctions put in place after the military coup under Section 508 of the US Foreign Operations Appropriations Act. Gen. Musharraf's latest pilgrimage to Washington has fetched his regime debt relief to the tune of a billion US dollars, in addition to USD 100 million promised for education and USD 142 million in increased market access for Pakistani textile products.

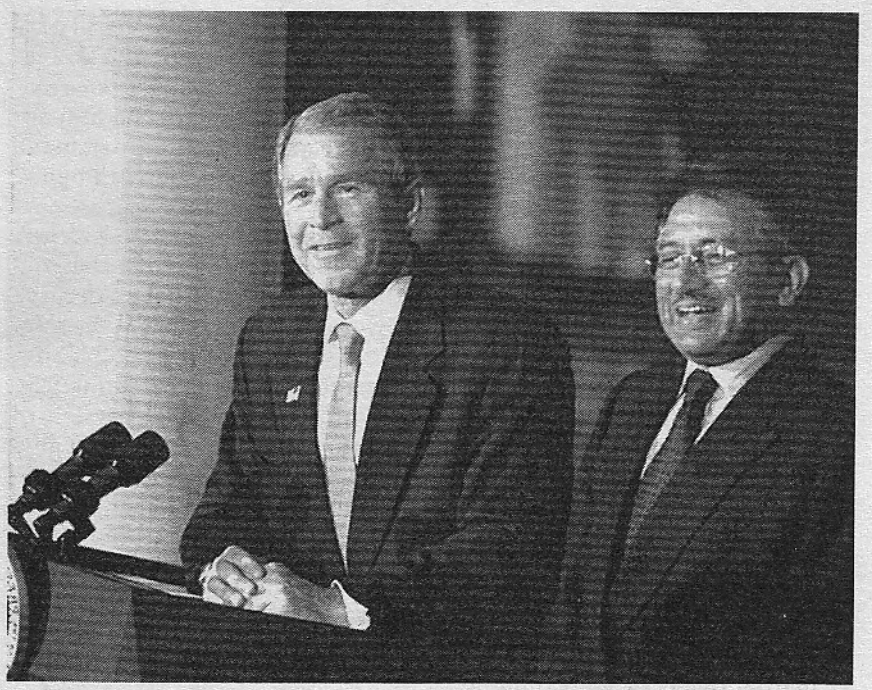
Khaki Politics, "Mad" Mullahs

By siding with the US and declaring his intention to root out militant Islam within Pakistan, the Musharraf regime has irked religious hardliners who may count on the support of as much as a tenth of Pakistan's 145 million population. The anger of these well-organised militants could pose a potent threat to the regime's hold on power and the stability of the state. With the moderate opposition silent, the danger remains that Islamic fundamentalist parties could step in to fill the political vacuum. Not unexpectedly, the regime seemed visibly nervous in the face of aggressive pro-Taliban protests that had become common in major cities as well as the volatile Pashtun tribal belt of North West Frontier Province in the wake of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. To his ardent supporters in western capitals and the military's 'liberal apologists in Pakistan, Musharraf appears to be walking a tightrope between the urgent needs of the "War on Terror" and the radical opposition that he faces at home.

Are Islamabad's chickens coming home to roost? For more than two decades, Pakistan's religious right and its military establishment were natural allies. In the early 1980s, General Zia-ul Haq made calculated appeals to Islamists in order to gain their political support to buttress his own regime. Throughout the 1990s, the madrassas run by Islamic fundamentalist groups continued to supply the canon fodder for the "jihad" in Indian Kashmir. The military's volte-face, under pressure from the US and India, appears to have rent asunder this unholy alliance between the

generals and the mullahs, visibly enraging several Islamist groups operating in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir and beyond. But might there be more to this mullah-military split than meets the eye?

Whatever else it might mean, the threat of Islamist rage does give Gen. Musharraf an opportunity to tighten his grip on power. Confident of his military's ability to quell any serious threat to his regime, Musharraf seems to be playing the 'mad mullah card' to impress upon Washington his indispensability for providing stability to a nuclear-tipped Pakistan. He is thus able to demand – and get — unconditional support. In early October 2001, just hours before US warplanes began bombing Afghan targets, Musharraf fired or sidelined three hardline generals, including the chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), in order to allay Western fears that officers sympathetic to the Taliban might be furtively impeding Islamabad's efforts to support the United States. But with this top-level reshuffling, it should be noted, Musharraf also quietly removed from the scene the other ambitious generals who had helped him take power just over two years earlier.



A "terrific" leader: Musharraf has gone from international outcaste to fast friend.

Nazim-Governor-President troika

In what is reminiscent of the political shenanigans of Gen. Zia, though certainly with different emphasis, Gen. Musharraf has often invoked divine sanction for his rule, never mincing words about his willingness to lead Pakistan indefinitely should the "national interest" so demand. In August 2001, he invoked the "supreme national interest" in the course of naming himself president of Pakistan. Two months later, on the very eve of the first US air strikes on Afghanistan, he extended his own tenure as the army's Chief of Staff for an unlimited period. He has also repeatedly avowed his desire to amend the now-suspended 1973 Constitution in order to create the necessary balance of power among the various parts of the state structure, a clear indication that he would like to restore Article 58 (2) B (albeit in a modified form) that would give his position the power to dismiss the prime minister without dissolving the National Assembly.

Moreover, international desire to have a stable Pakistan before a democratic Pakistan has emboldened the general to further entrench the military's involvement in politics. He may even have been preparing for such a move in July 2001 when he reconstituted the National Security Council (NSC). This supra-constitutional body, dominated by senior military officers, is now in effect the highest decision-making body in Pakistan. The National Reconstruction Bureau's electoral reforms package that more notably debars politicians from contesting elections based on arbitrarily determined educational qualifications (clearly in line with the military's desire to supplant the existing political class with a cadre of "real" democrats) leaves little doubt that the roadmap which Gen. Musharraf loves to trumpet leads in reality to a system with an enfeebled National Assembly, managed by a pliant prime minister serving under a Constitution distorted to legitimise the actions of a military regime.

On the one hand, we have the general's personal assurances that elections will be held on time, which have boosted hopes that he will indeed transfer power to a civilian government by October 2002. But hardheaded calculations of political advantage could make Gen. Musharraf, now ensconced atop the army hierarchy and a fast friend of Washington, break the promise of elections he made on the last Independence Day anniversary. Return to civilian rule would be made contingent on the military's analysis of whether or not it would retain power, directly or behind the scenes. Given the unmistakable international preference for democracy, even in these days of fighting terror, the military clearly sees its political interests served best by transferring power to a weak civilian government. It could thus have its cake and eat it too, while the political evolution of Pakistani democracy would yet again be delayed by such a hiatus.

The signals emanating from Washington could be the key to understanding trends in South Asia.

Will the United States re-impose democracy sanctions if Musharraf reneges on his commitment to free and fair elections? No one knows, but one has suspicions. On the surface, the USD 1billion debt relief offered to Islamabad has been made contingent on Congressional approval subject to free and open elections in October 2002. What constitutes a 'free' election would remains open to wide interpretation, of course, and there is little doubt that if the United States decides to condone – and in all likelihood it will – the regime's manipulation of the political process, the generals will institutionalise their political role. Many of Pakistan's out-of-work politicians see the hasty manner in which the US Congress waived these sanctions as an indication that a "martial democracy" is quite acceptable to Washington DC at this time. Raza Rabbani, general secretary of exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, couched his worry in blunter terms when he told this writer, "Pakistani democracy is dispensable. In the 1980s, when General Zia put democracy on hold, brutally suppressed human rights, and mutilated the Constitution, the US and its allies turned a deaf ear to our demands for democratic rule; they could do the same now."

The second leg of the journey sketched out on Musharraf's roadmap to democracy is underway with the delimitation of new constituencies and preparation of new voter rolls. As part of its strategic preparations for the return to civilian rule, the regime is actively propping up a broad coalition of pro-military political elements, including the breakaway faction of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) in order to try and ensure a hung parliament in the next general elections. Gen. Musharraf has named a close confidante, Lt. General (retd) Khalid Maqbool, to take over a key slot as governor of the vote-rich Punjab. This is one clear signal that Gen. Musharraf intends to stage-manage next year's general elections.

Through an ingenious local government plan, drafted and implemented with assistance from Pakistan's external donors, the military has already created an extensive network of district governments, headed by powerful nazims (mayors) who are beholden to the General-President via the provincial governors, who actually have a decisive power over their removal. In a future civilian set-up, the "Nazim-Governor-President" troika is likely to function as a parallel system of government bypassing elected governments at the national and provincial levels. This "devolution of power" has also been predictably accompanied by the suppression of legitimate political activities at both the national and provincial levels since the coup of October 1999. Meanwhile, the Islamabad regime has deployed the infamous National Accountability Bureau to settle political scores and win over defectors from the ranks of the PPP and the PML-N. The goal is to win the regime more maneuvering room and a playing field tilted in its favor well in advance of the parliamentary balloting set for October 2002.

Pakistan's crisis of governance stems in large part from the formidable political power and influence of an autonomous military establishment

The President-General

Soldiers are trained in the science of warfare, not the complex art of democracy. Force, conquest and armed combat are the army man's chief preoccupations, for which the qualities of flexibility, compromise and political dialogue are not valued requirements. While most Pakistanis view the military's role in politics as legitimate given the perpetual state of hostility with India, the army's wide and growing political influence is clearly diluting the democratic process at a time when it should be strengthened in preparation for civilian rule. General Musharraf's 'benign' military rule, too, has led to a forceful depoliticisation of the public arena, complete with unlawful jailing of political figures and ban on public rallies.

Democratic politics and civilian politicians have long been anathema to the military's rigid institutional vision of how Pakistan should be governed. The Pakistani military remains acutely wary of the emergence of independent power centres that could pose a threat to its internal autonomy and its dominance of both state and society. The removal of successive civilian governments since 1989, including most recently the ouster of Nawaz Sharif in October 1999, must be seen in this broader context of the self-serving politics of an interventionist military. Many Pakistani analysts agree with what the *Economist* wrote in October 2000: that the Pakistani military is the problem to which it pretends to be the solution.

Despite the factionalised nature of Pakistan's politics, there is now a consensus across the broad middle of the political spectrum that the basic structural fault in governance stems from the military's consistent refusal to accept subordination to civilian authority. There is now a strong realisation among the key senior leaders of the two major parties of how their disunity on basic democratic issues contributed to today's mess by encouraging the army to use undemocratic methods to divide the political opposition and rule with impunity. The only silver lining to the political situation today, in fact, is the emerging consensus within the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD), comprising the mainstream political parties, on the future contours of civil-military relations in Pakistan as envisaged in the 1973 Constitution. But could this be a case of too little, too late?

The ARD, torn by competing rivalries and political interests, remains largely ineffectual. The military regime has blocked all its efforts to mobilise the public. The mainstream parties remain leaderless (with Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharief both in exile) and marginalised despite the ARD, and seem to be in no position to fill the widening void in Pakistani politics. It is this political vacuum that could give the bold and vocal Islamic fundamentalist parties an opportunity to take maximum political advantage even as Musharraf tries to curb them.

Many moderate Pakistanis, including their self-appointed president, continue to take comfort from the claim that Islamic radicals have never been a significant force in electoral politics. They also point to the deep political and personal rivalries between the leaders of these groups. But the influence of the Islamic parties in the national polity go beyond their vote-garnering capability. The Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's biggest and best-organised Islamic party, and others have mounted large public demonstrations openly calling for Musharraf's overthrow. Their ability to muddy the political waters should not be under-estimated. Moreover, under military rule, the country's federal units feel powerless in the face of what is seen to be a Punjabi-dominated army. The absence of representative mechanisms therefore puts a double premium on language, religion, and ethnicity as tools of political bargaining. Given the military's track record in manipulating elections, other analysts fear that general elections run by a partisan military could give the extremists the opportunity to cry foul if the results are not to their liking. They might then exploit their street-level muscle to gain a share of official power, especially if the economy is at meltdown. On the other hand, there remains the possibility that the military will benefit from an Islamic-extremist presence in the future parliament. This would provide it with the third force to use against the PPP, which is the party the generals dislike the most.

KANAK DIXIT

The exiled threat: fromer Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Back to Square One

Though a muteness born of disarray besets both the two large mainstream parties, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the main tussle for power ahead of the October polls is likely to be between these mainstream parties and the military establishment. While 11 years of "sham democracy" did give civilian politicians a chance to chip away at the military's zealously guarded control over national security and foreign policy, the soldiers seem to have reversed those civilian gains in one stroke with the 1999 coup. If and when democracy is restored, civilian governments will have to work within bounds set by a president who is also the on-active-duty chief of army staff.

When Pervez Musharraf seized power, most Pakistanis welcomed his coup in the hope that the military would institute long-awaited structural reforms to put Pakistan back on track. Musharraf swiftly laid out an ambitious reform agenda aimed at recovering defaulted loans from the country's industrialists and politicians, reviving the economy, controlling corruption, depoliticising institutions, and devolving political power to the grassroots. In its third year in power, this challenge has hardly been dented, and the army does seem unsuited to the task of governing or reforming Pakistan however pious the intentions. The drive against corruption has so far mostly targeted the regime's political opponents, leaving out military officers and judges. Structural reforms, announced with much fanfare, remain either half-implemented or stalled as the regime drags its feet on policy changes that would threaten special-interest groups that remain powerful even under khaki rule. And the highly touted devolution-of-power plan, despite the unprecedented administrative changes introduced in its wake, has so far amounted to little more than a cleverly crafted rehash of previous military experiments with local bodies.

Ironically, liberal sections of the Pakistani public and intelligentsia are still counting on the military to deliver the elusive desideratum of good governance. In this misplaced optimism, they continue to forget that Pakistan's crisis of governance stems in large part from the formidable political power and influence of an autonomous military estab-

lishment, with its clear corporate interests, superimposed on civil and political society. The military's entrenched hegemony over civilian affairs has largely dictated the do's and dont's of government in Pakistan for more than 50 years. While it is true that civilian governments in post-Zia Pakistan did make matters worse, they had little policy space to manoeuver in the face of overwhelming constraints imposed by an overbearing military establishment working at odds with its civilian bosses, as it pursued its own political, security and foreign policy agendas.

Pakistan's long-term political stability and real institutional reform depend on the restoration of an uninterrupted democratic process. Sold to domestic and world opinion as urgent steps taken to restore stability in the short run, military interventions undermine stability in the long run by signaling that the world of civilian political give-and-take can go forward only as long as the generals say it can. No single group, be it the military officer corps, the politicians or the bureaucratic elite, can or will reform Pakistan on its own. Sustained reforms will require public pressure exerted through representative public institutions. Only by embedding democracy into society can the capacity and incentives for reform be created. The long-term governance gains from political democracy, though uncertain and reversible, will far outweigh any short-term gains in administrative efficiency that might accrue from military-style surgical measures.

For now, Pakistanis will have to brace themselves for another long period of autocracy backed by the world's Superpower. Emboldened by the Bush administration's fondness for General Musharraf's "terrific" leadership, the soldiers are likely to return Pakistan to elective rule strictly on their own terms. This was not unexpected, but the events of 11 September and the US-led coalition's unflinching support for the military regime in their aftermath have decisively tilted the civil-military equation in the military's favour and now afford Musharraf a better opportunity to carry out his political agenda with little cross-check or control.

General-president Musharraf, heading the military and a powerful NSC, seems poised to guide future prime ministers through their tenures in the "supreme national interest". Any elected prime minister who dares to stray will be shown the exit. If the mainstream political parties do not stand their ground, the Pakistan's next civilian experiment promises to be yet another praetorian farce perpetrated in the name of "real democracy" – in essence, a repeat of the post-1989 musical chairs, with the generals deciding who gets which seat.

The Moving Movie Screen

Traveling Film South Asia opens eyes by moving across borders

Last October in a crowded auditorium in Kathmandu, Shyam Benegal took the stage to announce the winners of the biannual Film South Asia (FSA) documentary competition. Of the hundreds of documentaries submitted from across the region, 45 had been selected to compete at FSA 2001. As Benegal, the chairman of the three-member jury panel, rose to announce the winners, a hush fell over the over-capacity crowd, which spilled into the aisles. "And the winner is..."

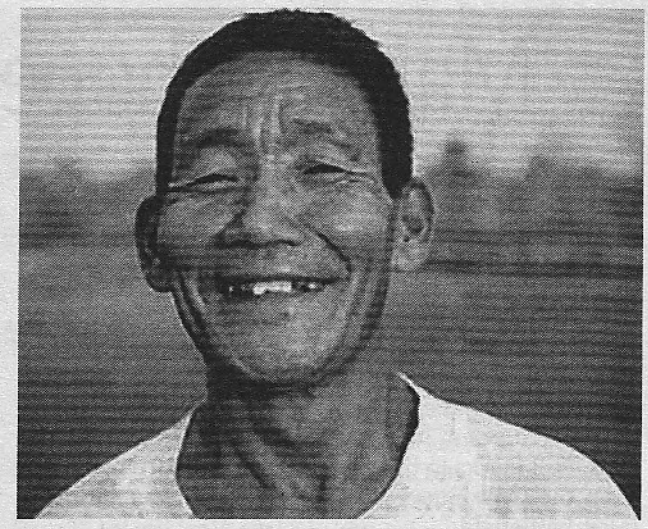
FSA's origins date to 1997, when Himal Association, a Kathmandu-based group, and Himal magazine decided to organise a regional documentary film festival. Since that time, the competition has grown to involve hundreds of filmmakers from across the region. Most significant has been the evolution of a traveling festival that takes FSA's best documentaries to audiences small and large in South Asia and overseas.

The latest Traveling Film South Asia (TFSA) set out immediately after the awards ceremony ended last October and has traveled so far to venues in Pakistan, India and the United States. TFSA Coordinator Archana Bhandary explains that the focus of the organisers is to promote a "screening revolution" in the region by ensuring that not only film buffs and elite urban audiences but also lay viewers and those in smaller towns get to enjoy the films. "The non-fiction films being produced now have a lot of variety, and many are rather slickly made. And we believe there is an audience for these documentary films all over – the only problem being that no one has taken it to them." Bhandary says the organisers encourage groups all over South Asia to screen TFSA. "The package of films comes for free for South Asia venues, subsidised through a modest charge for all overseas screenings."

"We encourage prospective organisers in cities, towns and even village communities to get in touch with us. The films are all on videocassettes and it is very easy to screen them." (Information about hosting TFSA can be obtained from Himal Association's website at www.himalassociation.org/fsa, or write to fsa@himalassociation.org)

Because of the relatively low cost of documentary film production, the festival has been able to open its doors to hundreds of aspiring filmmakers, as well as to already-established professionals. The festival's guiding principle is that local filmmakers can bring local issues and concerns to life on the screen much

My Migrant Soul's tragic hero: Setting out full of hope, Bangladeshi migrant Shahjahan Babu's life ends away from home.



Lachuman Magar: An old man in search of young women's hearts.

more effectively than high-cost television programming meant for general audiences. While the organisers are happy to see TFSA making its way around South Asia and to communities overseas, the ultimate goal is to build filmmaking skills at the local level, which first requires and appreciatve local audience, says Bhadury. "Now that non-fiction filmmaking is encompassing entertaining themes rather than developmental or artistic themes alone, the audience is bound to grow," says Manesh Shrestha, director of the FSA organisation. As technology costs plummet, it may soon be possible for hundreds of small towns throughout South Asia to host TFSA as well as support their own documentary filmmakers.

My Migrant Soul, a documentary telling the tragic story of a Bangladeshi labourer in Malaysia who does not return home, won the Ram Bahadur Trophy for Best Film at FSA 2001. The film is produced by Yasmine Kabir, also known for her earlier FSA entry, *Duhshomoy: A mother's lament*.

In addition to *My Migrant Soul*, TFSA includes 16 other jury-selected documentaries and a collection of five "silent-shorts", less-than-five minute long experimental films where the 'handicap' is the prohibition of ambient sound. The shorts were part of a "festival within a festival" at FSA '01 called "Kathmandu Silent Night". Other award-winning films in the TFSA lineup include *A Rough Cut of the Life and Times of Lachuman Magar*, a humourous look at a lascivious 58-year-old Nepali pensioner, and *Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories*, which examines life in Mumbai's sweatshops. One of the most powerful presentations in the traveling group is *The Killing Teraces*, by Dhruba Basnet, which takes a searing look at the rise of the Maoist movement in the mid-western hills of Nepal describing the situation of a peasantry caught between the insurgents and the police.

TFSA Engagements

Date	Location	Local Organiser
5-6 January	Melbourne, Florida, USA	Indian Association of Space Coast
26-27 January	San Francisco, USA	Ekta Group
2-3 February	Oakland, USA	Ekta Group
8-10 February	Delhi, India	Desh Kall/Henrich Boll Foundation
11-18 February	Islamabad & Rawalpindi, Pakistan	SDPI
15-21 February	Calcutta, India	Roop Kala Kendro
16-17 February	Patna, India	Desh Kall/Henrich Boll Foundation
17-24 February	Bombay, India	Kala Goda Foundation
23-24 February	Bhopal, India	Henrich Boll Foundation
7-10 March	Baltimore, USA	Johns Hopkins University
19-24 March	Guwahati, India	Centre for Film Culture
25-29 March	Georgia, USA	University of Georgia
5-7 April	New York, USA	Binghamtom University
16-22 April	Princeton, USA	Princeton University
19-21 April	Austin, USA	University of Texas, Austin
1-21 May	Oregon, USA	Association for Communal Harmony
9-11 May	Vancouver, Canada	International South Asian Forum
7-9 June	Singapore	School of Film and Media Studies (and others)
27-29 August	Delhi, India	India International Centre Seher

Confirmed but dates not set: Dhaka, Calcutta (repeat), Karachi, Lahore, London.

Maintain hope, ye who enter!

It's truce time in Sri Lanka. Even though the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been observing a unilateral ceasefire since Christmas Eve, which the government had reciprocated, the **formal ceasefire** signed between Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Vellupillai Prabhakaran came into effect on 24 February. This truce deal has been brokered by the Norwegians, and is expected to be monitored by representatives of Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Full marks to the warring parties for being able to keep the Only Super Power away from the suddenly quiet battlefield.

The ethnic inferno between the Sinhala majority (14 million) and the Tamil minority (3.2 million) has been raging uninterrupted since 1983. The fire of hatred has left more than 64,500 dead, displaced 1.6 million and left disturbed the entire population. The flames once leaped across the straits and claimed the life of Rajiv Gandhi, then in the prime of his political career.

But will the ceasefire lead to lasting peace? It is too early to tell and the fact is that the last truce in 1995 lasted all of one hundred days, and the fighting got even more ferocious when it disintegrated. However, the chances of accommodation do look brighter this time, as both Wickremesinghe and Prabhakaran represent war-weary sides who now appear to be willing to give peace another chance. The biggest worry at this time is President Chandrika Kumaratunga's reluctance to support the peacefire process. After having helped do the ground work, she now feels left out.

Dante says that the gates of Hell have the legend: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!" Presumably, the gates of Heaven have a statement that is its exact opposite.

The churning within

The militants who abducted and then killed *Wall Street Journal* reporter **Daniel Pearl** have inflicted more damage to the Pakistani nation-state than even the worst of its enemies could have done. The killing of Pearl has angered Western society and strengthened the stand of those who greeted General Pervez Musharraf's promise to fight fanaticism with a heavy dose of scepticism. Apart from the fact that the killing of a non-combatant even in a 'jihad' is inherently immoral, the brutal murder of Pearl has also damaged the cause that the fanatical group professes to espouse. Most importantly, however, it puts an obstacle in the path of the general as he tries to de-theocratise Pakistan. Indeed, challenges to General Musharraf have just begun – his fate will be decided by the outcome of his war on fanaticism inside his own country rather than by the troops amassed by India on his eastern frontier.

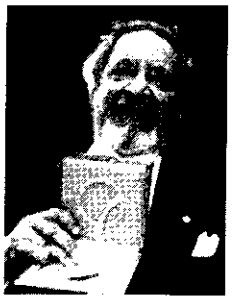
If the ceasefire holds, LTTE fighters and government troops may soon be living on an island of peace.

The bus torched by Nepal's Maobaadi.

Further east, the **Maoist insurgency** of Nepal just got more brutal. The rebels stormed the district headquarters of Achham in far-west Nepal, wiping out a military barrack as well as a police post, and decamped with a loot of more than 20 million rupees and a cache of the army's automatic weaponry. Nearly two hundred people died. Within a week, another police post fell, this time in the central hills, and the swarm of Maoists butchered more than thirty policemen. Even more brutal than these massacres of security personnel (many of whom were executed) was the burning of a bus carrying passengers on their way home for Id-ul-Joha. Among those burned alive were children and women. This outrage seems to have alienated even the Kathmandu intelligentsia, which harbours a soft corner for the rebels bent upon establishing a 'republican' state.

Bhutan is the only country in the region that is cashing in on the success of its quiet diplomacy. The little

Himalayan kingdom already has an installed hydropower capacity of about 500 MW; it now wants to add double that in next five years by alluring private Indian investment. With negligible domestic consumption, the Druk nation sells almost all of its power to India. All in all, Thimpu's diplomats enjoy considerable leverage over the establishment in New Delhi. It is this influence that has made the Indian policy-makers exonerate Thimpu of its past human rights violations. Perhaps the peacemakers from Oslo can be persuaded to take a look at the one hundred thousand Lhotshampa refugees expelled by Thimphu a decade ago. Or do mediators prefer warring dissidents rather than those who choose to remain docile refugees?



Vajpayee with tika, Naipaul with Nobel

In the **floodplains of Padma**, the two warring Begums do not seem to have taken note of the statement of Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, the finance minister and chairman of the planning commission of Bhutan, that his country has the potential of generating 30,000 MW of hydro-power. That power, especially if it is generated by the market-savvy private sector of India, will directly compete with the natural gas that Bangladesh aims to export to India some day. Perennially engaged in settling political scores, the two leading ladies of Bangladesh – Khaleda Zia and Shiekh Hasina – are still engaged in the game of trading charges of "selling-out" the moment selling of gas is mentioned. Result? The ruling party (whichever) doesn't want to risk being branded 'traitor', and the natural gas continues to remain where it lies – in the womb of Amar Sonar Bangla. Hope, however, lives in the hearts of Bangladeshi economists and planners who expect to ride to riches (courtesy UNOCAL) once the gas start gushing.

The common thread that ran through all of South Asia this month has been hope.

...Bharat Mahan!

The brightest ray of hope this month came from India, where Hindu revivalists lost **elections in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal**. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had thundered during the campaigning that the Bhartiya Janata Party would win the elections "without the support of Indian Muslims". It may have earned Rajnath Singh some votes among the consuming classes of Lucknow and Varanasi, but his party paid a heavy price in western UP, where Muslims came out in full force to show that with about 150 million followers of Islam living in Hindustan, it remains the second largest Muslim country in the world.

The fact that Bharat is not Hindustan was also being ignored when Ashok Singhal, the fire-breathing chief of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, thundered in turn at Ayodhya: "The country is asserting itself, people want the temple to be built soon!" Oh, really? The simple fact is that the party that looked on with a kindly eye when the Babri Masjid was razed and which tacitly approved of a Ram temple being put up in its place was defeated at the polls. This defeat was almost certainly due to the disenchantment of a significant portion of the populace, and it indicates that there is energy left in the electoral system of India yet. This self-correcting mechanism indicates the limits of Brahminical exclusivism to the political, business and bureaucratic classes of the largest country in South Asia. This is good news for all South Asians, and perhaps the war-monging wallahs will now be tempered? That would be UP's gift to all of us.

While 'the people' were queuing up at the polling booths in Uttar Pradesh, **Sir Vidia** was being feted by Prime Minister Vajpayee in New Delhi under the aegis of Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Fresh from his Nobel that, in all likelihood, was conferred upon Naipaul for shamelessly pandering to Western prejudices in his writing, he remained true to form and scoffed at the idea of 'colonialism'. A true 'mimic man', to use his own vivid phrase to describe a fine writer who has chosen to be like a "coconut – brown outside and white inside", Naipaul finds merit in Hindu resurgence. Naipaul should read Iqbal's poetry, rather than his pamphlets about Pakistan:

I'll tell you truth, O Brahmin, if I may make so bold:
These idols in your temples – these idols have grown old.
From them you have learnt nothing but hatred of those who share your life
And Allah to His preachers has taught mistrust and strife;

Too long has lain deserted the heart's warm habitation;
Let us build in this homeland a new temple's foundation!
And let our shrine be taller than all shrines of this globe,
With lofty pinnacles touching the skirts of heaven's robe.

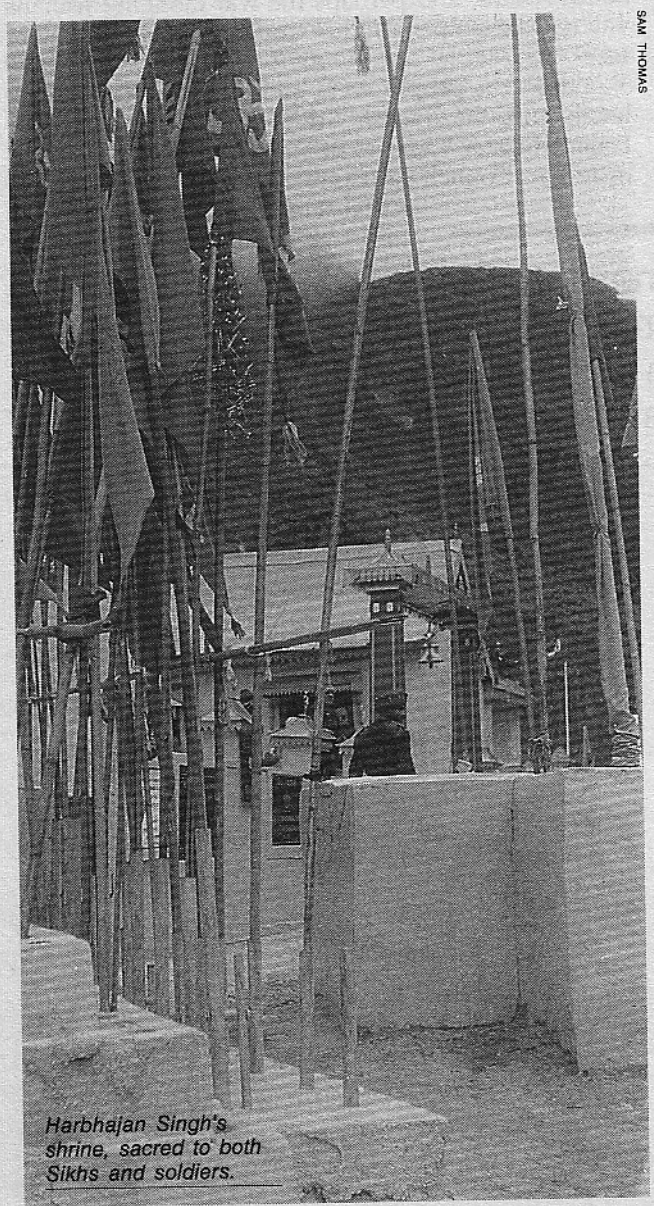
At the United Services Institute located inside the Cantonment of New Delhi, 20 **budding** diplomats of the new Afghanistan are learning to handle the ropes of their trade. Let us hope that the South Asian Afghanistan that will emerge under their leadership will not blow up any more Buddhas and will not ask Hindus to wear saffron bands.

– *Saarcy*

Saint-Sentinel
Harbhajan Singh of Upper Sikkim

Our travel writer planned to write about Sikkim as a destination but got diverted by an intriguing military-tourist to a Sikh soldier's shrine up by the India-China frontier.

by ***Samuel Thomas***



SAM THOMAS

Harbhajan Singh's shrine, sacred to both Sikhs and soldiers.

Crossing state borders in India does not tend to be very eventful, unless you are badly hassled at a checkpoint leading into some sensitive zone. The landscape is usually the same, linguistic boundaries are not really clear until much later, and development patterns are much the same; a lot of other little things seem very similar, at least for a while. Boundaries tend to blur. Not so with Sikkim. It is beautifully different, and you realise this as soon as you enter this "twenty-second" state, incorporated into the "Indian Union" in 1973. Sikkim was a former kingdom, and it was nice to see that Sikkim Tourism feels confident enough to once again use the 'k' word, however so innocuously – its current advertising campaign describes itself as "The Flower Kingdom".

The drive up to Sikkim from Siliguri passes through some very beautiful country. Try and get a front seat in one of the buses or jeeps running shuttle services. The breathtaking views apart, there is imaginative free advice along the road for drivers from the Border Roads Organisation – "Better be late than The Late" or "Be Gentle on My Curves". The winding road is surprisingly good and follows the river Teesta for a long stretch. The river is blue and wild-white, and rafting companies are in business at this time of year. If you are coming from Darjeeling, there are tea gardens that follow you for quite a distance and forests of planted teak three decades old, and further up, lush hillsides and beautiful terraced farmlands.

The driver was a young Tamang, friendly and informed. "Try and avoid the peak tourist season," he advised. True enough, when we got to the capital at dusk, most lodges were full and the permits to some of the best places in Sikkim taken. This is that time of year when 'domestic tourists', mostly Bengali, outnumber locals. There are few 'foreign tourists' about, notwithstanding '11 September', as the state is still to fully exploit the 'Shangri La' image it can lay claim to, like Bhutan to the east. Sikkim, probably the prettiest of Indian states, is seeing a major tourist boom – not only

for sightseeing, but also to trek, raft and follow wildlife and bird-watch.

We were stopped at several places on the way to Gangtok by groups of youngsters who offered us prasad and put tika on our foreheads. But the driver refused every time because, he said, "The community heads impose a fine of INR 5000 on anyone celebrating the festival of the brahmins and chhetris". According to him there is a resurgence of ethnic pride and the movement is gaining strength. "There is the other five thousand rupee fine in these parts", he said, pointing to a signboard announcing the penalty for littering in Gangtok. Polythene bags are banned and shopkeepers give you stuff in paper bags. The capital of Sikkim is remarkably clean.

The town, nestled and now overgrown on the western flank of a longish hill running northward, is easy on the traveler. People are friendly and courteous, there are no touts hustling the tourist, it is a nice place for long walks and there are interesting places to see like the Rumtek monastery and settlements along the trails that lead off the capital. It also affords brilliant views of the Kangchendzonga range. There is little level ground; one is mostly ascending or descending to get to places – but that is why this is a hill town.

In the tourist season it is tough to even get a vehicle to go up towards Nathu La, one of the two main passes to China (The other is Jelep La, which you reach from Kalimpong, and both lead up to the Chumbi Valley route pioneered by Younghusband to get to Lhasa). Special permission is required to go up to areas that are considered 'sensitive' (and most of Sikkim is) and all permits were taken. It would have to be a couple of days before we could even get a booking to Yumthang in the north. So the next day we would go to Tsomgo Lake (pronounced Chhangu), in east Sikkim.

In search of a shrine

A convoy of jeeps and vans sets out for the high-altitude sacred lake each morning of the tourist season. There is a lot of needless commotion as families settle in and squabble over side seats before the jeep leparts to Gangtok. The climb is steep, and the engine groans and whines piteously for about four hours, with falling efficiency as the altitude increases from 5000 feet above sea level to 13,500 feet – the road follows the old Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route. Above the groan, the topic of the necessarily loud conversation turns to Baba Harbhajan Singh.

The story goes roughly like this. Harbhajan Singh was an army man who died in an accident on the Chinese border. Because of his dedication to his company and regiment he never took leave, and to this day he continues to protect the border and the soldiers stationed there. A shrine has been put up at the site of his *'samadhi'* and the Baba visits every night, puts on his uniform and regulation boots and does his rounds. He is known to be a stickler for unit discipline and is said


SAM THOMAS

Sikkimese yaks welcome.

to admonish soldiers who have had one too many. There is a camp bed kept ready for Harbhajan Singh in these Sikkimese heights, and the Punjabi baba is said to use it every single night. Each morning, the crumpled sheets are smoothed out or changed, his boots are polished and his uniforms are readied. The departed soldier still draws a salary and even takes annual leave. He answers prayers, grants boons and guards the lives of soldiers on the inhospitable border. Besides providing psychological sustenance to the *jawans* guarding the cold heights, it becomes clear that Harbhajan Singh's bed is a unique, if unlikely, tourist resource of Sikkim. Certainly, his story sustained us on the four hour swaying ride up to Tsomgo.

In the drive up to the lake, the vegetation changes very quickly from sub-tropical to alpine. Soon after you depart the capital there are bamboo forests in the valleys (which the driver informed us is a haunt of the red panda) and the air gets cold. Beyond the checkpost at Hanuman Tok, it is mostly army turf. Army establishments, mostly camouflaged shelters and villages established by locals who cater to these establishments, dominate the landscape as one proceeds higher. Otherwise it is bamboo and pine and, further up, rhododendron clumps and then alpine grasslands. There is the odd tent of the yak herders.

The arrival at Tsomgo is dramatic as the expanse of water at this height greets you. But this is the peak tourist season and the commercialisation on the left bank (known as the Khasa Strip) is hard to miss. There is a row of tin shacks that sell everything from Kashmiri shawls to Chinese blankets, fleece jackets and thermal underwear. Yaks wear woollen "Welcome to Tsomgo" knitwear on their foreheads, all manner of tourists ride yaks and stalls do brisk business selling woolies to tourists who have never been so high and so cold in their lives.

Fishing is not allowed, since the lake is sacred, and the faithful walk over to the middle of the frozen expanse in winter and feed bread to the fish. Tsomgo Lake, the driver (who doubled as a tour guide) told us, was where the son of the erstwhile ruler of Sikkim and

SURESH NEUPANE

The sign at the lake greets visitors in English and Tibetan.

his fiancé drowned. Ignoring all warnings the son of the Choegyal drove over the ice in a jeep and disappeared into the lake. The bodies of the young couple were never recovered and were probably eaten by the numerous trout in the lake (The real story is quite different: the crown prince was driving down from Gangtok wearing a black *bakhhu* when the lamas had told him not to wear the black bakhhu that day, and a truck coming the other way slammed into his Mercedes, which is how he died).

The place looks like the venue for the world's highest fancy dress party. Hordes of tourists, Bengalis mostly, dressed in Tibetan clothing (available for hire at Rs 10 a piece) wander about posing for pictures along the lake and astride obliging yaks. Many are drunk on the liquor that comes remarkably cheap in Sikkim.

The other interesting observation concerns the goods sold at Tsomgo: fleece jackets, windcheaters, sweaters, scarves, caps, shawls and underwear. Most of the stuff comes from China, all the way from the Khasa-Tatopani border point north of Kathmandu (and a long way west of here). These are brought here through Kathmandu, past the Pashupatinagar border point. Prices double and treble on this journey, but the Tibetan traders who dominate the trade at Tsomgo still find it worthwhile. This is a particularly circuitous trade route especially since the Chinese border is only a stone's throw away. Things are bound to change before long, however. Both India and China are committed to opening the Northern and Jelep La routes, and when that happens, the goods and tourists will flow well beyond this high, cold pass. The highways and godowns are ready on both sides of the border, and the obstacles to an opening seem surmountable. Depending upon whom you ask, the roadblock has to do with a) Indian wariness of the Chinese market acumen and their ability to swamp India with electronic goods and other manufactured items; b) China's refusal to accept the 'annexation' of Sikkim by Indira Gandhi and India, which would be recognised if the route were to be opened.

A soldier arrives and drivers disappear behind the vehicles for a huddle and a 'deal'. This is, after all, still 'India'. Soon, the drivers announce that while we still could not go to Nathu La we could make it all the way to Baba Mandir. For an extra fifty rupees a head we could even go further and higher, if the majority of passengers in each vehicle agreed. One man and his wife said they would come if they were given the front seats and charged a reduced price. The driver asked them to stay put, and we departed.

The alpine meadows were turning red, hinting at the approaching winter. Semi-wild yaks and mules grazed on the sparse vegetation and we passed the road that branches off towards Nathu La. Several small streams meander through the treeless landscape and make their way down to the lake. The driver pointed to where his father came from, across the pass that is the route that a lot of Tibetans fleeing the Tibetan Autonomous Region still take – and it was here that thousands arrived daily during 1959. Today, they are brought down by the army and then sent off to Dharmasala to be cared for at a "reception centre" of the government-in-exile. Baba Mandir is situated at 14,500 feet, bustling with military presence.

Harbhajan Singh was a *sipahi* of the Sikh regiment. The guide-and-driver had this to say: "The Bihar Regiment was posted here first but the Biharis couldn't take the cold and so the Punjabis came." Whatever the military history and general feelings towards plains people, the weather does take a toll on the men manning this frontier – their faces are darkened by the ultraviolet rays at this rarified altitude and they all look like they've walked out from duty at a brick kiln. At the Baba Mandir, a Sikh soldier who hands out sweetened prasad to the tourists-turned-devotees is not willing to answer many questions about the Baba. It is possible he does not know, but more likely he is trying to conserve energy at these oxygen-depleted heights.

Harbhajan Singh was the first casualty of the regiment after it was raised in 1966, soon after the disastrous war with the Red Army. He was not a battle casualty; he was reported missing after he had gone escorting a mule train to a remote outpost. He had slipped off a treacherous slope and since the loss of a soldier with a weapon is a serious matter, a manhunt was launched. It took the army three days to find Harbhajan's body, which was later cremated with full honours. The story has it that he himself led searchers to the site. It was after this that a legend began to take shape around the sipahi-saint's life and afterlife, and how he became Baba Harbhajan Singh, protector of the border and soldiers, a saint who grants boons and an angel of peace.

The other soldiers in the regiment reported that the Baba had been appearing in their dreams and imploring that a shrine be built to his memory. The regiment

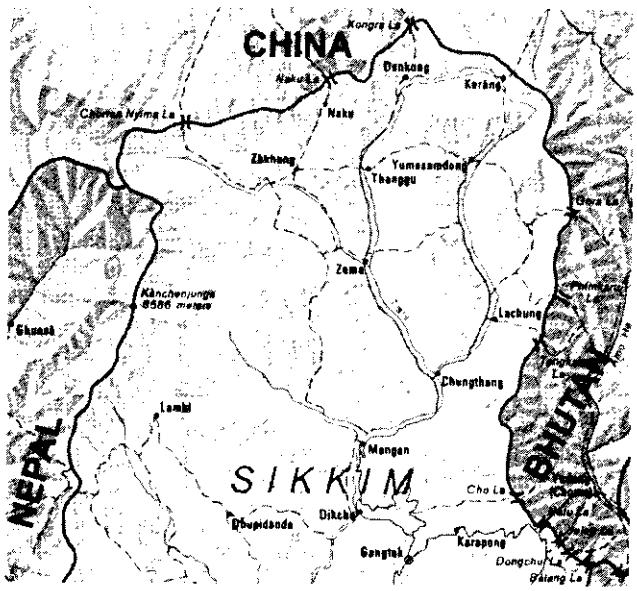
obliged and a shrine was raised at Tuk-La where the company was posted. Soon other soldiers were reporting visions and there were more tales of Harbhajan Singh's spirit doing the rounds. Today, the legend is firmly established. Soldiers posted to Nathu La and Jelep La believe that he guards the border and will give them a three-day warning if hostilities break out or anything untoward happens. Some officers here say the Chinese too have the early warning assurance – the Baba has also promised the Chinese a three-day warning before trouble breaks out. During flag meetings with their Indian counterparts, the Chinese are said to set aside a chair for the saint. This is a bit like the Sufi shrine in the Khemkaran sector of Punjab with its Hindu priest, worshipped by Indians and Pakistanis alike. The Pakistanis pray from 200 metres away on their side of the border.

Every year on 14 September, an Army jeep pulls up at the shrine and departs with the Baba's personal effects. This is the Baba (or his spirit) going on annual leave, to visit Kuka, his native village in Kapurthala district in Punjab. Regular railway reservations are made for him and an orderly accompanies the luggage to Kuka where the "spirit" of the Baba and his personal effects are handed over to the regiment posted there. A small sum is sent every month to Harbhajan Singh's mother in her village.

The approach to the shrine does not give you an idea of what to expect. It looks like a Hindu shrine with saffron flags bearing *om kar*, fluttering by the dozen. There was a time, according to the driver, when the place was a wood and tin shack, and when a few people made the pilgrimage out of sheer faith – it was mostly an army affair. Now, it is part of a tourist package. The Sikh aspect to the shrine is the *langar* that is held each Friday. Otherwise, there are pictures of Hindu gods alongside a huge framed portrait of the Baba, sardar Harbhajan Singh, cans of water that the faithful bring to be blessed and to take back, and flowered candy doled out by the barefoot Sikh soldier who prefers to smile but not to speak. The faithful prostrate, ring the several bells as they walk in, and leave offerings of money and incense.

The place looks like the venue for the world's highest fancy dress party.

Curiously, there are other Sikh shrines in these remote mountains, but they are mired in controversy. These include the shrine of Guru Dongmar (at over 18,000 feet) in Sikkim and the Menchukha Gurudwara in Arunachal Pradesh. The reason the Baba Mandir of Nathu La and the myth of the saint-sentinel survive is probably because it is only incidentally a Sikh shrine – it actually valourises the military. That is how it has been packaged, mainstreamed and sold. It is important to tourism in these parts and clearly the army, tourist operators and businesses all the way to Nathu La and back benefit. In fact, the shrine was moved from its original consecrated location to where it is now situated so that more people could visit. And as happens with such places, it now enjoys ample funds, some of which are used to help the local population and children adopted by the 164 Mountain Brigade, so said the driver.



Harbhajan Singh was not the first Sikh to come to these parts and make history or legend. All these places have a Sikh history older than the arrival of the Sikh Regiment and the mountain brigades on the border. Guru Nanak visited the area on his eastern travels in 1516. After his visit to Kailash Mansarovar, Guru Nanak is said to have returned to the plains via the Kali Gandaki river into Nepal. There is an ancient Gurudwara in Kathmandu that commemorates this visit. After visiting several other religious places in Nepal, he made his way to Tibet. From Tibet he entered Sikkim, where he is reported to have engaged in fruitful discussions with Buddhist leaders, helped some high altitude herders with water for their animals (which is why lake Guru Dongmar never freezes, 18,000 feet above sea level, it is said) and solved the problem of altitude affecting their virility. Then he went to Bhutan, before making it all the way to Arunachal Pradesh.

A month or so after this visit, the government of Sikkim announced that several places – including Tsomgo and Yumthang – would be closed to visitors out of respect for the sentiments of the Bhutia community. One wonders if this will be enforced and what then will happen to the tourist destination of Tsomgo and its annual fancy dress ball and yak rides, and more importantly, to Baba Mandir and the myth of Baba Harbhajan Singh.

Reminiscences of the Silent Chanakya

A (late) review of the book by the former Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao by a US-based writer who passes judgment that the book is important reading, and proceeds to disclose the whole story for the benefit of those who will not get around to buying the book.

"The common motivation: power. The common point of unity: self. That was the game, by whatever name you chose to call it" (p.206)

P.V.Narasimha Rao presided over India in the Prime Ministerial hot seat during some of its most tumultuous years, gaining notoriety for bribery scandals, Hamlet-like reticence and tight-lipped silence. It is almost as if to compensate for those five years of brooding inaction and "law will take its own course" taciturnity that Rao has come up with a tome of a fictional autobiography that could almost have beaten *A Suitable Boy* for volubility. As it is, Vikram Seth's record for the longest English novel of the 20th century remains intact, although Rao broke all existing records for the highest authorial royalty received by an Indian for one work. David Davidar, CEO of Penguin, must have signed the cheque calculating the status of the writer, his unique position as an insider who has 'seen it all' and the controversial subject matter he was delving into – "the fascinating institution of politics." Sure enough, *The Insider* possesses all the necessary ingredients that deservingly make it a bestseller and a standard reference for analysing and debating the successes and failures of India's democratic safari.

The Rebel

Rao's alter ego, Anand, is born into a 'middle middle class' family in a sleepy hamlet of Afrozabad state of princely India. Aged five, he takes a fascination for Hanuman, the wind god, and sets fire to his uncle's hut hoping it would be as spectacular as the burning of Lanka in the Ramayan! As he grows up in a state notable for Hindu-Muslim amity, the precocious child is gradually sensitised to a new phenomenon engulfing India in the 1930s-communalism. Identity crystallisation around religion takes such a tenor that Anand's understanding of Hindu and Muslim as mere accidents of birth begins to be questioned with Afzal Chacha's taunt on *Janmashtami*, "It's *your* festival, isn't it? So Hindus only should celebrate" (p.43), rings in his subconscious for long. In the district headquarters, Gulshanpur, where Anand proceeds for high schooling, slogans like *'Naara-i-takbeer Allah-o-akbar'* and *'Bajrang bali ki jai'* attain a politicisation and violence unheard of by his parents' generation.

On a routine bullock cart ride to his village, Anand is humiliated by a *girdawar* (revenue inspector) who misuses his local authority to oppress the toiling labourers: "I know you are all plotting against Ala-Hazrat...all Hindus have become members of Gandhi's Congress and want to overthrow the king." (p.61) This incident makes a decisive dent on Anand's career trajectory and he veers away from his father's dream of a son entering government service. He secretly begins vetting Nehru's writings in school and earns the ire of the principal for 'disloyalty' to the Nizam. A revolutionary organisation spots his talent and clandestinely absorbs him into violent rebellion for freedom. Anand becomes a fugitive, fleeing the brutal persecution of Rahim Alvi's *Khadimaan* secret police and carrying out deadly attacks on the feudal-military infrastructure upon which Afrozabad's power superstructure rests. When freedom comes in 1947, the guerilla fighters of Anand's state remain locked in combat with the dynastic ruler who hoped to declare separation from the Indian union. "As many of their countrymen woke to freedom, these young men and women found themselves in fetid prisons, or in thick forests among snakes and wild beasts." (p.95) They wage an intense struggle for 14 more months, a time bloodied by *Khadimaan* depredations on the countryside, until Sardar Patel moves decisively to integrate the state into India.

The Entrant

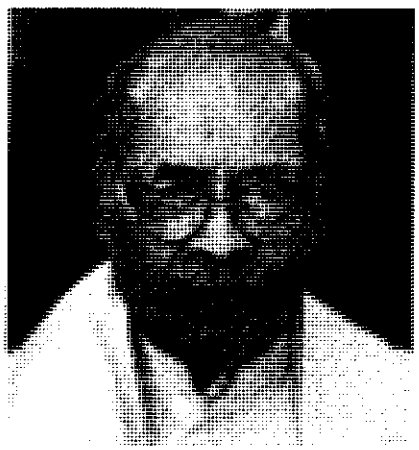
Having forsaken education for the freedom struggle, Anand faces a dilemma for the future, but on the advice of his revolutionary accomplice Sudershan, he decides to remain in public life, serving his state party which now merges with the All India Party. Anand's first set

The Insider
Penguin Publishers 2000, 833 Pages, Rs.495,
ISBN- 0140271171
PV.Narasimha Rao

reviewed by Sreeram Chaulia

back in politics comes at the 1952 Assembly election, when despite his grass-roots popularity and in spite of enjoying the unparalleled advantage of Jawaharlal Nehru's charisma backing his party, the opposing candidate carries the day with him promising voters "five acres of land and a milch cow for every vote cast." Anand's friends and relatives begin chastising him for 'straightforwardness'. Demoralised but undaunted, he continues to do party work and this pays dividend in the 1957 election and he becomes a member of the Legislative Assembly. Once admitted into the 'system', he realises that beyond superficial change, the old feudal values of loyalty and authority have been transposed onto the democratic order. "Democracy in action at best consisted of the question 'Who Should Reign'? The essence of democracy as people governing themselves had not taken root." (p.130). Chief Minister Mahendranath and his rogue Industries Minister wage an internecine feud for power in the party, treating Nehru's socialistic and federalist slogans as ballast for ulterior self-promotional ends. Newcomer Anand finds to his utter dismay that "the interests of the people figured nowhere in the high-voltage political drama that had engulfed the state." (p.138). Infighting and political gossip hardly matter to the common man, but a sensation-hungry press skillfully creates illusions with blazing headlines that nothing else matters to him! Everything is done in the name of the people, but as in front of the the Hindu deity, the worshipper and the priest share the *prasad*.

Anand befriends a likeminded legislator, Aruna, and tries to avoid taking sides in the CM vs. Chaudhury jousting. Shekhar, a young *vakra buddhi* (evil genius) and rank opportunist MLA, joins the Mahendranath 'camp' and plans to build up a personality cult of the CM through a regal and pompous birthday celebration to mark the chief minister's greatness. He tries to win over Anand to this 'cause' arguing, "This is pure power politics, my friend! What role do the people have in this dirty game?" (p.172) Meanwhile, people's cynicism at the game being played comes home to Anand when they tell him repeatedly, "We have a new tribe of kings to loot us these days. If this is what we get, why not have the old king back?" (p.183) When Mahendranath's profligacy irks the party high command in Delhi, he is eased out through a sinecure posting at the centre and Chaudhury wins the war, but little improvement in governance ensues. Anand is a surprise choice for



Anand.

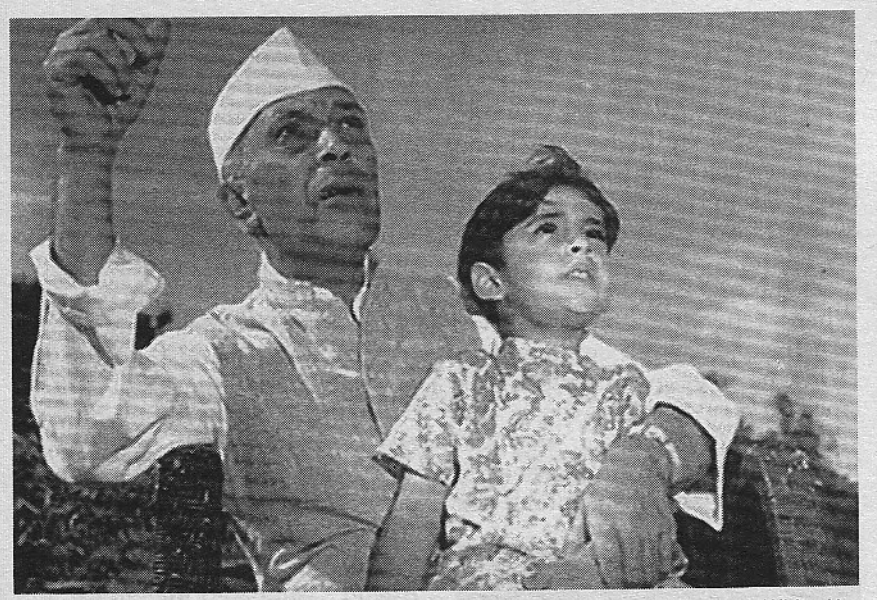
Chaudhury's new cabinet, alongside Shekhar and a motley crowd of criminals, caste leaders and landed gentry. That criminalisation of politics had begun even before the decade of the sixties is driven home when Anand as a temporary minister of prisons is pressurised by prominent MLAs to accord special treatment to a serial killer whose 'respectability' derived from landlordship. Conscientiously rejecting this petition, Anand the idealist takes a principled plunge into a fatal whirlpool.

The Minister

Anand turns into a *bete noir* of the landlord lobby and enters the bad books of numerous influential power brokers. His quality of "testing everything on the touchstone of the common man, Mahatma Gandhi's *daridranarayan*" (p.247), is met with snideness and ridicule. Disgruntled contractors and politicians gang up under Shekhar's tutelage and plot a strategy to demolish Anand's pious image. They try a smear campaign in the press, alleging a liaison between Aruna and him, failing which Shekhar convinces the CM that Anand should be moved to the dicey portfolio of land reforms, which Nehru was exhorting all over the country. Anand takes up the new job egging himself on, "don't cavil at the system, change it if you can; replace it with a better one if you know how!" (p.312). Shekhar poisons minds of rural bigwigs like Aruna's brother, Balram, and adds fuel to the landlords' fire against Anand's campaign for reform ideology and equity. They threaten Anand that he is "just an individual swimming against the current... the entire administrative machinery of the government is behind the landlord class." (p.354).

Nehru's death and the ensuing confusion in political succession puts paid to many of Anand's plans, as does continued sparring between Chaudhury and Mahendranath loyalists in the state. Anand observes with horror that even in a seemingly innocuous event like the Legislative Council elections, faction fighting prevails and "kidnapping, intimidation, money, liquor, carnal pleasure, cajoling and every other form of inducement [is] used." (p.419) The 1965 war with Pakistan completes the obfuscation of Anand's ministry as the nation wobbles from uncertainty to crisis. Lal Bahadur Shastri's sudden demise reveals deep schisms within the ruling party at all levels and layers, with the Indira Gandhi-Morarji Desai race defining alignments in the states. The 1967 elections, ("the time that the rot really set into the electoral process" p.495), set against the backdrop of an infirm Indira Gandhi and a limping party provides perfect grist for Shekhar & Co's new attempt at "Anandocide".

Leading landlords like Balram and Shyam Sunder mobilise a massive conservative movement against



Three generations, three prime ministers: Nehru with Rajiv (left), Indira at a White House reception.

Anand's re-election, employing the caste factor as well as booth capturing tactics. Anand barely scrapes through and retains his ministership under Chaudhury, but this time around land reforms attains a compulsive importance in the party's programme as Naxalbari emerges with vengeance in many states, including Anand's. He analyses Naxalism as a systemic challenge to Indian democracy and proposes a fundamental transformation through land ceilings to avert land hunger from feeding into violent upheaval. Ironically, the threat to the system goes unnoticed in the party and the sadistic game of seeking each other's downfall is followed. At every national contest, be it the Zakir Hussain-Koka Subba Rao duel for Presidency or the 1969 the vertical split between Congress-S and Congress-I, Chaudhury and Mahendranath play the game with consummate grace, ignoring the pressing problems of the public. Anand takes sides arguing in terms of which candidate would support land reform, hoping all the time that his guesses about leaders' intentions come true. He supports Indira Gandhi's candidate (VV Giri) against Sanjeeva Reddy in 1969, under the impression that Nehru's daughter would deliver her father's socialistic promise. But for the rest of the party, it is a game of kowtowing and displaying 'loyalty' to the dynastic central leadership, a continuation of feudal-monarchical subservience. "It was a depressing a demoralizing scenario. Scruples seemed to have taken leave of the party more than ever before." (p.563) Notorious central manipulators and 'fixers' like Gopi Kishen and Ranjan Babu are placated endlessly by all state factions in a bid to be in the good books of Mrs.Gandhi or Morarji Desai. The con is all encompassing, and these central 'brokers' milk provincial hopefuls by exaggerating their influence over 'Indiraji'. Corruption pollutes the body politic excessively, the only morality being "not so much that one should condemn corruption, but that one should not be incompetently corrupt." (p.710)

After her spectacular victory in the 1971 elections and the crowning moment of her political career, the liberation of Bangladesh, Anand expects Mrs.Gandhi to finally address the festering sore of landlessness and do justice to the party's *garibi hatao* manifesto. Accumulation of power in her personal hands does not bother Anand, who believes that this power will soon be employed for economic uplift of the masses. Controversial dismissals of chief ministers that ensue are interpreted by Anand as Mrs. Gandhi's style of eradicating reactionary obstacles to reform at the state levels. But the cult of personality overreaches all imaginable limits in the process, so that obsequious MLAs and MPs could claim nonchalantly, "My constituency is the Prime Minister's house (not the people). Make no mistake about that." (p.706) Chaudhury's axe is ground as CMs fall like ninepins countrywide and, suddenly, the state is thrown into a flurry of political speculation as to his potential successor. Shekhar hatches a conspiracy to defame Anand's reputation by planting lurid details of Anand's alleged illicit smuggling of timber wood. But 'Indiraji' plumps for Anand and a new phase of life beckons.

The Reformer

A nominated chief minister, Anand convinces himself that he has been granted this responsible office for the purpose of finally overturning centuries-old inequalities in rural relations. He retains the land reforms portfolio and feverishly probes an executable ceiling on rural property. Starting from the bureaucracy in the Secretariat and the

vociferous landlord lobby to the corridors of the Legislative Assembly, status quoist elements warn of cataclysmic consequences and an unimaginable backlash against the "overenthusiastic fool of a chief minister." (p.739) A 'Land ceiling scare' is spread deliberately throughout the countryside, leading to a deluge of *benami* transfers, fake divorces, spurious gift deeds, inter-state partitions and boring of holes in cultivable land to get them entered for salt manufacture. Wild rumours are also circulated that Indira Gandhi is out to impose Soviet-style collectivisation upon small, medium and large farmers alike.

Anand first gets an ordinance passed making it mandatory for all transfer actions of holdings above 30 acres to be reported and verified by district collectors. Through state publicity and information, poor tillers learn of the cover-ups underway and fraudulent deeds are exposed. In the eyes of the layman, "for the first time, a peaceful law was seen as being used as a weapon of effective attack for a just cause." (p.760) Anand then wins over disgruntled Village Officers and coaxes them into conducting a survey of landlord holdings and identifying *pattadars* (proprietor peasants) owning more than 30 acres wet crop land in each village. As this final assault on feudalism, the Land Ceilings Bill, is around the corner, trouble comes calling from the Centre.

Desperate *Nomenklatura* and *Kulaks* resort to the last weapon to halt Anand's dogged march – Indira Gandhi. It is initially insinuated in the Central Hall of Parliament that land reforms in Afrozabad are going to neutralise the newly blooming Green Revolution by stealing property from the most efficient producers who were responsible for achieving grain self-sufficiency in India. Shekhar arranges for news stories screaming, "Landlords are offering ten crores for every acre above ten, while our great socialist chief minister is sitting firm on twenty five crores – not a rupee less." (p.771) Once the Ceilings Bill went into discussion stage in the Assembly, procrastination is ensured by filibustering MLAs, while more brazen attempts to drive a rift between Anand and Mrs.Gandhi are made. 'Professional agitation gangs' are pressed into service to create an artificial atmosphere of crisis in rural areas, to send signals to Delhi that the state was turning into a major law-and-order inferno. Afrozabad is converted into a "huge anti-government demonstration camp for the entire duration of the discussion in the legislature." (p.795) Zilla Parishad chairmen all over the state join the agitation displaying total disregard for rules governing local self-governing institutions, alarming the party high command claiming that Anand is destroying all elected bodies in one swoop. A sustained disinformation crusade is launched in ruling circles in Delhi that Anand is planning to start an independent party of his own and as a last straw, obscene graffiti targeting Mrs. Gandhi are painted on walls of many towns cursing her for supporting a "land-grabber CM." Against all odds, the Act is passed in the Assembly, but Anand's goose has been cooked in Delhi with the prime minister aghast at the libellous murals and the law-and order situation in the state. Article 356 is invoked and Anand's government is dismissed. The honest party servant complies with the central decision, reasoning with sangfroid, "When you (Indira Gandhi) arrive at the pinnacle of power, the inevitable result is the preoccupation to retain it. Nothing is more important... for this you make compromises with the status quo."

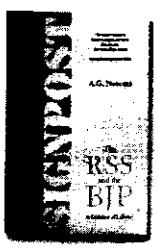
A ringside view of what has come to be known as "Congress Culture", *The Insider*, is, according to Atal Behari Vajpayee, "a mirror not of people but of the life and times they have lived in." Endowed with a sprinkling of collo-quial humour, biting sarcasm and a deeply perceptive narrative, it is meant to be Part I of Narasimha Rao's political memoirs, the sequel of which would pick up the story from the point when he becomes Prime Minister in the early 1990s. The epilogue briefly runs over events in the interregnum (mid-Seventies to 1991) and leaves readers itching for the next volume. One only hopes that Part II does not run into 800 pages too as well! But knowing the can of worms that promises to be opened, Rao could be forgiven another epic in a bid to disclose the innards of India's polity.

Dispatches from a Wounded World
edited by Ethan Casey and Leah Kohlenberg
BookSurge.com and BlueEar.com, 2001
pp vii+258, price not mentioned
ISBN 1 59109 066 0

To belabour a cliche: 11 September changed the world in many ways. Did it really? And if it did, what other dramas were being played out hidden behind the crescendo of voices in the 'fight against terror'. These are the questions that are addressed in this volume by a diverse group of contributors. Essays deal with the dilemma of life as an Arab-American; a comparison between the Afghan and Cambodian situations; the international media's obsession with pro-bin Laden demonstrations by fringe groups of Pakistani fundamentalists, ignoring much larger anti-war rallies; the sidelining of the fight against globalisation; and so on. 'Journalism is the first rough draft of history, goes the saying,' writes Ethan Casey in the introduction. If that be the case, the book seems to stand the test well.

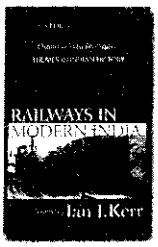
Gender
by V. Geetha
Stree, Calcutta, 2002
pp xvi+149, INR 175
ISBN 81 85604 45 2

This is part of a series to introduce key concepts of feminist theory to lay readers and students. It uses a language free of jargon to show how gender identities are inextricably linked with those constituted by caste, class, religion and sexual preferences, as they have been passed down by tradition.



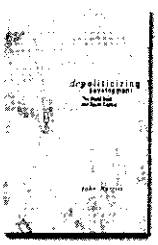
The RSS and the BJP:
A Division of Labour
by A.G. Noorani
LeftWord Books, New Delhi, 2001
(reprinted with updated Epilogue)
pp xiv+118, INR 75
ISBN 81 87496 13 4

Modelled after Orient Longman's 'Tracts for the Times', this is the third in the series called 'Signpost: Issues That Matter'. Jurist Noorani looks at the genesis of the Rastriya Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS), the political compulsions that led to the formation of the Jana Sangh, the progenitor of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the calculated attempts by the RSS to embrace Gandhi and the demolition of the Babri Masjid by its front organisations -- to piece together convincing evidence that the RSS and the BJP are one and the same. It is only a convenient matter of division of labour between them and others like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal.



Railways in Modern India
edited by Ian J. Kerr
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001
pp xvi+356, INR 625
ISBN 0 19 5648285

The government-owned Indian Railways runs the largest railway system in the world. Since their origins in 1853, trains have played a significant role in the making of modern India (and Pakistan and Bangladesh). Drawing from a wide range of sources, this book looks at the effects railways have had on Indian life. The issues range from the economic consequences of the railways to their impact on pilgrimages. It includes a critique by Karl Marx on the introduction of railroads in India, and Mahatma Gandhi's view that the British hold on India would have been tenuous without them. (For an article on Indian railways by the author, see *Himal*, February 2002)

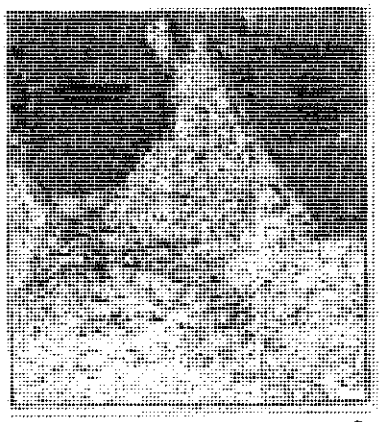


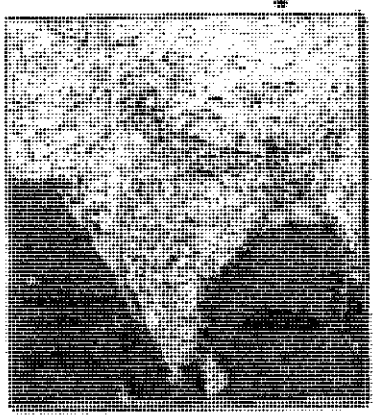
Depoliticising Development: The World Bank and Social Capital
by John Harriss
LeftWord Books, New Delhi, 2001
pp 145, INR 250
ISBN 81 87496 16 9

An idea that has been bandied about in sociological discourse for close to a century, social capital – that is, social connections that people cultivate for mutual benefit – has suddenly found new currency among a group of economists who claim this to be the "missing link" in international development. Giving weight to this school of thought is the World Bank, "the most powerful of social science research organisations". The author, an LSE professor, traces the modern evolution of the idea and urges a closer look at power equations at the lowest levels of society before contesting its validity. There is mutual exclusivity among the 'social capitals' of competing groups, he argues. And just like the earlier fad of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) was used in some cases by local influentials to project their agenda, Harriss cautions that the World Bank's propensity to view NGOs as the repository of social capital could be equally stultifying given the lack of popular participation in these organisations.

Compiled by ***Deepak Thapa, Social Science Baha, Lalitpur***

That Map!





At the India International Centre by the Lodhi tombs in New Delhi, the watering hole of India's, and now South Asia's, diplo-academic elite, workshops are held in a glassed-in chamber that is surrounded by grand trees. This one had been called to ponder on South Asia's future. As usual it had the usual mix of renegade academics and former diplomats (some arrogantly New Delhi-centric, others self-assuredly 'South Asian'). Plus add a bunch of academics from the Jawaharlal Nehru University's school of diplomacy.

From beyond New Delhi came academics – from Madras University, Bombay University and the University of Panjab – less encumbered by proximity to Raisina Hill, or being part of India's opinon-making elite, and hence willing to stick their necks out a bit. From the other South Asian countries came academics, some mildly critical of the 'state' but most of them without the ooomph to take the diplo-scholars who presume to represent newly resurgent India.

Shri Inder Kumar Gujral, who would probably be the overwhelming choice for Prime Minsiter of the Republic of South Asia if we had one, opened the meeting with a cautionary note. "In all the papers that I see here, there is diagnosis of the problem, but no prescription". Rather than discuss overarching solutions to the problems that dog interstate relations in the region, the conclave concentrated on the report of the "Eminent Persons' Group" meant to revive the SAARC organisation.

While Shri Gujral spoke on, JN Dixit, former Foreign Secy at South Block tried to pry open his bottle of Blue Lite mineral water. It was proving very difficult and CK Lal, the roads engineer-cum-columnist from Kathmandu joined the fray and wrestled with the uncooperative bottle. Finally, the plastic wrapper came off, and they had their fill of aqua before their attention returned to the proceedings.

As Shri Gujral spoke, the incredibly varied birdlife of Lodhi Gardens kept banging against the windows trying to get in. There were what looked liked starlings, a rufus-backed woodpecker, turtle doves as large as turkeys, all of this ornithology wanting in on a piece of South Asian action. The woodpecker even had a go at the masonry outside, but the seminarians kept a straight face.

"The Andaman Sea is the only area of the world where fish die of old age," said the professor from Madras, who was plugging for a Bay of Bengal Community as a competitor to the non-starter SAARC. One reason the idea would work, he said, was that "there is no China or Pakistan in the Bay of Bengal". Interesting point of view. The professor from Bombay said one should learn from the United States, which had a self-correcting political mechanism and an ability to learn. He left it at that, but it seemed like he was taking a dig at someone.

It was only a Kathmandu-based engineer-economist, Deepak Gyawali who used the collective 'we' when referring to South Asia, but this is bound to be a growth industry. Till just the other day, people were finding it hard to twist their tongues and say 'South Asia'. Not any more, and the it is not long before the first person plural too makes 'us' all South Asian.

The poo really hit the fan when Himal's representative introduced his/her presentation with its smart and smashing south-side up map of South Asia. A rude shock, therefore, to learn that some considered this an affront to India. "Why have you turned India upside down?" was the accusatory query of the editor of a South Asia journal no less. The response that not only India, but every other country too was similarly "upside down" did not make an impression.

The fact that Delhi The Rajdhani had got relegated to somewhere in the lower part of the map seemed to have irritated those who believed that top-of-page is sacrosanct. If a Dilli-wallah gets peeved with this new perspective, could the same be said also of Islamabad, which similarly is now towards the bottom of Pakistan? Besides, this reaction was not 'India-centricism' as someone suggested. It was northindia-centricism. Because, as was pretty clear, those from the South of the Vindhya were more than happy to find themselves 'on top'. For them, this was not anti-Indian sacrilege. Indeed, those who were most pleased were the Chennaian professor and the Sri Lankans, particularly the one from the southernmost town of Matara.

Thoughts on coming away from the workshop: being critical of New Delhi's policy does not mean

a) you are anti-national (if you are Indian),
b) you are anti-Indian (if you are non-Indian), and,
c) that you are pro-your-own-government from wherever in the neighbourhood you come. In fact, those who criticise New Delhi are likely to be even more critical of their own individual governments.

So there!

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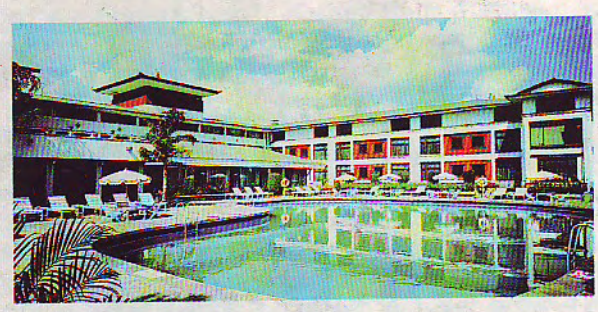
Kanak Dixit

We love Kathmandu

That's why we are at its heart



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