

HIMAL

S O U T H A S I A N



Harassed to suicide
in Bangladesh



Hussaini Brahmins



Deja Vu: Musharraf's
ego & referendum

The violent minority and silent majority of Gujarat do not constitute separate and distinct social fragments. The silence of a sizeable part of the silent majority is not the speechless shock of numbed bystanders. It is the conspiratorial silence of willing spectators, remote witnesses to a Roman holiday, whose public silence is a private roar of approval that is clearly audible to the architects of the violence. There are those who cannot speak and those who will not speak.

How else are we to explain the seeming paradoxes of the riots in Ahmedabad? We have seen educated girls and boys from middle and upper middle class families who do not actually participate in the killings but follow in the wake to loot Muslim establishments. We have seen couples on two wheelers bring home consumer durables scavenged from the debris of retail outlets. The cell-phone wielding rioters are not isolated elements who have taken control in a social vacuum.

The shaming of India

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Gujarat Burning



After more than two months of death and destruction, Gujarat continues to simmer with communal hatred. A direct consequence of the RSS-VHP-BJP strategy, the carnage of Gujarat is a stark reminder of the threat that Hindutva – as well as other forms of religious extremism – poses to secularism. As Gujarat burns, now is the time to bring to account the leadership that has brought South Asia to this horrific moment and renew our commitment to pluralism.

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HIMAL

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The enemy within

The terror in Gujarat is a South Asian calamity. It is also a reminder of the calamities of the past and a forewarning of manmade disasters ahead. The restraints of civilisation are sometimes all too thin. The targeted mass killings of Muslim children, women and men is an expression of the violent urge that can be stimulated in a mass of people who have been systematically reared to think of others as less than human.

Everywhere in South Asia, there are people who nurture the desire to conduct pogroms and wipe out of existence those who are supposedly different. The energies and urges of such forces are generally kept in check by the weight of law and social sanction. But every now and then, they spring out through the cracks and contradictions of civil and political society. That is when the lives of others are consumed to settle imaginary scores with history. When the beasts prowl among citizens, communal riots and sectarian killings happen – be it in Nellie, Surat, Bhiwandi, Bhagalpur or Bombay.

It is possible to douse the communal flames quickly when the state is willing. The worst conflagrations occur when the exclusivist ideology takes control of a government – as has happened in Ahmedabad – and the state then becomes a killing machine.

South Asia condemns the carnage on the Sabarmati. No barrier of nationality and citizenship can keep us from denouncing the killing of innocents on the basis of religion. In humanitarian empathy, the citizens of Karachi, Calcutta, Colombo, Madras, Dhaka, Kathmandu and Guwahati, equally abhor what has happened in Godhra, Ahmedabad and elsewhere in Gujarat.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, prime minister of a billion-plus souls, said before the Muslim refugees that Gujarat had shamed India before the world. Before his tears were dry, he went to Goa and shamed India and South Asia before the world. "Wherever they are, Muslims do not want to stay peacefully," was among the ideas he shared with an apparently appreciative audience of his ruling party.

This was the moment of heart-stopping realisation. Not that it showed Mr Vajpayee for what he apparently is, but that he speaks the mind of a good portion of India's population by generically lumping all Muslims (of India, of the world) into one malevolent category. In the psyche that is emerging, are all Muslims to be merged into one monolithic community that acts with singular purpose?

"Why did *they* carry out that massacre in Godhra?" is the refrain in the households and bazaars across north India, as if the torching of the train bogey full of Hindu devotees was a design of all Indian Muslims. It is this mindset – this forced ascription of a unitary agenda to all the Islamic faithful – that one encounters again and again, in railway sleeper-cars, family dinners or neighbourhood cafes. This mindset can rip India apart, with unfathomable consequences for the whole Subcontinent.

To repeat, everywhere in South Asia there are individuals capable of the slaughter that in this instance overtook Gujarat. All our communities have, at different times and under dissimilar circumstances, come under threat from the inner barbarism that does not flinch from clenching its fists, thrusting the dagger, or hurling the bomb. Everywhere in the Subcontinent, there are killings underway, Gujarat's distinction being a government's inacabre acts of omission and commission against innocents.

While the elite establishments in each of the other countries of South Asia wear their anti-Indianism on the sleeve, there is unstated confidence in Indian democracy and secularism as a role model. If New Delhi begins to let go of the credo that has been the glue for India, then the repercussions will buffet not only its own regions, but all South Asia. Reactionary elements – of all hues and not just 'Hindu' – will take advantage of the message that is emanating from Ahmedabad and New Delhi and crawl out of the woodwork to continue with what Gujarat has started.

When the Sangh combine screams its exclusionist ideology in the north and west of India, it gives fillip to reactionaries in the far corners of the Republic and across the expanse of the Subcontinent. When the checks and balances are off the Indian state, extremists everywhere in South Asia feel free to exploit the primal emotions churned up by the appeal to religion and nationalism.

It is for South Asia's largest and most populous country to rediscover the traditions of tolerance it has officially nurtured over the last many decades. India's plurality is too vast to be contained in the restrictive formulas of sectarian politics. The peril to India lies within, but not in the places they are looking to find it. ▽



An armyman's response

THE ESSAY 'Erosion of the Nepali World' by Deepak Thapa (April 2002) probably did more damage to the image of the Royal Nepalese Army than all the attacks of the Maoists so far. The essay is highly lopsided and it is clear that Thapa has an axe to grind against the army. He has concentrated only on the negative aspects. He refers to the Maoists attack on barracks in Dang on 25 November 2002 and the loss suffered by the army, but he does not mention the defeat suffered by hundreds of Maoists at the hands of a handful of RNA soldiers in, for example, Salleri on 26 November. Perhaps the writer is afraid of demoralising the Maoists, for whom Salleri was their first big defeat in the six years of their insurgency.

Thapa alleges that the Royal Nepalese Army is an unprofessional and "feudal" force, without battle experience. Mind you, it is this same army which has inflicted heavy casualties on the Maoists in numerous clashes, such as at Ghodepani (7 December), Ratamate (8 December), Karpurkot (9 December) and Sankrati Bazar (22 January), to name a few. These defeats forced the Maoists to rethink their battle strategy and abandon their high profile.

The attack on the Achham district headquarters on 16 February was no doubt a big setback for the soldiers, but as you can see from the subsequent actions that has in no way diluted the strong resolve of the army to fulfill the task given it. Meanwhile, the soldiers have learned from their mistakes and are back in strength at their posts in Dang and Achham.

It is true that the Army is not battle-experienced, but this cannot be seen through a negative prism. For the reason the army has not had to fight is that Nepal was at peace within for more than a century and had not faced external aggression. If the writer's wish of a battle-hardened army had been fulfilled, there may not have been a country for him to cherish.

You must remember that it has been all of five months that the Royal Nepalese Army has been out fighting the insurgents, who have shown their ruthlessness as well as strategic ability. In the context of Nepal's terrain and the logistical burden the soldiers have not done badly at all. The Maoists were allowed to grow in strength over the years, and it was when they were at the peak of their morale and flush with looted money and equipment that the army was fielded. But the soldiers have gone about their task methodically, knowing that the country has to be saved from this scourge.

What I found lacking in Deepak Thapa's piece was

empathy for the soldiers (both officers and men) who are out there in the hills fighting an enemy about whose viciousness there is no doubt in anyone's mind. These soldiers have had no rest since the day they were deployed, they are performing their duty, far away from their beloved family and friends, without letdown in their strength and vigour. Many have already, and willingly, sacrificed their today so that that the people can have a tomorrow.

Such a prejudiced article in a magazine of such high repute caught me, and many of my friends in the force, by surprise. Such writeups, prepared with callousness, can damage the credibility of a proud institution which is doing all it can to protect the sovereignty, integrity and independence of the country. Such articles can also provide legitimacy to a terrorist organisation that is out to destroy the country. The soldiers of the Royal Nepalese Army are always ready to serve the king and the country, and to save us from chaos and disorder. The army men, too, are the custodians of the Constitution and our democracy. Journalists are not the only persons concerned with the protection of this Constitution and democracy.

A serving officer, Royal Nepalese Army

IN HIS article on the Maoist war in Nepal, and the State of Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on 26 November, Deepak Thapa writes that "this is the second time the country has been under a state of emergency. The first was after the royal takeover of 1960, when multiparty democratic system was abolished in favour of direct rule by King Mahendra and political parties were banned." May I correct him on this count?

The first time a state of emergency was declared in Nepal was by King Tribhuvan after the revolt of the Rakshya Dal led by the Dr KI Singh on the night of 21 January 1952. Bhuwan L Joshi and Leo E Rose in their *Democratic Innovations in Nepal: A Case Study of Political Acculturation* (101) write, "King Tribhuvan promptly declared a state of emergency and invested Prime Minister Koirala with full power to govern without the advice of the cabinet, if deemed necessary. The Rashtriya Mahasabha, whose leaders had been involved in the uprising, was declared illegal on 25 January, as was the Communist party for its alleged support of the revolt." This fact is confirmed by the historian Grisma Bahadur Devkota in his *Nepal ko Rajnitik Darpan* (vol I, 64).

Nishchal N Pandey, Bishalnagar, Kathmandu

Use of Laptop

FOLLOWING THE suggestion of the 'Lastpage' columnist that it is more 'South Asian' to squat rather than sit, I tried it and I am now faced with a quandary. How does one squat while working on the laptop? If you've figured it out, let me know.

LM, Sagar



Unravelling criticisms

Will the captain of a true-blooded Sihala Urumaya cricket team be only from the same majority caste? Will the vice-captaincy be rotated among the other castes? Will the players be chosen for the traditional skills of their caste, as they could be applied to cricket, or on their capability as cricketers? Will the Karavas be expected to transform their sea-faring skills for the betterment of cricket? Will the Salagamas be asked to use their experience with cinnamon peeling and other skills to better effect at cricket? Will the Duravas be asked to adapt their skills as trapeze artistes between coconut trees, for the success of the game? That is just to name a few castes. There are many other castes and skills to draw from.

In the article 'When Captain Cool plays cricket the Sihala Urumaya way', Lucien Rajakarunanayake, *Sunday Observer*, 30 July 2000, on Arjuna Ranatunga, former Sri Lankan cricket captain, joining the Sihala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage), a rightwing anti-Tamil Sinhala chauvinist party.

MY FRIEND Anand Teltumbde, a commentator on dalit issues, sent me a congratulatory message on 25 March, for *Lagaan's* failure to win the Oscar. Some of ambedkarite friends from Madras and I were not exactly delighted, but we certainly felt good about it. Before my article appeared in *Himal*, I had written a brief critique of *Lagaan* on similar lines for a little magazine in Madras, *The Dalit*. When the Oscar-for-*Lagaan* campaign gathered momentum in the Indian media, with channels like Star TV and newspapers like *The Times of India* rooting for it, I suggested to the Star News reporter in Madras that he file a report on how some dalit and dalit-friendly activists and publications in Madras perceived *Lagaan* as anti-dalit. He agreed, did some interviews, and filed a 'story'. I asked several activist friends to keep an eye on Star News and we eagerly waited for the report to be aired. After much delay, on the morning of the Oscars night (24 March), the report was used twice, briefly. Star News preferred to downplay any anti-*Lagaan* voice when a national desire for *Lagaan* winning the Oscar was being orchestrated by the media. The anti-*Lagaan* view was never aired in the prime-time slot. Why highlight this jarring note when it was the time to feel good, its news editor Sonia Verma, who got so emotional and sensitive over Natasha Singh's high profile death, must have felt. When a nation so starved of international glory in sport, cinema, culture, art and literature – desperate enough to claim Naipaul as its own – seems on the verge of getting some token recognition from the "world's sole superpower" why give

too much room to some stray jarring note? And so Lubna Mariam, with millions of others, "hoped with all my heart, that *Lagaan* wins the Oscar".

Lubna's Sanskrit position

Now, to the responses to my essay published in *Himal's* April issue. I think Lubna Mariam and Sudhanva Deshpande have made my task easy. Symbolically they (respectively) represent the *Gadar* and *Lagaan* of intellectual positions. Lubna, unwittingly though, gives ample proof of how *Lagaan* can be read/viewed in the sanskritic-puranic tradition – and thus vindicates my position. Chiding me for my unfair expectations of *Lagaan*, she asks me to understand the creative license of art in the "Indian context". I quote: "For what after all is the substance of 'art'?" Indian thought maintains, it is "*Apurvam yad vastu prathayati vina karanakalam Jagadgrava prakhyam nijarasa bharat sarayati ca*. Art is that object which, not having any antecedent (*apurvam*), though inspired by the manifested world, is created by the infusion of individualist and intrinsic emotions (*nijarasa bharat*". Notice that 'art' gets scare quotes but not 'Indian'. We are supposed to know what Indian is. Indian is hindu and hindu is sanskritic. We should thank her for translating this gibberish from the language of the gods. Now, how does this sanskrit tradition, which is the preoccupation of three per cent of the population, become the 'Indian tradition'? (It is the same as depicting Bharatanatyam as 'Indian art' while the mention of Thappaattam, also from Tamil Nadu will have to be explained, which I refuse to do here.) And she concludes: "*Lagaan* is just such a myth. I salute *Lagaan* for successfully incorporating the art of the old 'kathakar' to give new dreams to our sorry world."

Lagaan, whose secularism for some folks is heightened because a muslim producer has come up with something in the sanskritic tradition, therefore, "can be allowed to play around with its facts and figures for it is the 'figment of imagination' of its creator. However, the sloka goes on to state that the act of creation is accomplished both by the creator and the spectator or *sah-hridaya*. Maybe there is a need for more *sah-hridayata* here. *Lagaan* certainly found an empathetic *sah-hridaya* in me." Predictably, Lubna steamrolls the tastes and preferences of millions in the Subcontinent who have been 'traditionally' denied access to such Sanskrit slokas. Lubna's comments in effect alienate me and at the same time justify the need to exercise caution against *Lagaan*. This vulgar and proud display of brahmanic sanskritism in rebuffing an ambedkarite critique of *Lagaan* should make Sudhanva realise, at least now, that along with him there are some dangerous people celebrating *Lagaan*. He might not be quoting Sanskrit couplets, like Lubna, but they seem to share some basic perceptions. Lubna finds a co-heart (*sah-hridaya*) in Sudhanva. This is heartening.

Lubna also asserts – she does not even guess – that Aamir Khan and Ahustosh Gowariker did not read

Gandhi and Ambedkar and locate their film in the intellectual politics of either of them. "...the producer and director of *Lagaan* did not have any aspirations of doing an Ambedkar or Gandhi on the audience and merely meant to provide commercially viable 'entertainment'." She therefore thinks I am reading too much of my own politics into the film, in her words an "academic running down of some 'Theory of Social Reforms' rather than a critical appreciation of artwork". But how come she is justified in locating the aesthetics of reception of *Lagaan* in the sanskritic tradition and that of *kathakars*, while my critique from the point of view of dalit aesthetics and politics is not tolerated? Is she implying that the producer and director of *Lagaan* were conscious of these sanskritic, hindu traditions and willingly placed their 'artwork' in such a tradition?

It is frustrating when there is not even an effort to understand or listen, but only talk down. This is the brahmanic hindu culture of intolerance when it comes to dalits and their views (see the Ambedkar quote at the end of this response).

What else does Lubna have to say? "For an industry remarkable for the brashness with which it reduces such stalwarts of history like Asoka into obnoxious sex symbols and mutates the magical vyahritis of the Gayatri Māntra into meaningless chants of 'the bold and the beautiful', *Lagaan* is a seminal piece of work." But what are vyahritis? Lubna presumes that good Indians (read brahmanic hindus) must know that much. This is the 'good hinduism' that is upset by the mutating of the Gayatri Mantra. As a woman and non-Hindu she is anyway ritually excluded from the Gayatri Mantra but is anxious to preserve it in its original context (whatever that is). But an ambedkarite has not much to choose between Times Music trying to 'democratise' the Gayatri Mantra chants and the puritanical Lubnas mocking at such exercises. Both are equally dangerous and are mere variations – sometimes leading to internal squabbles – in the overall brahmanic tradition.

Finally, Lubna's nostalgia for ram rajya. "Ram Rajya is a myth that found universal acceptance and popularity through the untiring industry of the ancient 'kathakars' and traveling bards of old. Whatever ethics still remain ingrained in our depraved hearts comes from these modes of centuries of social mimesis." Should one react to this? Who constitutes this unqualified 'our'? Who are Lubna's *sah-hridayas* – fellow bleeding hearts? Not the shudra-sambhukas who were decapitated by the mythical Rama. Not the *ahal-yas* who were demeaned. Not the chandalas who were demonised. Perhaps Sudhanva Deshpande.

Caste tags and liberals

Sudhanva's response might be the left word, but hope not the last word on the subject. Let me begin by admitting my deep discomfort of debating with someone who announces his brahman identity in his very name. Deshpande. (By writing/talking about this discomfort, I hope to overcome it, though Sudhanva might detect an Oprah Winfrey-type Americanism here!) It seems to me that this dialogue is the equivalent of an ambedkarite in Madras arguing with a man who seems concerned about casteism but happily retains his Iyer/Iyyengar tag. In others words, struts his caste tail, even as he seems to publicly denounce casteism. It might seem like I, too, am getting personal, but caste is a deeply personal thing while at the same time being equally political.

(Since my essay's target – via a reading of caste, cricket and *Lagaan* – was anyway brahmanism and dalit exclusion, I think I am justified in this apparent digression about caste tags.) In choosing to retain a sub-caste tag, you do make a statement. Despite my insistence that I would prefer to refer to Sudhanva (and other such names) by the first name after the first reference, Himal's editors decided to follow their stylesheet. No concessions to some one-off ambedkarite essay. Even our stylesheets are, and will remain, overdetermined by the ideology of caste. (Yes, I can see Kanak Mani, Thomas Mathew and Team Himal fretting at my ingratitude.) The result: Sudhanva becomes just a Deshpande. Which he is.

It is symptomatic of the self-defined secular-liberal intelligentsia's deeper, pathological problem: its refusal, rather its inherent brahmanic inability, to reckon with caste/brahmanism other than on its class-inflected terms

Which is a choice he exercises, like a million others, despite his obvious progressivism as managing editor, LeftWord. Just like VR Krishna Iyer would be Iyer, and Kanak Mani Dixit would be Dixit, Somnath Chatterjee would be Chatterjee, Vinod Mehta would be Mehta, Brinda Karat would be just Karat (leading to obvious confusion) and suchlike.

Atal Behari Vajpayee too retains his caste tag. In doing so, he declares that he traces patriarchal lineage to a sub-caste that performed, perhaps, centuries ago, the *Vajapeya yagna*. He must be proud of such baggage. So do chaturvedis, trivedis and dwivedis announce their lineage from families tutored in four, three, two vedas respectively. In left-liberal-secular circles no demands are made of you to shed these tags.

Even if you are Charu Majumdar or Sudhanva Deshpande. Of course, this simple demand begs the simplistic question: is giving up a caste tag a mere marker of one's anti-casteness? Does one cease to be a brahman if one gives up the Iyer/Deshpande tail in one's name. But retaining it, rather choosing to retain it, certainly does connote something.

We, therefore, live in a world where a leftist like

communist MP Somnath Chatterjee can invite an Atal Behari Vajpayee to his grandson's 'thread ceremony' when he runs into his so-called political foe in the corridors of parliament. In caste India doors open easier when you are Sudhanva Deshpande, not when you are Jangam Chinnaiah. Even if both have PhDs. The tail indicates the kind of head you possess. Name-tags, skin colour, accent, the nasal index matter when you apply for a job. They overdetermine your credentials. Whether at *Outlook*, *Himal* or *LeftWord*. (A word here on the caste assertion of dalits. During the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS) struggle in Andhra Pradesh (where the madigas among dalits demanded a proportional division of the benefits of reservation in government jobs and educational institutions), the madigas started sporting caste tags as a sign of assertion. The brahmanical society which had got used to addressing people as Krishna 'Sastri', Krishna 'Rao' and Krishna 'Reddy', suddenly felt uneasy about referring to the MRPS leader as Krishna 'Madiga'. For centuries words like 'madiga' (in Telugu) and 'paraya' (in Tamil) have been used as derogatory terms. Even today popular Tamil and Telugu cinema use 'chandala buddhi' or simply 'chandala/chandali' as terms of abuse, derision and contempt or a combination of all these. So when someone like Krishna 'Parayanar' in Madras proudly flaunts his caste identity and traces his lineage to the Tamil saint Thiruvalluvar and claims music genius Ilayaraja as a fellow-traveller, it pleases no one – not Ilayaraja a fellow-dalit, nor the dravidians and Tamil nationalists, nor the leftist and brahmanical groups. But of late, tags like 'Dalit' Kumar, or prefixing/suffixing a dalit subcaste tag is catching up among dalit activists in Tamil, Telugu and Kannada countries. The politics of such caste assertion is very different from the politics of those who choose to remain Krishna 'Iyer' or Sudhanva 'Deshpande'. Yet, some dalit intellectuals, while recognising the cultural resistance involved in celebrating a hitherto-suppressed subcaste identity, are alive to the long-term dangers of using of subcaste tags; they welcome the more generic political assertion involved in a name like 'Dalit' Kumar as against Kumar 'Madiga'.

Now what is the point I am trying to make? That the inherent brahmanism that I allege exists in cricket is the same that exists in the institutionalised left (and liberal circles) in India (South Asia?). And given that I am prone to gross generalisations, I would argue that Sudhanva's response is not just an individual's position but is symptomatic of the self-defined secular-liberal intelligentsia's deeper, pathological problem: its refusal, rather its inherent brahmanic inability, to reckon with caste/brahmanism other than on its class-inflected terms; its refusal to respond both in the realm of mainstream electoral politics and also intellectually to the challenges of the dalit and feminist movements. What is wrong with *Lagaan* is what is wrong with the left-liberals.

Before going further, I wish to accept the factual inaccuracies in my essay pointed out by Sudhanva and apologise for them. The inaccuracies I am guilty of are about the bowling arm of Kachra (not left, but right); and Bardhan not being an MP. These points, however, do not take away much from the thrust of my essay. (Let me add one more inaccuracy a friend from Bombay alerted me to. Sanjay Manjrekar is not a brahman, but an OBC of the 'bhandari' caste.)

The caste of class

Sudhanva's lament is that I neglect class/economics and prioritise caste. I am glad he understood that much. Since there are hundreds of Sudhanva-type card-holding leftists who have dominated the academic and intellectual corridors, we leave it to them to over-emphasise class. But, in a caste society, isn't class caste-inflected? Aren't most brahmans economically well-off/rich and most dalits poor? And are all 'creamy layer' dalits treated as equals by caste hindus? Even dalit bureaucrats (IAS officers) have testified to discrimination. "Poverty", 'lack of a balanced diet', "lack of basic training facilities" and "so on" that Sudhanva lists as contributing to the absence of dalit sporting excellence are not merely class-inflected. In India poverty/class are to be understood from a caste optic. That post-Mandal, post-Durban post-so-much-else Sudhanva cannot see this much is sad. Let me top this with a factoid that Delhi-based dalit intellectual Chandrabhan Prasad is fond of quoting: Romila Thapar presided over the Jawaharlal Nehru University history department for some three decades, but not one dalit was appointed to the history faculty. The same (unreviewed) constitution that stipulates 22.5 percent reservation for dalits and adivasis was in place then. There was no formal hindutva, nor was BJP calling the shots. The left halo was in full shine.

Fitness in sport is an absolute value, but its form will vary, says Sudhanva. I agree. Which is why I argue that cricket, especially tedious test cricket, has certain demands of fitness that best suits brahman bodies, saraswat or whatever type. (As for meat-eating brahmans there might be many from Sudhanva to Atal Behari to Sachin.) And since brahmans and other brahmanical oppressor (not 'upper') castes dominate society, it is cricket which emerges as the dominant sport.

Cricket suits a caste-ridden society best. (Boxing, as Sudhanva says, has indeed been a site of black male assertion. That cricket has not been, and perhaps cannot, be a site for subaltern assertion in India, is the point of the essay which Sudhanva misses.) As for wicket-keeping and fitness look at how Deep Dasgupta does not keep and how Syed Kirmani used to. Finally, in saying that I argue "that cricket is upper-caste dominated" he is wrong. I had said cricket is dominated by brahmans and hence is brahmanical. I continue to maintain this much. To replace brahmans with "upper caste" is mischievous. It is also true that after the

popularity of one-day cricket, the Indian team has been forced to take fitness seriously; hence we see more non-brahman players in the shorter version of the game. Besides, fielding has been a specific problem with the Indian team and this again is related to fitness/bodies and hence the caste makeup of a team. (I also have serious problems with Sudhanva's (or anybody's) careless use of the terms 'upper' and 'lower' castes. It might be argued as being part of common sense, but that is a caste hindu common sense that is deeply offensive and insensitive. Many dalits, too, might have internalised this 'upper-lower' binary, but that is no excuse for continuing to use it.)

It is good that Sudhanva also rejects my positing that intra-caste marriages might contribute to weak bodies because of inbreeding. We now know where he stands. And he marshalls evidence through some colleague, probably a brahman: even in intra-caste marriages, "not just the gotra but more crucially the sapinda must be different (just the single criterion of gotra can cause the marriage to stray back inside the prohibited conjugal pool and cause inbred blood lines)". This much, and more, Ambedkar tells us in his essay 'Castes in India'. But Sudhanva seems to be not just a casteist but a supporter of patriarchy too. In my essay I referred to marriages within "patriarchal sub-caste specificities". Now how are gotra and sapinda-hood decided? Only through the male lineage. On this point, he concludes: "my feeling is that in a Subcontinent that has made something of a specialisation of proliferating its numbers, the size of castes and subcastes are *probably* large enough to prevent sanguinary inbreeding of the kind that is reputed to cause congenital deviations." Well, if there is extensive subcaste proliferation the risks of inbreeding debilitating bodies can only be greater. Sadly, as Gail Omvedt often laments, neither social scientists nor physical scientists have addressed this issue. For now, both Sudhanva and I can only use words such as 'probably' and base our conclusions on 'feelings'.

Lagaan and Hindutva voices

Now for Hindutva groups' dislike for *Lagaan*. True, *Gadar* is straight up their lane. But to cite merely an ABVP journal's anti-*Lagaan* line is irresponsible. To use Sudhanva's words: "that does not quite measure up to the standards of rigour that a purposive politics must command". Here is Pritish Nandy, a representative of the Shiv Sena in the Rajya Sabha: "It is possibly the finest movie I have seen in my life and, believe me, I have seen some very fine movies. No praise is enough to describe *Lagaan*. It is the first film I have seen that deserves 100 in a scale of one to nine." Atal Behari Vajpayee, Sushma Swaraj and LK Advani watched the movie at a special screening organised for Bharatiya Janata Party MPs and senior journalists. Aamir after the show: "I was incredibly tense and self-conscious when I sat so close to Vajpayeeji while watching *Lagaan*."

And I was thrilled beyond words when he said '*bahut khoob*' [very good], after the film. Still, I couldn't get over my tension. He was very inquisitive in lots of places and I kept explaining it to him. I watched him smiling and reacting to the scenes that I wanted him to react to." Aamir on home minister LK Advani: "Advani was a film critic at one point and I was expecting him to criticise it. Thank god, he didn't say anything bad. Instead he enquired about the choreographer, because he loved the song sequences." After all this we had news reports about the BJP approaching Aamir Khan to campaign for the party in the UP elections, which he refused to do. But after reading Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief KS Sudarshan's statements on what kind of muslims the RSS wants (the Bangalore resolutions of March 2002), I suppose we may say that Aamir Khan perhaps fits the bill.

The problem with Sudhanva or for that matter with the left-liberals is their poor 'strategic' reasoning: because *Gadar* is a terribly anti-muslim film, and because the Shiv Sena and hindutva forces like it more, we must not say anything against the 'comparatively progressive' *Lagaan*. This is called strategy. Which perhaps has a mainstream political echo in the left parties' pro-Congress posturing only because the BJP is truly bad. We can, meanwhile, suffer a Sonia Gandhi falling at the feet of Sankaracharya of Puri or taking a dip in the Kumbh. Sonia-Congress is better than Vajpayee-BJP, as much as *Lagaan* is a better bet than *Gadar*. But sirs, do the dalits have a choice?

Sudhanva asks me to tolerate the erasures in *Lagaan* and understand that this is, after all, Bollywood masala cinema (Lubna will agree to this sah-hridaya's response) "simply recounting a nationalist saga". But why can't I critique Bollywood cinema for what it is worth and problematise such naive nationalist nostalgia? Why can't an ambedkarite think that the Indian National Congress (gandhian) brand of nationalism and the BJP-hindutva type of nationalism both have nothing to offer the dalits? Now to Kachra. Every character who enters the team seems to have a family, some wife/father/brother to consult/discuss the issue with. But Kachra is denied this. In the film he comes across as an orphan, patronised by Bhuvan. Sudhanva asks us to see Kachra's handicap as a "physical symbol of his social location". This is simply perverse. It is Sudhanva's turn to be patronising. Also, he has nothing to say about the 'merit' angle woven in here. The dalit is shown to have no intelligence of his own. It is unfair to compare Kachra and Muralitharan as Sudhanva does. Unlike Muthiah Muralitharan, Kachra is shown to spin the ball only because of his handicap. When he tries to bowl with his normal hand, Bhuvan tells him not to. So the ball released from Kachra's deformed hand spins automatically. He knows less about its trajectory than Bhuvan. A case of fluke. And here I talk of what the film shows.

As for my anti-muslim bias, if I have not commented

on Ismail's knock, nor have I on Gooran or any other players': next, as strategy, I suppose I would be told not to critique *Lagaan* because it is made by a muslim. Sudhanva also typically fails to understand my refusal to recognise the difference between 'good hinduism' (of Bardhan, Sudhanva and Co.) and the 'bad hinduism' (hindutva) of the Bharatiya Janata Party and its affiliates. Which is why the attack on a fellow-communist like Bardhan elicits a brash response. He goes on: "Bardhan, in the immediate aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, is merely *making* the point that the Sangh parivar, which claims to speak for all hindus, does nothing of the sort, and that there are many traditions within hinduism which are antithetical to hindutva." But Bardhan does not merely quote 'Gandhi-ji', but also 'Guru-ji' (meaning Golwalkar) and sundry other openly hindutva ideologues. At least the Sangh Parivar is open about its biases. They don't talk about 'the many traditions of hinduism'. (How many hinduisms will the dalits, muslims and other non-hindus fight?) It is hypocritical leftist defenders of hinduism-not-hindutva who are more dangerous. You cannot fight what you do not understand. True. The Deshpande in Sudhanva refuses to understand hinduism; how dalits have, and will have, no place in this religion. He also cannot understand why Ambedkar had to formal-quit hinduism. Let me conclude with a long quote

from Ambedkar:

"I am quite aware that there are some protagonists of Hinduism who say that Hinduism is a very adaptable religion, that it can adjust itself to everything and absorb anything. I do not think many people would regard such a capacity in a religion as a virtue to be proud of just as no one would think highly of a child because it has developed the capacity to eat dung, and digest it. But that is another matter. It is quite true that Hinduism can adjust itself. The best example of its adjustability is the literary production called Allahupanishad which the Brahmins of the time of Akbar produced to give a place to his Din-e-Ilahi within Hinduism and to recognise it as the seventh system of Hindu philosophy. It is true that Hinduism can absorb many things. The beef-eating Hinduism (or strictly speaking Brahmanism which is the proper name of Hinduism in its earlier stage) absorbed the non-violence theory of Buddhism and became a religion of vegetarianism. But there is one thing which Hinduism has never been able to do – namely to adjust itself to absorb the Untouchables or to remove the bar of untouchability."

– *Siriyavan Anand*
Madras

(Note: capitalisation style reflects author's preferences.)



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SRI LANKA

PRABAKARAN AND HIS PRESS CONFERENCE

LTTE LEADER Velupillai Prabhakaran's media conference was an unprecedented event with nearly 300 local and foreign journalists making the tortuous journey to his heavily guarded headquarters in Wannu. For Sri Lanka, this was an unprecedented media event, indicating the impact of the LTTE on the country, and the mystery surrounding its leader which enticed even the world media. The press meet received mixed reviews from its viewers, which would have included virtually the entirety of the Sri Lankan population with access to television.

But one thing is certain. The demon-like and superhuman images of the once elusive Tiger leader disappeared in the glare of the television lights. Prabhakaran came across as extremely human and perhaps even ordinary. Especially at the initial stages of the media conference he appeared uneasy and perhaps even trapped as he faced a hostile and critical barrage of questions from foreign and mostly Indian journalists. The human side of Prabhakaran may be reassuring to those who believed him capable of superhuman feats and therefore felt threatened to the point of irrationality by him.

The battle for hearts and minds through the television screen is entirely different from the battle for military victory which the LTTE commander has specialised in and in which he has an undoubted genius. The art of persuasion in which politicians excel is entirely different from that of imposing by force which is what the LTTE has excelled in up to now. Perhaps Prabhakaran will learn to perform more sophisticatedly at future media conferences as a politician might have done. But for this time it suffices that he came across as speaking without bluff or bluster, addressing the point of the question for the most part and saying why he would not elaborate on other questions.

Those who expected the media conference to herald a startling breakthrough for peace were disappointed. The LTTE leader neither withdrew from his aspiration for an independent state of Tamil Eelam nor did he guarantee that his guns would be spiked forever. On the other hand, there was also relief that he did not strike an intransigent posture that could have undermined the ongoing peace process. While sticking to his old positions, Prabhakaran seemed to wish to communicate a determination to stick to the peace process as well. This may account for his repeated assertions that he had faith and confidence in the sincerity of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Thimpu Principles

The LTTE leader also made an important concession when he said that a solution based on the 'Thimpu Principles' could be an alternative to Tamil Eelam indicating that this fell short of separation. Indeed, there was nothing contradictory in Mr Prabhakaran asserting that his goal still remained Tamil Eelam and also saying that he believed in the sincerity of the prime minister to find a political solution that would be an acceptable alternative.

At the peace talks in the Bhutanese capital in 1985, all Tamil parties present, including the LTTE, took the position that the Tamil people were a nationality and entitled to the right of self-determination within their traditional homeland. One question that has troubled the government is whether the right of self-determination includes the option to secede. At Wannu, Prabhakaran, speaking through his theoretician and translator Dr Anton Balasingham, clarified for the first time that internal self-determination could be acceptable, thereby pointing out that the right of self-determination could be exercised by the Tamil people internally in Sri Lanka and without having to secede.

It is clear therefore that the Thimpu Principles hold the key to the longer term political solution that will have to be worked out by the government and LTTE. There is a need to de-mystify the contentious terms of nationality, self-determination and homelands. Other countries have dealt with these issues in a satisfactory manner that has led to a large amount of social peace within them. South Africa is an example of a country that had to deal with the issue of

The demon-like and superhuman images of the once elusive Tiger leader disappeared in the glare of the television lights

self-determination in its constitution. Spain had to deal with the term nationality in its constitution. Canada has been dealing with the issue of a distinct society within the larger Canadian society and the land claims of its indigenous population.

Civil society organisations may need to take the lead in discussing the issues pertaining to the Thimpu Principles and creating a greater awareness of them in society. At present, there is strong support and near unanimity among the general population for ending the war. However, there will not be that same unanimity about the type of political solution that can bring about a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict. Much work has to be done in that area, for which civil society is better equipped than the government.

Indian attitude

Whatever may be the LTTE's motivation for calling the media conference at this time in Wannai, it clearly did not result in a decisive outcome one way or the other. As in all political encounters, it was but one step in an ongoing process that needs to be encouraged. Perhaps one reason for calling the press together was the LTTE's desire to use the euphoria of the present peace process to create a better image of itself internationally. In recent years, the LTTE has seen its international image hit rock bottom in a manner that cannot befit any organisation that seeks to represent an entire people.

The beginning of the LTTE's international decline was undoubtedly its assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi under the most treacherous circumstances when he was garlanded by a woman suicide bomber during an election rally in May 1991. Elections are the most sacred arena of a democracy's life and those who violate that sanctity can never be respected in the modern world. Having rejected electoral politics, the LTTE cannot understand that the electoral process cannot be trifled with, if international respect is sought after.

The beginning stage of the Norwegian-mediated peace process might have seemed to be the ideal opportunity for the LTTE to present itself in a new light. Better now than later, might have been its calculation, considering the uncertainties of the peace process as time goes on. However, after the media conference the LTTE would have a



Prabakaran at Wannai, in safari suit

more realistic assessment of this prospect. Without public repentance, a new leadership, or vindication by standing for elections, the LTTE has an uphill task to convince a sceptical international community about its bona fides.

At Wannai, it was evident that the most unforgiving component of the international media was the large contingent of Indian journalists. The assassination of their former prime minister loomed very large in their sharp and hostile questioning. They kept on pressing Prabakaran on this matter to which his response was the only one that is possible at this time – to put the past behind and look to the future, while recognising the irreversible tragedy of the past.

Many who oppose what the LTTE stands for would have taken satisfaction in the hostility of the Indian journalists to the man whom they believe murdered Rajiv Gandhi. His was a precious life in a sea of tens of thousands of lives that have been lost due to the ethnic conflict. But an intransigent Indian attitude towards Prabakaran will pose a major road block to the peace process in Sri Lanka, which almost all Sri Lankans with a few miserable exceptions yearn for. The LTTE will be loath to join the mainstream of a non-militarised Sri Lankan society if they feel that their leader will be nabbed by India in the process.

For peace to come to Sri Lanka, and perhaps anywhere else in the world, the past

At Wannai, Prabakaran clarified for the first time that internal self-determination could be acceptable, thereby pointing out that the right of self-determination could be exercised by the Tamil people internally in Sri Lanka and without having to secede

has to be buried and the future must be looked towards. Sri Lankans – Sinhals, Tamils and Muslims – have to forget the past regarding each other's atrocities. Sri Lankans also have to bury the past with regard to their great neighbour India, which once trained and armed the Tamil militants, including the LTTE. As a good neighbour, which it is to Sri Lanka at this time, and for the sake of peace in Sri Lanka, India needs to find a way to let go of the past that it once aided and abetted in an underhand way to create.

The announcement by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee shortly after the LTTE leader's media conference that India will consider permitting Dr Anton Balasingham to make use of Indian territory for his health needs is positive in this context. It is a humanitarian gesture that may include a desire to assist in the success of the Sri Lankan peace process. On the other hand, some of the Indian opposition parties, including the Congress Party that Rajiv Gandhi once led, have called for Prabhakaran's extradition to face murder charges in India. These sentiments are understandable, but they will not help Sri Lanka on its difficult road to peace. ▽

– Jehan Perera



“spontaneous”, “natural” retaliation for the terrible 27 February Godhra episode in which 58 Hindus were burnt alive. In reality, the violence has been a one-sided, targeted, systematic, massacre – a pogrom of Muslims. Yet, the Indian foreign ministry's official report, posted on its website, does not even mention Muslims.

Far from being spontaneous, the Gujarat violence was pre-planned and in the making for weeks. The 24 hour-long gap between the supposed “trigger event” and the butchery that began on 28 February, the geographical extent of the violence, and the collusive involvement of the state, all reinforce the conclusion.

Gujarat marks a South Asian watershed. It is this region's worst pogrom of a religious/ethnic minority in half a century, sponsored and organised by the state. Even the massacre of the Sikhs after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 pales beside it in sheer cruelty and in the overt nature of the state's involvement.

In 1984, an apologetic, embarrassed Indian government brought the rioting under control in 72 hours by deploying the army. Today, the BJP delights in Modi's success in “teaching the Muslims a lesson” and “standing firm”. Millions continue to live in a climate of terror and intimidation, including over 100,000 in the inhuman conditions of refugee camps.

No government has so blatantly justified, the way Vajpayee has, the killing of its own innocent citizens and the flagrant breach of its own sources of authority and legitimacy: the democratic constitution, the fundamental rights it guarantees – above all, the right to life – and adherence to secularism and pluralism.

And none has so egregiously sought shelter in “the last refuge of the scoundrel”. Faced with widespread and wholly justified expressions of international concern at Gujarat's ethnic cleansing, Vajpayee in-

INDIA

PARADIGM SHIFT

AS THE communal carnage in Gujarat enters its third month, the Vajpayee government has fashioned a three-pronged strategy: brazen out the opprobrium, attack domestic and international critics of

Narendra Modi for “interfering” in “internal” matters (of party and nation), and stage farcical “peace marches” to further terrorise Gujarat's religious minorities – as George Fernandes and his ilk did on 28 April. This strategy must be comprehensively defeated in the interests of the people not just of India, but all of South Asia. This criticism must be sustained.

Vajpayee would like to depict the diabolical violence in Gujarat as a “communal riot” or as an “understandable”,

Gujarat marks a South Asian watershed. It is this region's worst pogrom of a religious/ethnic minority in half a century.

vokes patriotism and sovereignty.

Vajpayee's BJP is deeply implicated in covering up its diabolical misdeeds. This involvement derives directly from the Hindutva agenda of polarising and communalising society by stoking profoundly irrational prejudices, denying and altering India's multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic character, and imposing the will of the majority on insecure minorities to effectively exclude and disenfranchise them.

This viciously undemocratic agenda must not succeed. Its pursuit menaces the whole of South Asia. At stake is the plural, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nature of each one of our societies and the future of our democracies, many of them already under strain.

The BJP and its cohorts could not have embarked on their project in the absence of the global political conditions created by the United States' response to 11 September, and Washington's indulgence of Vajpayee's right-wing regime which seeks a "strategic partnership" with the US as it kowtows to capitalist globalisation.

By reducing all issues of international and national security to "terrorism" alone, and by opting for an indiscriminate and disproportionate military response to it, Bush has legitimised a sharp increase in the level of violence that can be used by governments against their internal adversaries. Sharon and Vajpayee have taken their cue from him.

Other South Asian leaders too may do the same. To prevent this, those culpable for the Gujarat carnage must be brought to book – both in national and international forums which have jurisdiction in respect of crimes against humanity.

All South Asian peoples must actively protest the Gujarat pogrom. Human rights are a universal concern. Their gross violation calls for global intervention. "Sovereignty" is no defence against crimes against humanity. Considering the crimes committed in Gujarat, civil society in South Asia has a special responsibility.

The South Asian diaspora living in countries which allow universal jurisdiction for heinous crimes must join hands in bringing the guilty of Gujarat to book. That task must not be hijacked by parochial and communal forces.

There is one other, positive, lesson from Gujarat. It is India's civil society groups and the media, not political parties, which took

the lead in highlighting, investigating and demanding action on the carnage. They largely succeeded in forcing the parties to take Gujarat on board and give it high priority. Civil society and the press can play such a pioneering role even in situations where democracy is weak. They must.

Gujarat's dance of death will not end unless the larger world community – and in particular South Asian peoples – shame the Vajpayee government into taking long-overdue corrective measures: replace the BJP's state government with an impartial regime that cracks down on the perpetrators of the violence, purges the administration of communal influences, and undertakes full physical, economic and psychological rehabilitations of the victims.

Gujarat is a watershed, a defining moment, a paradigm shift. South Asians must treat it as such.

– Praful Bidwai

Those culpable for the Gujarat carnage must be brought to book – both in national and international forums which have jurisdiction in respect of crimes against humanity



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The contradictions of modern Gujarat

WRITING THIS letter takes me back to when I first came to Ahmedabad five years ago and fell in love with the city. Gujarat, the fourth most urbanised and second most industrialised state of India, contributes 6.6 percent of national production and 11 percent of the national industrial output. The average quality of life in the villages of Gujarat is much better than what I had experienced in the tribal belt of Bihar in eastern India, where I had worked earlier. I was told that the mercantile Gujarati community assimilates outsiders like water absorbs sugar. In less than a year, I too was assimilated and acquired the true Gujarati spirit.

Trouble, however, was on its way. In 1999, the monsoon failed for two consecutive years and many parts of Gujarat suffered acute drought. Kutch, Saurashtra and north Gujarat faced severe shortages of drinking and irrigation water. Government and voluntary agencies reached out to the people in distress and helped them emerge from the crisis. But there was more in store. In the cold winter of January 2001, a devastating earthquake killed thousands of people and left many more homeless. Once again, voluntary agencies and government assistance poured in to help people in distress. The Gujarati spirit survived.

The question now, however, is whether Gujarat will survive the present crisis – of division of the people along communal lines. This is a crisis that has divided society so deeply that one newspaper headline said that the only person who could feel safe in a beard is Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat. Gujarat is not an isolated event in the cyclical history of violence that has gripped South Asia and the world in different forms. Whether it is ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, fundamentalism and its fallout in Pakistan, the assault on minorities in Bangladesh or the Maoist insurgency in Nepal – violence seems to be the order of the day. However, what is most surprising about Gujarat is the changing perception of violence and its acceptance by Gujaratis. How can a predominantly vegetarian community that espoused the values of non-violence values and nurtured both Jainism and Gandhism for years justify killings on the grounds of religion? How could a society in which killing animals and non-vegetarianism are seen as dreadful acts even today tolerate such extraordinary brutality? Does only lack of monsoon showers or the rumble of seismic tremors arouse compassion for people in need? Let me point out some of the contradictions of modern Gujarat that exist side by side.

The Godhra incident was first reported on one of

the 24-hour TV news channels in the mid-morning of 27 February 2002. The news initially came in bits and pieces, and even till evening one could not gauge the gravity of the situation from television. However, that evening I visited the market on CG Road in Ahmedabad and could sense that something was appallingly wrong. Gujarat is known for its peaceful nightlife and it is common to see women and men on the road even at midnight. But on that particular evening the streets were deserted. The shops were closed and there was a perceptible tension in the air. Later I learnt that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad had announced a Gujarat Bandh for 28 February.

At that moment, I could foresee what was going to unfold in the coming days. What followed from 28 February onwards is a nightmare without respite. The televised 'riots' showed the ugly face of Gujarat to the world – attacks on innocent lives and property and the rest of the rampage of the rioting mob. Today, thousands of people are still living in relief camps in major urban and rural clusters after their houses were burnt and their basic means of livelihood destroyed, leaving them at the mercy of others.

What makes the recent riots different from Gujarat's earlier disturbances is the participation of dalits, adivasis and middle and upper-middle class Hindus in the riots. Much of this can be accounted for by the history, sociology and realpolitik of Gujarat today. The partial success of industrialisation in many areas of Gujarat created pockets of development, the fruits of which are visible in Gujarat's golden corridor stretching between Mumbai and Mehsana. The bulk of this land falls in the agriculturally and industrially developed northern and central parts of the state that are under the communal cloud today. The KHAM (khatriya, harijan, adivasi and Muslim combine) politics of Gujarat, a legacy of the Congress regime, partly transferred power from the erstwhile Brahmin-Baniya-Patel combine to the more prosperous strata of lower castes and adivasis. This transfer was not without its problems, as the riots that rocked Gujarat in 1981 and 1985 demonstrated. However, politicians took note of this division of Hindus along caste lines and crafted a common Hindutva strategy to unite the majority community against Muslims. The dalit identity gave way, in the face of urbanisation and sanskritisation in Gujarat, making the state a breeding ground for communal hatred. The loss of identity assisted this assimilation process by building up an aversion to Muslims. The post-Babri Masjid riots in 1992 accelerated this process and changed the social geography of urban Gujarat, creating increasingly sharp distinctions along communal lines.

After 1990, India underwent globalisation and experienced dramatic increases in middle class incomes, primarily fuelled by the industrial and financial sectors. The Fifth Pay Commission hiked govern-

ment salaries, creating the necessary surplus liquidity for the market to expand. Places like CG Road underwent a remarkable transformation, with large departmental stores and neon lights. In the last three years alone, four multiplex theatres have come up in Ahmedabad screening new Hindi and English movies. However, these new up-market amenities are the exclusive privilege of the affluent. The general public's access is regulated in various ways, including economic restrictions. A cinema ticket that costs more than INR 100 is beyond the reach for the majority of Gujaratis. Lower-middle and middle class citizens can only gaze in envy, unable to enter these islands of sparkling capitalism. The recent riots included televised images of people from the middle and lower-middle classes looting these stores, bridging the yawning gap between the aspiration and the reality. The phenomenon is important and cries for sociological analysis.

The other part of the story includes the assimilation of Muslims into the mainstream Gujarati economy through changes in income levels. Many of the Muslims have been successfully self-employed in hotel and motor mechanic businesses and the larger process of integration was just beginning. Targeting these business establishments pushed the Muslims back into the very misery that breeds hatred and antagonism.

However, in these times of extreme distress, many

people stood out in divided Gujarati society to prove that humanity still survives. Virsinh Rathod, who lives next to the Muslim locality in Naroda, risked his life and brought 20 Muslim families to his home, from where they were later escorted to relief camps. Virsinh helped also 2000 others to reach nearby relief camps in trucks he hired specially for the purpose. The 20,000-odd inhabitants of Ram-Rahim Nagar of Behrampura in Ahmedabad also showed the harmony that could potentially exist between the two communities. They have lived together for years and survived the riots of 1969, 1985, 1990 and 1992. They maintained constant vigil to prevent outside mobs from inciting violence in the area. At the centre of the slum, the two communities have built a temple and a dargah facing each other as a symbol of communal co-existence.

These signposts of secularism rooted in the social fabric of Gujarat bring hope and suggest a glimmer of light at the end of the terrifying tunnel. It gives one hope that, as with other calamities, Gujarat will survive the man-made disaster created by communalism. More than a century old, the *bhajan* of Saint Narsinh Mehta, which was adopted by Gandhi, still says it all:

"*Vaisnav Jan To Tene Kahiye Je Pir Parayee Jane Re*" - Vaisnavs (humans) are those who understand the agony of others.

-Anjal Prakash

Call for Proposals from Filmmakers

On behalf of International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Himal Association, a Kathmandu-based not-for-profit group working in the fields of publishing, media-related activities and organising film festivals, calls for proposals from filmmakers and production houses to produce non-fiction films on the subject Culture and Natural Resource Management.

Films have to be on the linkage between culture and natural resource management (broadly understood) in the Hindu-Kush Himalaya region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan). The films should be between 25-35 minutes in duration and the total budget should not exceed USD 10,000. Deadline for submission of proposal is 31 May, 2002. Proposals will be awarded by 7 June and the completed film in Beta and mini DV formats have to be submitted by 15 September, 2002.

Proposals must include the following information:

- Background and context to the culture and natural resource management of the proposed film including the justification for using a film to focus the subject
- Proposed story approach
- Locations, institutions and individuals likely to be involved in the production
- Importance of the chosen theme or issue for the management of natural resources
- Likely significance of the issue for the Hindu-Kush Himalaya region
- Proposed strategy for script research, location filming and post-production
- Brief description of the technical facilities, equipment and

expertise available for the production

- The filmography of the producer/director
- Budget estimate for the production. Please show sub-totals and totals in US Dollars, giving conversion rate between local currency and US\$.
- Brief assessment of factors beyond the producer's/director's control that may delay the production process.
- Likely local broadcast interest for the film (responsibility of use by television channels.)
- Proposed distribution strategy for the film (broadcast and non-broadcast)

Himal Association may later request for a viewing (VHS) tape containing recent, representative work of the producer/director. However, this need not be submitted at the time of sending in the proposal.

The proposals received will have to go through a selection process and the criteria for selection will be significance of the theme and its treatment. The following will be included in the contract with director/producer of the award-winning proposals:

- ICIMOD will provide a grant of up to USD 10,000 (in installments) and will share the copyright of the film together with the producer/director.
- The producer/director will hold copyright of the footage collected during the filming.

Detailed information on the Call for Proposals can be found at <www.himalassociation.org/fsa>



The social engineering of Gujarat

The ongoing violence and its broadening social and geographical base in the state is a consequence of the political recasting of social identities.

by Hemant Babu

The winter moon had already risen over the Taranga hills, when a group of men and women stopped our vehicle on the road from Ambaji to Baroda in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The women were dressed in brightly coloured half sarees, worn in the typically western Indian tribal style. A man in the front was carrying a photograph of Hanuman, the monkey god and lieutenant of the Hindu deity Ram. The light of the full moon bathed the hills on both sides of the road, and the exchange that followed was as pleasant as the surroundings.

"Donate some money," said a woman from the group. In the tribal districts of Gujarat it is customary to stop passing vehicles and collect money around the time of Holi and other festivals that western Indian tribals celebrate. Only, this was not the month of Holi, or of any other festivity. Queried about the purpose of the collection they replied, "We are collecting money for the *bhajan mandali*" (the collective singing of hymns celebrating deities). The bright red image of Hanuman that they carried was most certainly not native to their original spiritual repertoire. Neither was the idea of the *bhajan mandali*, which is a characteristically Hindu institution. The image and the ritual had come from somewhere else. This was in early 1993 when several parts of India, including Gujarat, were burning in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. But, the violence had not yet touched the tribal belts of Gujarat.

A month ago, in the aftermath of the Godhra incident and the subsequent riots, a friend, who sports a vandyke beard, was accosted on the same road by a group of men who live on the gentle slopes of the Taranga hills. But, there was nothing gentle about these men. Armed to the teeth, they snatched his wallet and then grilled him about his religion. He was allowed to proceed unmolested only after he furnished proof of his Hindu bona fides. Newspapers the next morning reported the killing of Muslim highway travellers, who were perhaps fleeing the riots.

An end to the violence of the last two months is not in sight, and, the end of it will not be the last of it either. The first incident of 1993 was not the starting point of a process that culminated in this second incident, almost a decade later. Both events and all that happened in the interim are merely stages in the acceleration and

amplification of a process that has been in the making for some decades. In Gujarat, where it is today imprudent to wear a beard and a misfortune to be a Muslim, a pervasive communalisation has been cultivated even among communities marginalised by Hindu society. The participation of tribals in the brutal enterprise of Hindutva is an index of this communalisation. The collection for the *bhajan mandali* was only the more benign aspect of a development whose logical intent was the killings on the road from Ambaji to Baroda and elsewhere.

The arrival of Hanuman in the Gujarat hills has a cultural and political significance. It is also a mythological metaphor for the arrival of tribals in the militia of Hindutva. The military prominence of Hanuman and his army in the epic, *Ramayana*, has been understood to signify the martial services rendered by some forest dwellers for a Hindu purpose of the remote past. Likewise, the adoption of Hindu symbols and rituals by the tribals of Gujarat suggests their subordinated absorption, as a regiment of foot soldiers detailed by the Hinduised polity to kill on command its 'enemy' of the moment. And as in the mythology, all they get in real terms is an honourable mention for services rendered. In both the myth and the current reality (a distinction that often has no meaning in the recent politics of India), the labours of the aboriginal underclass are directed towards the almost exclusive benefit of the caste-Hindu leadership that commandeers it.

'Normalcy' in a normal state

Both the violence and its expanding social base have been commented on at length. What is forgotten in all the rhetoric for and against the politics that engineered it is the historical-political context in which this engineering took place. The context may not be the direct cause of the psyche that produces such extreme forms of violence but it nevertheless merits description, if only because it may help identify and explain the direct cause, besides dispelling misconceptions about both Gujarat and the riots that seem to have found purchase in the media.

Ever since the outbreak of violence, there have been frequent expressions of surprise that such events could ever happen in the "land of Gandhi", in a state that is the most industrialised after Maharashtra, in a society

with such a "strong mercantile mentality", and in a polity that has seen such "stable governments". These vaunted attributes are not a necessary impediment to organised violence and in any case this is not the first, worst or longest riot recorded in the state. In fact, any or all of these factors could cohabit with or even produce such violence. Perhaps the idea of riots in Gujarat will be less bewildering if it is kept in mind that during a riot organised under an extremely stable government with resources garnered from industrial and mercantile sources among others, the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, founded by Mahatma Gandhi, no less, shut its gates and turned its back on Muslims fleeing certain death. If the political process can so easily erode the historical legacy of *ahimsa* in the ashram in which the concept was elaborated, optimistic assumptions about the restraining influence of Gandhi, commerce and industry do not place Gujarat under a special compulsion to be less violent than any other state in India's degenerating polity. As Achyut Yagnik, the well-known social worker and researcher from Ahmedabad, notes: "Gujarat is as normal as any other state."

A sign of this normalcy is the number of incidents of communal violence in the state as recorded officially. Judicial commissions of inquiry, the Justice Reddy Commission and the Justice VS Dave Commissions, were instituted after two major riots, of 1969 and 1985 respectively. Both commissions referred in some detail to Gujarat's history of communal violence. The Justice Dave Commission traced the history of communal violence in Ahmedabad as far back as 1714 when a bloody riot was sparked off during the Holi celebrations. The city then was still under Mughal control. Subsequent riots broke out in 1715, 1716 and 1750. The Marathas, who succeeded the Mughals in Gujarat, were described by the Commission as being "instrumental in creating a riot in Ahmedabad" after the city was occupied by them.

Hindu-Muslim violence continued in the centuries that followed, with the pace and intensity picking up in the second half of the twentieth century. When communal riots broke out in 1941, curfew had to be imposed for over two-and-a-half months. The Justice Reddy Commission identified as many as 2938 instances of communal violence in the state between 1960 and 1969, that is, an average of approximately three riots every four days during this ten-year period. It is perhaps more than just a coincidence that this was the period when the Jan Sangh, the first overtly political front of the Rashtrya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), and the organisational precursor of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which by all accounts is responsible for sustaining the current riots, became active in the state. During this period, riots began to spread over a much wider geographical area of the state, affecting towns like Veraval, Junagadh, Patan, Godhra, Palanpur, Anjar, Dalkhania, Kodinar and Deesa, all of which have been hit by the ongoing violence.

Immunity of social conscience

Violence of the communal variety staged in urban and semi-urban venues, besides rural violence directed against agricultural labourers, particularly dalits, was thus as routine an aspect of Gujarat as it is of most other states in the country. But violence of a different, more systematic and sustained order was inaugurated in 1969. The Hindu-Muslim riots of that year mark a major break with the hitherto prevalent pattern of steady if unspectacular social conflict. More than two years of hectic Muslim and Hindu fundamentalist activity preceded the outbreak of these riots. Communal violence in the state acquired a more organised form against the backdrop of the India-Pakistan war of 1965. The Jana Sangh stepped up the level of patriotic mobilisation and secured a toe-hold among the urban middle class. This mobilisation cashed in on the shelling of the area near the Dwarka temple in Gujarat by the Pakistan Navy, and the death of the incumbent Congress chief minister of the state, Balwantrai Mehta, when his plane was brought down by the Pakistan air force.

Muslim mobilisation too was simultaneously taking place. The Jamiyet-Ulema-e-Hind tried to rally Muslim support, perhaps with the tacit consent of the Congress Party, which was then going through a phase of organisational and political crisis. In June 1968, the national convention of the Jamiyet was organised in Ahmedabad. Though it professed to be a nationalist organisation which supported the Congress, the convention showed very clearly that the Jamiyet was drifting towards communal politics. Its firebrand leaders, Maulana Asad Maad and Yunus Salim delivered provocative speeches. A booklet called *The communal riots and the harm that they have done to the country and Hindu religion*, authored by the president of the Jamiyet, Maulana Aqualak Husain, was circulated during the convention. The booklet gave grossly exaggerated accounts of atrocities on Muslims in communal riots elsewhere in the country. This spurt of Islamic activity prompted the Jan Sangh to found the Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti. It also brought the RSS chief MS Golwalker to the city. At a rally in Ahmedabad in December 1968 Golwalker attacked Muslims as invaders who the country could not tolerate for too long. The idea of Muslims as invaders has been repeatedly used by Hindu fundamentalists to a point where it has become the received wisdom, all cogent arguments to the contrary notwithstanding. The riots that ensued in 1969 left some 1500 people dead.

A riot of this magnitude, unprecedented in both scale and duration, had a foundational significance for the politics of the state and the techniques of mobilisation and orchestration that increasingly came into use. The discrete and scattered violence of the preceding period can be presumed to be manifestations of everyday class, caste and community struggles arising from socio-economic conflicts of a more or less local nature. To that extent, their individual histories and repercussions

were confined to the respective localities of incidence. The 1969 riots had the critical mass that lent it state- and nation-wide visibility and gave it a prominent place in the historical inventory of community grievances. This riot could now be invoked at will, not just in Gujarat but wherever else tension had to be engineered. In effect, this was the first explicit politicisation of both communalism and public violence in the state.

Most importantly, the riots of 1969 took Gujarati society past the psychological threshold of normally tolerable public violence, and this not just of the communal variety. Once the barrier to the use of violence in inter-party conflicts was crossed, its repeated use acquired a tacit legitimacy as the social conscience became gradually more immune to the incremental doses of it that the polity administered. The two instances of extended public ferocity that Gujarat witnessed after these riots, the 1974 Nav Nirman movement, launched by the opposition parties to oust the Congress state government, and the 1981 riots against public policy designed to benefit lower castes, involved a high level of violence, including in the latter instance, the burning alive of dalits. Both these instances of extra-parliamentary 'politics' were remarkably successful in their objectives. Violent street politics had made an impressive debut in Gujarat and presented itself as a model worth investing in and emulating.

Making of a pattern

There were two aspects to these agitations that had long-term social and institutional consequences. One was the induction of middle class youths into a form of politics not normally associated with them. The other was the emergence of the incipient social and financial networks that sustain prolonged violence. The issues involved in both the 1974 movement and the 1981 riots, though they affected a much larger segment of the population, were articulated most vigorously by the middle class through its traditional channels. But the urgency of the objective, particularly in reversing affirmative state action in favour of the lower castes, caused dissent to spill out of the traditional channels. Middle class, upper caste youths played a leading role in the anti-reservation riots, and the focus of conflict here belonged solely to the matrix of Hindu social relations and its hierarchies of caste. A middle class, consisting predominantly of caste Hindus who saw themselves as the true repositories of merit, was defending its privileged access to professional education and government service. The high level of violence was justified as a legitimate expression of thwarted merit and one more barrier to muscular Hindu middle class street politics was crossed. The BJP was active in the 1981 riots as were its professional front organisations, notably the university and secondary school teachers associations. The classroom, the family and many other institutions which crucially shape

social and political values had succumbed to the pressures of protecting the elite monopoly of state privileges and public resources.

The 1981 riots were replayed in a more drastic form in the 1985 anti-reservation movement. In many ways, this sequel marked the beginning of a new phase. Although it partook of features of all the antecedent riots, it also had a novel dimension. The roots of Gujarat's radical communalism can be detected here. Methodical violence from now on became a more regular instrument and expression of electoral politics, recurring with increasing frequency and refinement of technique and exhibiting remarkable similarities of character. Soon after it commenced, the riot of 1985 was annexed to the exigencies of the BJP's political constituency-building drill. The seemingly undirected 'riot from below' was given a purposeful leadership by the present dispensation in the state, notably the current Chief Minister Narendra Modi, acting then in his capacity as a senior functionary of the RSS. By 1985, the Hindutva cadres had acquired considerable experience in disruptive politics, many of its leaders having participated in the '81 agitation.

The BJP's active influence on the 1985 agitation explains many of its more curious features. The riots began on 19 March, the day after the newly-elected Congress government assumed office, and was directed against a policy measure declared more than two months prior. In January, the Congress government had announced an increase in the quota of jobs in government and seats in public educational institutions reserved for backward castes. The riots lasted six months, much after the policy had been revoked by the government. The fact that a riot could start two months after the cause that provoked it, and end as suddenly as it started, points to a high level of coordination by an existing command structure. It cannot be a mere accident that the violence extended beyond Ahmedabad to smaller towns and villages, particularly in those areas where the BJP had acquired influence, notably in central Gujarat and some tribal belts. South Gujarat, which had previously been unaffected, now found itself on the riot map of the state. The social base of the violence expanded to include gangsters, bootleggers and professional killers. Various reports of the period quote doctors who described the stab wounds they attended to as the work of trained hands. The agitation finally degenerated to a point where sections of the state constabulary abandoned their uniforms and relinquished their responsibilities to join the riots.

The beginnings of social engineering

But there is another compelling aspect of this riot that overshadows all others. The 1981 riots sharpened the conflict within the 'Hindu' community, between the upper and lower castes, the victims being primarily dalits. By contrast the 1985 agitation, though initially directed against caste-based affirmative action,

transformed itself very quickly into a gratuitous attack on the Muslim community, which had nothing to do with the reservation policy of the government. In the final reckoning, an extended riot led by upper caste Hindus that succeeded in revoking a policy that benefited lower caste Hindus eventually managed to inscribe itself into the social memory as one more gory episode in the deteriorating history of Hindu-Muslim relations. Perhaps the danger to a conceptual and potential 'Hindu' unity from a conflict internal to the community was being minimised by quietly diverting the focus of the agitation. If its similarities with the Sangh Parivar's current modus operandi are anything to go by, then the 1985 riot was the real crucible of Hindutva politics in Gujarat. A kingpin of that agitation is the kingpin of the current spate of pogroms; the only difference is that today he officially rules the political roost with a popular mandate of 55 percent.

There are many crude calculations in the social engineering formulas of the RSS, but the last 15 years have proved that, given a polity degenerating in the appropriate manner, these calculations can yield the desired outcome. From 1990 on, Gujarat has witnessed riot after riot, varied in scale, but similar in character and equal in significance for the BJP's rise to political power. The late 1980s witnessed an escalation in the tempo of the Ayodhya movement and this furnished the climate for the orchestration of events that would culminate in the party's emphatic electoral victory in 1995.

The pattern of the first riot of 1990 is interesting, though not necessarily symptomatic. LK Advani's *rath yatra* from Somnath in Gujarat to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh came in the immediate aftermath of widespread and violent upper caste agitations across north India against the affirmative action principles in favour of backward castes, adopted at the national level by the United Front in New Delhi. These agitations had intensified socio-economic conflict between upper and lower castes at a time when the plural constituency of a potential Hindutva was being assembled through the politicisation of Hindu symbols and myths. This was the period when imagined grievances, culled from an imagined history, were being assiduously broadcast, accompanied by the shrill denigration of parties which allegedly indulged Muslim treachery. The rath yatra did manage to rally large numbers, particularly from the lower castes, and the arrest of Advani en route to Ayodhya provoked riots in many states, including Gujarat.

Gujarat again witnessed riots in 1992 when the disputed Babri Masjid at Ayodhya was razed to the ground a few hours after *kar sevaks* stormed the monument. Surat experienced intermittent disturbances over a six-month period. In 1993, more riots followed, after the blasts in Bombay, allegedly masterminded by the Muslim underworld. Perhaps these riots were attempts at forging a Hindu unity that, on the face of it,

seemed impossible. Whatever the intention, there is no denying that the rath yatra precipitated a political crisis in which the existing intra- and inter-party equations began to break down. And, there is no getting away from the fact that, though not uniformly successful across India, the BJP from the 1991 general elections has secured more than 50 percent of the votes cast in the state. Remarkably, for three years following its assumption of office in Gujarat in 1995, the state was free from communal riots. The BJP was clearly living up to its boast of ensuring a riot-free administration, prompting critics to cite this as proof of the party's monopoly of organised public violence. At any rate, this peaceful interim was part of the established pattern of violence erupting and subsiding according to the clearly discernable designs of politics. The inference, therefore, that violence had become a crucial raw material of electoral politics controlled by a cartel is unavoidable.

New tribe of kar sevaks

The brief interlude of social peace came to an end in 1998, with the attacks on Christian missionaries and establishments in the Dangs, a forested tribal belt on the southern edge of Gujarat bordering Maharashtra. This was a new theatre of conflict in terms of both the region and community involved. This was the first instance of organised violence after the BJP came to power and the context once again is instructive. Cracks had developed in the carefully crafted socio-economic balance in the BJP soon after it came to power in the state. Hindutva once again confronted a crisis of caste. An influential segment of backward castes in the BJP legislature party had revolted against its upper caste leadership, on the lines of what was subsequently to happen in the Uttar Pradesh unit too. Social engineering had failed in the face of an old caste conflict and a substitute social group had to be found to take the place of the departing backward castes. Tribals make up 14 percent of the states population. Christians, who are largely concentrated in the tribal districts, add up to less than 1 percent of Gujarat's population. Even in the Dangs, they do not exceed 5 percent.

On the night of 25 December, under the auspices of an RSS front organisation called the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM), churches, educational institutions and houses were attacked in Ahwa, Subir, Jamlapada, Gadvi, Divan Temrun, Madagkhadi and Padalkhadi. Over the next four days attacks spread to other tribal areas in Bharuch, Surat and Vyara districts of south Gujarat. This orchestration of violence by the HJM had been preceded by a decade-and-a-half of patient mobilisation by another RSS front organisation, the Samajik Samrasta Manch, founded in 1983 to assimilate those segments of society marginalised by Brahmanic Hinduism. Whatever else the RSS fronts have been doing, it is clear that within four years of those attacks, tribals from both north and south Gujarat have been

recruited in large numbers as kar sevaks for both the construction of the Ram temple and the destruction of the Muslim community.

The similarities between the broad context of the riots is striking. Any crisis internal to Hindutva inevitably leads to violence against well-defined 'enemies'. If the 1998 violence was necessitated by the social crisis of Gujarati Hindutva, the present and continuing violence comes on the heels of a comprehensive political rout of the BJP across several states in India. Gujarat is its last bastion, and reports and analysis in the media indicated that defeat stared the party in the forthcoming elections in the state. The prominence of tribal participation is the common element between 1998 and the ongoing violence. Perhaps, in the social engineering calculus of the RSS, a fresh massacre of the old enemy by new recruits will add to the prowess of Hindutva, enrich its folklore, expand its social base and thereby forestall a defeat in the nursery of its politics. A tribal population of 14 percent is electorally significant enough to justify the slaughter of several hundred Muslims.

Secularism and silence

Clearly then, from the mid-1980s political violence in Gujarat had become more organised and more numerous, had increasingly begun to manufacture its own provocations, and was directed at minorities, particularly Muslims. This last development coincided with the BJP's Hindutva agendas in a period when the party was systematically cultivating overarching Hindu nationalist sentiments. In 1985, the Congress party was at the peak of its electoral strength, enjoying the support of 55 percent of the electorate. By the 1991 general elections, the BJP had secured 55 percent of the vote and in 1995 rode to power in the state with an overwhelming majority. In this violent ten-year period the Congress Party, which ruled the state for most of the past four decades, had crumbled and out of the ruins of the existing polity the BJP had emerged triumphant.

There seems to be a *prima facie* correlation between the violent politics of the state and the BJP's rise to power. Numerous studies, by the Centre for Social Studies, Surat, by the sociologist Ghanshyam Shah, the historian Jan Breman, the political scientist Atul Kohli and many others, have chronicled some of the micro-level processes in the party's rise to power. But there has not been any real synthesis of explanation, based on these studies, that describes the precise mechanics at a state-wide level. Perhaps, that exercise is precluded by a lack of uniformity, and even an organic unity, in the strategies of the RSS and its offspring. The intricacies of refabricating a complex socio-economic demography may well require multiple, even mutually contradictory, local strategies within an overall climate of communal strife.

But even if there are not too many identifiable and overt statewide strategies, barring of course the assault

on minorities, the BJP's success has been statewide and not all of it can be attributed to just the ingenuity of the party's political techniques. After all, identical experiments by the BJP in other states have not fetched the same dividends. It would seem therefore that conditions specific to Gujarat's history, society and politics have facilitated the cultivation of Hindutva politics. These specific circumstances may help penetrate the air of inscrutability that surrounds the BJP's covert strategies and successes, if only by questioning many well-meaning but untenable secularist assumptions about Gujarat and the riots, which actually impede an understanding of Hindutva's politics in the state.

In the secular intelligentsia's description of the gory events of the last two months, communal violence is the handiwork of a violent minority of fundamentalists. In this view, the secular majority is silent and can only watch helplessly as the state administration actively abets the Hindutva lumpens. This is not an entirely accurate description of the reality. True, there are many who have actually gone to the aid of the victims and prevented more unspeakable brutalities than have been committed. It is also true that there are many localities where irreproachable community relations, fostered by shared concerns of a more fundamental and material variety, have ensured that provocateurs have been unable to incite murderous passions. But it is equally true that there are many others who silently approve of the carnage. The violent minority and silent majority of Gujarat do not constitute separate and distinct social fragments. The silence of a sizeable part of the silent majority is not the speechless shock of numbed bystanders. It is the conspiratorial silence of willing spectators, remote witnesses to a Roman holiday, whose public silence is a private roar of approval that is clearly audible to the architects of the violence. There are those who cannot speak and those who will not speak.

How else are we to explain the seeming paradoxes of the riots in Ahmedabad? We have seen educated girls and boys from middle and upper middle class families who do not actually participate in the killings but follow in the wake to loot Muslim establishments. We have seen couples on two wheelers bring home consumer durables scavenged from the debris of retail outlets. The cell-phone wielding rioters are not isolated elements who have taken control in a social vacuum. They roam about so brazenly because they know they have a silent social mandate. This is the clear conspiracy of silence among many of the so-called silent majority and it has many manifestations – the son of a bureaucrat who gets away with murder, a government official who demands bribe, the worker who looks at unions as an instrument of personal gain, the trader who cheats at one go the marginal producer and the small consumer. We have seen the faces of this silent majority at various places. Sometimes they are at a safe distance behind the rioting mob, sometimes they are in the air-

conditioned cabins of newspaper offices. They are always there where it matters and they are always silent when it matters. We have seen them outside Gujarat too, in 1984 in Delhi when Sikhs were being butchered, in the 1992 Bombay riots, in the Dangs, in Orissa, in Madhya Pradesh, in Uttar Pradesh and many other places too numerous to be listed. And now we are told that the VHP in Ahmedabad has a team of 50 lawyers who will, without payment, legally defend the Hindutva rioters. Secular optimism should not blind us to the reality of communalism's expanded social base.

Anatomy of a Hindu state

Gujarat is a visibly Hinduised state today, and not just because of the 55 percent that voted the BJP. Even if that 55 percent were to vote in other ways, the ideology of Hindutva that has sunk roots will continue to pervade society. What this means in effect is that even if the Congress were to return to power, it will have to mould itself more openly to the agendas of Hindu politics. In fact, it is more than likely that the state Congress unit has itself already been Hinduised. Reportedly, Congress-run municipalities have extended infrastructural and other assistance to the rioters, particularly in destroying evidence of demolitions. Even casual observers of politics have noted that the Gujarat Congress has been less than tepid in its response to the riots, being more keen to defend Sonia Gandhi's credentials than to protect Muslim lives. The state administration has been so extensively contaminated that even if a Congress government were to allow some residual secular instinct to surface, it is unlikely to get much support from the bureaucracy. This is the most impressive achievement of fundamentalist politics – that it has recast even the opposition in its own image.

Some traces of how a caste-divided state can achieve an overarching Hindu unity, even if only briefly and at extraordinary moments of stress, are to be found in aspects of the state's social, political and demographic history. Gujarat came into existence in 1960 after the States Reorganisation Act of 1957, which carved out states on a linguistic basis. Two broad regions – mainland and peninsular Gujarat – make up the territory of the state. Peninsular Gujarat consists of Kutch and Kathiawad, now known as Saurashtra. Prior to Indian independence, numerous kingdoms, principalities, and *jagirs* dotted the territorial landscape of present-day Gujarat. Saurashtra alone had 499 political units. Kutch was a princely state while parts of mainland Gujarat were directly administered British territory incorporated into the Bombay Presidency. In 1948, all these units were consolidated and Kutch, Saurashtra and the mainland were added to Bombay state in 1956, where they stayed until 1960 when, through linguistic division, the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat were created.

This territorial consolidation gave the future politics

of Gujarat several institutions, forms, values and characteristics that made it easier for Hindutva to take hold. Among the more useful heritages was the myth of the Somnath Temple. The temple complex is located in the port town of Veraval on the southern coast of Saurashtra just a little below Porbandar, where Gandhi was born. The myth of Somnath left Gandhi untouched. But it excited many others who formed the cream of the Congress leadership in Gujarat, mainly because in AD 1026, Mahmud of Ghazni (in Afghanistan) raided the temple of Somnath and broke the idol. The temple was situated inside a fortress in which wealth accumulated from the brisk maritime trade of ancient and medieval Saurashtra was stored. Before Mahmud's raid, this amassed wealth had attracted the notice of many other rulers, some of whom, like the Chudasama, Ahiras and Yadhavas, had attempted to make off with it. But the attack of the Mahmud from Ghazni has been singled out for special attention and presented as proof of Muslim insolence.

Eminent historians like Romila Thapar have argued very eloquently against simplified narratives of the Somnath raid. But the matter long ago passed from the hands of professional historians and into the arsenal of practised politicians such as Rajendra Prasad, the president of India in the 1950s, Vallabhai Patel, the first union home minister, and KM Munshi, a senior minister in successive union cabinets. Among the Congress leadership, Somnath was a Gujarati preoccupation. It was only the objections of Jawaharlal Nehru and some of his secular colleagues that prevented the repair of the temple under state auspices, but that did not stop the president of India from participating in the ceremonies of the privately funded restoration.

Somnath was the Gujarat Congress Party's gift to Hindutva and is an early example of the politicisation of temple related trauma. Such is the pedigree of the Somnath myth, and the extent of its popularity in Gujarat, that it was absorbed and given prominence in the politics of the Ayodhya myth. Thus it was that the rath yatra that symbolised the spiritual conquest of India by vaishnavite Hinduism began its journey from this shaivite monument.

Shackles of faith and caste

The appeal of such religious themes is not difficult to understand in a society permeated with strong orthodox vaishnavite traditions. The absence of a serious bhakti movement in Gujarat's history is perhaps a reflection of and reason for this potent institutional vaishnavism. Mythological religiosity has been an integral part of Gujarat society and continues to be fostered by bardic performances. *Kathakars*, who recite stories from the *Ramayana*, have an important role in collective social life and in recent years have been active in the BJP's political cause. According to Ghanshyam Shah, in the 1991 elections kathakars like Morari Bapu were involved in the party's campaign and "attracted a cross-section of

society both in urban and rural areas".

Mass politics right from the Gandhian phase has been unable or unwilling to break the shackles of this public religiosity. In fact, as the historian David Hardiman points out, Gandhi and his followers were themselves not above using the idioms of caste and religion in political mobilisation. As early as 1920, Gandhi was to appeal to fellow members of his bania caste to, as good 'vaishnavites', abstain from courts and schools run by the British government, whose rule he likened to *ravanraj*. Patel, likewise, played on caste traditions, and laid stress on themes like kshatriya martial virtues. It is not surprising at all that Gandhi should have harped on *ramrajya* as a political ideal. Vaishnav, kshatriya, ravanraj, ramrajya, all popular currency in the BJP's rhetoric, have a long and respectable history in the mass politics of Gujarat. The state did not really witness the emergence of a politics that seriously tried to purge the public arena of its religious inflections.

As is to be expected, orthodox faith and values were nurtured within the bounds of an entrenched caste system. The mass politics that emerged in Gujarat could not escape the dynamics of caste and so chose by and large to be confined within it. Although caste divisions did not fully coincide with class divisions in the state, socio-economic power was predominantly in the hands of a few castes, i.e. patidars, brahmins and baniyas – and to a much lesser extent the kshatriyas. Caste associations, some of them active in party politics, are a common feature of Gujarat's public life. They include the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha and the Gujarat Kshatriya Sangh, the Patidar Yuvak Mandal, the Khedut Sangh and the Khedut Samaj, which are basically patidar organisations, the Prajapati Mandal and numerous others. These caste associations, besides undertaking welfare measures, function also as lobby groups seeking to influence politics in addition to manoeuvring for control of resources. Of these organised castes, the most powerful are the patidars, who in much of the state practically control the rural economy. Brahmins and baniyas, though insignificant as a proportion of the population, are economically and politically powerful by virtue of their dominance in professional services, industry and trade.

The politics of Gujarat has been based on the alliance between castes. The Congress party's near monopoly of power was based on a patidar-brahmin-baniya leadership that brought together under a broad

umbrella the dalit, tribal and Muslim electorate. The weak opposition in the state in the early period, the Swatantra Party, was primarily a kshatriya enterprise, allied to the leadership of dissenting patidar groups. Through the 1960s, the state legislature was dominated by a highly organised Congress party well-versed in the practice of an accommodative politics that did not fundamentally affect the socio-economic structure. As an efficient organisation that functioned both as a civic institution and a political machine, it perfected the technique of herding a large electoral constituency without altering the overall status quo. The patidars, brahmins and baniyas continued to dominate the economy while the dalits, tribals and Muslims continued to vote the Congress.

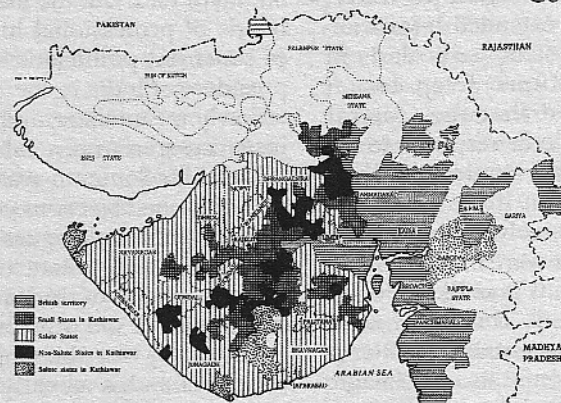
The moment of accommodation

In 1969, by the time the Swatantra Party was beginning to make inroads into the state legislature, the Indian National Congress experienced a nationwide split. The two groups that emerged were the Congress (Organisation), which inherited the party's organisation, and Congress (Requisition), which had

Indira Gandhi and a large part of the influential 'left-leaning' leadership of the parent party. A new political alliance slowly emerged, with the Swatantra Party and the Congress (O), both with orthodox social and economic programmes, aligning with the Jan Sangh, which had no real policy other to offer than Hindu Rashtra. The split in the Congress is that moment when the public accommodation of Hindutva politics by

the larger polity begins. The existing caste-political equations also began to break down. The two numerically significant castes that were political ly influential, the patidars and the kshatriyas became internally divided along political lines.

Over time, both the Swatantra Party and the Congress (O) disappeared, having merged, along with the Jan Sangh, into the Janata Party during the period of unstable politics that followed the split in the Congress. With the political opposition uniting against it and itself lacking any real organisation to combat the trend, the Congress, under Indira Gandhi, adopted a populist economic and political course. While that helped secure a wide base for the party at the electoral level, the lack of an organisation meant that the Congress was unable to deal with the growing forms of extra-parliamentary agitations that commenced with the Nav Nirman Movement of 1974. That movement unseated the Congress government and brought the combined



1947: Gujarat divided.

FROM DOMINANCE AND STATE POWER IN MODERN INDIA, EDITED BY FRANCINE FRANKEL AND VISHA RAO

opposition, including the Jan Sangh, to power. Hindu politics had tasted office for the first time in the country in the company of like-minded organisations.

The Congress returned to power after the Emergency of Indira Gandhi, once again without any real organisational structure, but with an infusion of new lumpen cadres. The caste-leadership of the post-Emergency Congress changed hands as the kshatriyas became more dominant. A peculiar aspect of kshatriya politics in Gujarat is that in the course of political mobilisation it redefined itself to include a large backward caste component, notably the kolis. This was to be of some significance in the nature of Congress politics, which in turn influenced to some extent the rise of Hindu politics. By the 1980s the Congress social alliance was based on what has come to be called the KHAM formula, ie an alliance of kshatriyas, harijans (dalits), adivasis (tribals) and Muslims. (see page 24)

Through the period that the Congress held power this was the combination that gave Gujarat its governments. And through the period that these governments were in power the patidars, baniyas and brahmins continued to control the economy and some crucial nodes of the public sphere, such as the various levels of the state administration. And when the Congress, as part of its 'welfare populism' went through the motions of announcing measures that would benefit its socially and economically marginalised constituency, the real managers of the economy and the public arena drifted towards an opposition that was gradually being dominated by the BJP.

This was the period that the agitational politics mounted by social groups increasingly backed by the BJP, left the Congress governments in a state of political crisis. Organisational weakness obstructed substantive civic response on the part of the Congress to these agitations against benefits directed towards backward castes. As a consequence, the government simply retracted its policy measures. Welfare populism antagonised the elite. Its retraction and failure disillusioned the dispossessed. The Congress could not herd its own constituency. That constituency was now available to be politically recruited, at a time when the flavour of Hindutva was being systematically imparted

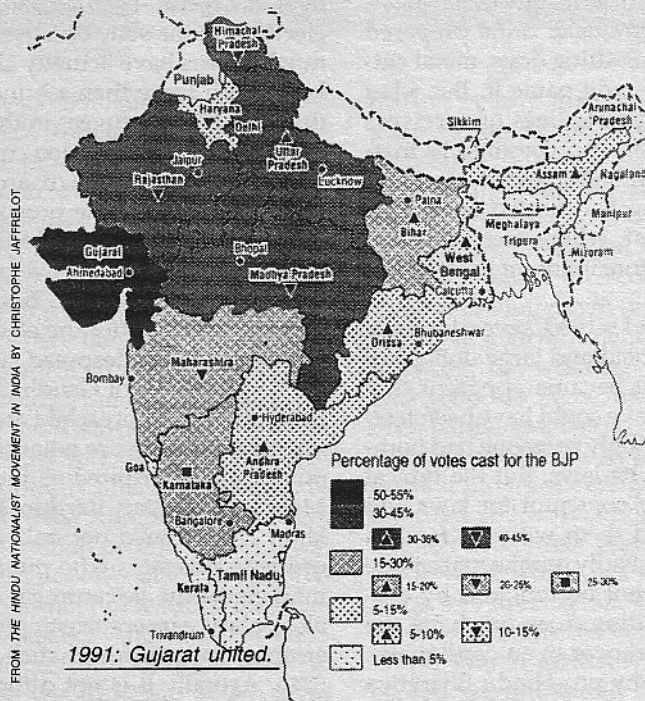
to the society and polity by the hydra-headed Sangh Parivar, through its numerous organisations.

The Gujarat polity had been in an organisational vacuum from the time of the Congress split till the rise of the BJP. The seeming stability of Gujarati politics was to a large measure based on a stable sub-stratum of caste networks. That stable network which enabled the Congress Party to recruit its caste base also enabled the BJP to recruit its constituency. Welfare populism had given way to spiritual populism, the crucial difference being the latter's level of organisational capacity. The BJP, through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, had created a dense complex of agitprop organisations that could engage in sectional caste-specific propoganda and simultaneously season it with the larger Hindutva ideology of the caste-Hindu leadership of the RSS and the BJP. The process by which a tribal population of 14 percent is conscripted into Hindutva's ranks also

renders an 8 percent Muslim population completely dispensable to an electoral politics many of whose rules have been redrafted by a vaishnavite orthodoxy. When reluctant Hindus become majoritarian enthusiasts, minorities too large to be ignored and too small to make a difference have no place under the protective umbrella of competitive politics.

In the 50 years after Indian independence, Gujarat has been transformed. It has been the laboratory of Gandhian politics, of civic institutions, the cooperative movement and the Hindutva campaign. It has become more urbanised, more industrial, has seen more social mobility, and become more prosperous.

It has also seen the re-emergence of an organised mass politics. The earlier phase of that organised politics, under the Congress, consciously divided the polity of the state along caste lines. The second phase, under the BJP, consciously divided the polity along communal lines. A state predominantly of Hindus had become a state predominantly of Hindutva. In 50 years a 'Hindu unity' had been engineered in a caste-divided state, and Muslim life had become as dispensable as the Muslim vote. The map of Gujarat in 1947 and the map in 1991 tell a chilling story. The price, paid and yet to be paid, cannot be counted.



India's self-goal in Gujarat

The evil now consuming Gujarat emerged from the BJP's communal 'laboratory experiments' in the state. The massacres of Muslims thus do not represent a failure but rather a perverse success.

by **Ranjit Devraj**

The teams of rescue workers that flew into Gujarat from around the world following the devastating 26 January 2001 earthquake came prepared for every imaginable disaster. Sniffing dogs, metal cutters, cranes, mobile hospitals – you name it. But what confounded them were the separate lines of survivors that queued up for relief. Caste and community mattered here even when the earth had yawned open and nearly every high-rise building had keeled over. This was, after all, BJP-ruled Gujarat, where men were not equal before god, much less before ignorant relief workers from strange lands.

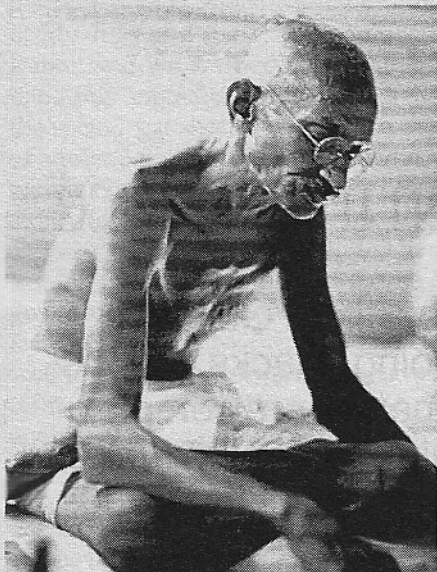
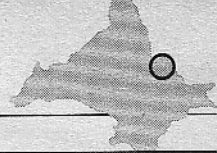
It was only after the dust had settled, several rounds of learned seminars had been held and large dollops of compensation paid out that it became apparent that the casualties from the earthquake could have been fewer and the damage much less if only someone had bothered to enforce basic building by-laws. But the typical affluent Gujarati has a healthy contempt for laws and by-laws and has long replaced them with the famous *chal se* (anything goes) attitude. Sadly, unlike man-made laws, the laws of physics cannot be replaced by attitudes, and if a high-rise building does not have the specified foundation it will keel over in an earthquake. But Gujarati ingenuity backed by pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments at the centre and state levels quickly ensured that money poured in by temporarily suspending such pesky things as the Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act (FCRA) for the first and only time. In contrast, the poor souls who survived the Orissa super-cyclone are still waiting to be rehabilitated.

A visitor to Gujarat, which is still burning two months after a pogrom was unleashed there against a prosperous but peaceful Muslim community to avenge the torching of a train at Godhra station, was told that the "days of that 'choothia', Gandhi", were long gone. No more turning the other cheek. The hero of the day is Narendra Modi, who bears more than a passing resemblance to the talented Bollywood actor Paresh Raval in one of his more villainous roles. That Modi can count

on his popularity having risen as a result of the mayhem in Gujarat – and actually wants to hold mid-terms elections in the state because of it – is testimony to how much values have actually changed in Gandhi's homeland. With more than a hundred thousand people reduced to being refugees in their own homeland and the army still out, the election commission would most certainly have shot down any snap poll. A sobering thought though is the prospect of Modi attempting to engineer another post-Godhra situation to rustle up anti-Muslim sentiment when the state is actually due to go to polls next year. Besides its fanaticism, the BJP has little else to offer the electorate in Gujarat except a reputation for widespread corruption and lawlessness.

Yes, the days of Gandhi and scrupulous respect for the truth that he preached are indeed gone. New experiments with truth are what concern latter day Gujaratis on the make, inspired as they are by Messrs Harshad Mehta and Ketan Parikh. The manipulations of the latter have ruined not only hundreds of thousands of ordinary investors who put their money into the stock markets as the government requested them to do but also salary earners trustingly put their money in government mutual funds such as the Unit Trust of India (UTI). Actually it is not difficult to see why the Indian middle class now associates the BJP government more with Ravan than with Ram.

Gujarat is also where Hindus are "rediscovering" themselves more than anywhere else in the country. This could be in the shape of dubious archaeological finds that purport to push back Hindu civilisation by a couple of millennia. Or it could be in the form of pernicious attacks on Christians and their institutions because they are threat to Hinduism – never mind that they form less than two percent of India's population and have made real contributions in such areas as education and social upliftment. What is left unspoken is the fact that such commendable efforts tend to upset established hierarchies and privileges that are inimical to modernity. On the other hand, archaeological finds by people of dubious academic antecedents can



Gujarat: land of Gandhi, land of destruction

be conveniently used to establish such preposterous ideas as that the Aryans went from India to the European steppes, rather than the other way around. To control the future you must control the past.

But as to the present, whether the pogrom was pre-planned (as many accounts including that of the British High Commission allege) or not, Godhra provided the perfect trigger for the pogrom. Here were *kar sevaks* returning from Ayodhya, where they had been participating in the Hindutva brigade's project to build a Ram temple. Tempers were already running high over the government insisting that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) heed the supreme court stay on construction at the disputed site and temporarily abandon the grandiose plans set out at the last Maha Kumbh at Allahabad, which was attended by 20 million people. The greatest support for the Ram Temple, not only in terms of donations but also in the sheer number of available *kar sevaks*, actually came from Gujarat. And many of them had been thwarted by police from fulfilling the VHP boast that a 100,000 people would gather at Ayodhya for the 15 March function. And on top of all that, the BJP fared poorly in the Uttar Pradesh elections, finishing a disappointing third behind the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party in spite of the fuss over the *shila daan* ceremony. The inference was clear – the Ram temple issue no longer inspired voters in Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP first began its politics of divisism and hate.

The more immediate concern for the BJP was to somehow hold on to the only state where it still held power, Gujarat. After all, Gujarat is the laboratory of Hindutva's failed experiments which are now being conducted under the direction of Dr Modi. Gujarat is where government officials were allowed to join the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the fascist organisation once banned for its role in the assassination of that same old Gandhi. These days, the RSS sees nothing wrong in de-

claring openly that the safety of Muslims lies in the goodwill of Hindus. The Sangh is only a shade better than Nazi Germany, which inspired the RSS founders.

With the solid support he enjoys in the RSS there is no way that Modi can be sacked by the BJP as has been vehemently demanded by the secular allies of the BJP-led government at the centre. That would be the equivalent of closing down the laboratory altogether. And so Vajpayee's government must go through contortions insisting that what has been referred to as 'pogrom' and 'genocide' is the internal matter of Gujarat in which even parliament has no right to interfere. And of course any statement made by foreign diplomats is an infringement of India's sovereignty, never mind the plethora of international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which New Delhi is signatory and which has been clearly violated. So ferocious was the reaction of India's External Affairs Ministry, ascribed by the noted jurist Fali Nariman to a pre-World War II mentality, that well-meaning diplomats backed off, mumbling that they were more anguished than angered. The British High Commission disassociated itself from a "leaked internal report" which said the pogrom was pre-planned and apologetically said any concern was prompted by the large Gujarati diaspora in the United Kingdom.

Omar Abdullah, who offered his resignation as minister of state for foreign affairs rather than have his National Conference support the Vajpayee government on Gujarat, was frank enough to admit that the entire diplomatic effort mounted against Pakistan is now in shambles. No longer can India claim the high moral ground that it has assiduously sought to gain through a diplomatic blitz in which Abdullah played no mean part, especially in influential Muslim countries. The BJP in Gujarat has just scored a spectacular self-goal for India. ▽

Riot cheerleaders

The anomaly of Hindu women in violence

Once only passive witnesses to public violence, Hindu Gujarati women have taken a prominent role in the ongoing attacks on Muslims in the state. While the roots of this phenomenon are complex, many of them emerged from the social-political context of the past twenty years – in particular, the anti-reservation riots of the 1980s.

by D Parthasarathy

A disturbing feature of the ongoing communal violence in Gujarat has been the fervent participation of entire Hindu families in acts of arson, looting and brutality. The active involvement of women, especially middle-class, upper-caste women, needs explanation. Ahmedabad has been witness to the changing nature of communal violence correspondingly accompanied by the geographical spread of violence beyond the traditional confines of the strife-torn walled city to middle-class locales.

For some years, particularly after the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, it has been clear that communal riots were not the spontaneous outpourings of mass rage manifested as random acts of arson and looting and untargeted murder. In the current Gujarat case, this element of spontaneity has been ruled out to the extent that the bloodshed is being referred to as a pogrom against Muslims or ethnic cleansing.

Indisputably, such violence is accompanied by planned mobilisation. However, is the mobilisation of Hindu women by the Sangh Parivar sufficient explanation for the extent of women's attendance in the unparalleled violence in the state? Tanika Sarkar and others have provided valuable insights into the emergence of a women's movement within the Hindu right and have explained to some extent the tenor of change in the cultural world of upper-caste, urban, middle-class life. This has led to a reassessment of comfortable assumptions about women's relationship with violence, religion and politics. The limitation of such analysis is that it is locked into the specificities of Hindu right-wing ideology and politics in India beginning from the early 1900s. While this study is helpful in illuminating the large-scale contribution of Hindu women

to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement (including the destruction of the Babri Masjid), it does not explain the degree of their direct participation in violent activity in Gujarat. How then can we understand women in their nightdresses coming out on to the terraces of their houses, egging their menfolk on, throwing stones at the houses of Muslims and turning a blind eye to the horrifying extent of sexual violence perpetrated against Muslim women? (A compelling account of the last is *The Survivors Speak*, Citizen's Initiative, Ahmedabad, 16 April 2002.)

The sight of women involved in riots leads to a questioning of some of the existing approaches to the understanding of Hindu women's militancy. Explanation for the normalisation of such violence as a social activity is needed. The transformation of women as political activists is not insignificant; their participation in communal violence is extremely disconcerting. In Sarkar's own line of reasoning, it is easy to explain the assumption of militant roles of women without a violation of the norms of 'Hindu' womanhood. This explains the consent to violence by the males in their community and female participation in public protests. It may even explain women's engagement as rabble-rousers in militant Hindu organisations. Nevertheless, it will stop short of explaining actual participation in violence.

This seemingly novel phenomenon has to be located in a social and political context, particularly the history of upper-caste, middle-class, urban mobilisation against affirmative action in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the liberal intellectual justification of violence in honour of merit, and the subsequent inclusion of merit as a component of the notion of rights. Add to this

the propaganda which resulted in the dehumanisation of Muslims and the state's complicity in this demonisation and we are perhaps better situated to comprehend this anomaly. Integral to a holistic explanation is the socio-legal short shrift paid to the de-legitimisation of violence, particularly domestic violence, against women. In the Gujarat case, attention needs to be drawn again to the genocidal nature of the violence. The majority community, orchestrated by a controlled political organisation and backed by the connivance of the government, has retained the clear upper hand in the last few months. (see page 16) Hindu women, especially well-to-do upper-caste women, have nothing to fear in terms of retaliation. This perhaps enables their carefully contained acts of violence. After all, gender relations in Hindu households are unlikely to change as a result of this face of women's activity in the public sphere.

The first crucial footstep

When did the average middle-class, 'apolitical', urban, *savarna* Gujarati woman take that decisive step outside her house and onto the street as part of a collective? The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed large-scale mobilisation of the upper castes against the Mandal Commission Report re-commending reservations for backward classes. While anti-reservation movements were not new to Gujarat, the anti-Mandal demonstrations were unique in at least two respects:

The first was the mobilisation (and participation in violence) of sections hitherto untouched by nearly a century of Gandhian mass politics and a women's movement. That was the first time that large-scale violence spilled outside the walled cities, onto streets located in the posh parts of town, outside the compound walls of the well-heeled. Violence against the state and against specific social groups was regularised, regarded as socially legitimate and not condemned.

The transformation of a reactionary mass activity into communitarian violence through the deflection of a rights' issue into a communal one was the second aspect. This displacement and the work of the Sangh Parivar perhaps explain the widespread participation of dalits and adivasis in the Gujarat carnage.

Neither of these two is unique to cities in Gujarat. Elsewhere, too, the anti-Mandal movement took in its wake the hep middle class, the apolitical yuppie, the staid middle class housewife and spread to affluent localities. The political linkage between anti-Mandal and pro-mandir is well-known. It happened in Andhra

Pradesh and other states.

Liberal intellectuals gave further legitimacy to violence by overlooking the tasteless and vulgar aspects of the anti-reservation movement. In fact, the 'meritocracy' argument against positive discrimination still impedes equality. Both the anti-Mandal and mandir agitations took place during the early phase of market liberalisation, which itself has caused considerable damage to equality and social mobility.

The social profile of the *savarna* men participating in the anti-reservation movement is central. Dominating the mobs were sheltered youth who had no reason to be informed about the wider social and political context of their middle-class, upper-caste urban existence. Taking to the streets, burning their bodies, damaging public property was the only way their lives could be secured. Where was the understanding of social issues, structures or constitutional processes of redress? They quickly accepted the rhetoric of a 'shrinking pie' being endangered by reservations and the dilution of 'merit' in places that mattered by the onrush of less-meritorious beings. This oratory was given full space in the mainstream media and was applauded by sections of the intelligentsia. Once merit

was narrowly defined and claimed as the preserve of the upper castes, existing caste and kinship notions of hierarchy were reinforced. The ideological bankruptcy of the movement was typified in the gross public caricature of dalit-bahujans and reflected in protest techniques such as polishing shoes and sweeping roads. It was clear that labour was the burden of the lower caste or the casteless, while more merit-demanding jobs were the monopoly of the *dwijiyas*.

Most of the young men and women involved were extremely proud of their participation in the violent activities and one often heard accounts of specific violent acts, recounted with glee and pride. It was not only the first time that many of them had participated in public protests, but for many of them, it was the first time parental sanction had been given for participation in public activities. Parents, especially domineering fathers, were not only tolerant of their children staying out late to attend 'strategy' meetings, but also liberal with reports of their progenies' participation in acts of vandalism.

The socio-legal context

It is this negative sanction and the permitting of violence – the *sanctioning* of violent activities, as it were – that

The extension of the normalisation of violence from the domestic to the public is not difficult to explain in such a context. It may give women the feeling of 'being included' – into the family, and into a community – in whatever way it is defined

also perhaps explains women's violence as part of family violence. Women are not likely to face oppression as a result of partaking in violence against members of other communities. This is one activity where male members cannot or will not impose restrictions. Just as fear of reprimand keeps women in check and ensures their conformity to established norms, the very absence of fear in this case makes them do things which they would otherwise not do. Perhaps the commission of violence is just catharsis, a release for these women. The extension of the normalisation of violence from the domestic to the public is not difficult to explain in such a context. Possibly, it also contributes to a feeling of empowerment. It may give women the feeling of 'being included' – into the family, and into a community – in whatever way it is defined.

More attention needs to be paid to the ways in which new methods of belonging and feelings of inclusion are produced for individuals by the Hindutva movement. As Arvind Rajagopal has argued, more emphasis has been given to the disruptive effects of these movements than to the possibilities of increased inclusion generated by them. The puzzle of increased participation in the Hindutva movement of dalits, adivasis, lower castes and women – groups that have traditionally borne the brunt of Brahmanical-patriarchal violence – is explained by an analysis of the inclusive nature of the Hindutva movement; the term 'Sangh Parivar' is especially instructive.

The lack of support structures for women is frequently used to explain why women are afraid to actually confront violence within the family. This does not however explain how women are able to overcome their antipathy to male violence and become active collaborators in communal violence. One reason is in the way in which violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is viewed by society. Despite the women's movement's struggles to highlight the issue, it remains at best a social nuisance, not a legal crime. Of course, Muslim women too suffer from domestic violence. However the larger social and political context explains their absence as perpetrators of communal violence. For Hindu women, the socio-legal context, where domestic violence is seen as normal and barely acknowledged as a crime, helps to partially explain the acceptability of women's participation in socially-sanctioned, patriarchally-controlled communal violence. If the legitimisation of violent action on Muslims has been crucial in facilitating women's participation in violence, the failure to de-legitimise domestic violence equally explains the active collaboration of women with

the perpetrators of violence. The drawing of distinctions between types of violence and their acceptance becomes difficult.

This is partly an outcome of the way in which political parties have related to such issues. Even left-of-centre parties have 'ghettoised' the women's wings of their parties, refusing to mainstream women's issues, leaving them to be taken up by the women's mass organisations like the AIDWA and Mahila Dakshata. Many women's organisations affiliated to political parties have just not had the political support to launch struggles to change the law, even though there has been no dearth of attempts to do so. Thus struggles relating to women's issues are often reduced to 'social' struggles in the form of public awareness campaigns, or taking

up individual issues for redress. As is also well known, women leaders in the Hindutva movement have themselves spoken about the 'normality' of male domestic violence and the need (for women) to 'adjust' to violent domestic life. Viewing domestic violence in this manner effectively takes it out of the sphere of law.

The combined effect of legitimising attacks on members of other communities and the failure to label domestic violence as criminal and illegitimate has thus created a

situation where women may find it much easier to collaborate with their own oppressors in inflicting violence upon others. Social codes relating to violence and the meanings of legal codes are important in understanding why some people find it easier to indulge in violence compared to others. Again, while legitimacy and the knowledge that illegitimate acts will not be punished are significant in explaining why people are violent, socialisation practices, levels of exposure to violence, and political mobilisation – all determined by one's location in social space – are also equally important in explaining how people become violent actors. The transformation of women in this regard is critical.

Ideological support

Apart from the support for violence given by intellectuals and the media, other forms of propaganda have played a role. There is enough evidence of the inflammation unleashed by the Gujarati-language press by its reiteration of a past and a possible future attack on Hindus by Muslims and the need for Hindu men and women to train in physical 'self-defence' activities. In recent times, through rumours, pamphlets, public meetings and other such channels, fear has been created among Hindu women by providing mostly fictional accounts of sexual attacks by male members of other

**Liberal intellectuals
gave further
legitimacy to violence
by overlooking the
tasteless and vulgar
aspects of the
anti-reservation
movement**

communities on women. The fear is now specifically focused on women's own bodies. This brings about a radical change in the attitude of women, who now have a greater sense of legitimacy and justification for violence and are now better prepared, at a personal level, to launch attacks on the 'others'. Legitimacy becomes a multifaceted issue here. On the one hand, it is implied that if a woman chooses to protect herself by joining the Hindu mob, her acts of violence thereof will be granted legitimacy. In return, she condones instances of rape and sexual assault that Hindu men perpetrate on Muslim women perhaps by justifying quite plausibly to herself that given the chance, Muslim men would target her similarly. The real attack then becomes a revenge for the attack she potentially faces. On the other hand, there is the consciousness that as a woman she cannot risk sexual assault for the consequence of that is that she will cease to have any legitimacy in her society.

Violence by women as part of a fundamentalist movement, and their complicity in male violence on members on other communities, reinforces their own oppression by patriarchal structures. This is despite the fact that some women may temporarily be given an exalted status for their participation in such movements, whether it is

an anti-minority pogrom, or the movement which brought down the Babri Masjid. Fundamentalist leaders justify such action in the name of a particular normative order which justifies violence, and de-legitimises constitutional bodies and norms. Similarly, neo-liberal advocates shift the rights' discourse by justifying violence either by popular groups or the state acting in the name of a specific normative order. The overall shift in the way in which rights are discussed, the condoning of violent actions targeted at the marginalised, and the refusal to recognise certain forms of social and political mobilisation, all have contributed to an overall rise in legitimacy levels for violent actions by the powerful. It is in this larger context that one has to understand the participation of women in attacks on members of other communities. In the specific context of economic liberalisation and globalisation, intellectuals, media and political leaders must learn that rights are tied to specific ends – in terms of social justice; and that the choice of means is as important for realisation of rights and justice as the objectives themselves. As a colleague never tires of reminding me about Gandhi's approach to public issues – it is not just enough to be right, but one must be right for the right reason, for the right cause.

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Dalits and Adivasis: Cannon fodder for Hindutva?

Gujarat's 'mobs' are not a random mix of Hindu activists. Rather, they are the designed outcome of the RSS-VHP-BJP strategy to weaken Dalit-Adivasi activism and turn it against Gujarati Muslims.

by *Praful Bidwai*

One of the most cruel ironies of the violence in Gujarat is the significant participation in that state-supported anti-Muslim pogrom by the 'subaltern' classes of Hindus, in particular Dalits and, to an extent, Adivasis (indigenous tribal people who are not quite Hindus). These are the very same forces whose self-assertion in the 1980s was seen as a major threat by the upper caste Hindus who proceeded to crush it.

In fact, it is impossible to understand the strong roots that Hindutva has struck in Gujarat's society and politics and the success that communalism has come to enjoy in that state without understanding the origins of the consolidation of the rule of the upper castes, particularly of Brahmins, Banias (traders), and the patidar (upwardly mobile land-owning) Patels.

These origins go back to the formation of a social coalition known as KHAM (Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis and Muslims) conceived of by the left-leaning Congress strategist, the late Jinabhai Darji. The KHAM strategy, based on the "core minorities" and the low-caste groups known in Gujarat as Kshatriyas, was itself a part of a new political mobilisation that Indira Gandhi tried to evolve in the late 1970s/early 1980s. This sought to distance the Congress from its dependence on upper-caste Hindu groups such as Brahmins and Marathas. It represented a major attempt at "political engineering" based on the common interest of these groups in gaining access to political power from which they had been excluded for long decades, if not centuries, by the "twice-born".

The KHAM coalition won the state legislature elections in Gujarat in 1980. The upper castes rightly saw it as a challenge to their established hegemony and mounted a militant agitation against the policy of positive discrimination in favour of Dalits and Adivasis, which in India takes the form of reservations of specific quotas in government jobs and in access to education. The agitation was targeted at Dalits in Gujarat's major cities and it managed to weaken KHAM by putting it politically on the backfoot.

The anti-reservation agitation was followed in 1985-

86 by another street-level upper-caste protest against a proposal to implement a version of the Mandal Commission report in Gujarat – via affirmative action in favour of the low castes in the Hindu hierarchy, technically called OBCs (Other socially and economically Backward Classes). This too was an extremely violent campaign to resist any dilution and sharing of the power that upper caste Hindus had hitherto monopolised in Gujarat.

None other than Narendra Modi led this violent conservative right-wing agitation. To this day, he recalls his role in it with pride. Modi rose rapidly within the hierarchy of the RSS and BJP thanks to his able stewardship of this movement. He was honoured by being given charge of drawing up a detailed plan of Lal Krishna Advani's rathayatra in 1990 to canvass support for the cause of demolishing the Babri mosque and building a Ram temple in Ayodhya.

The 1980-82 and 1985-86 agitations were crucial in creating an ideological and political base, as well as the organisational support structure and cadres necessary for the BJP's growth and consolidation in Gujarat – itself a remarkable story of spectacular gains leading to the longest uninterrupted and undiluted role of that party in any state of India. It is precisely the leaders, planners, strategists, crowd-gatherers, and arsonists of the agitations of the 1980s that provided leadership and organisational muscle to the Hindutva pogrom in progress in Gujarat, now in its third month. Yet, paradoxically these upper caste leaders and cadres seem to have been joined by a minority of their own erstwhile victims – namely, Dalits and Adivasis.

What explains this?

The best possible hypothesis, based on a degree of oversimplification, would appear to be a combination of four factors. The first factor is the crucial role played by the collapse of the cotton textile mill industry in Gujarat, particularly in Ahmedabad, which had concentrated a large 200,000-strong workforce within itself. This labour force was amazingly plural and diverse in its composition, including workers belonging to different religious, ethnic, linguistic and caste groups.

This plurality, and the bonds of solidarity – some of them consciously nurtured by the Majoor-Mahajan Sangh with its Gandhian ideology and its conscious promotion of programmes such as adult education, primary health centres, library and sports clubs, had acted as a strong dampener on previous episodes of communal violence which recurred in Ahmedabad since 1969.

The closure of the textile mills in the 1980s and 1990s meant not only the loss of more than 100,000 jobs, but the collapse of a whole social infrastructure and culture, and the growth of pauperisation and destitution among Ahmedabad's working class. As sociologist Jan Breman says, "it comes as no surprise that the front organisations of the sangh parivar were able to mobilise mercenaries from the lumpenised milieu of subaltern castes to assist in the operation of killing, burning and looting" in the latest episode of violence (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 20-26 April).

The transition was itself linked to the hardening, lumpenisation and morphing of capitalism in Gujarat into its neo-liberal avatar. As Breman says: "During the struggle for national freedom in the first half of the 20th century, Indian leaders made promises to the working class for a better deal... Although repeated again this pledge has fallen into abeyance in the post-colonial era. The brand of lumpen capitalism that came to dominate... is based on an ideology of social-Darwinism, could not care less about the urgent need to raise labour standards and shows precious little interest in increasing the dignity of the working poor."

Given the demobilisation of the working class and its total marginalisation in Ahmedabad's social life, the Hindutva forces have had a free run, gathering some support from pauperised, desperate subaltern castes and classes.

A second factor is the effort of a number of Hindu organisations and religious cults in Gujarat – where they happen to be particularly strong – to project Hindutva consciousness in ways that would make it relatively attractive or acceptable to subaltern or plebeian layers. This has a long history. Thus, way back in the 1920, recounts JNU scholar and Gujarat sociological expert Ghanshyam Shah, the Hindu Mahasabha floated the Bharat Sevashram and Hindu Milan Mandir which argued for "cooperation and unity" of the upper and lower castes.

These organisations consciously represented low-caste Hindus as hard-working and suffering, but strong "salt of the earth" who were discriminated against and humiliated. More recently, the VHP has tried to build on

the same appeal. KK Shastri, one of its prominent leaders, says: "All Hindus should unite against 'vidharmis' (people of other religions)... 'Savarna' (upper castes) Hindus should now become alert and not widen the gap between the castes. They must compromise with the Dalits..."

Similarly, movements like Swadhyay, Gayatri Parivar, and Swaminarayan have followed the same "Hindu unity" perspective, says Shah. They emphasise the dignity of labour, pride of individual identity and unity of all Hindus. These cults have politically moved close to the RSS and BJP over the past decade or so. This has made it easier for some Dalits and OBCs to aspire to the Sanskritisation process – of upgrading themselves

within the Hindu hierarchy. The use of symbols like the sword, the trishul and the saffron flag has helped to create a semblance of "unity" and widened the appeal of some aspects of Hindutva to low-caste groups.

A third reason pertains to the virtual collapse of the Dalit Panthers, a radical movement of Gujarat's Dalits which acquired great prominence during the early and mid-1980s. As Valjibhai Patel, one of its leaders, says, there has

been a generational change in the leadership, along with the growth of the Dalit middle-class, who are conscious of their individual rights, but reluctant to participate in collective or solidarity actions.

The decline and near-collapse of the Panthers has produced a great deal of demoralisation. Says Patel, "With this new generation it seems everything has changed. They have forgotten resistance against injustice and atrocities... Their capacity for retaliation and assertion has declined... So-called Dalit leaders and organisations have almost become captives of political leaders..." Some of these Dalits were lured by inducements offered by the RSS-VHP-BJP. Anti-communal activist Teesta Setalvad reports that over the past few years, scores of them were put on the Hindutva groups' payroll with a monthly "honorarium" of INR 1500 or more. The effort to recruit them got a big boost with the Ram temple agitation beginning last December, and Gujarat sent karsevaks to Ayodhya in large numbers – much larger than any other state – prior to the horrible Godhra episode, which was itself the result of an over-reaction to the karsevaks' harassment of Muslims during the preceding week.

A fourth, altogether different, factor explains the involvement of the Adivasis, especially in and around Godhra town, the headquarters of the predominantly tribal Panchmahals district, and in the Bhil belt of Chotaudapur and south-central Gujarat. This is related to

It is precisely the leaders, planners, strategists, crowd-gatherers, and arsonists of the agitations of the 1980s that provided leadership and organisational muscle to the Hindutva pogrom in progress in Gujarat.

economic tensions between the Adivasis and Muslims, particularly the Bohras, who are the dominant group of moneylenders in the area.

The vast majority of Adivasi households in Gujarat are heavily indebted and are forced to borrow money at usurious rates of interest as high as 120 percent a year. A significant proportion have lost their land and other means of livelihood and got embroiled in petty crime, including bootlegging thanks to prohibition, which exists in Gujarat alone among all the Indian states.

Some of these Adivasis became willing accomplices of the VHP-BJP's upper-caste Hindu goons. "This was done through bribery and inducement," says GN Devy, scholar-activist working among the tribals bordering Baroda. "This was the Hindu bania moneylender's offer to lower the interest rate from 120 to 80 percent in order to squeeze their main economic rivals, the Bohras, and to win over the Adivasis to the Hindutva plan to kill Muslims."

The effect was greatly enhanced by generous free supplies of alcohol to the Adivasis, along with the promise of impunity from legal prosecution. Some of them joined hardcore VHP workers in leading the mobs that lynched Muslims in Godhra and Chotaudaipur.

The Hindutva movement will deviously use these subaltern groups as cannon fodder and eventually turn against them with the same fury as it demonstrated against the Muslims – indeed, against these very communities, as it did in the 1980s

The participation of Dalits and Adivasis in India's worst-ever pogrom or ethnic cleansing of Muslims is truly regrettable. It is all the more deplorable because Hindutva in the last analysis cannot possibly overcome its parochial narrow upper-caste orientation and core-base and promote "Hindu unity", itself a myth. Rather, it will deviously use these subaltern groups as cannon fodder and eventually turn against them with the same fury as it demonstrated against the Muslims – indeed, against these very communities, as it did in the 1980s.

Yet, Dalit-Adivasi participation in the Gujarat pogrom is likely to occasion some reflection among activists in these communities – if only because parties like the Congress, which have traditionally had a base among them, have at last become assertive against Modi and his ilk, and because Gujarat's Muslims have shown remarkable restraint and sobriety even in the face of the gravest of provocation. All secular political and social activists should build on the possibilities of reconciliation that this opens up. Dalits and Adivasis must not be allowed to become victims of the upper castes' manipulation. ▽

Palestine, Pakistan & the distorted reality

by Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

The US 'war on terrorism' has given cover to Israeli abuses against the Palestinians and cemented the rule of democrat-authoritarians like Pervez Musharraf. South Asians must beware of neo-imperialism and decide their own futures.

When US Secretary of State Colin Powell went to meet Yasser Arafat at the latter's besieged headquarters in Ramallah on 14 April, CNN reported that the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) had assumed "defensive" positions in the area. The implication, as always, was that Israel was under attack, and was valiantly protecting itself, and Mr. Powell, from Palestinian terror. Most informed people in the world would agree that this was a distorted presentation of reality.

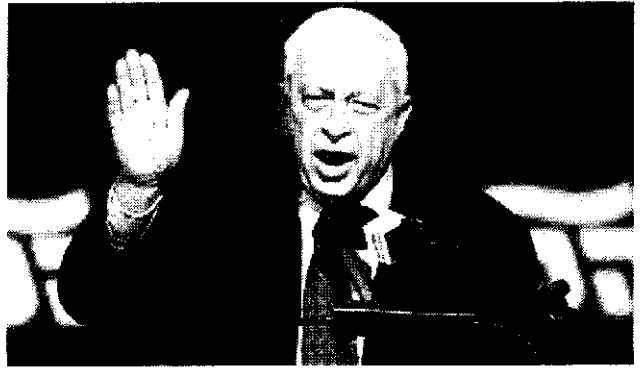
In Pakistan, as in much of the Muslim world, there is fury at what is happening in Palestine, what has happened in Afghanistan, and the potential destruction

yet to come in Iraq, Sudan, Libya, and a host of other countries that the United States seems intent on attacking sooner rather than later. There is also a sense of helplessness at the plight of thousands of innocent people, caught in the middle of the deadly assaults by the global hegemon.

This anger is felt not only in the Muslim world, but also in Europe where people are marching the streets against their governments' complicity in the price that Israel is exacting from the Palestinian population. But there also seems to be growing recognition within the United States itself of something dreadfully amiss, and



For whom do they serve?



this is what will ultimately matter. On 20 April, Washington DC saw the largest ever pro-Palestinian demonstration in the United States. As long as such protests continue, it is inevitable that those who turn a blind eye to Ariel Sharon and other perpetrators of injustice against the Palestinians will be forced to sit up and take note.

The pro-Palestine voices, of course, pale in comparison to the massive and organised pro-Israel lobby that has been operating in the United States for half a century. But the voices are being heard, and this reflects a growing sense of responsibility amongst progressive elements of American society. Progressive elements in Muslim countries, including Pakistan, have much to learn from this. The politics of the Israel-Palestine conflict represents a worldwide trend since 11 September, in terms of the mandate that has been given to the powerful to attack the weak under the guise of combating terrorism.

However, what is happening in the Occupied Territories also has much to do with the fact that Pakistan (and other Muslim countries) are obliging George W Bush on virtually every front. For some reason, the rage that Muslims feel against Washington DC for abetting what Israel is doing to the Palestinians does not extend to the fact that the United States has aligned itself with the military and other authoritarian governments in our own countries. In Pakistan's case, the US has made it clear that it is happy to see General Musharraf retain power.

For all the statements the Pakistani government might issue about the urgent need for Israel to stop the bloodbath of Palestinians, the fact of the matter is that General Musharraf will not go beyond issuing statements. In this, the present Pakistani regime is no different from the Arab countries such as the US-tilting Egypt,

Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The Pakistani military is towing the line that Colin Powell and Dick Cheney have asked it to tow, whether it be in providing bases for the military operation in Afghanistan, or making its firm commitment to implement the neo-liberal agenda.

People from all over Pakistan were bussed to polling booths on 30 April to legitimise the rule of the Pakistani general. How is it that General Musharraf, an international pariah eight short months ago, is now the world's favourite democrat? What does that tell us about who is committed to whom? Rather than act helpless to the injustices we see in places like the Occupied Territories,

For some reason, the rage that Muslims feel against Washington DC for abetting what Israel is doing to the Palestinians does not extend to the fact that the United States has aligned itself with the military and other authoritarian governments in our own countries.

Pakistanis have a responsibility to reject the forces in Pakistan that represent the same hegemonic force that is victimising the Palestinians. Pakistanis and the people of the Arab nations who suffer under despots supported by the United States, must learn to fight the tyrant right in front of them rather than lament at the injustice being perpetrated far away.

The whimsical nature of international politics aside, the fact is that General Musharraf has created a distorted reality in Pakistan, and the referendum of 30 April was part of this new unreal world. For the legitimacy that

General Musharraf needs to stay in power is delivered not by the Pakistani population, but by Washington DC. While we all understand that the political parties in Pakistan have shied away from their responsibility, this makes it all the more important for the citizens of Pakistan to understand the pawns that they are being made in the Great Game of the 21st century. It is a difficult path to tread, because of the risks involved. But if we are so convinced that Mr. Bush's distorted reality of the world must be exposed, then the fight must start at home. △

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THERE MUST be hundreds if not thousands of South Asians who have been had by this Nigerian Scam, where the promise of providential lucre has our menfolk salivating and secretly doing all that the smart men of Lagos suggest. Most importantly, this involves an invitation to **Lagos International Airport**, kidnap even before the immigration counters, and ransom money which the poor family back home has to come up with if you are to emerge alive. Individuals high and low are caught by this scam, but here is why you never hear anything about it. When the letter arrives via email or fax, you want to keep it secret so that you can have it all. If one is foolish enough to fall for the scam, and emerges from the kidnap ordeal alive, it is best to keep your embarrassment and newfound poverty to yourself. But take it from me, this scam which finds happy hunting grounds in South Asia because of our collective need to try and get something for nothing. Boy, have the Nigerians got us typecast!

THE OTHER swindle, one which Mediafile has dealt with before, is the recognition handed out by the **American Biographical Institute** and other organisations who send letters at random to gullible people (many of them actually so-called leaders of business) promising them inclusion in some tome or the other and a plaque for USD 250 as an achiever in society who deserves the highest recognition. In every English newspaper of South Asia, you will find self-congratulatory adverts being printed by the recipients of such fake awards – recipients so mediocre that they do not even understand the word 'gyp'. But they get away with it because no

one laughs at them. Which is why Chhetria Patrakar was happy to note that a hotel in Chandigarh nominated its cook to one such award, for services rendered to humanity, and lo and behold the plaque and citation arrived, congratulating the gentleman in question for having been a leading light of South Asian society!

HERE IS the concluding paragraph in "What we think of America" by **Ramachandra Guha** in the most recent *Granta*:

GRANTA

"Within India, the austere socialism of Nehru's day has now been replaced by the swaggering buoyancy of consumer capitalism. In cultural terms, America, rather than Britain, has become the locus of Indian emulation. Politically, too, the countries are closer than ever before. Yet the new enchantment with America – which is perhaps most manifest amongst politically minded Hindus – seems to have as shallow a foundation as the older disgust. Subliminally, but sometimes also on the surface, it is premised on the belief that America and its ally Israel have taken a tough line with the Muslims. (They take no nonsense from the Palestinians, as we should take no nonsense from the Pakistanis.) The prosperous Indian community in America models itself on the Jewish diaspora, whose influence it hopes one day to equal, and even exceed.

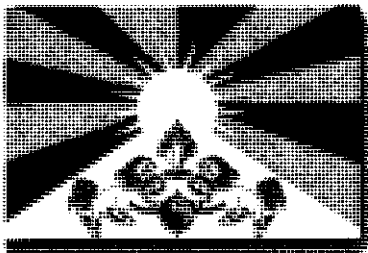
"The current admiration for the United States has all to do with power. Strategic thinkers in New Delhi have little time for America's experiments with transparency of governance; they ask only that it recognise India as the 'natural' leader of this part of the world – as, in fact, the United States of South Asia. That it already is. Like its new-found political mentor, India is more reliably democratic than the other countries of South Asia; at the same time, it seeks to bully and dominate them. At least in the short term, the prestige attached to the term 'democracy' in the post Cold War (and post-11 September) world will make India even more insolent in its dealings with its neighbours. Echoing a famous President of Mexico, King Gyanendra might well say: "Poor Nepal! So far from God, so near to the Republic of India."

THERE IS too much chat and fluff on the Net. So here is something useful if you are into medical ethics as it affects our societies – the latest postings were on the targeting of doctors in Karachi, and the response of Gujarat's doctors to the communal violence and its victims. The **South Asian Medical Ethics e-group** is coordinated by members of the Bioethics Group of the Aga Khan University, Karachi, and the Forum for Medical Ethics Society, Bombay. Writes Sandhya Sreenivasan, coordinator, the goal of the discussion group is to set up informal contact in the Subcontinent among those interested in medical ethics, to exchange ideas, and provoke meaningful debate. To join the group, which is already made up of 40 medically ethically interested

individuals from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, write to southasianmedicalethics-subscribe@yahoo-groups.com.

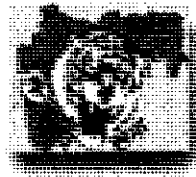
■
 IN THE Sindhi newspaper *Alakh* dated 5 September 1998 on page 2, there was an article titled "Indigestible Facts of Filthy Society" ("*Gutter Jehrri Moashri Khi Hazam ne Thendarr Sachaayoon*") by Ayoub Khoso. Apparently, he expressed critical views on some of the Prophet's "personal characteristics" taking the reference from historical works. This enraged some clerics. A complaint was lodged under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) and also the Anti Terrorism Act. The case was heard at the Anti Terrorism Court, Mirpurkhas, and the judgement delivered on 25 November 1999 sentenced Khoso to suffer 10 years rigorous imprisonment under the PPC and another seven years R.I. under the Anti Terrorism Act of 1997. Writes the Release Ayoub Khoso Committee, "Thus, the prominent Sindhi columnist and poet has been passing his days of youth in Central Prison Hyderabad, Sindh. We have started a campaign on the international level. We have plans to hold protest demonstrations in all the big cities and towns of Pakistan. We are in urgent need of international solidarity and help." Write to the Khoso Release Committee at search_in_justice@yahoo.com

■
 IT IS not fair that people have forgotten Tibet. Remember Tibet? The plateau? Changtang? Lhasa? *Dalai Lama*? There, now you remember! Well, the Tibet Information Network (TIN) has been keeping an activist/journalistic watch on Tibet, trying to ensure that it remains high on the international agenda. TIN is really the only



independent source of news from Tibet currently available. As a TIN release says, "The Chinese authorities go to great lengths to control the flow of information on Tibet. As a result, you often receive only fragmentary and misleading images of what is happening there. TIN gathers these fragments and fits them together to present a clear and balanced picture. Without TIN, so much of what is happening in Tibet would remain unreported or misrepresented." And now TIN, whose reports are prepared by a small team based in India, Nepal and the UK, is running out of money. Himal readers must keep in mind that Tibet is as much part of South Asia as it is of Central Asia, and so they too must help in infusing some cash to keep the agency solvent. You can donate online by going to <http://www.tibetinfo.net/admin/Donation.htm>. TIN is a registered charity. If you need to know more about TIN, write to tin@tibetinfo.net.

Here is a 'South Asian' news story if there ever was one. A New Delhi datelined report in Karachi's *Dawn* quoting reports from Colombo in turn quoting the India Abroad News Service, stating the following: "India's rightwing Hindu **Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh** (RSS) is galvanising Sri Lanka's Hindu Tamils against the country's powerful Christian church with its global arm, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), working in Tiger-controlled areas with the ostensible permission of the LTTE." Apparently a Hindu "preacher" named Swami Vigyananand is moving through Sri Lanka, particularly its north, helping set up dozens of VHP-linked units. Says the report, "This could signal a new dangerous trend whereby India's rightwing Hindu groups could gain access to lethal subversive technology used by the separatists." Just to push the point further, the report tries to establish proximity between the LTTE and the venom-spewing Bal Thakaray of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, stating that both the LTTE and the Shiv Sena "share the same mascot - a roaring tiger". Ha-ha.



■
 ONE OF the most copied articles on the Net on the Gujarat violence must be Siddhartha Varadarajan's "I salute you, Geetaben, from the bottom of my heart" in *The Times of India*, 18 April. In it, the reporter describes the death of **Geetaben**, a Hindu married to a Muslim who was killed by a mob in Ahmedabad on 25 March. Among other things, Varadarajan deftly slips in an innovative construction - he terms the BJP government of Gujarat state "Hindu separatist". This is the explanation: If historians use the phrase 'Muslim separatism' to define the struggle to carve out a Muslim nation from India in the last century, the project of the RSS-BJP could well be called 'Hindu' separatism. Separatism or secessionism is not just about the desire to create physical distance; it is as much about striving to distance oneself from the political, cultural and philosophical mores of the country. The BJP's separatist project poses as 'Hindu,' but it aims to secede from the philosophical and cultural foundations of India, including Hinduism, and from the political principles that Indians have evolved over the past 200 years of struggle for their rights.

■
 THE MAJOR South Asian media event of the last month without doubt was **Velupillain Prabakaran's press conference** on 10 April, when he played host to nearly 300 local and foreign journalists in the jungles of Wannai. What was interesting was the overwhelming presence of Indian media, and their extremely hostile response to Prabakaran. Given the LTTE's role in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, this is understandable.



The Indian attitude to Prabakaran presents an interesting knot for the Sri Lankans. As people who have suffered more (person for person) from the LTTE's wild ways, Sri Lankans nevertheless are in a position to let bygones be bygones. This is also reflected in the positive reception given to Prabakaran's press conference both by Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Colombo press. But if India will have no truck with the LTTE, it will be awfully difficult to move this negotiation forward. Do the Norwegians have an answer?

SOME GOOD news out of Paksitan. President Pervez 'Referendum' Musharraf has promulgated an ordinance for the privatisation of media, which also includes licenses for community radio. Thought to be the 'baby' of former Information Minister Javed Jabbar, the decision would create a regulatory authority consisting of eight members, including a chairman from "the private sector with communication and social development, and so on" (Hmm, that looks very much like Jabbar's ceevee they have there). Five members will represent the provinces and two will be women. The acronym of the authority is already decided (as this, also, is the South Asian way) and it is PEMRA, for the Paksitan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority.



GOT A response to my suggestion in the April Mediafile, with which I tend to agree. Chhetria Patrakar had written that the reason there was no political pressure to revive the banning of Indian and Pakistani aircraft over each other's territory was that the constituency that took the flights was small and unconcerned. Writes a reader, "I don't think that the constituency for peace between India and Pakistan is all that small – but the people most hit by the ban on flights – and don't forget, train and bus – are those who 'don't matter'!" Yup.

RECEIVED THIS email message, under the title, "Nepindo-pakalankadesh". The message reads, "The term South Asia has always bothered me – I'm sure it was invented for a bombardier's manual in WWII. At the same time I really believe in a South Asian synthesis. So, I'm really quite happy to have come up with this name: Nepindo-pakalankadesh. What do you think?"

Too many contractors

Recent reports from Arunachal Pradesh suggest that the state has set a record of sorts: it has taken 1,200 contractors to build a 20 km road! According to the North Eastern Council, work began in 1980 and is still, for the most part, at the initial stage when the earth is still being dug and levelled. It is a record, which has all the ingredients of a political scam. What's more, it is said, the contractors are not even licensed, the villagers having divided the work amongst themselves. The reason: Arunachal Pradesh does not have a system of calling for tenders for earthwork.

NEWS JUST arrived from Arunachal Pradesh, that the state has hired 1200 contractors to build a 20-kilometre road. On average, each contractor is charged with overseeing 1.7 metres of road – meaning that if they all lay head-to-toe, they might just be able to make a complete human connection without laying any cement.

MIZZIMA, WHICH is a news agency run by Burmese dissidents (www.mizzima.com), has been fanning out and covering the surrounding region as well. It reported some time ago that Bangladesh Biman will soon fly to Guwahati. Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin, a minister who also serves as Chair of Biman's Board, told Mizzima, "Biman is already flying to Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi, and now an arrangement with Guwahati is under consideration keeping an eye to the north-eastern region of India." Meanwhile, potential competition seems to be heating up. GMG Airlines, the leading domestic carrier of Bangladesh, has also shown interest in operating between the ZIA International Airport, Dhaka to Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport, Guwahati. The ambitious airline says it also wants to connect Dhaka to Madras, Shillong and Paro of Bhutan. All I can say is that airlines are great in talking of spreading their wings, but are often tardy in actually doing so.

SPEAKING OF air connectivity of the Northeast, I am sure all of the Seven Sisters are smiling at the Air India airlink that was just opened to Thailand from Guwahati. Given the age-old links of the Indian northeast to southeast Asia, this new air bridge is nothing less than historic and we have to wait and see how this changes ideas and expectations in the northeast. Congratulations northeast, and thank you Air India.

HERE'S AN 4 April headline in the *Asian Age*: "Nepal King relaxes restrictions on press." The story reads, "King Gyanendra on Thursday relaxed restrictions on the media and political parties that were imposed under a state of emergency he declared in November." Now, world media, let us get one thing straight. At least till the moment of going to press, Nepal remains a parliamentary democracy, and a constitutional monarchy. It is the duly elected government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba which calls the shots, and like in all



parliamentary democracies, it is his government who decides whether to impose a state of emergency or to relax restrictions on the press. King Gyanendra is a titular head, like the

President of India, see – who does what the Prime Minister says. Please understand, and stay tuned...

AUTHORITIES IN New Delhi are shooting themselves in the proverbial foot by clamping down on meetings with foreign participation, requiring permission from the “relevant ministry” to hold any and all such meetings. Now, which bureaucrat when approached would want to stick his neck out and give permission knowing that someone could well pop up to politicise the matter? This decision stifles academia, and – this just in – yet another proposed conference has bitten the dust. The Shillong-based Northeastern Regional Centre of the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) had planned a meet titled “Partnership for Development: India’s North East and Neighbouring Countries”, to be held in Gangtok, Sikkim, on 6-9 May. On 27 April, the organisers sent around a note announcing cancellation of the meet. It turns out that the Ministry of External Affairs turned down the Centre’s request for clearance for the seminar. It is not clear whether the permission was withheld because the venue was Sikkim, or whether the subject was thought to be inappropriate” at this time, as they say.

ETV licence illegal, declares HC

A BLOW for independent media was struck when the High Court Division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court declared on 27 March that the license given to the Ekushey Television (ETV) was “illegal and without any lawful authority”. The television station, which came closest to what you may call ‘public television’ in any of the countries of South Asia, had been granted a license during the time of the previous Awami League government. While there may be legitimate technical issues that brought the axe down on ETV, all I have to say on the matter is this – how come completely market-driven stations hang around whereas those with even a tiny dose of social commitment are not allowed to stick around?

STOP THE press! This just arrived even as Chhetria Patrakar was writing the Mediafile. Why are they so keen to make me rich?! “Dear Sir, I am the Treasury Controller, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and a close associate of the immediate past Minister of Petroleum Resources. The Minister has mandated me to transfer the sum of US\$88 millions recovered from an over-invoiced contracts involving the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) into several private accounts in Europe and United States. A total sum of US\$73,700,000.00 has been transferred

before the emergence of this present Civilian Administration, leaving the balance of US\$14,300,000.00. We are soliciting that you help us to receive the fund in trust. We have agreed that you will retain 20% of the entire US\$14,300,000.00. For your effort in this transaction, 70% for us partners here in Nigeria and the remaining 10% will be used for defrayal of incidental cost in the course of this transfer.” Dear reader, you know me. I want nothing more than to pass along this opportunity to make BIG MOOLAH to you. So now, be good, and write to Dr Anthony Ayuba, Treasury Controller, NNPC, Lagos. Email: tonayuba2@lycos.com.

WHEN NEPAL’S normally controversial Minister for Information and Communication, Jaya Prakash Prasad Gupta, made an uncontroversial remark after the SAARC Information Minister’s meeting in Islamabad in early March, it sent the media world in Kathmandu into a tizzy. All he had said was that media cooperation between Nepal and Pakistan should be encouraged, including the exchange of useful material and information. Unexceptional. But such is the sensitivity towards India among those very people who speak loudest and longest on Nepali nationalism, that a section of the Kathmandu press decided that this was practically an anti-national act on the part of the minister. Chhetria Patrakar personally is all for this sort of media cooperation, especially if Pakistani teleserial directors can camp in Kathmandu and teach Nepali teleserial actors to act sans histrionics and melodrama. That would be the day.

Last day of bandh fails to spoil zest for life

Psychologically-deranged persons rampage Gaighat

A quick public service announcement from the Newspaper Headline Writers Association of South Asia (NeHeWASA) – affiliation pending with the SAARC Secretariat. The *Himalyan Times* of Kathmandu has not paid this year’s dues, but carrying headlines that refer to a “zest for life” and “psychologically-deranged persons” officially gets the *Himalayan* invited into the fold regardless.

—Chhetria Patrakar

Musharraf's Referendum Sindh as silent spectator

Erstwhile enemies, the military and the MQM cosy up to each other as new power dynamics change the political landscape of Sindh, before and after the referendum called by Pervez Musharraf.

by *Hasan Mansoor*

When General Zia ul-Haq called a referendum in Pakistan on 19 December 1984 for the purpose of extending his rule by another five years, the people of Sindh – still reeling from the military regime's severe crack-down during the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) – displayed their resentment by avoiding the ballot box. The polling stations in Karachi and rural Sindh had a deserted look, and the message to the late dictator was clear.

Sindh had always been leader in Pakistani politics and the province's apathetic attitude naturally sent shock waves reverberating throughout the country. The result was that polling officials spent the day swatting flies. The referendum's results, when announced, instantly became the subject of jokes, and even inspired an idiom used for occasions where someone idiotically cheats.

General Zia's referendum asked the people of Pakistan this question: "Do the people of Pakistan endorse the process initiated by General Zia to bring all laws in conformity with the injunctions of Islam, as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah, and do they support the continuation of that process for the smooth and orderly transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people?" A vote in the affirmative was a vote for General Zia to remain president for the next five years.

Understandably, the country's democratic elements resisted the

general's plan and the MRD called for a boycott. Zia took a hard line, and detained opposition leaders throughout the country a week before the referendum. Troops patrolled the streets in Karachi and a ban was imposed on "unauthorised persons" near polling stations, making an independent verification of the turnout virtually impossible. According to official results, out of the total 34,992,425 registered voters in Pakistan, 21,7501,901 – 62 percent – cast their ballots. General Zia received an astounding 97.7 percent share of the vote. Except for a faction of the Muslim League led by Pir Pagara, and the Jamaat-I-Islami (JI), no political party in the country accepted this referendum result. While MRD leaders and independent estimates indicated that not more than five percent of the voters had participated, the referendum 'legitimised' General Zia's presidency for another five years.

The General's referendum was conducted just a year after the brutal suppression of Sindh's during the MRD movement in which hundreds of people were murdered in the rural areas of the province. The MRD and the retaliatory state violence was epochal in the modern history of Sindh, a region that had known relatively uninterrupted peace since British General Charles Napier took control of the region in the 1843 Battles of Miani, Dabho and Imambargah.

Despite the obvious transformation in the political scenario, there

are many similarities between the referenda called by General Zia on 19 December 1984 and General Musharraf on 30 April 2002. Zia had crushed every democratic voice raised against him and masterminded the US-sponsored Afghan Mujahideen resistance against the former Soviet Union and the then socialist government of Afghanistan. The present military government has been imposing curbs on the activities of the political parties, although it has not yet censored independent media. It, too, has assisted the Americans in Afghanistan, this time to dislodge the Taliban regime, an erstwhile client of Islamabad. After being 'elected' in the referendum, General Zia still needed constitutional cover for his dictatorial policies and the abrogation of Pakistan's constitution, leading him to allow partyless elections in 1985. Subsequently, a government, with Mohammad Khan Junejo as the prime minister, passed the Eighth Amendment in the constitution legitimising Zia's actions and granting him legal sanction to dislodge any elected government in future.

The referendum of 30 April 2002 was similar in many respects. General Musharraf started his political 'campaign' by addressing a public meeting in Lahore on 9 April, and he subsequently addressed dozens of such gatherings throughout the country, including some in Sindh. During this campaign, he has taken on the leaders of the two mainstream parties, Benazir Bhutto of the Paki-



Zia ul-Haq



Altaf Hussain

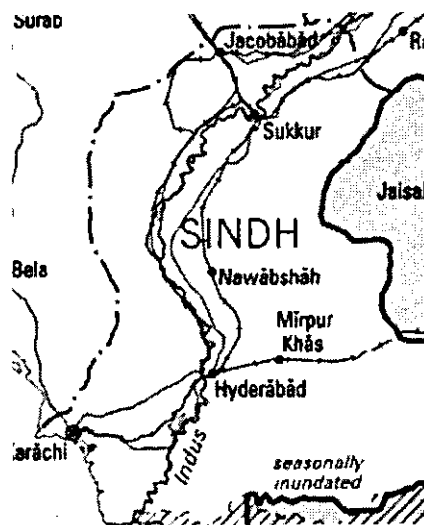
stan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), vowing to exclude them from October general elections. Simultaneously, the President-General has drafted an ordinance banning any person who has twice been prime minister, as both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have, to seek election to that office. This move is similar to another trick used by General Zia to keep Benazir Bhutto from becoming the prime minister – he formed an election committee which forbade women from holding the offices of prime minister and president and mandated that the female candidates for public office must be above 50 years of age and have prior written permission from their husbands.

Musharraf's Sindh expedition

President Pervez Musharraf started his Sindh campaign in the town of Thatta, where despite careful use of the television camera it was clear that police and law enforcement representatives outnumbered the assembled public. The *nazim* (mayor) of Thatta, Shafqat Shah Shirazi, has long willingly shifted with the changing winds of Pakistani politics, and he utilised every available method to get people – predominantly supporters of the PPP – to gather in front of Musharraf, who was wearing a Sindhi turban and *ajrak*. He did succeed in gathering a few thousand rural

peasants and government employees, but it was an unresponsive crowd as General Musharraf harshly criticised Benazir Bhutto in a town where PPP has never lost a seat in regular elections. The General affected surprise at the tepid reception, but he should not have been surprised if he understood politics better. At another stop in Sanghar, Musharraf repeated the same allegations and was pleased to receive some applause from the assembled Punjabis who have settled there, whose political inclinations often differ from the original residents.

Musharraf's performances in Sukkur and Jacobabad were similarly styled. Nonetheless, he was expected to make a strong showing in Karachi as the result of a deal with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the strong ethnic-based party formed by the offspring of the Urdu-speaking migrants (Mohajir) from India that dominates in Sindh's urban centres. The army and the MQM had been at loggerheads since 1992, but the tables have turned. Most of Sindh's political parties have declared themselves either for or against General Musharraf, but the MQM, opted to keep its options open, and has in fact been extending covert support to the military ruler. The party's strong showing at the recent Sindh Unity Convention shows that the MQM has at last also made inroads in the interior parts of Sindh.



The Sindhi nationalist outfit Jeay Sindh Mahaz (JSM) and its supporters from the suburbs of Karachi and various rural parts of Sindh also received a boost from the rally. Whereas in the past the slogan of "Jeay Mohajir" (long live the Mohajir) was the favourite chant, this year "Jeay Sindh" was the choice of enthusiastic activists from the MQM, JSM and "observers" of various Sindhi political and literary organisations. The venue, Karachi's Nishtar Park, was overflowing with people, who spilled into the surrounding lanes. Women and children filled the balconies and leaned out of the surrounding windows, and even though most of the assembled did not understand Sindhi, they listened in pin-drop silence. As the traffic police became spectators, MQM activists even controlled traffic on thoroughfares and alternate routes. Even the police had orders not to interfere with the MQM proceedings.

MQM chief Altaf Hussain has formed the Sindh Organising Committee, which is headed by a Karachi-based Sindhi intellectual, Ali Ahmed Brohi. Hussain has announced that the party will field a Sindhi-speaking candidate in a Karachi constituency in the forthcoming general elections. Brohi is considered to be the first Sindhi figure to inspire many Sindhi intellectuals and ordinary people to change their traditionally cool opinions of

the MQM, and a number of them have even joined the party. Hussain's organising strength in the towns and villages of interior Sindh has also grown considerably.

In his Nishtar Park speech, Hussain lashed at out at the major political forces – the PPP and the PML-N – as well as the Muttahida Majlis-I-Amal, an alliance of six religious parties. His criticism centres on the comparisons they make between the referenda of Generals Zia and Musharraf. Except for the PPP, all the political and religious par-

ties which opposed the 30 April referendum supported Zia's earlier referendum and Hussain asked their leaders to explain to their constituencies why they have reversed their position on military-led referenda. As for the PPP, Hussain criticises it for its increasingly pro-establishment and power-hungry behaviour that, he claims, "made Ms Bhutto so selfish that she never bothered to catch the killers of her father and brothers". His move to link his support for the referendum to the issue of provincial autonomy

enshrined in the 1940 Lahore Resolution is considered to be a shrewd trick to keep his options open. "It is a game to get maximum advantages from the ruling corridors," noted one observer. MQM Deputy Convener Aftab Shaikh insinuated that something "pleasant" had happened between the MQM and the country's current top leadership, which was evident from the fact that the MQM was allowed to hold a full-strength show without administrative hassles.

The MQM has quietly urged its

TWO GENERALS, TWO REFERENDA

THE LEGALITY of the referendum also received prominent attention, prior to the supreme court giving a thumbs up to the general's plans. The essential question was: Does a violation of law really matter in the context of today's Pakistan? More to the point, was General Musharraf's initial ascension to power or his assumption of the presidency legal? If not, why question the referendum alone?

The special circumstances existing in Pakistan, the pro-Musharraf jurists argued, provided justification for his previous actions (as confirmed by the supreme court) and now provided justification for the referendum. That the election commission conducting the referendum was headed by a former Chief Justice of Pakistan, and included four sitting judges of the high courts of the country, gave the exercise a degree of legal and constitutional bearing. (One member of the Commission, Justice Tariq Mehmood of the Balochistan High Court, resigned and was replaced by another judge of the same high court. In any event, a majority of the members of the commission, who are also members of the superior judiciary, do not seem to agree with Mr Mehmood's interpretation of the law.) Interestingly, Abdul Hafeez Pirzada, a feder-

al law minister in the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government and author of the 1973 Constitution, argued in support of the referendum.

Musharraf issued an order allowing the election commission to hold a referendum on 30 April 2002, "to give mandate to General Pervez Musharraf to serve the nation as President for the period of five years". The Referendum Order provided that citizens who have attained the age of 18 on or before 30 April, and has valid identity card, will be free to cast their vote in any polling station of his choice, indicating that no voters' lists would be used in the referendum.

"The whole of Pakistan should be single constituency and every voter be entitled to cast his vote at a polling of his choice, regardless of his residence," the order said. The question asked voters was: "For consolidating the local government system; establishment of democracy; continuation of reforms; end to sectarianism and fundamentalism; and fulfillment of Founder of the Nation's concept of Pakistan, would you like to elect President General Pervez Musharraf as President of Pakistan for five years?"

The Referendum Order further provides that no court, tribunal or other authority can call into question the validity of any provision of the order, or action taken thereunder. If the majority of the votes support the referendum, "the People of Pakistan shall be deemed to have

given the democratic mandate to General Pervez Musharraf to serve" as President of Pakistan for a period of five years. The period of five years begins from the first meeting of the parliament to be elected in the scheduled general elections of October 2002 in accordance with the judgment of the supreme court. The Referendum Order issued by Musharraf on 8 April 2002 serves an identical purpose as that issued by Zia in 1984, for the earlier one had also barred the jurisdiction of the courts to call in question the validity of any provision of the order or action taken thereunder.

Allowing voters to cast their votes at any polling station with no requirement of voters' lists has visibly opened the possibilities for a predominantly rigged result. There are no restrictions on which polling station one can vote from and one needs only an identity card to cast the vote. "The mind boggles at the sheer number of opportunities this will provide for duplication of votes," said one political analyst. Without the presence of polling agents from the opposition or any neutral party to oversee the legitimacy of the process, there would have been enough opportunities for stuffing the ballot box. This was how General Zia's abysmally low turnout translated into a bumper headcount, back in 1984. ▽

ranks to support the referendum, and a healthy turnout was expected on 30 April, at least in the urban centres of Sindh. Even though the kind of provincial autonomy demanded by the MQM is not on the cards yet, analysts believe that assurance to this effect has been given by the government to satisfy the party's local allies. The release of a large number of imprisoned MQM leaders and activists is the most significant tangible shift in the establishment's policy towards the MQM, which shows that the army has begun to set aside its decade-long grudge. Taking advantage of its improved fortunes, the MQM has started its pre-elections campaign by holding a series of press conferences showcasing its different political leaders and former members of the National and Sindh assemblies. These MQM leaders are visiting Sindh's cities as a part of the party's mass-contact campaign. The MQM leadership – very apprehensive till recently – has now allegedly decided to take part in the October general elections, although a formal announcement to this effect has not yet been made. An MQM delegation is scheduled to meet President Musharraf after the referendum and submit a blueprint for the development of Karachi and some other parts of Sindh. Discussions of a bargain are expected for the meeting.

PPP and JI

The PPP and JI have struck a deal in Sindh on a one-point agenda – opposing the referendum – and are trying to devise a counter strategy against General Musharraf. "Yes, we have met the PPP local leadership twice and we have happily agreed on some points, including anti-referendum strategy," the Jamaat's Karachi Amir, Mairaj-ul-Huda said. The PPP and JI have developed contacts at the provincial and district levels in an effort to make the President's campaign in Karachi a failure. Jamaat's provincial Amir, Asadullah Bhutto, met the PPP's Ghulam Qadir Bhutto while



Did you have to do this?

Mairaj-ul-Huda had a meeting with PPP Karachi leaders Muzaffar Shujra and Nabil Gabol. Gabol, a former deputy speaker of Sindh Assembly under the previous PPP government, has said that the Jamaat leadership feels that the two parties enjoy mass roots in the metropolis and must act together on "certain issues of mutual interest".

The two parties' leaderships are working out a future line of action not merely against the referendum but also on substantive long-term issues of mutual concern. "In the

City District Government of Karachi, we are the two largest parties and would act together on all the issues pertaining to the city and rest of the province," explains Gabol. JI Sindh chief Asadullah Bhutto has also indicated his party's rigid opposition to the President's Sindh expedition, stating, "Our party has asked our nazims even not to receive the President, as his referendum campaign has clear intentions to achieve political gains." Interestingly, neither of the two parties is in a position to dislodge the pro-Musharraf Karachi *naib nazim* (deputy mayor) Tariq Hasan. According to provisions enshrined in the Local Government Ordinance 2001, a move cannot be initiated against a nazim or naib nazim individually. Under the provisions, a no-confidence move can only be initiated against the both or neither. This provision has forced both the government and the opposition parties to stay within the existing system. The JI and the PPP leaderships, however, have plans to devise cooperative arrangements in local matters. ▽

Excerpts from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's Interim report on Musharraf's referendum published on 30 April:

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPC) regrets that the irregularities witnessed during today's referendum exceeded its worst fears. While a fuller report on the day-long polling will be released only after detailed communications from volunteers, who observed the process across the country have been analysed, HRCPC's main findings today are:

- The vast majority of voters fell in the category of 'captive voters' – prisoners (voting inside prisons was claimed to be 100 percent), state and local bodies employees, factory workers (who were driven to the polling booths located within the factory premises in controlled batches). Voluntary turn-out was very low.
- The voters marshaled by local councilors enjoyed the freedom to vote as many times as they wished. The polling stations were arranged in clusters obviously to facilitate multiple voting.
- Reports from Sindh indicate that even small children were forced to vote.
- The fiction of voter identification was scarcely respected. Councilors and municipal employees issued blank photocopied chits that were treated as identity cards.
- Secrecy of ballot was rarely in evidence.
- The manner in which the people were hustled into voting and the flagrant abuse of election procedures degraded the very concept of democratic choice.

(The complete HRCPC report can be read at www.hrcpc-web.org)

Sexual Harassment and the Public Woman

Bangladeshi women who face harassment from males lack any access to avenues of social or legal redress. The suicide of Simi Banu tragically highlights the need for the law to protect not only female 'modesty', but the very right to equality.

by *Dina M Siddiqi*

The frenzied pace of harassment, gang rape and subsequent suicides in Bangladesh during the last few months has made it difficult to keep track of the specifics of each incident. Fahima, Rahima, Indrani, Sabina – these names and the horrific events associated with them have begun to blur into one another. There are also countless other women – like the two garment workers who were raped in their rented rooms in early March – whose names fail to find mention in news reports.

However, one of the most distressing aspects of the reports is the number of women and girls who have felt compelled to commit suicide in the aftermath of a violent and traumatic encounter. Their recourse to suicide could very well be the result of cultural constructions of honour and shame which do not allow for the acceptance of such 'tarnished' women into mainstream society. As an explanation, this provides a partial and tidy answer.

However, the path to suicide is one which defies easy categorisation. Moreover, for women who are not raped but suffer traumatic harassment, there are few social or legal options available for them to escape their condition. Conventional explanations of 'shame' suicides fail to explain, for instance, why in her suicide note Simi Banu wrote that the kind of harassment she had to endure was "worse than being raped and left by the wayside". It

could very well be that shifts in social, economic and legal discourses in the past two decades have allowed women like Simi to 'opt out' of mainstream cultural ideologies of womanhood. By the same token, it is precisely because some women are not willing to submit unquestioningly to notions of purity and pollution that violence against them has taken on new, extensive forms.

For several reasons, an analysis of Simi's case illuminates many of the murky issues in this debate. First, she was a professional woman who was explicit in her rejection of the narrow, constraining 'traditional' female identity: she sought a broader social identity as a human being deserving of *dignity*. Second, she was never physically assaulted, yet she committed suicide. Third, at least according to available evidence, the incident did not involve any form of political retribution.

A familiar storyline

Simi Banu's suicide has thrown into relief disturbing but all-too-familiar questions about the harassment of Bangladeshi women, especially of that working women, in public spaces. The case highlights the treacherous social environment working women have to negotiate daily and also reminds us, quite tragically, of the precarious access to police protection. Under these dire circumstances, it is more urgent than ever before to ask what con-

stitutes sexual harassment, and what legal and social measures can be taken to combat such behaviour. Simi's was not an isolated case, nor will it be the last of its kind. The storyline is familiar even if the details differ. However, the details of Simi's story are important to recount since they underscore an implicit 'patriarchal collusion' between law enforcement authorities, the young men concerned, and the male community elders in their approach to Simi's predicament.

A student of the Narayanganj Art Institute, Simi lived with her parents and three siblings in Khilgaon, Dhaka. By all accounts, she was a vivacious, independent and outspoken young woman who was also talented and ambitious. Simi helped supplement her family's limited income by decorating wedding venues and working as a fashion designer for a firm. The nature of her work forced her to keep somewhat irregular hours, and she often returned home 'late' (that is, after dark), and usually unaccompanied. According to published reports, her 'late' hours and her freedom of movement caught the attention of a group of young men – Doel, Khalil, Mofazzel and others – who spared no opportunity to communicate their disapproval of her behaviour. Denizens of a local general store, this group incessantly taunted Simi, casting aspersions on her character and making remarks with sexual undertones. Simi's usual response

was to ignore these provocations, which however became increasingly threatening and intimidating.

On the evening of 21 December 2001, Doel and his friends are reported to have gone further than usual with their taunts. "Where did you (*tui*) get so much freedom, to stay out late at night? You need a good beating." One of them pulled at her dupatta. When Simi's father and brother subsequently protested, the three insulted the father and beat up the brother, Sumon. Later, in consultation with the neighbours, including relatives of the boys, it was decided a *shalish* would be held on 23 December to sort out matters. However, on the morning of 22 December, Doel, Khalil and several other men, armed with guns, went to Simi's residence and began to berate her once more about her "promiscuity". Apparently unable to withstand such humiliation in front of her family, Simi at one point slapped Doel. The gang left soon afterward but only after threatening to throw acid on Simi and kill Sumon. Simi in turn threatened to lodge a case against them.

That afternoon, Sub-Inspector Bashar of Khilgaon police station showed up at Simi's residence, accompanied by Doel, Khalil and another local resident, Ripon. SI Bashar allegedly refused to hear what Simi had to say in her defence and is said to have told Simi's father that, "If you don't sort things out, I'll have to take away your daughter in handcuffs. If women are on the streets, men are bound to pass a few comments. But that doesn't mean your daughter has the right to lay her hands on a man. Does this mean men and women are equal?" The following evening (23 December) Simi returned from work to find local elders, including some relatives of the young men in question, gathered at her residence, preparing for a *shalish*. Before formal proceedings could begin, some of the elders, in an altercation with

Simi, made it apparent that they blamed her entirely for the turn of events. Frustrated, Simi retired to her room. Later that evening, after writing a short note, she consumed insecticide and ended her life.

A case of unnatural death was lodged in the Khilgaon police station. Simi's father also lodged a case against SI Bashar and the young men mentioned in the suicide note for inciting his daughter to commit suicide. After an initial period of inaction, in response to pressure from women's group and the media, SI Bashar was suspended and eventually placed in custody. The men of the mohalla remain free.

Voices from the grave

It is paradoxical but perhaps not surprising that the voices of the powerless are heard more clearly after their deaths. Death offers a different kind of safety, cruelly enough. To take an example from India, the suicide of High Court Advocate San-

of harassment she faced, Sharma ultimately committed suicide. She did, however, leave behind evidence of grave misconduct on the part of fellow lawyers and senior advocates. As with Simi, the victim of harassment felt protection and justice could only be attained in death.

In many respects, Sharma's and Simi's cases are similar. Like Sharma, Simi was not weak in a conventional sense. She was a strong, independent, and educated person who was aware of her rights under the law. She had sought advice from a women's organisation. She threatened to lodge a case with the police. But as a working woman from a lower middle class background, she did not wield much social or economic power. The police not only did not protect her rights as a citizen, a worker or a woman but in the person of SI Bashar threatened to turn its frightening power against her. Local community assistance was not forth-

coming either – in fact, it was firmly in favour of 'the boys from the mohalla'. Simi's immediate family could offer little but moral support, and even that was withdrawn toward the end. In the circumstances, Simi could hardly take threats of acid attacks and possible harm of family members lightly.

Nevertheless, Simi refused to be a silent victim, even in death. In her short but poignant suicide note, she states clearly how her tormentors had made her life unbearable to the point that, "[It was] worse than raping a woman and leaving her on the road. That's why it's no longer possible for me to tolerate such insults and go on living." That she implicated certain individuals by name indicated that Simi held out some hope of getting justice, even if it had to be posthumous. Simi intended her suicide to be interpreted as act of protest and resistance, and a (desperate) means of capturing social attention. She ended her note by stating that hers was a sacrifice made



Female workers, burdened with responsibility and entrapped without rights

geeta Sharma in Andhra Pradesh, India, on 15 June 2000, due to alleged sexual harassment by fellow lawyers, is illustrative. It indicates that the problem is not one of powerlessness in a straightforward manner. The Sharma case provides a critical reminder of how social power dynamics, in a highly gendered form, are played out to induce silence. Sharma sought legal assistance from a women's group but refused to divulge in public the names of those harassing her, fearful of any reprisals on her and her young child. Unable to alter the situation

to save other women from such an awful predicament.

Available statistics indicate that the number of female suicide cases in Bangladesh has increased dramatically in the last few years. Simi's death only underscores this point and forces us to ask: Under what economic and social conditions does suicide become a woman's only available recourse for reprieve, protection and protest? The simple answer is that this condition is reached when no legal or social redress is any longer available to the individual.

Before examining the legal aspects of the case, it is worth trying to understand the everyday social reality Simi inhabited. She lived in a city with a highly contradictory environment, one in which Valentine's Day has come to be celebrated with unexpected fervour (and consumerism) and couples can be seen wandering hand-in-hand through the Boi Mela and other places. Moreover, on a national scale, women are exhorted to make a difference to the development of the nation, and the government (on paper, at least) promotes women's rights as human rights. Yet this is also the city in which a young woman can be literally hounded to death simply for going about her business, for making a living. Or a female student like Badhon can be sexually assaulted in public, as happened during the millennium celebrations on the Dhaka University campus, and later be blamed for inciting the attack – because she was “out so late”.

Where young women are concerned, public and private spheres constantly seep into each other, and private behaviour is invariably subject to public scrutiny and collective morality. In this way, community (*samaj*) opinions regulate and reinforce dominant ‘constructions’ of femininity. One of the elders at the shalish gathering just before Simi's death is said to have berated her: “This is all your fault. We have daughters too. Why isn't anyone talking about them?” No one was talking about them be-

cause, unlike Simi, they conformed to certain social codes and norms. Simi's crime was to be young, single and female, and out in public, unescorted, “after dark.” Like Badhon before her, she had transgressed culturally acceptable boundaries of the gendered division of public spaces that mark the respectable woman from the promiscuous one. From the perspective of Doel, Bashar and others, she was literally out of place. Therefore, she was no longer entitled to the protection afforded to “respectable” women. This association between the public woman and promiscuity particularly implicates working-class women, as any female garment worker knows all too well. Indeed, garment workers are the most vulnerable of all working women.

The street – urban public space coded male – can be an extremely

The victim of harassment felt protection and justice could only be attained in death

dangerous and intimidating space for the average female garment worker. Perceived ‘low’ social status (which translates into lack of social protection) combined with often very late working hours and inadequate transport facilities, exposes them to all sorts of insecurity and harassment on the streets. The conditions of garment work give a kind of license to young men, making garment workers ‘fair game’ for male attention. Only in March, two young workers in Ashuliya living in rented quarters had their rooms broken into by the landlord's younger brother and his friends. The women were dragged outside, gang raped and left unconscious on the road. As of writing, the two workers are in “safe custody” after having tried to lodge a case under the Women and Children (Preven-

tion of Repression) Act and reportedly finding officials unwilling to record the case or undertake medical examinations in time. Notably, these women remain nameless even in newspaper reports (perhaps they chose to remain anonymous although it is not clear how much choice women have in this matter).

This may have been an extreme example, but the sexual harassment of garment workers has been a regular feature since the inception of the industry. It is only very recently, in the aftermath of incidents of sexual harassment of middle class women, that the issue has generated any sustained publicity. From a distance and in an abstract sense, garment workers are considered national heroines, for they help generate the largest share of foreign revenues for the country. Up close, they are subject to constant humiliation for being “public” women who have to stay out at night. Indeed, it is a cruel irony that work – making a living – is not a legitimate reason for women to be in public and to stay out late in one of the poorest countries of the world. Of course a small number of highly visible women from affluent families frequently escape the limits of such ideologies of protection. Their class status, and their ability to travel around in the enclosed space of cars, confers on them a degree of protection; it allows these highly successful bankers, lawyers, professors and business persons to pursue their professions more or less unimpeded by such concerns.

What the law says

What legal options were open to Simi? How does one prosecute such cases? To answer these questions, we need to determine the nature of the ‘crimes’ committed by Doel, Bashar and others. They were responsible for a series of acts, presumably not all of them legally actionable. Was this a case of sexual harassment, pure and simple? After all, the men in question never actually physically harmed Simi. In the end she took her own life. Does

Simi's experience count as a 'classic' case of sexual harassment when there was no actual attempt made to assault her? Or can it be 'dismissed' as eve-teasing, in a 'boys will be boys' attitude? Was the crime actually sexual in nature and intent – that is, was the harassment primarily about the inappropriate expression of sexual desire? Or might there be a more nuanced power struggle taking place over the appropriate relationship between the sexes? The answers to such questions are not necessarily clear-cut. We are faced with a certain amount of ambiguity in a situation where unemployed and bored young men loitering in the streets have nothing better to do than taunt young women whose presence on the streets highlights the latter's ability to make a living.

One way or the other, Simi's was a case of harassment, sexual or otherwise. Legal definitions of sexual harassment vary widely. In some countries, it is defined narrowly and refers only to unwanted sexual advances or conduct. Legislation in other places is much more comprehensive. Notably, the bulk of sexual harassment laws concern the question of workplace conduct. However, for working women in Bangladesh, harassment in public is an added occupational hazard, one that is not always accommodated in legal vocabulary or in anti-harassment laws. In Bangladesh, the Suppression of Violence Against Women and Children Act of 31 January 2000 for the first time made sexual harassment a criminal offence punishable by law. Section 10 (2) of the Women and Children Act states:

Any man who, in order to satisfy his lust in an improper manner, outrages the modesty of a woman, or makes obscene gestures, will have engaged in sexual harassment, and for this, the above mentioned male will be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of not more than seven years and not less than two years and beyond this will be subjected to monetary fines as well (author

translation, emphasis added).

The law is fairly straightforward, and deals with the expression of inappropriate sexual desire and conduct. In one sense it is quite comprehensive, as it is not limited to workplace conduct. But its language is limiting in other ways. It may or may not be possible to argue in a court of law that Doel, Khalil, Bashar and others attempted to "satisfy their lust" and thereby "outraged the modesty" of Simi. However, one could argue that the hostility and attacks on Simi, although frequently expressed in a sexualised idiom, may have been more about her female transgression of existing gender relations than about overt male sexual desires and demands. (This is one reason for the extreme hostility confronted by most garment workers on the streets of Dhaka.) That may be a sociological question that the courts are not equipped to deal with. Nevertheless, the definition of harassment in the existing law is limited since it focuses entirely on threats that are directly or indirectly of a sexual nature. Most important in this respect, the law assumes implicitly that what is at stake is a woman's modesty, presumably sexual modesty. Once normative notions of modesty and femininity are introduced into legislation, potentially dangerous terrain is opened up. Interpretations of what constitutes immodesty and "appropriate" female behaviour are highly subjective and the legal protection of modesty can end up limiting rather than expanding women's freedom.

The European Commission offers a broader definition of sexual harassment that might be usefully drawn on in this context:

Sexual harassment means unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men at work. This includes unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct. This conduct constitutes sexual harassment under three conditions: the behavior must be a) unwanted, improper or offensive b)

refusal or acceptance of behaviour influences decisions concerning a job and c) the behaviour in question creates a working climate that is intimidating, hostile, or humiliating for the person. (European Commission, 1991 cited in Timmerman and Bajema: 423. Emphasis added.)

Like many discussions of sexual harassment, the European Commission definition focuses on the workplace and on harassment and intimidation by colleagues or superiors. It specifies rules for appropriate or normative behaviour at work. The objective is to protect subordinates from exploitation and provide a mechanism for disciplining those in power. It does not say anything specific about norms of behaviour in public places. However, the EU definition covers not only conduct of a sexual nature but also conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men at work. The concept of dignity gets away from culturally loaded and highly contestable notions of modesty. It is gender-neutral and directly addresses question of an individual's human rights. In a similar vein, in an effort to define harassment that is not purely sexual, some scholars have suggested using the phrase "gender harassment." In the United States, in fact, one of the most widely used definitions of sexual harassment includes gender harassment, that is, conduct "expressing hostile, insulting or degrading attitudes against women." (Timmerman and Bajema: 423, emphasis added) Although not in the workplace, the behaviour of Doel, Khalil, and others could easily constitute gender harassment as defined in many jurisdictions of the United States.

In the absence of similar legislation in Bangladesh, an alternative approach could draw on existing laws that protect every citizen's right to equality, freedom from discrimination, and freedom of movement. A recent Supreme Court judgment from India is instructive. In the case of Apparel Export Promotion Council versus AK Chopra, (1999 SOL Case No. 36), a female

employee of the firm complained of attempted molestation by her boss. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court, which argued, among other things, that physical contact with the female employee was not an essential ingredient of the charge of sexual harassment, given that the statement made by "Miss X" shows that the conduct of the respondent "constituted an act unbecoming of good behaviour, expected from a superior officer." The judgment goes on to state:

It was not the dictionary meaning of the word 'molestation' and 'physical assault' which was relevant. The entire episode reveals that the respondent had harassed, pestered and subjected Miss X, by a conduct which is against moral sanctions and which did not withstand the test of decency and modesty and which projected unwelcome sexual advances. Such an action on the part of the respondent would be squarely covered by the term 'sexual harassment'.

It should be noted that the parameters of decency, modesty and moral sanctions are taken for granted here and assumed to provide a guide for appropriate masculine behaviour. This 1999 judgment took its cue from the landmark Indian Supreme Court case of *Visakha vs. The State of Rajasthan* (1997). The *Visakha* ruling noted the lack of existing civil and penal laws for the specific protection of women from sexual harassment at places of work. In the absence of appropriate legislation, the Court took a proactive stand by issuing a set of guidelines to be followed by all institutions until appropriate legislation was enacted. The Supreme Court proceeded on the presumption that sexual harassment was a form of gender discrimination and violated the Fundamental Right to Gender Equality and Right to Life and Liberty as guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Notably, the ruling made special use of international legal instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination

Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration, which direct all state parties to take appropriate measures to prevent all forms of discrimination against women. The ruling further noted that Article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises a woman's right to fair conditions of work.

It may very well be that the hostility being expressed through harassment is a sign of male social power, not sexual power

Limitations of the law

What can we learn from the above rulings and definitions? Simi, it should be recalled, was being harassed *because of the conditions of her work*, even though she was not harassed at her workplace. Doel and others made the street a hostile, humiliating and intimidating place for her, no doubt affecting her working conditions in an indirect manner. The incessant public humiliation deprived her of her dignity as well as her sense of security. For Simi, such treatment was unbearable, "worse than rape", and, after a point, worse than death. Her rights as a citizen, a worker and a woman were all violated with impunity.

The current sexual harassment law in Bangladesh provides a point of departure, even if its language is troubling. Working women face a double hazard, inside the workplace as well as on the street. There are no written codes for behaviour on the street and, in any case, 'moral codes of decency' are applied selectively. This is a social reality that must be addressed in the law. Moreover, sexual harassment laws need to accommodate forms of gender harassment which are not explicitly sexual. It may very well be that the

hostility being expressed through harassment is a sign of male social power, not sexual power. Assuming that laws that refer to female modesty are inherently limiting, it is advisable to take a cue from the Indian Supreme Court judgment cited earlier, and stress the violation of a woman's right to equality, and freedom from all forms of discrimination. These are rights that are enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh. To fill lacuna in existing legislation, reference can be made to international legal documents, including those of the International Labour Organisation and CEDAW, to which Bangladesh is a signatory.

Enacting progressive laws by itself will not suffice to change the situation, however. As we all know, it is critical to ensure that existing legislation be implemented and that those in charge of law enforcement be held accountable for their actions. By the same token, the efficacy of laws will be constantly undermined if social attitudes, especially widespread cultural tendencies of blaming the victim in cases of sexual harassment, are not transformed. This requires, among other things, serious gender-sensitisation training for those charged with protecting the rights of citizens, especially police personnel and judges. There can hardly be legal or police protection if the authorities a priori assume "guilt" or "moral laxity" on the part of women complainants. It was only when Simi was confronted with what has been called 'patriarchal collusion' – that is, once she was convinced that she had been judged and sentenced by the community as well as the police without even a semblance of a fair hearing – that she decided death was her only escape. It must now be the struggle of activists, scholars and legislators to work towards providing alternatives other than death to women like Simi. ▽

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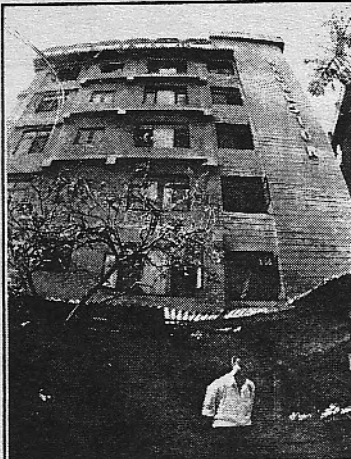
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The Hindu devotees of Imam Hussain

A case of cross- veneration

by *Yoginder Sikand*

One of the most important events in early Muslim history was the battle of Karbala fought in 680 CE in which Imam Hussain, grandson of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and her husband Imam Ali, was slaughtered along with a small band of disciples in a bloody battle against Yazid, a tyrant who had usurped the Muslim caliphate. The slaughter of Ali is one of the pivotal events that led to a divide between the 'mainstream' Sunni and Shi'ite communities, with the latter ascribing special importance to the family of Ali. This event occurred in the Islamic month of Muharram, and it is for this reason that this month is observed with great solemnity in many parts of the Muslim world.

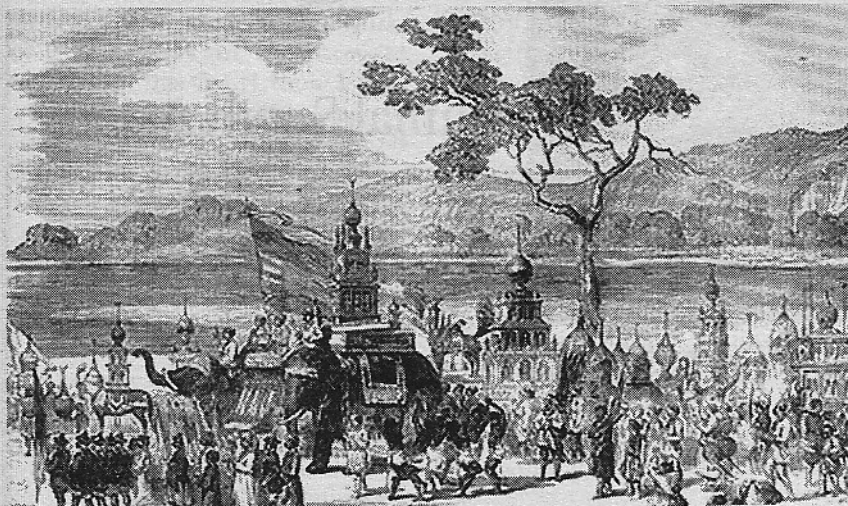
What is particularly striking about the observances of the month of Muharram in India is the prominent participation of Hindus in the rituals. This has been a feature of popular religion for centuries in large parts of India, and continues

even today, albeit on a smaller scale. In towns and villages all over the country, Hindus join Muslims in lamenting the death of Hussain, by sponsoring or taking part in lamentation rituals and tazia processions. In Lucknow, seat of the Shia nawabs of Awadh, prominent Hindu noblemen like Raja Tikait Rai and Raja Bilas Rai built Imambaras to house alams, standards representing the Karbala event. The non-Muslim tribal Lambadi community in Andhra Pradesh have their own genre of Muharram lamentation songs in Telugu. Among certain Hindu castes in Rajasthan, the Karbala battle is recounted by staging plays in which the death of Imam Hussain is enacted, after which the women of the village come out in a procession, crying and cursing Yazid for his cruelty. This custom is known as *pitna dalna*. In large parts of north India, Hindus believe that if barren women slip under an alam moving in a procession they will be blessed with a child.

Perhaps the most intriguing case of Hindu veneration of Imam Hussain is to be found among the small Hussaini Brahmin sect, located mostly in Punjab, also known as Dutts or Mohiyals. Unlike other Brahmin clans, the Hussaini Brahmins have had a long martial tradition, which they trace back to the event of Karbala. They believe that an ancestor named Rahab traveled all the way from Punjab to Arabia and there developed close relations with Imam Hussain. In the battle of Karbala, Rahab fought in the army of the Imam against Yazid. His sons, too, joined him, and most of them were killed. The Imam, seeing Rahab's love for him, bestowed upon him the title of sultan or king, and told him to go back to India. It is because of this close bond between their ancestor Rahab and Imam Hussain that the Hussaini Brahmins got their name.

After Rahab and those of his sons who survived the battle of Karbala reached India, they settled down in the western Punjab and gradually a community grew around them. This sect, the Hussaini Brahmins, practised an intriguing blend of Islamic and Hindu practices, because of which they were commonly known as 'half Hindu, half Muslim'. A popular saying about the Hussainis has it thus:

*Wah Dutt Sultan,
Hindu ka dharm
Musalman ka iman,
Adha Hindu adha Musalman
(Oh! Dutt the king
With the religion of the Hindu
And the faith of the Muslim
Half Hindu, half Muslim)
Dutt = Hussaini Brahmin*



A Muharram festival: The holiday marks the death of Ali.

But there is also another version of how the Duttts of Punjab came to be known as Hussaini Brahmins. One of the wives of Imam Hussain, the Persian princess Shahr Banu, was the sister of Chandra Lekha or Mehr Banu, the wife of an Indian king called Chandragupta. When it became clear that Yazid was adamant on wiping out the Imam, the Imam's son Ali ibn Hussain rushed off a letter to Chandragupta asking him for help against Yazid. When Chandragupta received the letter, he dispatched a large army to Iraq to assist the Imam. By the time they arrived, however, the Imam had been slain. In the town of Kufa, in present-day Iraq, they met with one Mukhtar Saqaffi, a disciple of the Imam, who arranged for them to stay in a special part of the town, which even today is known by the name of Dair-i-Hindiya or 'the Indian quarter'.

Some Dutt Brahmins, under the leadership of one Bhurya Dutt, got together with Mukhtar Saqaffi to

The Hussaini Brahmins believe that Krishna had foretold the event of the Imam's death at Karbala in the Gita.

avenge the death of the Imam. They stayed behind in Kufa, while the rest returned to India. Here they built up a community of their own, calling themselves Hussaini Brahmins, and although they did not convert to Islam they kept alive the memory of their links with Imam Hussain.

The Hussaini Brahmins believe that Krishna had foretold the event of the Imam's death at Karbala in the Gita. According to them, the Kalanki Purana, the last of eighteen Puranas, as well as the Atharva Veda, the fourth Veda, refer to Imam Hussain as the divine incarnation or avatar of the Kali Yuga, the present

age. They hold Imam Ali, Imam Hussain's father, and son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, in particular reverence, referring to him with the honorific title of Om Murti.

The Hussaini Brahmins, along with other Hindu devotees of the Muslim Imam, are today a rapidly vanishing community. The younger generation abandoning their ancestral heritage, often now seen as embarrassingly deviant. No longer, it seems, can a comfortable liminality be sustained, and ambiguous identities seem crushed under the relentless pressure to conform to the logic of neatly demarcated 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' communities. And so, these and scores of other religious communities that once straddled the frontier between Hinduism and Islam seem destined for perdition, or else to folkloric curiosities that tell of a bygone age, when it was truly possible to be both Hindu as well as Muslim at the same time. ▽



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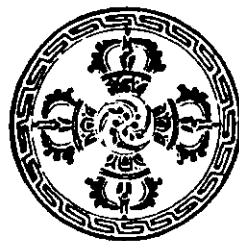
Ketaki Sheth
Inside Outside.

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

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Cleansing the soul in Spring '02

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of deadland, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain*

TS Eliot (1888-1965) begins 'The burial of the dead' in *The Waste Land* with these soul-stirring words. Times are no less desperate for South Asia. We sorely miss an Allama Iqbal who could reassure South Asians thus: "Something there is in us, that nothing can erase us so. / Though time's revolution for centuries hath been our foe." Time's revolutions are turning at such a speed that we are not able to realise that we are going round and round in circles.

In Serendib, the old adage that the more things change, the more they remain the same, is once again proving to be true. Once again, Sinhala chauvinists have started behaving spitefully, and the fragile peace process may just unravel if they have their way. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) seem to be leopards wanting to change their spots. Tired of being branded the most lethal terrorist outfit in the world, the LTTE leadership seems to have decided that future wars with the establishment in Colombo must be fought on the negotiating table set by the facilitators from Oslo. Post 9/11, it is a changed world for armed insurgents everywhere. 'Freedom fighter' is no longer a kosher term in the lexicon of Bush bin Bush.

Head Tiger Velupillai Prabhakaran has assessed the geo-political reality and has decided to come out of his lair. Addressing a press conference after a gap of 12 years in the bush, Prabhakaran was ill at ease in English and looked little like the much-feared rebel leader of myth and fact. But the safari suit and hesitant demeanour does not hide the fact that the dreaded militant is merely responding to events beyond his control. He

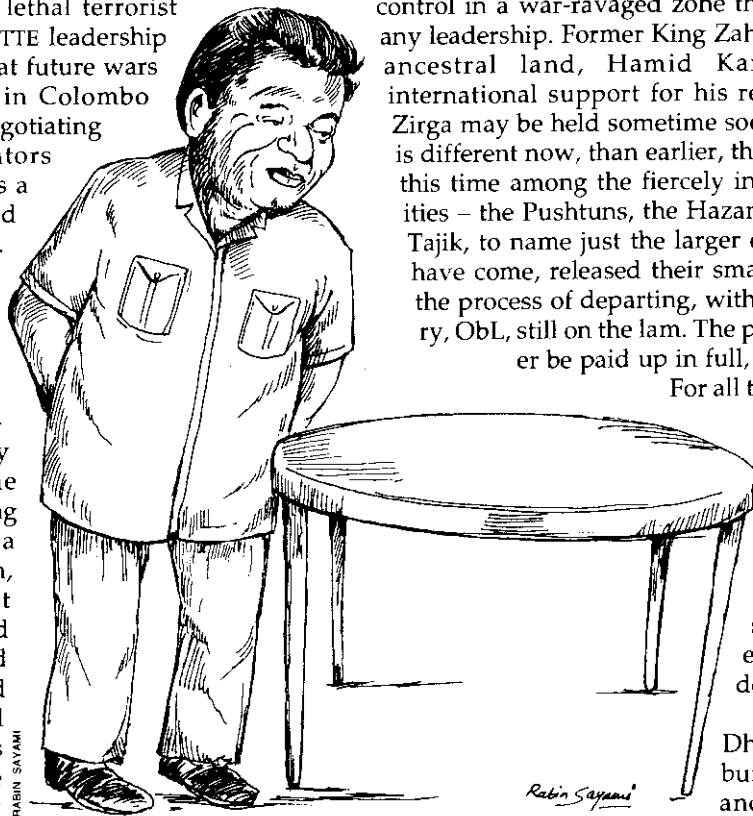
has not had a change of heart, it is the transformed situation which has forced him to the table – most importantly, the Western countries' closing of the fund conduits from expat Tamils. But do not expect the Tiger Supreme to purr like a cat. He urged India to forget the "tragic incident" that consumed the life of a former prime minister in the prime of his life, and he refused to divulge his strategy for the upcoming negotiations with the Colombo government in June.

While Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe wants to keep the door open and prefers to read the LTTE overtures magnanimously, President Chandrika Kumaratunga has no illusions regarding a group she likens to the Al Qaeda. But for the war-weary island, there seems to be no way ahead except through talks, so the president should make her peace with the idea. But if the June negotiations in Bangkok fail to produce a tangible peace, there is no telling what the resulting retributive cyclone will do to the country.

Afghanistan is relearning an old lesson of history: winning a war is relatively easy, it's establishing control in a war-ravaged zone that tests the mettle of any leadership. Former King Zahir Shah is back in his ancestral land, Hamid Karzai is lining up international support for his regime, and the Loya Zirga may be held sometime soon. But what is it that is different now, than earlier, that will usher in peace this time among the fiercely independent communities – the Pushtuns, the Hazara, the Uzbek and the Tajik, to name just the larger ones? The Americans have come, released their smart bombs, and are in the process of departing, with their principal quarry, ObL, still on the lam. The promised aid will never be paid up in full, as is always the case.

For all the eyes he has turned in the West – rather like a latter day Dalai Lama – I would not envy Mr Karzai but would wish him all the good fortune that he so badly needs. Uneasy lies the head under that karakul cap.

If Kabul does accept Dhaka's offer to help rebuild the Afghan army and police, Saarcy can only hope that the Bengali officers will refrain



VELUPILLAI PRABHAKARAN PONDERES THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

from im-parting coup lessons. The Royal Nepal Army would probably be a better exemplar for the security forces of a country in the Hindukush, with a myriad of identities rather like Nepal-in-the-Himalaya. Alas, His Majesty's forces are presently otherwise occupied, pursuing their Maoist quarry with the monsoon rains barely a month away. Till now, Nepal's men in khaki had been serving as United Nations blue helmets with no real combat experience under their belts. One can expect that if they are able to best the very capable Maoists in a fair battle, the demand for the Royal Nepal Army's peacekeeping services will grow dramatically.

But the story unfolding in the hills and plains of Nepal gets ever-more depressing. For last six years, the government in Kathmandu has been pushing the boulder of peace up the hill only to see it tumble down to the bottom. The wily Maoist strategists have used every weapon in the book – from human shields to propaganda to well-planned attacks using indigenous and modern weaponry. The army is finally up and about, and is notching up small victories, but the Maoists still range free. Desperate, the government has fixed a price upon the heads of prominent insurgents, and wants them dead or alive. But, especially since the declaration of the state of emergency in late November and the deployment of the army, the Maoist leadership is probably holed up in the safehouses provided by their CCOMPOSA (Confederation of Communist and Maoist Political Organisations of South Asia) comrades in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal. Meanwhile, both those who kill and those who die – be it the army, police or the insurgent militia – are mostly the weak and the oppressed.

An American military delegation went on a reconnaissance mission to the most insurgency-affected districts of Nepal and Washington has promised to extend USD 20 million worth of military hardware to strengthen the Royal Nepal Army. While we may be wary of an army thus strengthened, and fear for the democracy once the current problems are over, we have only the Maoists to thank for this American gift to the generals of Nepal. Meanwhile, it is unlikely that even this amount will be enough to completely modernise the army. When the helicopters and the armaments are delivered, the cost of running a suddenly top-heavy military will fall squarely on the impoverished population and economy.

History repeated itself as a farce in the one-horse race of the referendum in Pakistan. The Supreme Court recognised the validity of self-proclaimed President



Pervez Musharraf's plan of action to legitimise himself and the outcome was never in doubt. While the general has proved to be an ace strategist in responding to American demands on Afghanistan, and he does have an uncanny knack for besting the Indians in public relations, his history lessons have obviously been perfunctory. Similar plebiscites in 1960 and 1984 produced predictable results, but predictably enough failed to change the status of either Field Marshall Muhammad Ayub Khan or the Islamic evangelist-general Muhammad Zia ul-Haq. As Roedad Khan wrote in Karachi's *Dawn*, "The tragedy of Pakistan is that our rulers, like the Bourbons of France, don't learn from history and are doomed to repeat the

same mistakes." Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again in the expectation that it would produce a different result.

General Musharraf's failure is a double tragedy – his decision to carry through with the meaningless political charade has put a question mark over the elections slated for October, and it has diluted the impact of his CEO's zeal of cleansing public life in Pakistan. The reduced stature was tragically evident in his televised address to the nation in the last week of March, where he looked a pathetic caricature of his former Atatürkish self, sounding like any of the run-of-the-mill politicians that South Asians everywhere recognise so well. And the General looked phoney in his newly stitched Sherwani. And one had so hoped that Emerson's dictum that every hero turns out to be a bore in the end would not apply to the snappy General Musharraf.

But General Musharraf would be looking even worse, if it were not for his neighbour, the poet-premier of the Republic of India. Atal Behari Vajpayee once wailed over the fate of Hiroshima in verse, but in the next breath he ordered Pokhara II. He begged lyrically for Mahatma Gandhi's forgiveness for being "guilty of breaking oath, of defiling Rajghat, of forgetting the real aim and leaving incomplete the journey" – and then turned around to become an ardent apologist of Narendra Modi. For those not familiar with the political career of this RSS propagandist of yore, the contradictions in the personality of Vajpayee may seem baffling. "A shrinking Vajpayee," wrote the talk-show host Karan Thapar in *The Hindustan Times*. "The mask is off," agonised Siddhartha Vardarajan in *The Times of India*. Hold your horror, gentlemen, and shed that belated outrage. Did you not allow yourself to forget that the Bharatiya Janata Party, which Vajpayee leads, is nothing but the repackaging of Guru Golwalker-inspired Jan Sangha? Do you not see in the poetic utterances of Vajpayee ("Jay-

prakashji, keep faith, for we shall reknit the broken dreams.") the mumbo-jumbo of a conartist rather than the up-front duplicity of a masked man? Was this not the same prime minister who just a couple of months ago had teased UP Muslims that he didn't really need their votes in the UP Assembly elections? And are his recent pronouncements not consistent with his long-standing views on Kashmir, the Muslim Personal Law, or the demolition of the Babri mosque?

New Delhi's mediawallahs at least have the easy option of restrained criticism of the New Delhi government. But for the diplomats of South Block, there is no escape from the despair of having to defend the dirty deeds of their saffronite political masters. There has been an unequivocal domestic and international condemnation of the Gujarat government's complicity in the communal violence post-Godhra. Some European diplomatic missions in New Delhi have termed the carnage "ethnic cleansing" in deliberately leaked media reports. An exasperated JN Dixit, firebrand former foreign secretary, couldn't help but admit that the stature of his country has sunk to "zero global credibility". And yet, South Block is reduced to telling the world that the Indian government "didn't need lessons in sec-

ularism from the West." This, remember, is the country which held the torch of freedom high and did not shirk from its leadership role in criticising South Africa or Israel when the times demanded it. How one wishes that the stridently moralistic India of yesteryear was back up on the world stage, lifting a stern finger of warning to states which would act against human decency. Give me that any day, to this shifty-eyed caricature of government that the BJP has turned 'GOI' into.

Eliot ends *The Waste Land* by repeating the invocation of 'Shantih' three times. According to the poet's own notes, he uses the word to evoke the meaning implied in the formal ending to an *Upanishad*, which he translates as "The Peace which passeth understanding". Vajpayee can rhapsodise over such an impenetrable idea in his terse Khari Boli. However, Saarcy feels that the peace that the South Asians really need is the peace of the Buddhist prayers. But can Buddha answer our prayers if we keep blowing him up again and again - in Pokharan, in Jaffna, in Ayodhya, in Bamiyan... and now in Gujarat? Stop composing poems, Pandit Vajpayee, and stick to Hanuman Chalisa. We are all in need of a soul cleansing. △

-Saarcy

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Grieving till it hurts

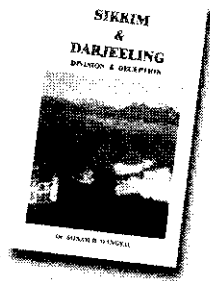
An authoritative work on the history of the Darjeeling-Sikkim hill tracts is marred by the emotionalism invested in the text. More distance would have served the subject well.

Sonam B Wangyal is a popular columnist and, as every reader of the Siliguri edition of *The Statesman* must know, Wangyal has the unique storyteller's gift of turning the driest pieces of history into interesting narratives of contemporary relevance. However, the hope of getting to read an interesting story is belied in *Sikkim and Darjeeling: Division and Deception* as Wangyal has chosen to use an academic style in compiling this book. In misplaced eagerness to sound authoritative (misplaced because he already is an authority), the author uses bold letters, indents, italicised paragraphs, extensive footnotes, textnotes, and additional notes inside parentheses; sometimes all of it in a single page.

In addition to making the book tedious to read, the use of extensive quotes pushes the message of the book into the background, which is, perhaps, to urge the West Bengal government to give to Darjeeling "...till it hurts". It is an enduring irony of non-fiction writing that while many academicians aim to be as lucid as popular columnists, even journalists who should know better (such as Wangyal) aspire to ape academicians and pour forth footnote-laden prose when they get around to writing books. In fact, the author himself admits that the book could have done with a copy editor. While the annexes at the end are immensely useful, there is no bibliography or index, which is a serious shortcoming in a work of this nature.

The structure of the book, on the other hand, follows a logical sequence as it interprets the history of

Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong from the stories of place-names to the deceptions over the years that led to their division. The work ends by describing the murky politics of the Darjeeling Hills. Dr Wangyal (he is a practising doctor,



**Sikkim and Darjeeling:
Division and Deception**

KMT Press, Phuentsholing 2002
pp 248, no recommended price
Dr Sonam B Wangyal

reviewed by CK Lai

based in Jaigaon, West Bengal) admits in his acknowledgements that he "lacks the unprejudiced vision of a good historian", and it shows. The tone of the book is that of setting the record straight rather than putting facts or opinions up for scrutiny. Hence the finality of an eyewitness account in an interpretative sentences like, "the truth was that he injured the native sentiment by spurning hospitality" in an 1849 episode. And that too without offering any evidence to contradict the existing opinion, or prefixing the accepted fig leaf of 'perhaps' that pundits are expected to use in such situations.

There are several other problems in the writing that would have been

acceptable in a newspaper column, but end up grating the nerves of a book reader. For example, no medical practitioner that writes a book in 2002 can declare a diplomat of 1836 a "pathological liar" when all that the person in question was doing was discharging his duty – to the best of his ability and by being economical with the truth whenever a need arose – to advance the interests of his government. Similarly, the author has every right to rail at the British colonialists for their rash decisions during the fag end of the Raj, but to call the declaration of Darjeeling a Partially Excluded Area an act of "treachery" is a bit too emotional.

The drama of the transformation of Sikkim from a Protectorate to an Associate in the early 1970s and its subsequent integration as the 22nd state of the Indian Union on 16 May 1975 may vary in details with the usurpation of Darjeeling by the British in 1835, but their end effect was the same – a small state could not stop a bigger power from getting what it wanted. A comparative study of tactics employed by GWA Lloyd Major and A Campbell in the early nineteenth century and BS Das and BB Lal in the later part of twentieth century could prove to be an important contribution to the study of diplomacy as a tool of aggression.

Dr Wangyal has done to the earlier adventures of the Empire what Sunanda K Datta-Ray did to the later coup in a no less enthusiastic a way in his *Smash and Grab: The Annexation of Sikkim*. Just as Wangyal's Dr Arthur D Campwell, Dr Joseph Dalton Hooker, and *Pagla Dewan* Tokhang Namgyal held "centre stage in the drama of annexation of Darjeeling", Ray's BS Das, BB Lal and Kazi Lendup Doji saw to the demise of the semi-independent status of Sikkim. However, the uninspiring roles played by the two Chogyals – Tsudphud Namgyal in 1835 and Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1973 – were no less responsible for the results that the schemers of the Indian empire produced in

Documenting dalits in Nepal

Despite their shortcomings, these two films deserve attention for focussing on the dalit issue, an under-recognised problem in South Asia.

The *karmas* of the *sanatan dharma* and the dogmas of the neo-liberal faith are both impediments to welfare democracy. This is the most fundamental barrier to dalit emancipation in large parts of South Asia. Both the caste Hindu and market orthodoxies refuse to acknowledge that a community oppressed by history needs special measures to enable them to take their equal place in the mainstream institutions of South Asian society and economy. In such circumstances, anything that documents the plight and the continuing oppression of those who are denied the most basic human dignity on the grounds of birth is valuable. These two films are for that reason alone to be commended.

The term dalit is a self-description, unlike scheduled caste which is a statist designation, or harijan, which is a mildly condescending Gandhian description. The term has been adopted as the unifying identity of a large section of the population of South Asia. The term, meaning 'broken' or 'crushed', was coined by the late-nineteenth century social reformer Jotirao Phule, and used by Bhim Rao Ambedkar, but popularised by the militant Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s. In Nepal, dalit as a definition both of social degradation and political pride, was generalised in the 1990s with the revival of democracy.

The two films are far from flawless. Both of them focus rather exclusively on untouchability, which while undeniably the most extreme form of discrimination is

only a receding part of the problem. If the problem was restricted to just untouchability, then would its eradication signify the end of the dalit issue? Clearly not, as the evidence from all over suggests. It is a known fact that even when untouchability is abandoned, the discrimination that dalits still face prevents any real change in their social and economic conditions.

The other problem with the films is that even the degradation asso-



"We have the same kind of blood"

&

"Why dalit?"

Danida (HUGOU), MS-Nepal and Berit Madsen, 2001 (PAL)

reviewed by Bela Malik

ciated with untouchability has not been effectively captured. Facets of untouchability that pertain to its eventual economic and social consequences are neglected since the focus is only on social interactions. This is in addition to the silence on economic interactions outside the relationship of untouchability.

Since 1990, there has been a democratic constitution in Nepal which made caste-based discrimination illegal and punishable. But there is no indication of how

this has affected the lives of dalits. The only passing reference to the constitution is in *Why dalit?* and that too only in the songs composed for the film. Politics is relegated to the margins and again any reference to it seems to be only in *Why dalit?*

The two films seem to separate the footage rather neatly into (a) dalits who attribute their existence to the 'way things are and have been' and (b) the change in dalit consciousness and mobility. *We have the same kind of blood* and *Why dalit?* focus only on the artisan class whereas many dalits in Nepal are agricultural labourers. Surprisingly, while the films talk at length about untouchability, they refrain from commenting on Hinduism or the caste system on which the 'world's most accommodating religion' rests.

The aim of the films is to create awareness about the dalit condition but they do not quite succeed in realising that goal. As essays in pure documentation they are useful as a window to those unfamiliar with caste divisions in Nepali rural life. But without supplementary material, the films are not a sufficient introduction to the dalit condition in Nepal.

We have the same kind of blood follows the daily life of dalits in a mountain village in western Nepal. The film attempts to give voice to the karni (blacksmith), damai (tailor), bhul (leather worker) and other dalit. In the process, there is a lopsided focus on religious cosmology and the cultural landscape. Though the film manages to go beyond mere phenomenology, the script does not extend to a critical assessment and contextualisation of the issue. Viewers are left to make their own sense of a film whose purpose is always somewhat unclear. As a slice of life, it is mildly interesting, amusing in moments, poignant in parts, nothing more. There is a sense of fixity in the film. Nothing seems to have changed in the village. Viewers are not given any idea of the location (Pachnali village, district Doti,

western Nepal) nor its socio-economic specifics. Overall, the film presents a very partial take on the dalit situation in Nepal.

Why dalit? underscores the paradoxes of the practice of untouchability and seems a more balanced picture of dalits. It is shot both in Doti and in Bardiya and Banke districts. The film chronicles dalit awareness about the absurdities of casteist practice and shows how migrating from the hills to the terai is a case of dalits 'voting with their feet'. This film though shorter, gives a sense of being far more complete.

Having made all these criticisms, it is nevertheless important to stress that makers of the film have rendered a service, partial though it may be. The films are a beginning. It is to the filmmakers' credit that they chose to film dalits, who never feature in the image of Nepal that the world knows.

Well-meaning nationalism should not come in the way of appreciating the fact that fragments of dalit life have been recorded. The films serve as a testimony. Such a recording is all the more important because the South Asian intelligentsia by and large tries to wish away the issue of caste discrimination. In India, where sociology has made the study of caste its professional obsession, there are any number of sociologists who will deny that caste leads to any real discrimination. Issues of social justice are often quietly buried.

The brutal face of casteism needs an audience. In this, pure description can be more effective than prescription. And sometimes the audience has to be international, if India's recent attitude is any indication. Before the 2001 Durban World Conference Against Racism, India denied its caste problem completely and expunged any reference to it from its official documents. Just as the efforts to bring down apartheid were aided by the solidarity of progressive forces around the world, perhaps external pressure is called for since the *chaturvarna* system is so entrenched

in large parts of the Subcontinent. Minimally, the films can serve the purpose of bringing to wider notice the fact that a community called dalits lives on the margins of society. The one-sided focus on untouchability can at least shock the uninformed viewer into recognising that a problem exists.

The films also augment a meagre corpus of information on the dalits in Nepal. The popularity of 'dalit studies' in South Asia stands in inverse proportion to the accommodation of dalits in the political process in these countries. To make matters worse, much that passes off under the rubric of 'dalit studies' has very little real information on the community. We can begin with the basic problem. How many dalits? The Nepal government census of 1991, which divided the population into 63 jatis, did not demarcate dalits into a separate category. Estimates based on the census plug the figure at 12 per cent. Dalit activists claim that dalits are underrepresented in the 1991 census and that their population is 20 percent of the total. Take the single growth industry in Nepal-related academia - anthropology. Relative to the reams published on various aspects of Nepal's variegated population, work on dalits is sparse. In this context of absolute dearth, the films are welcome.

The third reason for judging the films in a positive light is that they debunk the comfortable view that 'caste is a thing of the past'. Upper caste urban elites in South Asia probably have no reason to think about the caste issue since in their immediate environment caste does not explicitly figure. Hence the common drawing room notion that any talk of caste merely revives a waning caste consciousness. The letters flooding the 2-8 November 2001 issue of *Nepali Times*, in response to an article by Kanak Mani Dixit, 'The bahuns and the Nepali State' (19-25 October 2001) were indicative. Evidently, the same article in Nepali (*Himal Khabarpatrika*) evoked an equally

vehement caste-based reaction.

Dalit indices

Some everyday indices will show why it is necessary to address the dalit problem urgently. The majority of them crowd the congested zone of poverty, stake a claim to only a fraction of the Subcontinent's vast resources, are mostly illiterate, are more susceptible to infant and maternal mortality and are inadequately represented in the walks of life that are recognisable signs of social arrival. In India, despite affirmative action, half of the scheduled castes (SCs) live below the poverty line (49 percent of all dalits in urban areas, and 48 percent in rural areas). Two-third of the scheduled castes continue to live in rural areas where access to the means of production is usually denied. According to the 1990-91 Indian census, 65 percent of all SCs are wage labourers at the all-India level, 19 percent are self-employed cultivators, of which few own land larger than 0.5 acres. Unemployment is 50 percent higher among dalits than among the others. About 78 percent of dalit households have no electricity and 90 percent lack sanitation facilities, 60 percent of dalit children below four years suffer from under-nourishment, the infant mortality rate is 90 per 1000. In 1991, the all-India dalit literacy rate was 39 percent against an all-India rate of 52 percent.

The statistics are more appalling when it comes to Indian dalit women. The female school drop out rate is 54 percent at the primary level, 73 at the middle level and a staggering 83 percent at the secondary level. All this in a country that is forever showcasing its electoral democracy and affirmative action.

In Pakistan, the dalit population is relatively smaller (estimates place it at 1.5 million), but it lacks economic power, political leadership and education. No organisation works exclusively for the dalit cause.

In Nepal, where there is no affirmative action and no real statistics, it can be surmised that

dalits are perhaps in as bad or worse a situation. According to estimates, which cannot be authenticated for want of statistical data, only 10 percent of Nepal's dalits are literate. Reportedly there are only about 25 dalit lawyers in the whole country, while dalit representation in the media as journalists, reporters or editors is only about 1 percent. There are no dalits in the lower house of parliament or in the upper echelons of the army, judiciary, or constitutional bodies (including the National Human Rights Commission). The nomination of dalits as candidates in parliamentary elections is low and will not change until there is affirmative action.

Even high office is not a guarantee against harassment. Just recently, the vice chairman of Kotbhairab VDC (Village Development Committee) in Bajhang, Nepal, was reportedly denied tea at a teashop. *Dalit Voice*, a Bangalore publication reported that when Jagjivan Ram (former union minister of India) visited Banares on invitation and garlanded the statue of Sampurnanand (a kayastha), the statue was washed with Ganga *jal* and *mantras* were recited to make it 'pure'. In India, dalit civil servants are given postings that no one else wants and they are far more susceptible to disciplinary action. The names of various dalit castes - 'bhangi', 'churra', 'chamar' are still commonly used terms of abuse.

The safai karmachari

In Nepal, where lawmakers are predominantly upper-caste, where is the scope for structural transformation? As the films clearly bring out, escape in many cases has nothing to do with policy. It is a function of mass transportation and urbanisation. One of the men in *We have the same kind of blood* felt that passengers in crowded buses do not care about the caste of fellow passengers. In *Why dalit?* dalits interviewed in the tarai felt that there is a huge difference between town life in the plains and rural life in the hills. Discrimination is less wide-

spread in urban areas. Public space is freer. But city life, though relatively better, is not without its tensions. Government policy, if anything, often perpetuates the occupational degradation of dalits. Most municipal sweepers are dalit. In many areas in India, particularly in Gujarat, dalits carry 'night soil' on their head despite a militant dalit movement. Many of these government employees are graciously designated '*safai karmacharis*'. Such is the power of a time-honoured system.

An outstanding feature of the films is that while the filmmakers empathise with dalits they do not shy away from looking at discrimination that dalits practice among themselves. Dalits have never been homogeneous. *We have the same kind of blood* testifies to the practice of untouchability even by dalits. This is a problem many dalit activists often fail to address. Paradoxically, affirmative action in India has strengthened hierarchies among dalits by creating a new elite, distanced from the many real problems confronting those who have never received the benefits of welfare measures. Nepal's dalit movement too is plagued by such internal caste-hierarchies. This, however, cannot be an argument against affirmative action, though it does speak volumes for how that policy has been implemented.

We have the same kind of blood and *Why dalit?* are at their best in offering a preview into dalit perceptions of their own social condition as well as upper-caste perceptions about casteism. In *We have the same kind of blood*, dalits were unaware of why they are dalits and attributed their status to tradition, poverty, illiteracy, or simply because they labour. In their perception, it has always been like this, a condition ordained by god, which is above question. *Why dalit?* showed more conscious individuals who pointed to the anomalies of the practice of untouchability.

The films foreground women and shows the triple burden of

caste, gender and class. *Why dalit?* has Baadi women who speak of 'the profession' and the inconsistencies in the behaviour of upper caste men. As one of them says, "It is okay for them to sleep with us, but not okay to call us to their house since we are polluting". Where paternity determines citizenship, many Baadi children go through life without this official recognition of nationhood. Without an identity card, they find it difficult to enrol in schools.

Upper-caste voices are recorded, but mostly from the villages. One woman says that there have always been lower caste and it does not matter if they are clean now, they remain untouchable. Such voices and views recur: "Their behaviour is not pure", "They are born dalits because of improper conduct in previous births, hence the discrimination". An upper caste builder who hires bhuls and lohars as stone carriers says, "How can we be equal? In any case, we don't like equality. We like it like this." Shorn of intellectual finery, many of the arguments of the South Asian intelligentsia are not very different. The language of efficiency, market and merit does not help in understanding the dalit condition.

It seems surprising that democracy and its institutions have not made much difference to the dalits of Pachnali village. In Nepal for example the practice of untouchability invites a fine of NRs 1000. The law is a recognition of the problem. It is a first step. But by itself the legal penalty cannot bring about change. These two films can be seen in the same light. They document some concrete elements of the dalit problem, and therefore like the law mark the start of a social documentation in Nepal. ▽

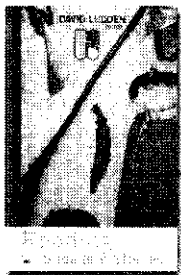
(The writer thanks the discussants at the films' screening in Martin Chautari, a public discussion forum in Kathmandu, who helped clarify her perception of the films)



Jihad: The rise of militant Islam in Central Asia

By Ahmed Rashid
Orient Longman,
Hyderabad, 2002
pp 281
ISBN 81 250 2228 7
INR 295

Written by best-selling *Taliban* author Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad* traces the evolution of Islamic movements in the five former Soviet republics of Central Asia over the course of the last century, with particular attention paid to developments in the post-Soviet era. Originally published by Yale University Press, this book incorporates Rashid's fifteen years of field work as a Central Asian affairs journalist and his independent research into the movements' international networks. By adeptly analysing recent developments against a backdrop of historical precedent, Rashid shows how the Central Asian movements will directly affect neighbouring regions, with important geo-strategic implications involving religious militancy, strategic resource competition and Western entanglement.



Reading subaltern studies: Critical history, contested meaning, and the globalisation of South Asia

Edited by David Ludden
Permanent Black, Delhi 2001
pp 442
ISBN 81 7824 025 4
INR 695

This collection brings together a wide-ranging assortment of writings on various aspects of colonial South Asian historical theory. By surveying the major trends in subaltern studies in the last twenty years, Ludden has assembled a balanced compendium of articles from leading scholars such as Javeed Alam, K Sivaramakrishnan and Henry Schwarz. This book is useful for both the academic reader as well as the non-specialist interested in South Asian historical debate and theory.



On the national and colonial questions

By Karl Marx and Frederick Engels
Edited and with an introduction by Aijaz Ahmad
LeftWord, Delhi, 2001
pp 252
ISBN 81 87496 15 0
INR 125

Strongly influenced by the Indian mutiny of 1857, Marx and Engels noted the rise of the European colonial age in the mid-nineteenth century and theorised its implications for the communist movement in many of

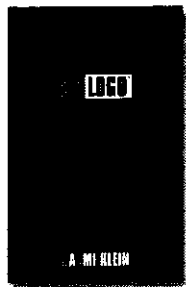
their most famous works. This collection of essays, letters and articles includes more than 40 works spanning five decades of observations on colonialism and the plight of the colonised. In his introduction, Aijaz Ahmad notes that Marx and Engels were ambivalent about nationalist movements, feeling that anti-colonial struggles distracted workers from the more necessary class revolution. However, writing that "torture forms an organic institution" of British imperialism, communism's founding theorists dissect the foundations of colonialism and offer commentary on political and social affairs relevant to today's readers.



The market that failed: A decade of neoliberal economic reforms in India

By CP Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh
LeftWord, Delhi, 2002
pp 192
ISBN 81 87496 20 7
INR 275

Professors at JNU's Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, CP Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh are well-positioned commentators on India's current economic climate and period of recent reform. By analysing various measures of economic activity – including foreign trade balances, unemployment, subsidy policy and government debt – Chandrasekhar and Ghosh arrive at the conclusion that the policies of economic liberalisation launched by the Indian government in mid-1991 have resulted in largely detritus effects for the Indian nation. The book's insights and thorough compilation of data are a useful addition to the growing corpus of Indian neo-liberal economic reporting and commentary.



No Logo

By Naomi Klein
Flamingo, London, 2000
pp 490
ISBN 0 00 653040 0
No price recommended

A book which has only gradually come to the attention of readers in South Asia, *No Logo* is a penetrating account of multinational corporations' marketing strategies and their inhumane treatment of workers in developing countries. As the gulf between the consuming classes of South Asia and the impoverished majority widens, Klein's insights provide a valuable starting point for a larger debate on the contractions of modern wealth.

Compiled by Deepak Thapa, Social Science Baha, Patan

The Liberation of Dohori Geet

For sure, women are exploited, overworked and underappreciated in Nepal, as perhaps everywhere. But in one instance at least, women have the freedom to flaunt their intellect in public and even be risqué while doing so.

Women are not be as subjugated, repressed, exploited and battered as you may have believed, if you get to watch a certain late-night programme on Nepal Television, and its clone on the private satellite station, Channel Nepal. These are semi-dramatised sing-along jousting sessions, called the *dohori geet*, where men and women sing playful and often suggestive, unrehearsed lyrics in an attempt to defeat the other side.

These programmes are just organised enough to allow videography, but they remain spontaneous enough to emulate the sing-alongs of real life that happen across mid-hill Nepal. In the natural settings, batches of women and men are on the prowl, seeking each other's company during festivals and fairs. When they meet, the members sit down facing each other, a crowd gathers around, someone brings a *madal* drum and the *sarangi* string instrument, and the competition begins.

The *dohori geet* has its origins in the various male-female bonding routines used by the different hills communities, particularly during *melas* (fairs), where boys and girls are allowed the time and space to get to know each other. The mostly-unmarried women and men address each other directly, making eye contact, and creating impromptu verse that has the crowd on edge. The lead singers require quick-wittedness and superior observational skills. The format of the *dohori geet* is simple, with a four-line submission sung by the lead female or male singer, after which a chorus common to both sides is repeated. The rhythm is zesty. Drawn by the beat, men and women rise to dance.

The lyrics tend to involve romance, elopement, marriage, jobs, income, household chores, village activities, mothers-in-law... They can go further afield, and include travel in India and (always) riding trains, going off on a jeep (invariably "raising dust"), references to gifts of silk handkerchiefs, ribbons and

the wearing of watches and dark glasses. The goal of the protagonists is to try and playfully embarrass each other. The lead female singer is given 'equal time', and her intellect is allowed to range free. Further, she can dare be as suggestive, explicit or as subtle as she chooses in the use of humour, sarcasm, irony or even sexual reference.

The genre, therefore, could be seen as indicator of the relative emancipation of Nepal's hill women – their ability to interact in public with the men, to dance, to joke and laugh about intimate subjects. And the fact that the two television channels of Nepal see fit to present this genre of song-and-dance too says something positive.

Look at it this way – these programmes are probably among the few (if not the only) that show men and women in close physical and mental proximity in an unrehearsed rural/folk situations. Certainly, you would not find anything like this in Bangladesh or Pakistan Television. Door-darshan may on occasion show folk dances where the sexes mingle, but none of the unrehearsed interaction that is the soul of



Dohori geeters as seen on television.

the *dohori geet* repertoire.

These are times when cultures across South Asia are being drowned under generic brushstrokes, pummeled by television and the market. A superficial oneness threatens to subsume all that is rare and precious in the nooks and crannies of our society. The *dohori geet* is one such institution. Nepal's television seems to have discovered it just before it disappears from the scene altogether and it is swallowed by urban middle class morality. The moment we lose our little cultural eddies is when South Asia (and Nepal) stops being South Asia (and Nepal). For this reason alone, as well as for the relative freedom that it represents for womankind, let us hope that the *dohori geet* tradition continues, using the help of television if necessary.

The *dohori geet* projects the men and women as equals – although I admit the camera tends to linger on the women more than on the men. Do I have a problem with that?

Kamakhya Dixit



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