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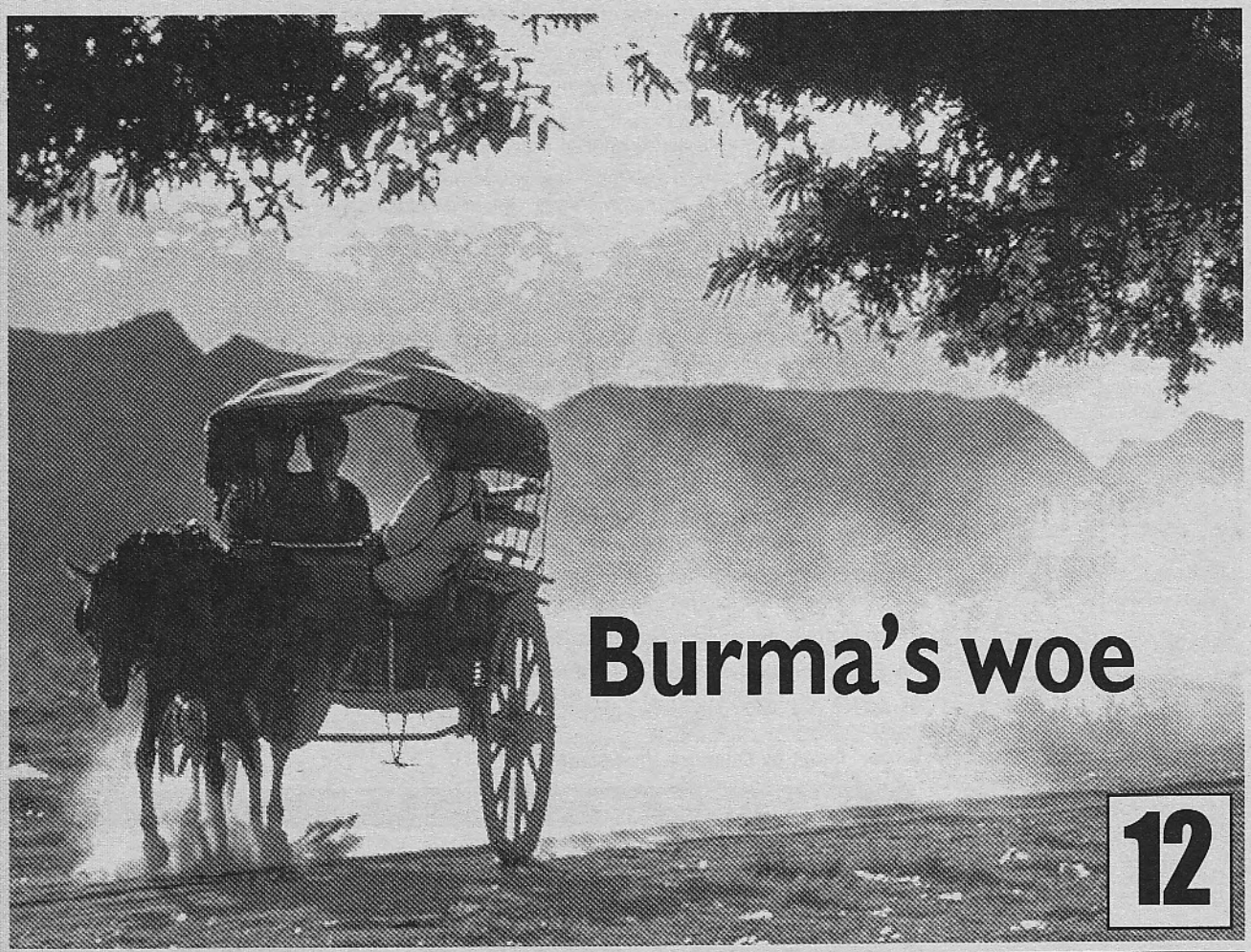

Burma's woe

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HIMAL
SOUTH ASIAN
editors@himalmag.com

Editor
Kanak Mani Dixit

Associate Editor
Thomas J Mathew

Assistant Editor
Shruti Debi

Contributing Editors
CALCUTTA Rajashri Dasgupta
COLOMBO Manik de Silva
DHAKA Afsan Chowdhury
KARACHI Beena Sarwar
NEW DELHI Mitu Varma
N. AMERICA Amitava Kumar

Editorial Assistant
Andrew HM Nash

Design Team
Indra Shrestha
Kam Singh Praja
Suresh Neupane
Bilash Rai (Graphics)
Bhushan Shilpakar (Website)

Marketing
advertising@himalmedia.com

Subscription/Overseas Sales
Anil Karki
subscription@himalmedia.com

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

Marketing Office, Karachi
Ajmal Kamal
City Press
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Abdullah Haroon Road
Saddar, Karachi 74400
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Contributors to this issue

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar is a Rawalpindi activist involved with people's movements.

Andre Vltchek is an independent writer/researcher who lives in Hanoi.

Anindita Dasgupta is a historian who teaches at Cotton College, Guwahati.

Aung Naing Oo is a research associate with the National Reconciliation Program based in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Aung Zaw is the founder and editor of *Irrawaddy* magazine, which focuses on Burma and Asia.

Bertil Lintner, author of *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, is the Burma correspondent for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He is based in Bangkok.

CK Lal is a Kathmandu-based engineer and columnist for the *Nepali Times*.

Hemant Sareen is a freelance writer based in suburban Delhi.

Jehan Perera, a human rights activist in Colombo, writes a weekly column in the *Daily Mirror*.

Kavi Chongkittavorn is assistant group editor of National Media Group, publisher of the Bangkok-based English daily *The Nation*.

Larry Jagan, who has been covering Burma for the last 12 years, is the BBC's Southeast Asia analyst based in Bangkok.

Mark Turin is a researcher with the Digital Himalaya Project of the University of Cambridge's School of Social Anthropology.

Ramachandra Guha is a social scientist based in Bangalore. His latest book is *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian history of a British sport.*

Rinku Dutta is molecular biologist currently teaching in Kathmandu.

RK Sinha is professor of zoology at Patna University.

Sarad KC is a Nepalgunj-based reporter for the BBC.

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Applications are invited from citizens and residents of South Asian countries for the ASIA Fellowships 2003-04 awarded by the **Asian Scholarship Foundation (ASF)** which is funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation. Its office in Bangkok administers the ASIA Fellowships in the region with assistance from partner offices in Beijing, New Delhi, Manila, Hanoi, and Jakarta. The ASIA Fellowships offer opportunities for outstanding young and mid-career Asian scholars and professionals to conduct research in a participating Asian country for six to nine months. Fellows should identify preferred placements in host countries. The **ASF Board of Directors** selects the Fellows, oversees the program and makes policy decisions.

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Prospective applicants are requested to read this advertisement carefully because the program is not obliged to respond to inquiries which violate the eligibility criteria or to inquiries which ask for information given somewhere in this advertisement.

The NRI's affections

I ENJOYED reading Bela Malik's review of 'Cinema India' ('Arrival of the native' *Himal* September 2002). As a member of the "well-settled generation that has come of age" outside of my native India, I found her observations on NRI "ethno-entrepreneurship" particularly interesting. She is right to point out that the superficial 'India' marketed for expatriates and their children is often a sanitised amalgam of the Subcontinent's dominant cultural products, specifically, the north Indian wedding and curry dishes.

To assume, however, that "non-resident nostalgia invariably reduces India to some familiar and ostentatious denominator" glosses over the complex dynamics of Indian families divided between East and West and fails to grasp the precarious position many non-resident Indians (NRIs) find themselves in. Undoubtedly, there is some truth in her observation that many Indians in India enjoy the reflected prestige of overseas cousins, just as Indians overseas invest a great deal of importance in maintaining a cultural homeland, or at least the façade of one. But this nostalgia manifests itself in many forms, not all of which are trite and self-serving; indeed, many reflect a sincere quest of NRIs to forge an ethnic heritage for their children. To implicate all NRIs as "desperate immigrant[s] longing for cultural respectability" neglects the nexus of manufactured and genuine attachments that continuously compete for attention. In making this assumption, Malik equates consumers of Bollywood-India with their producers without a thorough exploration of this intricate relationship.

More importantly, Malik does not suggest what the relationship between Indians in India and their "angst-ridden, identity-starved" cousins abroad should be. She seems to suggest the less contact the better, since these parties are reduced to unsavory socio-cultural and economic alliances. However, if one were to lift the corporate packaging off the NRI identity, one would uncover the same attachments and affections that characterise a family anywhere. In fact, in certain instances, these ties are probably even stronger because of the geographic and cultural distance, which force families abroad to work harder at maintaining these relationships and preserving a sense of family identity.

> Under the corporate packaging of the NRI identity are the same attachments and affections as in families anywhere

I look forward to reading more meditations by Malik on Indian identity, but I hope that they better penetrate the nuance of cultural and social relationships. Such articles are especially interesting for those of us who grew up in the West but have extensive ties to the East.

Fatema Gunja
New Haven, CT, USA

Tibet truths

THE COVERAGE on Tibet (*Himal* September 2002) was balanced and thought provoking, raising issues that need to be considered by all players. The veils of mystification obscure the views of both sides: the exile community's view is of Tibet as being sans blemish and the Chinese government's view is of happy minorities luxuriating in the benefits of a benign motherland. Both parties are working from disadvantaged positions because they do not see the larger picture. It is the middle ground that will provide the space for the resolution of this complex and protracted issue – as Buddhists, it behoves us to cut illusions with the sword of wisdom.

In the end compassion (not pity) may well be the key.

***Samphe**, Kathmandu*

Hardware obsolescence

I FULLY agree with the points made in Gaurab Upadhaya's article 'Digital Delusions in the South' (*Himal* August 2002). However, there is one aspect of the planned obsolescence of the computer industry that he has not dealt with, namely the availability of parts and replacement machines. This is a problem I have encountered several times, particularly in organisations using older machines and running on older versions of operating systems. The problem begins with the hardware components breaking down. Often the companies that produced these machines do not manufacture them any longer, and they no longer make individual components for replacement either. Even if they do, the parts are more expensive than replacing the machine with a used, but more recent and powerful machine would be. As a result, these organisations are forced to buy more powerful machines as replacements. In such an event, the operating systems on these newer machines cannot run the old software, and willy-nilly they have to upgrade their software as well. Of course, this is all in the realm of proprietary software, and an open-source operating system will remedy the software-driven need to upgrade hardware, but the problem with repairs and replacements remains.

An associated issue is that of the environmental effects of dumping old computers, something that is now getting some attention. Computers contain very toxic chemicals and cannot, or should not, simply be thrown into a garbage dump. A recent case deals with old computers being shipped to a city in China where poor people extract traces of valuable metals by melting the various components and then sell them. Obviously, the by-products do significant damage to the health of these

individuals, but they also adversely affect the environment and any nearby waterways. The case is typical of a trend: less industrialised countries take old computers from more industrialised countries because they are inexpensive, become dumping grounds for the highly toxic chemicals contained in component parts, and they rarely have the means or social structures to handle either the environmental contamination or the diseases that spring forth thus. Part of the reason for shipping out old computers is because the environmental and public health disaster that these potentially are then become someone else's headache. This dimension of hardware obsolescence has not been given due attention in Upadhaya's article.

Upadhaya seems to take a pessimistic view of the future of the 'simputer'. There could, however, be a different reading of it. The significance of the simputer is not in its individual success or failure as much as it is in showing that hardware can be developed outside the more industrialised countries, based on local needs, suited to local conditions. The simputer itself might succeed or fail, but that is immaterial if it inspires other inventions that embody its values. If later efforts are successful, production structures may even come up that support repairs of computers older than three to five years.

Layton Montgomery
University of Wollongong, Australia

Unfair!

MY DAUGHTER phoned me from Pune asking if my husband, Dr SB Wangyal, had quarrelled or fought with anyone. When I replied I had no idea she asked me to check my email and what I read disappointed, hurt and disgusted me. There was, in my inbox, a review of my husband's book by a certain Mr Lal ('Grieving till it hurts', *Himal*, May 2002) that took the book as well as the author over the coals; and what is worse, it seems to have been done with a certain amount of relish. I have been forced to write what follows because my husband keeps mumbling, "Don't argue with the umpire! This Lal has made a poor decision with fantastic finesse! But I don't make the rules and I can't bend them either".

There is very little doubt that Lal has the gift of writing and he has used the power substantially in the review. But what does he tell the reader about the book? Precious *nothing*. The fact that the annexation of Darjeeling by the British is challenged in the book for the first time has not been touched upon. While almost all previous accounts of Sikkim's history have glorified the British, that Dr Wangyal disagrees with that bias has not been reviewed at all. The second part, where the author points an accusing finger at successive governments for manhandling Darjeeling, has not been touched upon either. Lal laments that there was no bibliography and why should there be one when the footnotes mention the names of all the books with the authors, publishers, including the year of publication? A man of elaborate and eloquent words accuses the author of having too many footnotes and I guess if they were not there he would have cried foul at the omission.

Mr Lal notes that it is the opinion of the people for whom it is written that counts most. Mr Badrinath Pradhan, former member of parliament (Upper House) and a hardened communist called it, "a beautiful book" in spite of the author accusing the reds of many abuses. Mr Topden, Additional Chief Secretary (Sikkim) commented, "He has written the book as if he were a Sikkimese". Mr SND Lama, a Nepali writer, too recommended the book to many people. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and the proof of the book is in its sales: almost the entire stock was sold out in three months and that is the only reason that one does not find the book on the shelves of Kathmandu stores.

I particularly detest the comment that the book fails because it has a sentimental bias. It has, and therein lies its beauty; it is written with emotion and passion. My husband does not claim to be a historian and that frees him, and abundantly so, from appearing to be unbiased and actually being free to air his views or 'soft sentiments' as Mr Lal seems to think them.

Finally, good English does not necessarily make a good review. I hope that Mr Lal will keep that in his grey matter when he rips apart another book.

***Dr Diki Wangyal**, Jaigaon*

SRI LANKA

SO FAR, SO GOOD

GL Peiris

Anton Balasingham

THE OUTCOME of the first round of peace talks in Thailand between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was better than anticipated. While sceptics had doubted if the parties would agree to subsequent rounds of talks, on 18 September the two sides announced three more meetings to be held in Thailand between this October and January 2003. More remarkable still was the rapid progress made at the first round of peace talks, which surprised even hopeful supporters of the Norwegian-facilitated peace process. The government-LTTE discussions indicated a meeting of minds that went beyond simply agreeing to dates and an agenda for future talks.

The positive interaction between the government's chief negotiator, professor GL Peiris, and his LTTE counterpart, Dr Anton Balasingham, at the closing media conference could not have been a better example of joint problem solving. They answered the local and international media in harmony and articulated the view that their talks had been meaningful and successful. There was no indication of either Peiris or Balasingham looking for advantage or putting the other on the spot. On the contrary, Balasingham had words of great appreciation for the government for sending men of calibre and understanding with whom it was possible to negotiate. He spoke of the congenial environment at the talks, a sentiment reciprocated by Peiris.

> The discussions indicated a meeting of minds that went beyond agreeing on future dates and agenda

The best form of negotiation is one in which two parties approach issues in the spirit of problem solving. The success of these initial talks could not however have been due simply to the good rapport between the two sets of negotiators. Much groundwork was laid in the informal talks that are known to have been taking place in Wanni, Colombo and London over the past nine months of ceasefire. Among matters on which agreement was reached was the setting up of a joint committee to deal with the problem of high security zones and the resettlement of displaced people. Likewise, negotiators forged a creative agreement under which official government funds and international aid could be made accessible to the LTTE.

However, the potentially contentious issue of an interim administration for the northern and eastern provinces claimed by the LTTE as a Tamil homeland – a position opposed by majority Sinhala opinion – was left untouched at the first meeting. The talks did, however, reveal two important issues on which the LTTE showed its willingness to compromise. It did not push for the immediate establishment of an interim administration, instead expressing satisfaction with the establishment of a 'joint task force' in which it will be a partner with the government in rehabilitating the north and east. This important agreement in all likelihood will be a halfway house for the time being, until sceptical Sri Lankans see that such a partnership with the LTTE does not harm lives or the country.

Secondly, the LTTE made a major concession on the vexed issue of a separate state. The bogey of Tamil separatism is what gives strength to Sinhala nationalism, which negotiators took a meaningful step towards defusing. Balasingham clearly said that Tamil 'homelands' and self-determination only meant regional autonomy and substantial self-government within Sri Lanka, not in a separate state.

The government's acknowledgement that the LTTE would be its partner in the administration and economic reconstruction of the northern and eastern provinces was its return offer to the LTTE. The media conference was an early demonstration of the efficacy of this partnership, with Peiris and Balasingham both helping each other out with the probing questions of journalists.

Peace education

A long list of problems stretches before the two negotiating teams, including many which seem to have been untouched at this first session. The issue of a human rights framework found no mention in the communiqué, nor was there any public discussion of a role for civil society in the ongoing peace process. Both of these issues are important, and clearly the peace process needs to be founded as much on social acceptance as

on political will. Sustaining the peace process will also require a knowledge base that independent think tanks have the capacity to generate.

Civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in both generating a knowledge base of possible options for conflict resolution and disseminating information. In doing so they promote social acceptance of the need for a changed social and political order. Much of the groundwork for the present peace process was laid in the peace education campaigns carried out by civic groups over the past two decades when the government and LTTE were at war with each other.

Sri Lankan civic groups, including those such as the Peace Support Group, which were present in Thailand at the time of the talks at the invitation of Thai-based Forum Asia, have called for the implementation of a human rights framework. These issues need to be taken up. In response to a journalist's question on human rights at the press conference, Peiris said that these issues would be taken up in subsequent talks. The sooner this is done the better. The international community in particular has the leverage to influence the two sides to respect human rights and ensure the participation of civil society in the peace process.

Both government and LTTE spokesmen at the media conference expressed their appreciation for Thailand's hospitality and Norway's facilitation. The two parties also intend to make a joint appeal to the international community for assistance to rebuild Sri Lanka. In the months ahead Sri Lanka will rely on international support to ensure that its peace process remains on track. The increased involvement of civil society would provide a broader foundation on which the peace process can be built. △

– Jehan Perera

PAKISTAN

HAMSTRUNG POLITICS

GEORGE W Bush is no longer friends with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder ever since the latter, who has just been narrowly re-elected, had the gall to oppose military action against Iraq. Meanwhile, the United States military machine is getting ready for yet another strike against a country that has already been pummeled many times over. In West Asia, a familiar scene presents itself – Israeli forces running riot through Palestinian towns and villages, and to top it all off, Yasser Arafat's headquarters being bulldozed to the ground.

It would be inaccurate to say that Gerhard Schroeder, or other Western European leaders who are opposing military action against Iraq or voicing even the slightest concern about state-sponsored terrorism in Israel, are the world's most prominent upholders of human rights. But nonetheless, they seem to have decided that absurdity must stop somewhere. If not, the 'war on terror' could go on indefinitely, and that augurs badly for the entire world, rich or poor, powerful or weak. Nevertheless, it is likely that Bush will have his way, and Chancellor Schroeder will just have to accept that.

And so, as all common sense seems to be quickly dissipating from the practice of international politics, South Asians should consider how US unilateralism will affect us on the home front. After all, what happens at home is intimately related to the myopic decisions of George W Bush and his operatives the world over. The upcoming Pakistani general election is the strongest evidence of this unfortunate fact.

> Pakistan should be appalled at the rapidity with which sovereignty is being made an obsolete concept

It is now common knowledge that the Pakistani military has gone out of its way to ensure the consolidation of its role in politics once the newly elected government comes to power. Indeed, whether or not it will actually be accurate to term the new government as being *democratically elected* remains to be seen. But the fact is that the election will take place, and when it is over, there is little that is likely to substantively change.

There are many reasons for this. One is that the US is quite happy with General Musharraf being in power. And General Musharraf is quite happy with the US on his side, just as Zia-ul Haq was two decades ago. And so no one is too concerned when

the military redrafts significant portions of the constitution, when 40 retired generals and colonels stand for elections, when there is significant and worrying talk of pre-poll rigging, and when democratic principles and the norms of human rights are completely ignored across the country. The Pakistani people's reality is shaped by the actions of the US. The global hegemon has given General Musharraf a clean slate for now, and so the Pakistani people and Pakistani democracy will have to pay.

This is not to say that Pakistani democracy has a proud history in any case. Mainstream electoral parties have drifted so far from the general public that it hardly feels like a general election is around the corner. Political parties however, regardless of whether they are responsive to people's needs or not, should ask themselves some serious questions. The decade of the 1990s saw four governments all toppled before they completed their terms. There can be a variety of explanations for this, but ultimately, it must be said that all of these governments were operating under the larger security paradigm that determines decision-making in Pakistan.

The global hegemon has given General Musharraf a clean slate for now, and so the Pakistani people and Pakistani democracy will have to pay

That being the case, political parties ought to ask themselves how long they will continue to accept that the future of democracy, and therefore the future of their own politics, is largely determined by others, including the military and the US. Indeed, one of the defining features of the upcoming elections is the manner in which the military has already clearly stated that the new government will not be permitted to undermine the economic agenda that has been put into place by finance minister Shaukat Aziz and company. The international financial institutions (IFIs), for their part, have also been unambiguous about their preference for the military to retain a significant say in economic decision-making.

It is another issue altogether if one assumes that politicians are completely uninterested in articulating their own politics and the needs of the people at-large, and would rather continue to engage in power games to secure their own limited interests to whatever extent possible. But it is difficult to imagine that all politicians are happy to reap the rewards of colluding with the military while perpetuating the kinds of injustices and inequalities that always characterise undemocratic systems. This is especially true given the fact that the military government has systematically defamed politicians over the past three years, in close collaboration with the IFIs. The latter have pointed out that corruption, economic mismanagement and "poor governance" are the defining characteristics of elected governments in Pakistan, in contrast to which the present military government seemingly has a monopoly on good governance.

While it is necessary to acknowledge that Pakistan's next prime minister will be far less able to resist the dictates of the US and the IFIs than Chancellor Schroeder, states such as Pakistan should be appalled at the rapidity with which sovereignty is being turned into an almost obsolete concept. The first alarm bell should be ringing in the secretariats of all political parties that are taking part in these elections. After all, they are the ones directly affected by this current practice of international politics.

But the fear is that most of the mainstream political parties in Pakistan are neither informed nor interested enough to be doing anything about this situation. The world over, civil society has accepted the responsibility of reinvigorating political processes, particularly in countries where formal democracy has been practiced without interruption for decades. In Pakistan there is perhaps even more urgency required in not only opposing militarisation of state and society, but also in erecting viable political organisations that articulate people's needs and resist the onslaught of corporatisation.

This will hardly be a painless process, or one that has a definite timeline. But it is necessary because the alternative is much too grim to contemplate. For the time being, the very least that can be done is to ask difficult questions of political parties about how much they understand the problems of the populace, and how much they are willing to risk to address these problems.

This, of course, requires civil society to ask just as critical questions of itself, and the extent to which it is playing the role that is desperately needed.

The time has come to reconsider whether or not military governments, international institutions and global superpowers who use the language of poverty reduction, human rights and peace really mean it, or whether in fact they have just made their usurping tactics a little more sophisticated. The time has also come to shed the fear of supporting movements and initiatives that are radical, such as tenant movements which demand land reform, movements of forest dwellers which refuse to allow any more of their vanishing resources to be pillaged by the state and timber mafias, movements of fisherfolk demanding that their waters and livelihood be protected from profit-hungry corporate trawlers, or movements of teachers and students opposing the privatisation of education. Only when civil society takes such initiatives on its own will political parties be forced to redefine their politics, and only then, in this era of frightening militarisation, will Pakistan even begin the long march towards democratisation.

– Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

SOUTH ASIA

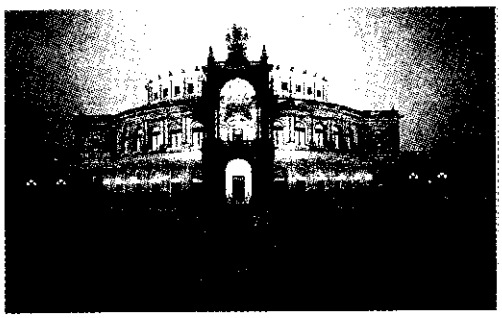
A TALE OF TWO FLOODS

IN THE northern Bangladesh district of Kurigram, disaster had struck in late July 2002. Hundreds of kilometres to the west, in Rajasthan, drought stalked the land, but northern Bangladesh was flooded with excess water pouring in from the Subcontinent's northeastern stretches. Millions of survivors abandoned their homes for the relative security of marginally higher ground. The death toll, at that point reaching only into the low hundreds, included nearly as many deaths by diarrhoea as by drowning. Several people had died of snake bites, and relief workers were wading through submerged villages delivering what little aid there was. There was not nearly enough food or medicine for all those in need. "We could provide relief to only a small number of flood victims", explained a relief worker in Sirajganj.

Yet while the mount-ing human toll of Asia's swollen rivers daily added new names to its death registers, the world's rich averted their eyes, pre-ferring to see instead the threatened historic districts and city centres of the Czech Republic, Germany and Austria. In scenes made familiar through up-to-the-minute satellite coverage, floodwater filled subway stations in Prague's old city, endangered postcard landmarks such as the Charles Bridge and the National Opera, and devastated corners of the city dubbed by BBC World "a jewel of Central Europe". Just across the north-western Czech border, one of the German cultural capitals, Dresden, mobilised thousands of emergency workers and volunteers to save famous architectural landmarks like the Zwinger Palace and the Semper Opera House. Czech officials also organised the populace for flood fighting, and went so far as to airlift animals from the Prague zoo to safety. The summer floods, now safely in recess, claimed about 100 lives in the Czech Republic, Austria, Germany, Russia and Romania together.

Without delay, the wealthy world stepped in to set things right in Central Europe. The US and several Scandinavian countries descended on Prague with heavy pumping equipment. The White House pledged generous financial aid and President George W Bush even called his Czech counterpart, Vaclav Havel, to assure him that the United States would rush supplies and monetary assistance to the Czech Republic for areas devastated by flooding. Not to be outdone by transatlantic generosity, the EU, which the Czech Republic may join as early as 2004, stepped in with USD 516 million in advance aid for German farmers, and another USD 55 million for the Czech Republic. The Germans, in turn, dug deep to find USD 500 million in immediate aid, and a whopping USD 6.9 billion in long term assistance. Down in Rome, the Pope offered prayers for the displaced of Central Europe, and European Commission president

> CNN's website has a European floods section, an honour typically reserved for US presidential elections and bin Laden



India under water, Semper Opera House under lights.

Romano Prodi vowed to raise USD 500 million for a natural disaster fund available to "EU states and those negotiating entry" – and then pledged to double that amount to an even billion within a few years. The Czech Republic, the most prosperous country of the former Soviet block, has a per capita GDP (purchasing power parity formula) of USD 12,900; Germany's is USD 23,400.

While the economic details of the European floods may be unfamiliar to many, the stories of heroism to save threatened museums, music halls and zoo animals are hardly unknown, even in the ignored corners of the South. All the international news channels (including BBC World, Deutche Welle and CNN International) continuously offered in-depth coverage of the tragedy on their global broadcasts. CNN has even gone so far as to establish a special European floods section on its website, an honour typically reserved for US presidential elections and the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

The world's poor are holding on to precious little, living in miserable conditions, with no access to clean water or medicine

In South Asia, the television cameras have yet to arrive, much less aid of any significant amount. Floodwaters along the reaches of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and their tributaries displaced or trapped 25 million, mostly poor, people. According to the latest 'official' numbers, the Subcontinent's floodwater human toll has topped 900. Nepal, the smallest of the region's affected countries, has suffered the heaviest losses, with at least 424 deaths. In China, floods have claimed 133 lives in the past few months; in Vietnam, at least 10. On the other side of the globe, 10 people died in central Mexico after high water brought on by unusually heavy rains burst through two dams, including one near San Luis Potosi, burying several villages under water.

Not surprisingly, information about the ongoing tragedies in South Asia, China and Mexico hardly appears on television programming beamed from the wealthy countries. Moreover, dispatches from Asia and Latin America carry no mention of 'aid' or 'relief'. No promises are being made to the people from these faraway places who are suffering what may well be the effects of a global warming primarily triggered by the rich world's unbridled consumption. No heavy equipment was shifted to India, Nepal, Bangladesh or China from nearby US Navy bases or from altruistic Scandinavian countries. The EU has resisted weak calls for assistance, and, as of going to press at the fag end of the Asian monsoon, George W Bush has not yet called South Asian leaders to offer the full resources of his country for the rehabilitation of flood victims.

As always, the rich world is ready to defend its citizens while neglecting the plight of the poor in other parts of the world. Destruction of cosy houses in the Bavarian city of Passau evokes more concern in Geneva or New York than the displacement of millions of poor peasants in India. Flooded cellars of Prague's national theatre mobilise incomparably more assistance than the destruction of Mexican villages.

Human life has different values, depending on where it is being threatened, a fact it does not take an 11 September to bring home. This reality is unfortunately accepted even by some of the poorest countries themselves. *Viet Nam News*, the national English language newspaper, carried long articles about the flood situation in Europe, while hardly mentioning that some poor Hanoi neighbourhoods on the banks of the Red River were under water.

In Nepal, the Red Cross was appealing for USD 1.6 million to help provide food, shelter, blankets, clothing and water puri-

fication tablets to flood victims. Truly a pittance, if one considers the magnitude of the tragedy. But then again, the implicit message in grants from the rich world is that poor countries should be grateful for anything they do get, even if the amount is insulting. Forget about the hundreds of millions of dollars being offered in the first stages of relief to Europeans.

While the International Red Cross aimed to raise USD 7.4 million in emergency aid for Central American countries devastated by Hurricane Mitch (1998), these very countries were paying USD 2.2 million every day in debt service to their creditors. When they pleaded to have the debt cancelled, the World Bank responded that "although there is a great deal of sympathy for the devastated countries, it would be unfair, impossible and ultimately irresponsible to end the debt burden and walk away". No substantial help for the hurricane victims was ever delivered. Only a few years later, hundreds of thousands of people in Nicaragua and Honduras are, once again, on the verge of starvation.

Czech, German and Austrian emergency units and armed forces are already cleaning up the mess left by the flooding of summer 2002. Insurance companies are opening their wallets (in the Czech Republic, to the tune of USD 597 million), governments are talking about emergency relief funds, and newspapers are advising their readers on how to file insurance claims for the maximum amount of money (an estimated 130,000 Czech claims have already been filed). Just as the water did a few weeks earlier, sympathy and funds are now literally pouring into Central Europe, and the long list of threatened "architectural jewels" is mentioned over and over again in thousands of detailed reports from the flood frontlines. Czech and German emergency shelters are providing victims with hearty food, medical care and, above all, limitless sympathy.

The world's poor are holding tight to the little bundles they have been able to rescue from their flooded homes and shacks, living in miserable conditions, mostly with no access to clean water or medicine. Does the rich, 'white' world have any genuine sympathy for those suffering beyond its high walls? The answer on the airwaves, and on the ground is: probably not.

– Andre Vltchek

Deadlock in Burma

by ***Larry Jagan***

For more than two years now Burma's military leaders have been holding secret talks with the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The dialogue started while Aung San Suu Kyi was still under house arrest. When she was released earlier this year, the international community and the people of Burma expected the process to move to the next stage – substantive political negotiations. But instead it now looks as if the whole process has stalled. Progress needed to resolve the country's political deadlock looks as far away as ever.

Just a few months ago a political breakthrough seemed not only possible but also imminent. The United Nations special envoy, Razali Ismail, who brokered the talks between the two sides, in fact, believed that it was just a matter of a few weeks before something substantial was achieved to break the impasse that is now more than a decade old. But Burma's generals have revealed their true colours. The military leaders have for long asserted that the country was going through a transition toward a multi-party democracy. Now, however, the country's powerful intelligence chief, General Khin Nyunt, says, "Such a transition cannot be done in haste or in a haphazard manner". He warned, "The world is full of examples where hasty transition from one system to another led to unrest, instability and even failed states".

In line with this, Burma's generals have taken to making public pronouncements about their vision of democracy, and the hardline underlying that vision does not inspire much confidence. They have borrowed quite liberally from the political philosophy of one of their few uncritical supporters, Dr Mahathir Mohammad. The Malaysian prime minister has always maintained that Malaysia's form of paternal democracy, which he believes incorporates what he terms 'Asian values', is the most appropriate for Burma. He told the generals when he visited Rangoon earlier this year that they do not necessarily have to adopt a Western approach to democracy. More importantly, he has constantly warned the regime that it should not bow to international pressure and instead evolve a Burmese variant of democracy.

But 'native democracy' seems to derive its more practical orientation not from Malaysia, but from the Chinese approach to politics. This is best exemplified by the intelligence boss' recent rhetoric. He has been saying, "The democracy we seek to build may not be identical to the West but it will surely be based on universal principles of liberty, justice and equality". It is therefore more than likely that Burma's military rulers are now looking at the Chinese political model as the basis of their new constitution.

General stranglehold

Despite recent expectations to the contrary, what seems to be happening is that the country's top military leader – Senior General Than Shwe – has actually strengthened his control over both the army and the administrative structure. Ever since the arrest of four members of the former military dictator General Ne Win's family six months ago, allegedly for planning a coup against the current military regime, there have been growing signs that Than Shwe is intent on establishing his own dynasty.

Even before Ne Win's son-in-law and three grandsons were detained in March, Than Shwe had been reasserting his authority. He dismissed two top generals who had been accused of being heavily involved in

corruption. He then made major changes within the army high command, transferring 10 out of 12 of the country's regional commanders, who exert almost complete authority in the areas under their control, and stationing them in Rangoon instead. They were replaced by officers whose allegiance to Than Shwe is unquestioned.

These actions have fuelled the growing suspicion in many quarters that Than Shwe, having secured his leadership position beyond question, is intent on staying in power. "General intends to hold onto power for another 10 years", says a senior military source close to Than Shwe. "He is prepared to talk to the opposition leader, work with the NLD in an interim administration, and even consider power-sharing at some point, but his main strategy is to drag the dialogue process out and retain power as long as possible".

The trend of recent promotions in the army – with Than Shwe's two top lieutenants being promoted and one of them, General Maung Aye, also being appointed Deputy Senior General – is a clear indication that this is an army top brass that does not intend retiring soon, despite being overtaken by old age . The suspicion that the generals are bent on consolidating power is strengthened by the death sentence awarded to the arrested members of Ne Win's family, even though most observers believe this will be commuted to life imprisonment. Either way, the end of the Ne Win dynasty as a potential rival to the ruling combine in Rangoon is certain. Indeed, the fear in pro-democracy circles is that General Than Shwe is fashioning a lineage of his own on the model of the Ne Win dynasty. The Senior General is now often accompanied on his official travels around the country by his teenage grandson, who has on occasion even been paraded around in his military uniform. This was conveyed in a particularly stark manner when the state-owned media continuously showed pictures of the two, even as the Ne Win affair was getting full play.

Those who know Than Shwe well say he is an avid sports follower. In fact many diplomats in Rangoon believe he spends much of his time watching international football games on satellite television. A senior Asian politician recently asked the general how he saw Burma's political game – between the army and the pro-democracy opposition – working out in the future. "You've got it all wrong", he replied. "We are the umpire not one of the teams in the match". For the Burmese people, all this is par for the course. For them the past 14 years have been full of hopes being raised only to be dashed by the junta's intransigence.

Today, on the streets of Rangoon there is growing despondency. This is in stark contrast to the mood throughout the country six months ago, after the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest on 6 May. She had spent the previous 19 months confined to her residence for trying to visit party activists in Mandalay, central Burma, in defiance of a travel ban slapped by the State Peace and Development Council. For the residents of Rangoon, Aung San Suu Kyi's release was a moment they had long waited for. Though the state-run media studiously avoided covering the event for hours, on the day she was freed people were watching satellite television and listening to overseas radio broadcasts. The official silence was to no avail, and by the time she arrived at the party headquarters everyone in Rangoon knew that she had been freed and large crowds had gathered to greet her.

"The country needs her free", an old man buying rice in the shop a few doors down from the NLD office said back then. "She will rebuild her party and win the next elections". Others were looking to her for some relief in their daily struggle for survival. "Now Daw Suu is free, things will get better – we will get more meat and vegetables to eat", said a young mother shopping in the market near the party headquarters. For the NLD and its key leaders, Suu Kyi's release was an ecstatic moment. "They are relieved", a senior member of the party said. "They have shouldered all the responsibility for the last 18 months and now Daw Suu is free, a great weight is lifted from their shoulders". These three reactions encapsulate the range of expectations of the freed leader, but the political expectation is clearly the most demanding one. The leader's release lifted the sagging morale of the opposition movement and transformed the headquarters into a hive of activity from the cemetery it had come to resemble during the period of her internment. On 6 May, the ramshackle office, near the famous Shwedagon Pagoda, was full of party activists preparing for the arrival of their leader.

But what happened on that day in many ways exemplified the political process that was to unfold – that the climate and agenda of opposition activity is still at least partially being dictated by the junta. On 6 May, the crowd outside the party office was destined to be disappointed. No sooner had Suu Kyi arrived than she was whisked into the building by NLD leaders who feared that the crowds outside might get out of hand, thus giving the military an excuse to place her under house arrest again. Her moment of arrival became also in a sense her moment of seclusion. Now, as time passes without any concrete progress towards negotiations the public euphoria over her release has been gradually dissipating.

External mediation

This discouraging recent history notwithstanding, the United Nations envoy Razali Ismail continues to be optimistic that progress towards real political discussions is still possible and that a meeting between Suu Kyi and a senior representative of the military government, probably General Khin Nyunt, is on the cards. This, despite the fact that many other concessions he expected from the regime are yet to materialise. Perhaps Razali's optimism stems from the fact that external pressure has been consistently maintained on the Rangoon

government to find a negotiated settlement.

There is no doubt that international pressure has been largely responsible for diluting the junta's intransigence. For more than 10 years, the world community has been trying to engage the Burmese generals in a dialogue through the UN, which has consistently demanded that the regime improve its human rights record and institute political negotiations. For the past 11 years a special rapporteur on human rights in Burma has compiled annual reports which have been tabled at the UN General Assembly. These reports have been among the principal bases for the UN resolutions adopted unanimously every year urging Burma's government to respect human rights, free all political prisoners, start concrete tripartite talks with the opposition and the ethnic groups, and honour the election results of 1990.

The 1990 elections remain, even after more than a decade, one of the most contentious unresolved issues of Burmese politics. Back then, the Burmese military had honoured the outgoing military dictator Ne Win's 1988 promise to hold national elections. Despite the fact that the opposition leader had been under house arrest since July 1989, the NLD swept the elections on 27 May 1990, winning over 80 percent of the seats. But the military regime then refused to honour the election results and held onto power despite the barrage of international condemnation. This has always stood in the way of international engagement with the Burmese regime.

Aung San

Apart from monitoring the human rights situation in Burma, the UN has also tried periodically to help break Burma's political stalemate by offering to facilitate discussions between the two main protagonists in the conflict. This was how Razali Ismail, a senior Malaysian diplomat, came to be appointed UN special envoy to try and break the Burmese deadlock. He has visited the country every three months since his appointment and held discussions with both Aung San Suu Kyi and the top military leaders, including General Than Shwe.

Razali has not only had the weight of the UN behind him, but the active support of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially the Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad, who is regarded by Than Shwe as Rangoon's most important regional and international ally. On several occasions over the past three years the general has sought the Malaysian leader's advice on a number of issues, including on how to reduce the country's international isolation and develop the country's economy.

While international pressure has played its part in improving the situation, Razali Ismail's own efforts at selling the idea of negotiations to both sides cannot be discounted. It was he who finally convinced the generals that they should release Suu Kyi if they entertained any hope of ending their international isolation. For her part, Suu Kyi was far from certain that being released would actually help the opposition's cause. In fact, while under house arrest she often told visiting diplomats that her release was her only bargaining chip with the generals. Razali eventually persuaded the reluctant leader that her release was an important precondition for the negotiations to make substantive headway. Discussions between the two adversaries on the political future of Burma, he argued, would require Suu Kyi to rebuild the NLD and discuss crucial policy issues with other leaders of the party.

The secret talks started shortly after the NLD leader was put under house arrest in September 2000. Since then, it has been a slow and tortuous process. The key priority was to build confidence between the two sides, to overcome mutual suspicion. For the NLD, the main demands were the immediate release of all political prisoners, the reopening of the party offices, and assurance that party members would be allowed to function without being harassed or intimidated by the military authorities.

Than Shwe

The general expectation was that with the release of Burma's most prominent political figure, national reconciliation would graduate to the phase of substantive political dialogue. "Both sides agree that the confidence-building phase is now over", Suu Kyi told a news conference in Rangoon immediately after she was released. "The authorities have said they look forward to moving to a more significant stage of the talks". But things have turned out somewhat differently. During her captivity, Suu Kyi had met top generals, including Than Shwe, Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt, more than 70 times. But in the five months since her release, according to the NLD spokesman, U Lwin, there has been no meeting between Suu Kyi and the generals.

The party and its perils

As always, the generals seem to be calling the shots and stalling the talks. The opposition leader and the NLD still have their work cut out for them if they are to succeed in sustaining the pressure against the regime. They need to rebuild the party and rejuvenate its activities. Most party offices throughout the country have been defunct for years. The party headquarters has fallen into disrepair, and even today resembles a rundown mausoleum of democracy rather than a vibrant centre of political activity.

Fortunately, the general despondency about the negotiations petering out seems not to have infected the NLD itself and some signs of revival at the party head-

quarters can be detected. On most mornings, there are education classes in session on the ground floor, where young activists study subjects ranging from public health to English language. In the afternoon, the party's medical workers run a health clinic where babies are measured and weighed, and the mothers given powdered milk. There are regular meetings of the various sub-committees that have been established to revitalise the party and prepare the ground for it to function properly as a well-equipped political party when the situation changes in Burma and there is full political freedom.

"There are committees preparing policy on health, education, defence and the economy", says U Lwin, "but our most important task is to reopen all our offices in Rangoon and the divisional headquarters throughout the country". While most offices in Rangoon have now been opened, only a small fraction of those outside the capital have been revived. Allowing the NLD to function is one of the government's concessions to the political process.

It is critical, at this juncture, for the NLD to show that it will be able to run the country in the future. Although the party won the 1990 elections convincingly, that victory was seen by many not so much as a vote for the NLD as an endorsement of its charismatic leader. NLD leaders even admit privately that the party would be nothing without her. The party has to be prepared to fight another election, in case the military allows polls to be held, and demonstrate that it has the organisational fire to match Suu Kyi's personal charisma.

Paradoxically enough, it is Suu Kyi's popularity that fuels concern about the NLD leadership as a whole. The fear is that there really may be no one within the NLD who could replace her. The other top leaders – U Lwin, Aung Shwe and Tin Oo — are all in their 70s, and the party in the near future will feel acutely the lack of a new generation of leaders. Unlike the military, which is carefully grooming junior officers to occupy high office in the future, there is little succession-planning within the opposition movement.

The party also faces the problem of inadequate cadre expansion. U Lwin admits that membership is falling. "We once attracted the students, but we now have great difficulty in interesting them in joining us", he says. He feels this will change though when there is greater freedom for political action. However, there may well be a deeper basis for this problem. Ever since the NLD was formed, there has always been tension between the young radical students and the old guard, most of whom were formerly soldiers under General Aung San and later General Ne Win.

There has been resentment among young NLD activists over the past decade that Aung San Suu Kyi has appeared to favour the old guard. And there is also growing impatience among the younger rank and file, who would like more transparency and vigour in the negotiation process. "We are frustrated by constantly being told to be patient and trust our leader", says one young NLD member. The junta's delay in taking the dialogue forward could potentially deepen the generational divide in the opposition.

The party's problems are compounded by the incipient and dangerous rift between the NLD and the pro-democracy opposition groups in exile, such as the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, which refuse to take the military's sincerity at face value. That attitude is likely to conflict with Aung San Suu Kyi's present political strategy, and if the divide becomes more pronounced it could diminish her ability to be the unifying force she currently is.

For Suu Kyi and the NLD, one positive change that may help overcome these problems is that since her release there have been few restrictions on her movement or her political activity. She has even been allowed to visit government development projects and UN projects. In a calculated publicity ploy, the military regime has even told her that it welcomes suggestions from her. "But they have been careful to tell her to send any comments or suggestions she might have in a letter", says a Western diplomat. "They certainly do not want to give an impression that she is being given any role in government at all, even in what would be seen as the legitimate role of an opposition".

No matter how slim the possibility may seem at present, Aung San Suu Kyi and the party need to prepare themselves for future political talks with the generals. This entails taking a substantial number of important policy decisions and clarifying the party's explicit position on many issues. The two major issues are its stand on the status of the 1990 election results and the NLD's participation in the National Convention, created by the military regime for formulating a constitution, which the party walked out of six years ago. The leadership will also have to formulate its position on an issue that has international implications, namely its attitude to trade sanctions and humanitarian aid. Any changes in the party's policy will have to be based on a vigorous discussion both within the party central committee and with the rank and file.

The biggest question that will confront the party, and one that gives the military regime the greatest scope

Editorial Note

Staying with 'Burma'

IN 1989, Burma was officially named Myanmar by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (renamed the State Peace and Development Council in 1997) to emphasise the fact that the country was made up of more than the Burman people. However, the substitution of the colonial name by the supposedly more 'egalitarian' Myanmar has been rejected by the pro-democracy movement because it is an initiative of the junta. The democracy movement in the country has, therefore, stayed with 'Burma', which is what *Himal* also follows.

for manipulation, is how to involve the ethnic leaders in any substantive talks about Burma's political future. Ever since the secret talks between the opposition leader and the generals started, there has been pressure to involve the leadership of ethnic groups in tripartite talks. This is something that Aung San Suu Kyi has also been particularly concerned about. The NLD has always maintained good relations with the ethnic political parties. To emphasise Suu Kyi's commitment to strengthening this relationship, on the day she was released, leaders of four ethnic political parties – the Shan, Mon, Arakanese and Chin – along with a Kokang representative were invited to join the NLD central committee members for a briefing by her.

So far the NLD has been advising ethnic leaders that they need to organise themselves before they can directly participate in talks. The de facto leader of the ethnic groups, Khun Tun Oo – who heads the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) – says he wants the ethnic groups to form their own national convention to discuss their common concerns, political aspirations and, above all, to build trust and confidence between all the ethnic groups before they are even involved in the dialogue process, let alone in tripartite talks.

This in itself is a major stumbling block, since a national convention of ethnic groups would involve legal political groups like the SNLD, political groups that have been de-registered by the military government, ethnic rebel groups which have signed cease-fire agreements with Rangoon, and armed ethnic guerrilla groups like the Karen National Union which are still fighting Burmese troops. So far the generals have tried to prevent political groups like the SNLD from meeting and talking with Shan rebel groups like the Shan State Army which have signed a ceasefire agreement with Rangoon.

There is no doubt that Rangoon's military chiefs know that only the ethnic groups can provide an answer to Burma's decades of ethnic strife and political uncertainty. However, the military regime to date has not given up its talk of a unitary state, whereas the ethnic groups want a federal state. The NLD vision of Burma's new constitution actually comes quite close to a federal structure, and talks may in fact lead Burma out of its decades-old morass, but the generals are adamant about not allowing a meeting among all the players in the game. So far they have kept the ethnic groups who have signed ceasefire agreements out of the national reconciliation process. It is likely that Burma's military leaders see the ethnic groups as a pawn they can use against the NLD.

The army's resistance to ethnic autonomy and a federal system has been clear from the outset. When the army first seized power in 1962, it claimed that it had been forced to take control in order to prevent Burma from being split by ethnic rebel guerrillas demanding autonomy, and plunging the country into anarchy. In the circumstances today, if the generals do allow the ethnic question to be raised, it may well be to drive a wedge and pre-empt the possibility of a combined opposition.

Consequently, the NLD will need to address these issues at the earliest, for though the talks have stalled for the present, the possibility of the regime returning to the negotiating table as a consequence of accentuated social unrest cannot be ruled out. At that juncture the NLD cannot afford to have permitted the situation to get out of its control.

Rice and revolt

The rapidly deteriorating social and economic situation has affected the NLD no doubt, but it is the government which may find its plan to cling to power for the long term undone by inflationary tendencies in the market and the accompanying collapse of law and order. In fact, what the government is confronted with today is an internal crisis of serious proportions. Though the public at large is despondent, some activist students have started a campaign demanding immediate political reform. In the wake of the recent arrest and release of some dissident students who had been protesting publicly in Rangoon, more students are planning a leaflet campaign demanding political change.

There is a real danger of social unrest escalating throughout the country. The aborted political negotiations may be the focus of some of the current protests, but the underlying economic crisis will very likely amplify the disturbances to unmanageable proportions. Reports of looting from across the country are increasingly frequent now. Diplomatic sources in Rangoon say at least six rice warehouses in rural areas have been ransacked in the past few weeks. Several trucks transporting rice to the districts have been robbed on the highways and two rice boats were attacked on the Irrawaddy. These incidents are direct consequences of inflation and the shortage of basic necessities.

Rice prices have been escalating rapidly as the government finds it increasingly difficult to procure sufficient stocks of rice to meet the domestic demand. A 50-kilogram bag of the lowest quality rice currently sells for more than 7000 kyat, an increase of more than 50 percent in the past two months. Better quality rice is now more than 1000 kyat for a kilogram. In Rangoon, the price of rice has registered a more than 100 percent increase since the beginning of the year, while in some rural areas, residents complain of a four-fold increase in price over the past five months. There is certainly a serious problem of supply in the domestic market. Analysts believe this is partly because of the government's obsessive export drive; the junta has set a target of exporting more than a billion tonnes of rice this year. This export-induced domestic scarcity is accentuated by crop damage due to floods, which have severely disrupted the government's distribution system. The flood forecast for the coming agricultural year is not very promising either.

The fear that the rice shortage is going to reach unmanageable proportions because of long-term environmental factors next year is not unfounded. An independent agricultural expert doing preliminary research in Burma has privately warned the UN that there is a very real risk of famine in the year ahead because of the likelihood of crop failures due to massive soil degradation arising from over-cropping and acute lack of fertilisers.

Burma's generals have always been nervous about the prospect of civil disturbances as a result of rice shortages. In the past six months they have been selling rationed low grade rice at subsidised prices throughout the country but especially in urban areas like Rangoon. Residents there say people line up every day for hours to buy the small quantities of essential commodities being dispensed at these government outlets. These queues are getting longer even as the permitted ration is getting smaller in volume. Because of the low rice supplies available for distribution even the minimal relief being provided is shrinking as the number of stalls has been reduced in some areas of Rangoon.

Inflation is now at over 50 percent a year. Even the bribes necessary to keep basic amenities like phone lines in working order have gone up. Medical costs have more than doubled over the last three months since the border with Thailand has been closed. Wages and salaries have not kept pace with the rise in prices. Burmese economists estimate that an average family of five needs more than 80,000 kyat (USD 80) a month to live, costs of food, medicine and transport included but not luxury goods. As against this, the average monthly income of professionals – teachers, university professors, government officials – is less than 10,000 kyat (USD 10).

Many families, especially those living on the outskirts of Rangoon or in the poorer rural districts, can afford only one meal a day. They supplement this with a bottle of glutinous water that is left over from cooking and is available for less than a cent in roadside markets. Average Burmese living standards are declining rapidly and UN officials fear that a massive humanitarian crisis is looming. They estimate that already at least one child in three under the age of five suffers from malnutrition. If the situation remains unchecked, they fear that this could double in the next 12 months.

Rice shortages have in the past brought people out onto the streets in protest against the government. According to senior military intelligence sources, the government fears the possibility of food riots and has already begun to form and train special military units to control civil disturbances.

It is not surprising that there has been an inordinate increase in crime levels, especially in Rangoon. Some observers claim that the situation is worse than it was in 1987-88. This new spate of crime is certainly a reflection of Burma's rapidly worsening economic conditions, especially in the cities, and could easily well up into political unrest.

Compulsions and equations

Political unrest sparked off by economic collapse will seriously compromise the government. But it is an outcome that the NLD does not want either. For the NLD, the process of building trust has come a long way, and it fears a return to the absolute repression of a few years ago. In September, on the anniversary of the founding of the NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi reiterated her willingness to cooperate with the military regime in the interests of the people. The real implication of this statement is still not clear, but it certainly was an invitation to the military to cooperate on social and humanitarian issues.

If the dialogue process is to make any progress, the NLD and the military must at least be seen to be looking for common ground. "Aung San Suu Kyi and the military must find ways of working together, the future of the country depends on it", says Aung Naing Oo, a Burmese political analyst based in Thailand. "The NLD needs the army because they do not have the necessary experience yet to run a country". The first and most obvious step in this direction is the forming of a joint committee, involving representatives of both the military and the NLD, to set priorities in health and education and mobilise humanitarian aid to put these programmes into practice. But even this seems quite some way off. The NLD favours the idea, but so far UN envoy Razali Ismail has not been able to convince the generals to accept it.

Burma's political future is now critically poised. There is no doubt that most people in Burma are struggling to survive and need a change. Aung Sang Suu Kyi may be free, but the military is still in control. Both the generals and the opposition have their compulsions, and there is really no clear indication of how events will transpire in the coming months. For the junta in Rangoon, politics may be manageable, but the economy is evidently not. The resultant social unrest may spiral out of the control of both the government and the NLD. That cannot be a pleasing prospect for either side or for Burma as a whole. It is therefore incumbent on the NLD to set about rebuilding and mobilising its base against the government, without provoking violence. At the same time it will need to cooperate with the generals on issues of humanitarian concern, without weakening its cadre's agitational resolve. Both sides are treading a fine line, and it increasingly looks as if the final arbitrator will be the 'international community'. When that final settlement will happen is anybody's guess. But in the interim the threat mounted by spiralling inflation and social unrest have added to the difficulties of the regime in Rangoon. "The generals must know they are running out of time", says a UN official, "and starting substantive political talks as soon as possible is essential if they want to ensure stability". △

China and South Asia's east

For economic and strategic reasons, Burma is crucial to both China and India. China has first-mover advantage but India has now woken up to the threat in the east. Meanwhile, the junta is looking less cohesive than it did.

by ***Bertil Lintner***

While Burma remains largely shunned by the West for its human rights record and repressive political system, the country's biggest neighbours, China and India, are jockeying for influence in Rangoon, with Pakistan actively supporting Beijing in the regional power play. To complicate matters, this has set off an internal power struggle within the junta in Rangoon. The outcome of this multi-layered regional competition is more likely to determine Burma's political destiny than any move made by the West to pressurise it into a dialogue with the country's pro-democracy opposition forces.

The configuration of this conflict became clear when Pakistan's military leader, General Pervez Musharraf, paid a landmark visit to Burma from 1 to 3 May 2001. Burma's military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has consistently maintained that foreign naval vessels would not be permitted to visit the country's ports. But prior to Musharraf's arrival, no less than three Pakistani naval vessels – a submarine, a tanker and a destroyer – were seen in Rangoon. At the same time, a Chinese submarine was reportedly visiting the port city of Sittwe in western Burma ahead of a visit by a high-powered Chinese military delegation. These two countries would be keen to persuade Burma's military leaders not to get too close to their common regional rival, India.

New Delhi, for its part, has also been trying to improve ties with Burma since it normalised relations with the military junta in 1993. In February 2001, Jaswant Singh, the Indian foreign minister, visited Rangoon to discuss avenues for closer cooperation. This was preceded by Burmese army chief and SPDC vice chairman General Maung Aye's two visits to India in 2000. Meanwhile, the powerful intelligence chief and first secretary in the SPDC, Lt General Khin Nyunt, seen as a rival to the army chief, is believed to be pro-China and he paid a highly publicised visit to Pakistan in July 2000.

China and its ally, Pakistan, enjoy a considerable head start in the race to woo Rangoon's military leaders over to their side. Burma began to formally develop into an important Chinese ally when, on 6 August 1988, the two countries signed a trade agreement. By then, the days of Mao's support to the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which holds the record for the longest running communist insurgency anywhere, were well and truly over and Dengist pragmatism was guiding Chinese policy. This agreement was the first of its kind that a hitherto isolated Burma had entered into with a neighbour. It was especially significant because the agreement was signed at a time when Burma was in turmoil: two days later, millions of people in virtually every city, town and village in the country took to the streets to demand an end to army rule and a restoration of the democracy the country had enjoyed prior to the first military coup in 1962.

The Chinese, renowned for their ability to plan far ahead, had expressed their intentions, almost unnoticed, in an article in the official *Beijing Review* as early as 2 September 1985. Titled 'Opening to the Southwest: An Expert Opinion', the article, which was written by the former vice-minister of communications, Pan Qi, outlined the possibilities of finding an outlet for trade from China's landlocked provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, through Burma, to the Indian Ocean. It mentioned the Burmese railheads of Myitkyina and Lashio in the northeast, and the Irrawaddy river, as possible conduits for the export of Chinese goods – but it omitted to mention that all relevant border areas, at that time, were not under Burmese central government control.

That situation changed in 1989 with the Wa mutiny within the CPB. The Wa is the hill tribe whose members formed the rank and file of the insurgent CPB, whose leadership of was primarily Burman. Subsequent to the revolt, the CPB split along ethnic lines into four different regional armies – and all of them entered into cease-fire agreements with the government. By 1990, trade between the two countries was flourishing, and ties between Burma and China gradually gained strength. By 1990, Burma had become China's principal political and military ally in the South Asian east.

Chinese arms poured into Burma to help the survival of the extremely unpopular military regime, recipi-

ent of worldwide condemnation when it brutally crushed the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. In view of the Rangoon massacre of 1988, and the Tiananmen Square massacre the following year, it is hardly surprising that the two then isolated, internationally condemned neighbours would feel a great empathetic bond. On 30 September 1989, Burmese intelligence chief Khin Nyunt said in an address to a group of Chinese engineers working on a project in Rangoon: "We sympathise with the People's Republic of China as disturbances similar to those in Burma last year broke out in the People's Republic of China [in May-June 1989]".

Brothers in arms

Burma's strategic importance to China was not lost on observers. By late 1991, Chinese experts were assisting in a series of infrastructure projects to spruce up the poorly maintained roads and railways. Chinese military advisers arrived in the same year, the first foreign military personnel to be stationed in Burma since the Australians had a contingent there to train the Burmese army in the 1950s. Burma was, in effect, becoming a Chinese client state. Ironically, what the insurgent CPB had failed to achieve for the Chinese on the battlefield had been accomplished by shrewd diplomacy and trade.

The total value of Chinese arms deliveries to Burma in the 1990s is not known, but intelligence sources estimate it to be between USD 1 and 2 billion, most of it acquired on extremely generous terms. After crushing the 1988 uprising, and to prevent a recurrence of similar popular movements, Burma's military regime has more than doubled the size of its armed forces. The number of men in the three services increased from 186,000 in 1988 to 450,000 in 2001, and all three branches underwent significant modernisation programmes.

Military hardware delivered by China in a little more than a decade includes 80 Type 69II medium battle tanks, more than a hundred Type 63 light tanks, 250 Type 85 armoured personnel carriers, multiple launch rocket systems, howitzers, anti-aircraft guns, HN-5 surface-to-air missiles, mortars, assault rifles, recoilless guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, JLP-50 and JLG-43 air defence radars, heavy trucks, Chengdu F-7M Airguard jet fighters, FT-7 and FT-6 jet trainers, A-5C ground attack aircraft, SACY-8D transport aircraft, Hainan class patrol boats, Houxin-class guided missile fast attack craft, minesweepers and small gunboats. In 2000, China delivered 12 Karakoram-8 trainers/ground attack aircraft, which are produced in a joint venture with Pakistan. Pakistan, for its part, has also sold munitions to Burma, including 120mm mortar bombs and machine-gun ammunition.

While one of the reasons why China has decided to arm Burma may be to provide a military umbrella to protect new trade routes through potentially volatile territory, some analysts view the support in a more long-term perspective. Access, even indirectly, to the Indian Ocean gives China a strategic advantage. The Strait of Malacca is, for instance, a key transit point for the bulk of Japan's West Asian oil imports.

But it is India, not Japan, that has reacted the strongest to China's high-profile presence in Burma. Of particular concern has been the Chinese role in the upgrading of Burma's naval facilities – including at least four electronic listening posts along the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea: Man-aung on an island off the coast of the western Arakan, or Rakhine, State; Hainggyi Island in the Irrawaddy delta, Zadetkyi (St Matthew) Island just north of the entrance to the Malacca Strait; and the strategically important Coco Island just north of India's Andaman Islands. Chinese technicians have also been spotted at the naval bases at Monkey Point near Rangoon, and the Kyaikkami facility south of the port city of Moulmein.

> Burma was effectively becoming a Chinese client state

Although China's presence in the Bay of Bengal is currently limited to instructors and technicians, the fact that the new radar equipment is Chinese-made – and is most likely also operated at least in part by Chinese technicians – has enabled Beijing's intelligence agencies to monitor this sensitive maritime region. China and Burma have signed several agreements under which they have pledged to share intelligence that could be of use to both countries. The arrival of a Chinese submarine in a Burmese port also adds an important strategic element to Beijing's arms sales to Burma, indicating that they were much more than purely commercial deals.

In June 1998, India's defence minister George Fernandes caused great uproar when he accused Beijing of helping Burma install surveillance and communications equipment on islands in the Bay of Bengal. Burma denied the accusations, while China's foreign ministry expressed "utmost grief and resentment" over the minister's comments. New Delhi however, had good reason to be concerned. In August 1994, the Indian coast guard caught three boats "fishing" close to the site of a major Indian naval base in the Andamans. The trawlers were flying the Burmese flag, but the crew of 55 was Chinese. There was no fishing equipment on board – only radio communication and depth-sounding equipment. The crew was released at the intervention of the Chinese embassy in New Delhi. The incident was discreetly buried in the defence ministry files in New Delhi. But when China's designs became more obvious, the new and more alert government in New Delhi began to pay greater attention to developments in Burma.

In March 1997, the China News Agency in Beijing reported that a Sino-Burmese expert group had "conducted a study on the possibility of land and water transport,

via Yunnan and into the Irrawaddy valley in Burma". On 5 May that same year, the official Xinhua news agency reported that Beijing and Rangoon had reached an agreement on developing this route. Xinhua said this route would be 5800 kilometres shorter than the older route of access to open waters which linked the Yunnanese capital Kunming and the nearest port on China's east coast, Shanghai.

Intelligence chief, Khin Nyunt, on state television.

Long before that agreement was reached, however, China had begun to construct a railway from Kunming to Xiaguan (near Dali), on its side of the Yunnanese frontier. By now, the old Burma Road from Kunming to Ruili on the Burmese border has also been upgraded, and Chinese engineers have completed work on the last 120-kilometre stretch of the road from Ruili across the border to Bhamo on the Irrawaddy river in Burma's Kachin State. Bhamo is the northernmost port on the Irrawaddy that is accessible from the south. Intelligence sources in Burma say the plan was to use a fleet of barges to transport goods from there to Minhla, some 1000 kilometres downriver and 280 kilometres north of Rangoon. From Minhla, a road is being built across the Arakan Yoma mountain range, running via An to Kyaukpyu on the coast. Kyaukpyu had been chosen as the site for a new deepwater port rather than the silted mouth of the Rangoon river.

It was to finalise this plan that army chief General Maung Aye went to China in June 2000, but it now seems certain that although he did agree to strengthen trade relations, Beijing may not have got all the concessions they had expected – and it is believed that India may have played a role in this turn of events.

Around 1993 India realised that its policies had pushed Burma closer to Beijing

Cultural calculus

Historically, independent India had maintained extremely cordial relations with Burma. Jawaharlal Nehru and U Nu, the first prime ministers of the two countries, shared a common worldview, and India even lent some assistance to the government in Rangoon in the political crisis that followed on the heels of independence. Even after the coup in 1962, India kept up formal relations with Burma until 1988 when India's stance changed with the military regime's brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy demonstrators. India's prime minister at the time, Rajiv Gandhi, came out in open support of the movement for democracy and it was stated policy that India would give shelter to genuine Burmese refugees. Supporting the country's pro-democracy forces is thought to have been India's way of countering China's influence in Burma. However, around 1993 India began to re-evaluate its strategy out of concern that its policies had achieved little except push Burma closer to Beijing. The result was a dramatic policy shift aimed at improving relations with Rangoon. A senior Indian official says that the Burmese generals have been sending signals to New Delhi to take greater interest in development work to lessen their heavy dependence on China.

In January 2000, the then Indian Army chief, General Ved Prakash Malik, paid a two-day visit to Burma, which was followed up by a visit by Maung Aye to the northeast Indian city of Shillong. The unusual nature of this visit by a foreign leader to a provincial capital was accentuated by the arrival of a group of senior Indian official from trade, energy, defence, home and foreign affairs ministries to hold talks with the general. In the aftermath of these meetings, India began to provide non-lethal military support to Burmese troops along the common border. Most of their uniforms and some other combat gear now come from India. India is also reported to have leased some helicopters to the Burmese.

In November 2000, the Indian government felt confident enough about bilateral relations to invite Maung Aye to New Delhi as head of a delegation that also included several other high-ranking junta members and cabinet ministers, notably two of the secretaries of the SPDC, Lt Generals Tin Oo and Win Myint, foreign minister Win Aung and Col Kyaw Win, deputy head of the powerful Directorate of the Defence Services Intelligence. Conspicuous by his absence was the intelligence chief, Lt Gen Khin Nyunt – who, tellingly, had taken off for a visit to Pakistan on the very same day that General Malik arrived for a second visit to the country in July 2000.

In many ways, Burma's military government has been caught on the horns of a dilemma. It had to accept Chinese aid when nobody else was prepared to support or do business with it – but what began as a rather modest trade agreement developed into a heavy political and military dependence. Moreover, tens of thousands of illegal Chinese immigrants have moved across the border over the past 10 years and taken over local businesses in the north of the country. This illegal migration has caused friction with the local population,

and some ethnic clashes have already taken place between Chinese immigrants and local tribesmen in the north. Maung Aye, a staunch Burmese nationalist, is said to be more concerned about these demographic changes than defence and trade agreements with China.

Mystery also surrounds the renewed presence of the Indian right-wing Hindu organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Burma. The RSS first came to Burma in the 1940s to provide services for the country's ethnic Indian minority, but it lay dormant after the military took over in 1962 and most Indians left. Now, a renewed effort to build up a Rangoon branch of the RSS is being made – apparently with the blessings of General Maung Aye. The RSS (which in Burma is called the Sanatana Dharma Swayamsevak Sangh) has convinced some Burmese generals that Hinduism and Buddhism are "branches of the same tree" – and that "the best guard against China is culture", to quote a Calcutta-based RSS official. Although the RSS is the parent organisation of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which leads the current coalition government in New Delhi, it is far from certain that the fundamentalists' Rangoon mission has the blessings of the Indian government. But, parallel to this development, New Delhi is actively encouraging Maung Aye to visit historic Buddhist sites in India, which seems to lend credence to the suggestion that this could indeed be part of a "cultural diplomacy" drive on the part of India to woo Burma away from China, and to take advantage of the rift between the army and intelligence chiefs.

But the question is also what Burma could do to loosen its dependence on China, if it were to decide to do so – and if India is to have any chance of succeeding in its attempts. Intelligence analysts say that China's economic, political and military grip over the country has already become so strong that it would be very hard for Rangoon to change its policies. Any major political change in Burma is also unlikely as long as its two most important leaders are still alive: the ageing strongman Ne Win, who established army rule in the country in 1962 – and who is still regarded as the "godfather" of the Burmese military establishment despite a court case brought against his daughter, son-in-law and grandsons earlier this year – and General Than Shwe, the present chairman of the ruling junta. But Ne Win turned 91 in May 2002, and Than Shwe's health is said to be deteriorating rapidly, although he is only 68. In May 2000, Than Shwe even wrote a letter to the junta, intimating his intention to retire from his post.

Without Ne Win pulling strings from behind the scenes, and Than Shwe gone as junta chairman, observers believe that the rivalry between Maung Aye and Khin Nyunt could turn into a far more critical power struggle. Given their different opinions on foreign policy – and their respective links to rival regional forces – the outcome of that struggle could also determine Burma's place in a broader regional security context. △

ASEAN's Burma tangle

Uneasy bedfellows they obviously are, but what are the dynamics of the ASEAN – Burma relationship?

by ***Kavi Chongkittavorn***

When the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was being established in 1967, Burma was approached to be a founding member. Rangoon declined, citing the principle of strict neutrality as a barrier to joining an organisation perceived to be an imperialist tool. That attitude persisted for two decades. But the emphatic international condemnation of the bloody crackdown on the pro-democracy movement of 1988 changed the mindset. The military junta, named the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997 before which it was known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), realised that in order to survive it must end its self-imposed isolation and find regional friends.

The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 also altered the political landscape of Southeast Asia. In the region's hotspot, Cambodia, a 14-year-old conflict was brought to an end two years later, enabling former foes such as Vietnam and the rest of the Indochinese states, including Cambodia and Laos, to reconcile their present and forget their past. Their admission to ASEAN in the late 1990s was a watershed event in regional politics, marking the closure of the ideological split forced by the Cold War. Burma's return to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1992, after it had departed in 1979, was indicative of its desire to rejoin the international community.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra toasting Burma strongman Than Shwe.

Almost three decades after the initial tentative contact, both Burma and ASEAN found themselves in need of each other for different reasons. Following the crackdown on the democratic movement, the Burmese regime wanted to shore up support within the region amid growing pressure from the West as well as international organisations. On the one hand, ASEAN's cardinal principle of non-intervention in the domestic politics of member countries suited Burma's diplomatic offensive very well. On the other hand, ASEAN's interest in admitting Burma was prompted primarily by its serious concern with China's expansion southward towards the Indian Ocean. Reports of a Chinese naval presence in Burma prompted senior ASEAN officials to conclude in a 1995 Bangkok meeting that the only way to counter Beijing's growing influence was to embrace Rangoon regardless of its brutal regime and underdeveloped economy.

This choice was influenced by ASEAN's view that Burma constitutes a strategic junction in Asia, linking China and India, the world's most populous countries. Therefore the inclusion of Burma was a better option than leaving it alone in the woods, open to the courting of the two Asian superpowers. Meanwhile, realising the geostrategic predicament of its immediate neighbours, the Rangoon regime has been playing one against the other. For years, Rangoon manipulated its China card effectively against India and ASEAN, playing on the fear of the enlargement of the Chinese sphere of influence. India, once a fervent supporter of the exiled Burmese pro-democracy movement, switched its policy in the first half of the 1990s and began to appease the Rangoon regime in an attempt to neutralise China's increased presence. Now, New Delhi too has acquired a toehold in Rangoon.

Unfortunately for ASEAN, Burma's entry into the organisation disrupted its traditionally strong ties with the West, which has been providing substantial aid and technical assistance to member countries. ASEAN's regional interests notwithstanding, Western countries continue to be critical of Burma. They have been criticising the Burmese junta's treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader, and remain well aware of the harsh political oppression in the country. ASEAN, pushed to the defensive, has argued that it can handle the Burmese situation better than countries outside the region, through the so-called ASEAN way of consensus building and non-interference. The organisation's hope clearly was that through peer pressure and discreet diplomacy, Burma would give in and cooperate with it on the more sensitive issues.

But, for ASEAN it has been a wait in vain. Burma has not cooperated. Even so, the organisation's optimism has not waned. Five years have elapsed since Burma's inclusion but the organisation's thinking has failed to evolve despite Rangoon's calculated insult of refusing, in 2000, to welcome an ASEAN fact-finding mission,

known as the ASEAN Troika. Instead, the Burmese regime went out of its way to welcome a similar team from the European Union a year later. And whatever change has happened in Burma has not really been at the behest of ASEAN. The process of political dialogue between the regime and the opposition made progress in October 2000 through the facilitation of the United Nations Special Envoy for Burma, Tan Sri Ismail Razali. Much credit has been given to his efforts for the release of Suu Kyi from house arrest. ASEAN's case for a special role for itself in the unfolding Burmese political process is therefore not very credible.

Meanwhile, Rangoon is back to playing the game it is now adept at. The junta leaders know full well that in order to revive their ailing economy and ward off growing pressure for political reform, they have to tussle with international opinion and the opposition. They have so far made the most from the minor concessions to the civilian political process. After Suu Kyi's release last May, the regime managed to secure some financial gains. Japan, which is Burma's biggest aid donor, has pledged more humanitarian aid as an incentive for the regime to loosen up. Lobbyists hired by Rangoon are active these days in the US Congress, working to stop possible legislation that seeks to impose an American trade embargo.

It is clear that Burma will continue to drive wedges within the international community. As an ASEAN member, Rangoon now has the cover of regional respectability. The regime also now has an international forum and to that extent is no longer an international pariah. Political dialogue, brokered by Razali, is bound to proceed only very slowly as the regime consolidates its grip on the polity and attempts to undermine the popularity of the opposition. Without concerted effort from the larger international community and more sustained and sterner measures from ASEAN, the junta will overcome international and domestic challenges, succeed in reigning in civil political forces and continue its repression at home.

The Road Home to Pang Long

After the damage done by the generals, it is time for democrats to try and fashion a federal Burma. But the Rangoon regime is all for continuing the 'status quo of disunity' among the ethnic groups.

by ***Aung Naing Oo***

"My blood is of the Karen so I will kill the Burman if I capture them", declared the tattoo on the chest of a young Karen guerrilla fighter. More than a decade ago, an encounter with such a determined mind was a chilling experience for a Burman. It was especially so because one had just arrived in a Karen rebel camp, fleeing the Burmese military dragnet.

Things have changed over time, but this tattoo reflects an anger that the ethnic peoples of Burma still feel at having been subjected to unspeakable suffering by the Burmese army. This bitterness and animosity is deep-rooted and ubiquitous, and indicates the intractability of Burma's ethnic conflicts. If there is one significant trait that Burma shares with her South Asian neighbours, this must be it.

The relevance of ethnic identity in Burma is clear from just a glance at the country's demographics. The Burman are the dominant group but ethnic minorities make up 40 percent of the country's population and reside in 60 percent of its land area. Also, Burma has a significant colonial legacy. While conflict in multi-ethnic Burma has pre-modern antecedents, its present-day form dates back to the early years after it gained independence from Britain. Soon after the British left Burma in 1948, the country was plunged into bloody chaos as the democratically elected government of U Nu in Rangoon came under threat from various ethnic armies. The Karen were the first to rebel, their short-lived but historic military success becoming a precursor to a wave of independence movements across the country. This struggle for power was as extensive as it was intense, and by the late 1950s all but three ethnic groups had taken up arms.

The military seized power in 1962 under the leadership of General Ne Win, the army chief, ostensibly to prevent the disintegration of the country. The reference was to the U Nu government's attempts at redressing ethnic grievances by amending the constitution and possibly orienting the political system towards federalism. The military takeover meant an effective halt to any effort to tackle the ethnic problem within the legal and democratic framework. The 1947 constitution was abolished along with several other fledgling democratic institutions. And thus, the spirit and essence of the Pang Long Agreement, signed on 12 February 1947, was lost. In the Pang Long Agreement had been enshrined the principles of peaceful coexistence between

the Burman and their ethnic brethren. It was signed by Burma's independence hero General Aung San and ethnic leaders, and had been the basis of the 1947 constitution.

The Burmese army tried to create a socialist utopia overnight. The ethnic armies continued their fight for autonomy from the centre, but their wars were largely ignored by Rangoon. The weight of heavy-handed military rule – in the guise of homegrown state socialism – all but completely buried the ethnic leaders' calls for a federated state. In a mock form of federalism, however, the socialist government divided the map of the country into Burman and ethnic areas. Seven administrative divisions were formed in predominantly ethnic Burman areas and seven states were established corresponding roughly to the homelands of the major ethnic groups. All real power, however, was in the centralised iron grip of the men in uniform in Rangoon. This situation was to last for 26 years as Burma's socialist ideologues drove the country into self-imposed isolation. The nearly three decades of 'socialist' rule ended only in 1988 when pro-democracy protests swept the country.

Unfortunately, the pro-democracy movement failed to secure victory during the uprising. Following the large-scale massacre of unarmed demonstrators by military forces, a new group of military officers calling themselves the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) assumed power. Despite the devastating oppression, the democracy movement in the summer of 1988 paved the way for a multiparty election in 1990. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won hands down, capturing more than 80 percent of the vote. Though the SLORC rejected the results of the elections, the stage was set for political negotiations that were to come a full decade later. Most significantly, a dialogue between the military and civilian groups, and thus the discussion on federalism, was re-established. For the first time since 1962 the ethnic nationalities and Burmans sympathetic to their cause had a say in politics.

> The military takeover meant the ethnic question would not be tackled within a democratic framework

Ceasefire complex

The politics of ethnicity are not linear. A year after the uprising in 1988, the Communist Party of Burma collapsed due in part to a mutiny by its Wa members, who made up the bulk of the rank and file. The SLORC responded to the development with a bold step, concluding truce agreements with the communists who then returned to their own ethnic bases and formed armies of ethnic composition. Within six years, almost every ethnic army either had surrendered or signed a ceasefire agreement with the regime at Rangoon.

As history has shown, the ceasefires were not comprehensive. Many of the armies were allowed to retain their arms and a portion of their territory, and were even granted business concessions by Rangoon. The regime, however, steadfastly refused to discuss politics with these groups. Complete surrender has been the only avenue to participation in the political process, which is effectively a non-starter due to the regime's total lock on power. The regime's attempt to write a constitution cementing its leadership in any future political system resulted in the NLD walking out of the constitutional convention in 1995, declaring the process and principles espoused in it unacceptable. Its demand for political dialogue was not accepted by the regime. Not surprisingly, as the uncertainty has lingered over the years, all major ethnic groups have chosen to retain their arms.

The ethnic truces complicated the already complex nature of Burma's ethnic problem. The major effect was the creation of different status among the various ethnic groups. A number of groups remain committed to political settlement, while others have settled for lesser gains. Some groups were transformed into local defence forces, and now essentially act as Rangoon's agents. Others, such as the Pa-O and the Kokang, traded in their political identities for business deals and closer relations with the regime. Several ethnic armies, notably the Mon and the Kachin, have tried to strike a balance between local political autonomy and a relationship with the generals in Rangoon. Still others, such as the Karen, the Karenni (Kayah) and the Shan, have maintained an armed commitment to independence or federalism. Aside from increased complexity, another result of the ceasefires has been a breakdown in inter-ethnic unity.

The junta, named the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, has refused to declare a blanket nationwide ceasefire. It has instead continued with its policy of proposing individual ceasefires with the remaining insurgent ethnic groups. The aim, clearly, is to maintain the status quo of disunity, and it is certain that the SPDC will respond negatively to the recent call by representatives of several ethnic groups, sounded when they met in Copenhagen, to allow them – whether as political parties, armed or unarmed, 'ceasefire' or 'non-ceasefire' – to meet freely.

Tripartite dialogue

For two years now, the Burmese junta has been in secret talks brokered by the United Nations with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. No tangible results have emerged from the negotiations. Suu Kyi has repeatedly expressed a willingness to cooperate with the generals, but since they have no political motivation to see these talks succeed, nothing concrete has emerged from the table yet. Recent reports even suggest that the talks have stalled. Nevertheless, when the time to tackle thorny issues comes, and hopefully it is a question of when

rather than if, one of the trickiest is bound to be the ethnic question.

Leaders of ethnic groups have repeatedly asked to be allowed to participate in the negotiations, but so far these calls have gone unheeded by the regime. Reminiscent of the suspicion of leaders of the African National Congress that Nelson Mandela had sold out the revolution in his negotiations with Pretoria's apartheid government, Burma's ethnic nationalities are concerned that they have been left out of the loop by an NLD conspiracy. The exclusion of ethnic representatives from the dialogue between the SPDC and the NLD, which commenced when Suu Kyi was under house arrest, led the ethnic leadership to conclude that the Burman were seeking a Burman solution, to the neglect of the interests of the minority peoples.

But the fact is that the activism of the pro-democracy groups led by Aung San Suu Kyi has given the various ethnic minority groups some much-needed breathing space. "Tripartite dialogue is our policy", confirmed Suu Kyi in May 2002 upon her second release from house arrest. She was referring to a popular phrase for the participation of ethnic groups in the negotiations, alongside her group and the junta. Besides the NLD, the UN and other international pressure groups have supported a tripartite composition at the negotiating table. However, even if the junta were to allow it, the complexities of differences in formal status, aim and political commitment of the various ethnic communities will have to be sorted out.

A Tatmadaw soldier

Furthermore, there is the question of who really represents the ethnic groups. For, apart from armed factions, there are recognised ethnic political parties working alongside the NLD as well. This provides an excuse for the regime to drag its feet at the bargaining table. The various ethnic groups have come to realise this and are now working hard to dispel the image of disunity. In the meantime, with the regime continuing to prevaricate and postpone a political showdown with the NLD, no one knows when the ethnic representatives will be taken on board.

Federalism as Balkanisation

Over the years, in Burma, the term 'federalism' has come to be regarded as synonymous with 'Balkanisation'. Forty years after the 1947 constitution was shredded and discarded, this belief is as strong as ever, especially among the Burman who continue as the politically dominant group. The concept of federalism is still not understood by the ordinary Burman or by the junta, although in the case of the latter it is perhaps a wilful lapse. In order to back up its anti-federal stance, the junta has argued over the years that Burma cannot be divided into 135 pieces, referring to the official list of main and sub-ethnic groups in the country.

Proponents of ethnic reconciliation argue that ethnic conflict in Burma is unlike the situation that existed in Rwanda or Yugoslavia. They point to the fact that the army's oppression is directed not only against the minority groups but also the ordinary Burman. They emphasise that the last episode of communal violence occurred as far back as during the Japanese occupation (1942-45) and even then it was not ordinary Burman that were responsible for the massacre of the Karen, but the Japanese-trained Burma Independence Army.

The ethnic issue is as critical as that of democracy in a country where minority peoples comprise about two-fifths of the population and live in the larger portion of the national territory. The conflict therefore cannot be considered simply a 'minority question'. Wars have been fought, and precious resources and lives have been wasted over the years. The military policy of 'divide and conquer' was strategically feasible for a period of time, but is sooner or later bound to fail disastrously. The regime has already overextended itself in its obstinacy, and the results are there for all to see in the crippled economy. The time of reckoning is near, the ethnic peoples' legitimate demands will inevitably have to be addressed.

Indeed, the ethnic issue has become more complicated the longer its resolution has been put off, to the extent that the junta is even using this as an excuse for forestalling on negotiations. Today, there is a possibility that the ethnic groups may settle for more modest concessions than they had previously sought, at least temporarily, if the negotiations are considered 'reasonable'. They are likely to do so if the federal goal is recognised as a long-term process rather than treated as an immediate solution to Burma's ethnic conflict. However, despite this possible change of stance, the ethnic problem is likely to always haunt Burma's leadership – be it made up of Aung San Suu Kyi, the junta or any other person or entity. The debate over federalism will rage on, but it is this debate that will serve as the locus for peace and ethnic reconciliation in Burma.

Four decades since the military seized power, Burma has not seen a day of freedom. Nor has it seen peace, with the ethnic crisis perpetually looming large over the political landscape. Ending this crisis is obviously the key to achieving both freedom and peace in Burma. The best way to do this is to return to Pang Long, where the founding fathers of the country placed their trust in each other, and agreed to coexist and cooperate. As it was the first time around, the road to Pang Long will be long and difficult, marked by deep-rooted distrust, hatred, suspicion – all of them exacerbated by the Burmese army's anti-federal stance. No matter how hard it may be, however, the road to Pang Long is the road home for Burma. ▲

Bleak Burma

The generals know they cannot improve the social and economic plight of the Burmese, but they will not let go.

*by **Aung Zaw***

Fourteen years ago, Burma's present junta came into power promising to bring about democracy and prosperity. The promises were never honoured. Now, trouble is brewing in military-ruled Burma.

Rangoon-watchers and analysts warn that a repetition of the social unrest and political instability that took place in 1988 is looming on the horizon. As the social and economic situation deteriorates, people are acting out of desperation and frustration. "We are on the brink of starvation", a senior Rangoon-based journalist told this correspondent in early September. However, his warning will not reach the Burmese people or authorities. His dire prognosis will not be allowed into print by the notorious Press Censorship Board.

Burma's military leaders do not like to hear such things. Instead, they prefer to read reports prepared by bureaucrats and economists who deliberately amplify Burma's GDP growth, while ignoring the realities facing the poverty-stricken country. But on the street in Rangoon, the journalist's words have the inescapable ring of truth.

In September, Burma's currency, the kyat, plummeted to new all-time lows on the black market. By the end of that month, the beleaguered unit had hit an unprecedented low of 1100 kyat to the dollar, after losing some 10 percent of its value over a just a week. Those who felt that the worst had been reached were in for further bad news as the slide continued and the kyat reached 1200 to the dollar. At the time of writing, the bottom is still nowhere in sight. While this precipitous plunge will play havoc with the country's medium- to long-term economic planning, which at the best of times is seldom better than farcical, in the here and now it is already pushing many citizens to the edge. Prices have skyrocketed, making even the most basic foodstuff prohibitively expensive. The price of eggs has reached outrageous levels. An egg costs 30-40 kyat, enough to put it beyond the reach of ordinary citizens.

Burma's opposition leaders are well aware of the deteriorating economic situation. In August, Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), told this correspondent, "When the economy is in shambles, the social conditions of the country only get worse. When both of these factors continue to worsen, it is the people who have to bear the brunt. Our country will suffer greatly if the current dismal economic situation is not reversed".

Deep denial

Burma's economic deterioration has been accompanied by an alarming increase in urban crime rates. Rangoon and Mandalay, Burma's second largest city, appear to be the worst affected. There have been reports of looting by large crowds in the suburbs of Mandalay. At a press conference in end-September, a government official denied reports of the lootings but admitted that "some people stole rice". Reportedly, hunger-related crime has become so widespread that the generals have been unable to bring it under control. Ironically, the generals themselves are now living in a climate of fear and insecurity. To prevent the situation from unravelling, the government media has been instructed to avoid reporting instances of such crime.

Despite the growing hardship of the people and simmering unrest, Burma's generals have shown no signs of moving towards much-needed economic reforms. Instead, they have demonstrated once again that they are in deep denial about their incapacity to meet the country's most basic needs. On 16 August 2002, at a regular weekly press conference, the deputy minister of home affairs, Brig-General Thura Myint Maung, went on the defensive when a foreign news service correspondent asked him about rising unemployment and the issue of human trafficking, which is fuelled by the desperate desire of the Burmese to look for work in neighbouring countries. Rather than answer the question, the general simply reiterated the myth that Burma is a land of plenty. "If you step out of your home, you can catch fish and prawns", he assured his incredulous audience. It is difficult to say if Thura Myint Maung's off the cuff comments really reflect the government's grasp of conditions facing the great majority of Burmese. Nevertheless it is clear enough that official statistics paint a picture of the economy that few Burmese can even begin to recognise.

Burma's minister for national planning and economic development, Soe Tha, recently claimed that the country had achieved an economic growth rate of near-

ly 11 percent in the fiscal year ending March 2002. He said the high growth rate was the result of opening up the economy and the adoption of a market-oriented system. However, according to one insider, UN envoy Razali Ismail, who is assisting in negotiations between the NLD and the military junta, expressed his "disappointment" with the figures cited by Soe Tha when they met recently in Rangoon.

Japanese experts and government officials who have been pushing for economic reform in Burma reportedly shared Razali's dismay at the junta's unrealistic assessment of the country's economic performance. Sources in Tokyo and Rangoon say that foreign observers have been especially troubled by evidence that General David Abel, the junta's economics czar, has been sidelined. According to well-informed sources, the move to marginalise Abel, who is regarded as open to reform proposals, was engineered by Senior-General Than Shwe, head of the military government. Than Shwe has begun to roll back some of the tentative reforms already in place. At a recent meeting between Burmese and Japanese officials in Tokyo, Abel's absence was conspicuous. Instead, Than Shwe sent Dr Than Nyunt, the chairman of the civil service selection and training board, who wields little or no influence over economic policy. Than Nyunt's sole qualification is that he can prepare reports that appeal to the head of the junta.

"If you step out of your home, you can catch fish and prawns"

Stubborn generals

Sadly, after more than a decade of at least professing to want progress, it appears that the Burmese regime is intent on bringing about a regressive trend. "We are heading back to the Ne Win era, when reports were prepared by puppet ministers and bureaucrats who did not dare to upset the Old Man", commented one journalist. Economic mismanagement under the dictatorship of General Ne Win had forced Burma to seek Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 1987, a year before the country was rocked by massive social and political upheaval.

Today, many observers fear that the regime's misguided policies will set Burma up for more unrest, as the country's social and economic crisis deepens against a backdrop of frustration with the slow pace of political change. Rangoon-based observers warn that looting and petty crime are unavoidable and say that the government should begin to treat the situation seriously.

In an interview to the London-based Burma Campaign, Aung San Suu Kyi said, "We do not think in terms of GNP and GDP, we are not thinking in terms of money flow and things like that. We are thinking in terms of the effect on everyday lives of people. The way the situation and the economy affect the health of people, the education of our young people, that is what we are thinking of. But the generals are not paying attention. Instead, they seem preoccupied with visiting temples and attending ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

The fear among some observers and journalists in Rangoon is that the military may use Burmese Muslims as scapegoats if the situation gets out of control. In the past, authorities have diverted attention from political and social problems by creating anti-Muslim riots in this predominantly Buddhist country.

Meanwhile, Burma's military leaders show little sign of the political will required to enter into a substantive dialogue with the NLD. While numerous protests were organised in the West and in ASEAN nations on the occasion of the military regime's 14th anniversary, Burma's foreign minister, Win Aung, told the United Nations General Assembly that his government stands by the goal of introducing a multiparty political system. But the government has set no timetable for democratic reform.

Over the last decade, despite international pressure and sanctions, the military government's human rights record has shown little improvement. Over 1500 political prisoners still remain in custody. The notorious Insein prison, located in suburban Rangoon, has recently seen the addition of new inmates. Two activist students who were staging a peaceful protest in front of the city hall during the Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad's recent visit to Rangoon were apprehended by intelligence officials and thrown into the prison. Peaceful gatherings are still banned in Burma. Last year, a 76-year-old professor, staging a solo protest at the same location asking the regime to initiate political reform, was arrested by security officials and sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

Quite apart from arrests, there is the urgent issue of the treatment of political prisoners. Recently, Aung May Thu, a 60-year-old political prisoner suffering from a perforated gastric ulcer, died after an unsuccessful eight-hour surgery. He had been arrested in 1989 on charges of being linked to the defunct Communist Party of Burma and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Although the sentence was commuted to 10 years, and he had served his term, he was kept in prison under a law allowing indefinite detention of persons considered a threat to the state. He will not be the last political détenu to die in prison, and he was not the first either. Dozens of political prisoners have died in detention as a result of maltreatment and medical neglect.

As the political stalemate continues the people of Burma face the prospect of living through years of darkness. It seems the stubborn generals will carry on ruling the country with an iron fist, even though it is clear to all that they lack the political will to solve Burma's long-standing problems. Sooner or later in Burma social and political unrest will erupt, at which point it is feared that the generals will resort to their old technique of unleashing repression and violence. The future of Burma looks bleak.

Prime or composite?

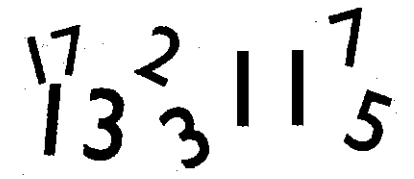
THREE COMPUTER scientists, Manindra Agrawal, Neeraj Kayal and Nitin Saxena from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, delighted the mathematical world by solving a problem that has frustrated mathematicians for many years. They figured out a clever way of quickly distinguishing prime numbers from composite numbers. Mathematical results seldom get mentioned in newspapers like *The New York Times*; this ingenious work made it to the front page.

In elementary school we learn about prime and composite numbers: a number whose only divisors are 1 and itself is called a prime number whereas if a number can be evenly divided by some other number, it is called a composite number. Thus 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17 are prime numbers but 15, being divisible also by 3 and 5, apart from itself and 1, is a composite. Similarly, 62579459 is a prime number and 208598179 is not (sceptics, go ahead, verify this!).

Euclid proved, some 2000 ago, that there are infinitely many prime numbers. Hence, we can never make an exhaustive list of them. However, the point is, given a number how do we tell if it is a prime number or not?

One idea is to try to divide the number by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and so on till one discovers a divisor of the given number or verifies that it has no other divisors other than itself and 1. This method, called trial division, works okay for small numbers but obviously becomes prohibitively time-consuming for large ones. If one were to apply trial division to a 50-digit number and use one's personal computer, the computer would compute for thousands of years before arriving at an answer.

Mathematicians and theoretical computer scientists have struggled to develop methods that can solve this problem in "reasonable time" which, when precisely defined in theoretical computer lingo, is called polynomial time. A major open problem in computational number theory has been to devise a method by which prime and composite numbers can be distinguished in polynomial time. Agrawal, Kayal and Saxena have managed to solve precisely this problem. Their method distinguishes prime numbers from composites, and they prove that their method takes polynomial time. The paper titled "Primes is in P" is available at the IIT Kanpur website



Three is prime!

It's about selling soap!

WAS THE UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (26 Aug-4 Sept 2002) convened to develop a timeline for resolving contentious environmental issues or to make the world realise the significance of sanitation and introduce it as a major development goal? Going by the outcome, it is evident that at Johannesburg the world was undivided on just one issue – sanitation. Unless 2.4 billion people, mostly in the developing South, get basic sanitation facilities the world cannot be considered developed, the summit concluded.

This least controversial of all problems had the support of diverse stakeholders. "Lack of sanitation is the cause for more than three quarters of diseases worldwide", announced Sir Richard Jolly, chair of the Geneva-based the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC). Cholera and dysentery alone account for the death of 7 million children every year, or 6000 every day. If people could wash their hands properly, most of these deaths could be under control, he said.

Subsequently, the WSSCC launched an ambitious campaign to promote hand washing. Nicknamed WASH, the campaign sought to package water, sanitation and hygiene such that these could be brought within easy reach of the deprived millions. Unsurprisingly, the programme was not launched in the Ivory Park shanties on the outskirts of Johannesburg, but in a decidedly un-African part of the city, at upmarket Sandton, the venue of the summit. The avowed aim of the WASH campaign was simple: encourage people to wash their hands. Apparently, however, this could not be done unless a public and private sector partnership was first forged.

For Unilever, Colgate Palmolive and Procter & Gamble, this is a promotion campaign of a scale they could not have ever imagined or undertaken. Under the patronage of governments and UN agencies, these multinational personal care companies will now make inroads into a hitherto unexplored market with minimal marketing investment. The governments and UN agencies will perform their pro-poor obligation of making the communities aware of the virtues of hand washing, and the companies will make the big bucks. To be launched simultaneously in Ghana and in India in October this year, for corporations the campaign is a direct gain from the summit. It is expected to open up markets that are estimated at USD 10 billion annually. Considering the massive returns on investment that this is likely to yield, is it any wonder that many feel that the multinational corporations hijacked Johannesburg?

In India, half a billion people do not have access to proper sanitation.

(http://www.cse.iitk.ac.in/news/primality.html).

What is pleasantly surprising is that the method is not too difficult. The main idea can be explained in a paragraph to students with some background in number theory and computer science. The details are not cumbersome either: the entire paper is less than nine pages long, and contains all the details of their method and the proof that their method works 'in reasonable time'.

This work represents a huge success for scientists working in South Asia in general and in India in particular. What we learn from this success is that world-class science can be and is being done in the region. Agrawal, Kayal and Saxena end their paper by posing another problem to the mathematical world where they point out that an answer to it would lead to an even faster method for distinguishing primes from composites. So, if anyone out there is looking for interesting problems, here is one that deserves space on your notepad. △

Sarmad Abbasi, Lahore

Tibetans travel

NOT UNTIL I came across nearly half a dozen Tibetans at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport was I convinced that the younger generation of Tibetans were now leaving India in hordes.

Indeed, Tibetans émigrés — thanks to the increasing globalisation of human traffic — are embracing international travel in a big way. Many Tibetans born and educated in India, including many of my own contemporaries, have left, only to be replaced by an influx of newcomers from Tibet, an estimated 3000 of which arrive in India every year. Some are going on vacation, some to study, and some for good, to work in New York and Paris (many to become maids in middle-class Western homes). "It is probably because of my nomadic blood that I find so much satisfaction in travelling", says Tsering Wangmo, an Indian-educated Tibetan poet, now settled in the US.

Others are travelling on shorter trips to new, previously undiscovered destinations. At the airport in Delhi, for instance, two writers were quietly making history by being the first Tibetans to ever travel to Skopje, Macedonia, to attend PEN International's literary festival there. Holding Tibetan identity certificates and speaking minimal English, they asked me for help. They were travelling to Skopje via Vienna on an Austrian Airways flight but had visas for neither Austria nor Macedonia, which does not have an embassy in Delhi. "I cannot let you board the plane", said the Indian Austrian Airways official, "you need a visa for Austria, at least". The conversation went back and forth for a while, with me acting as the translator, till finally the letter from the PEN branch in Macedonia appeared. "Yes, you should have shown me this", said the man before nodding out an approval and allowing them through customs.

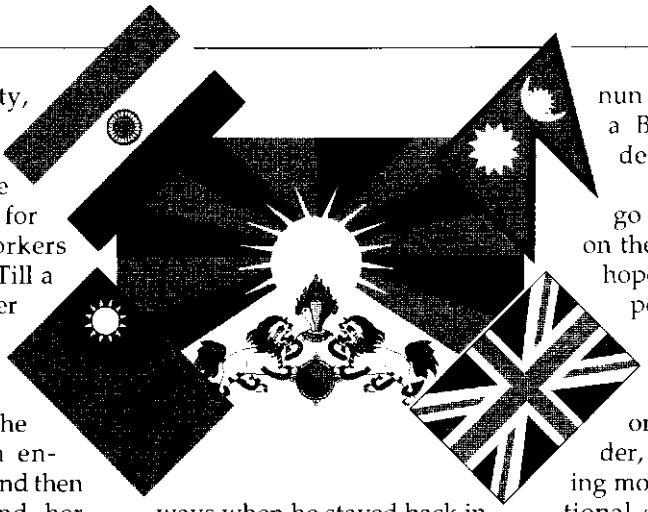
In the departure hall, I met another Tibetan. She had come to me to ask if I could keep an eye on her luggage and caught sight of my necklace, which bore a Tibetan gzi, a precious black and white stone. As it turned out, she was moving to Taiwan to study Mandarin after majoring in Chinese at New Delhi's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University. Such an achievement would have been unheard of only a decade ago. The odds that a Tibetan refugee girl, who did all her schooling at a refugee school in Dharamsala, India, in the foothills of the Himalaya, would go to arguably India's leading graduate school of liberal studies seemed too high. And to think she chose to major in Chinese! "I learn Chinese because only by learning the language of my enemies on the mainland will I be able to overcome them", she said.

Some go through amazing transitions, often at a high price. There is the story of Dolkar, a Tibetan nun who arrived in India in early 1991, fell in love with a fellow Tibetan and got married. Two years later, the husband died, but not before the marriage had produced two children. She, a nun, completely ill-

They are scattered in rural and peri-urban areas across the country and reaching them would be a costly proposition for any corporation, whether it sold soap or bottled water. However, now that the WASH campaign is here to facilitate the process, many more companies will enter the soap market to get a share of the cake. Furthermore, the campaign will provide a fillip to an ongoing hygiene education programme that is being run by UNICEF.

For an industry that has been going through a lean patch with the global economic slowdown, such an offer served up on a platter could not have come at a better time. Though pushing products among the socially disadvantaged is not new, social investments by the government and UN agencies in the process provide a much-desired legitimacy and the tag of social responsiveness to corporations. As Uri Jain, general manager of Hindustan Lever, remarked, ultimately, "it is about increasing the market". △

Sudhirendar Sharma, Delhi



equipped for such adversity, with two children, moved to Nepal where they got by on about a dollar a day that she earned by washing clothes for expatriates, mostly aid workers and students of Buddhism. Till a young English postal worker travelling in Nepal saw her and agreed to help her. For that he had to marry her. A speedy visa procedure at the British High Commission enabled them to fly to London and then to a remote town in England, her husband's hometown, where she learned to speak English.

Last year, she travelled to Nepal to be reunited with her monk brother, who brought her out of Tibet a decade ago. They went separate ways when he stayed back in a monastic school in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. She also went back to Tibet to meet her parents. For Dolkar, the British passport is a metaphor for the journey of reinvention: from a teenage refugee nun to a mother of two kids and a British citizen, all in one decade.

Most stories however do not go that way. Tibetans land up on the periphery of the EU in the hope they will cross over at some point. The EU, already overburdened with immigrants, is hardly keen to oblige though, and so they remain on the wrong side of the border, waiting. They may be sending money back home but the emotional cost of dislocation is high. Kids grow up parentless, families break apart, and worse, in a community where life expectancy is low, people pass on, before ever seeing one another again.

Tsering Namgyal, Taiwan

Religious zoning

IN SOUTH Asia, as S Akbar Zaidi says in his article 'Who is a South Asian?' in Karachi's *Dawn* of 9 September 2002, there is a conflict in perspectives because of the nation-states we happen to originate in. On the road in Delhi, Zaidi notices a hoarding advertising a teleserial called *Draupadi*. He asks a lady friend who Draupadi is, to receive a look of shocked disbelief: "'Hai Rama... what kind of a South Asian are you? You don't even know who Draupadi is?'" A feeling that he always gets in India returns, says Zaidi: "All of us who live in this region called South Asia, are now Indians".

Draupadi *on South Asian tv.*

In South Asia, just as there are multiple perspectives, the conflicts too are multiple. But Hindus have an advantage: like the Arabs, the Indian Hindus' source of religious and secular culture is one, while for us Indian Muslims, culture has many sources and the conflict arises when that is denied.

We are talking about multiple identities versus monolithic ones. The Arabs are actually quite close in every way to right wing Hindu *Bajrang Dal* activists. The Arab Islam versus Persian Islam debate was generated because Indian Muslims found the Arab cultural tradition alien and unsuited to the local context. Read Iqbal and the debate becomes clear.

What we really seek though, is an answer that ends all debate. But the answer may lie in its absence or in the multiplicity of possible answers. We can and should be comfortable with all of these but political and religious dogma forbids us and we do like to be conventional.

The Indian Hindu has very few cultural-religious sources – and those that there are come from within the borders of India. The Nepali Newar tradition is perhaps the best example of political syncretism expressing itself in religious cultures. Bengali Muslims, in contrast, have so many contending sources of inspiration; a syncretism was necessary to give space to so many beliefs, *all* considered *halal* to the religious but pre-dogmatic mind. Ashis Nandy has written that this itself became a new religion. With Islam now, though, the emphasis is on unity, a rallying call to fight the enemy. And Islamists cannot accommodate a critique beyond a point. Apostasy laws also rule out debate on certain fundamentals. 'Heresy' and its promised after effects are common to all the three religions that originated in the present West Asia. Their dogmas also are indistinguishable from each other in most cases, including in wanting to establish an absolute monolithic supremacy as opposed to the polytheism of the "Indian" religions. That polytheism had been an inspiration for religious and political flexibility, but in India today an almost monotheistic Hinduism is being politically preached.

I read the *Mahabharata* and about Draupudi in a religious comic book for children. They used to be sold in Dhaka as a matter of course before 1971. Depending on perspective, Draupudi is the positive symbol of a woman with choices, or a negative symbol, a woman with five husbands. A Bengali household would sympathise with her plight (her husbands lost her in a game of dice to their cousins, the 'evil' *Kauravas*) but it would never bring her home as a daughter-in-law. It is a complex acceptance and denial. (As many STD/AIDS researcher are finding out, the sharing of wives among brothers is a common but highly derided practice.)

By the way, betting wives was common till the late 1970s among the poor in Dhaka, and in our neighbourhood, being senior residents, my uncles used to routinely be called upon to settle these matters.

Going by the lady's reaction in Zaidi's piece, it would seem Draupadi was created by an executive order in New Delhi's South Block. The 'South Asia' she casually flings at him is the bureaucratically imagined one.

As long as South Asia is imagined from the state's point of view, there will be a struggle to reconcile the natural with the politically imagined. If, however, a region can be imagined minus the consciousness of political geography... say, as a cluster of environmental zones... now, that is a thought! Our problem is that we are un-reconstructed post-colonialists: the idea that whatever follows the fight against the colony is good is the root of our problems because post-colonial nationalism has thus become dogmatic and intolerant.

To end, a thought: Friday is a holiday in Bangladesh because it is the Islamic holiday while in Pakistan, its Islamic parent, Sunday is the weekly holiday, just as it is in India, its Hindu ancestor. △

Afsan Chowdhury, Dhaka

Campus chaos

THE BANGLADESH University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) reopened to near-full attendance on 28 September, after two *sine die* closures within the span of three months had crippled academic life at arguably the country's most prestigious academic institution.

The university was closed on 9 June 2002, following violent protests by students against the killing of Sabiqunnahar Sony, a second-year student of the chemical engineering department who was shot dead in crossfire between two rival factions of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), the student-front of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The fight was over rights to a tender that is thought to be worth BTK 87 lakh.

Subsequently, in disciplinary action taken during the closure, the authorities expelled 17 students, including not only the ones who were allegedly involved in the armed clash that took Sony's life, but also those who had resorted to violent protest against the alleged killers.

The campus reopened on 11 August to great pandemonium: the students reacted sharply to the expulsions, especially because the protesters of Sony's death were handed down their punishments in the same order as the alleged killers. The protesting students embarked on a weeklong programme, including a student strike, demanding immediate punishment of the killers and the withdrawal of disciplinary measures against those protesting the killing.

Faced with unrelenting authorities, the students under the banner "BUET students against atrocities", led by leftwing student bodies, formulated a six-point demand that included exemplary punishment of Sony's killers, revoking the punishment of the agitating students, lifting the ban on student politics and naming the university's girls hostel after Sony. 24 of them, including some of those awarded punishments, went on a hunger strike on 2 September to press the demands home. With agitations inside the campus picking up fire, the BUET authorities closed down the university for a second time on 8 September.

Known for its aversion to student politics, the BUET closures are striking examples of the government's mounting jitteriness over any kind of street agitation. That the situation was allowed to escalate to the level it did was ironically a result of the government's proclivity to term any agitation an 'opposition' conspiracy. The authorities had suspended a number of JCD leaders in their initial order but the subsequent handling of the agitating students, including police-charging the hunger strikers, was indicative of how hard a line the government takes with any kind of demonstration. The BNP has been quite trigger-happy as far as university closures are concerned; Dhaka University, another important educational institution, has remained closed for much of the year.

In both the cases, of the BUET and Dhaka University, the government and university authorities have failed to understand the sentiments of hundreds of students fighting for, what they believe are, genuine causes. The government's paranoia seems to stem from the belief that these movements could snowball into national agitations. If the government continues to indulge its habit of clampdowns and closures, its fear might even be realised because of its own self-defeating rigidity.

It does not help to ban student politics, and it certainly does not help when the government introduces words like "terrorism" into its discussion of the chaos that condemns Bangladesh's universities today. However, the quality of student politics certainly needs to be reviewed. Gunfights on campus, searches by the Bangladesh Rifles that actually yield significant quantities of firearms and ammunition, that too in the better institutions, battles over 'tenders' rather than debates on ideology or policy issues... surely, these make for an academic environment that is far short of ideal. △

Zayd Almer Khan, Dhaka

Lives in need of authors

Why South Asians don't write good biographies.

by ***Ramachandra Guha***

In contrast to the art of the novel, the art of biography remains undeveloped in South Asia. We know how to burn our dead with reverence or bury them through neglect but not to evaluate, judge or honour them. Newspaper obituaries are little more than listings of dates and positions, so-called 'definitive' biographies recitations of achievements with little reference to context. This is a world governed by deference, not discrimination. A widely circulated biography of Indira Gandhi was dedicated to – Indira Gandhi. The author of an adulatory work on the life of the long-serving communist former chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, was rewarded with the pro vice chancellorship of Calcutta University. Even when their subjects are not powerful politicians, biographers are excessively respectful. Thus, a Madras couple spent 600 pages on the first four decades of that most quotidian of lives, the life of RK Narayan.

The Calcutta historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee points out in a recent essay that while in the West "the second half of the twentieth century has been an era of great biographies", this has "left Indian writers and scholars unaffected. Biography is not an art that flourishes in India despite the nation's obsession with individuals". The record in the countries that neighbour India is not much better. The standard, or at any rate most accessible lives of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and SWRD Bandarnaike have all been authored by Western scholars. There are indeed two outstanding exceptions: S Gopal's life of the philosopher Sarvepalli Radha-krishnan, published in 1989 to mark the centenary of its subject's birth, and Amrit Rai's life of the novelist Munshi Prem Chand, first published in Hindi in 1962 and, 20 years later, deftly translated into English by Harish Trivedi. Both are books by offspring, not at all uncritical, but helped by the intimacy that comes from shared genes and the luck to have all the subject's papers in one's attic. Both pay proper attention to the lived life but also subtly set it in historical context. (Honourable mention is also due to BR Nanda's political biographies of Mahatma Gandhi and Gopalkrishna Gokhale, and to Rajmohan Gandhi's books on the nationalist stalwarts C Rajagopalachari and Vallabhbhai Patel.)

Probing the paucity

There would be at most a dozen biographies written by South Asians that are both well researched as well as moderately well written. This is a meagre harvest, if one considers that biography lies at the intersection of history and literature, fields where the region has made handsome contributions. Social and economic historians from South Asia have acquired an increasing visibility outside the region, particularly in the United States. And the works of South Asian novelists have been widely appreciated. When they have excelled at the writing of history and the writing of novels, why have South Asians been so laggard when it comes to biographies?

To find the answer we need look no further than the region's dominant religion, Hinduism, and its dominant intellectual tradition, Marxism. Both grossly undervalue the role and status of the individual human being. For Hindus, a man just dead has already been reborn as something or someone else: why bother to recall or document the life? For Marxists, the life is reflective of wider historical forces: of the clash of classes or the progress of technology. Why unduly dignify an individual by writing about him rather than about the social changes that the life mirrored?

Admittedly, while Hindus have not written biographies as Hindus, there have been professedly Marxist lives of individuals. These have generally been written to advance a particular historical thesis. Isaac Deutscher's three-volume life of Trotsky was an extended essay in sectarian vindication, which sought to prove that if, instead of Stalin, his hero had succeeded Lenin, the Russian Revolution would have been faithful to its original aims. EP Thompson's large life of William Morris was written to prove that his hero was a scientific socialist who believed in dialectical materialism, rather than a romantic radical with a sentimental attachment to justice and community.

Deutscher's books on Trotsky were once much praised in revolutionary circles, but no one reads them anymore. And Thompson is now remembered for his books on the working class and on the history of English law, rather than for his life of Morris. When that book was first published, in 1955, its author was a cardholding member of the Communist Party of Great Brit-

ain. But when it appeared in a revised edition, 22 years later, Thompson had long since left the party and most of its tenets. In the foreword to the revised edition, he admitted that in the original work he had "intruded far too often upon the text with moralistic comments and pat political sentiments". That, indeed, shall always be the case with avowedly Marxist biographies: they shall be strongly coloured by the party-political beliefs of their author.

As it happens, within South Asia Marxists have not ventured into biography in the first place. They have felt more comfortable writing about social aggregates: about peasants, workers, and the state – rather than about individuals. Take West Bengal, the epicentre of contemporary Marxism, and a province that is home to India's most highly regarded historians and political scientists. Bengali scholars have written insightfully about such topics as peasant protest, industrial evolution, literary history and street culture, but not about their own exemplary individuals. The best lives of the icons of modern Bengal – Ram Mohun Roy, Vivekananda, Subhas Chandra Bose, even Satyajit Ray – have been written by foreigners.

Whether Marxist or otherwise, Indian scholars tend to work with what the sociologist Dennis Wrong once called an "over-socialised conception of man". Doctoral dissertations almost never approach a problem through an individual, even when he had a fundamental influence in its articulation or resolution. Students and professors alike would choose to write on 'The Dissolution of the Princely Order' rather than on 'Vallabhbhai Patel and the Dissolution of the Princely Order'. It is striking how some of the most influential figures in modern India have yet to find their biographers. There are no books, good or bad, that one can turn to for the basic facts about such men as Sheikh Abdullah of Kashmir, Master Tara Singh of Punjab, AN Phizo of Nagaland and CN Annadurai of Tamil Nadu, men whose legacies continue to shape the politics of the land.

To religious prejudice and scholarly dogma one must add a third reason for the paucity of good biography, namely, that it is the most challenging of literary forms. As André Maurois observed many years ago, biography "will always be a difficult form of art. We demand of it the scruplosity of science and the enchantments of art, the perceptible truth of the novel and the learned falsehoods of history. Much prudence and tact are required to concoct this unstable mixture... A well-written life is a much rarer thing than a well-spent one".

The biographer must possess the instincts of a sleuth, a nose for smelling out hidden documents and a flair for persuading people to part with them. He must have the staying power of the historian, the willingness to read and take notes from millions of words written in shaky and indistinct hands and lodged in dark and distant archives. Last but certainly not the least, he must display the imaginative insight of the novelist, the ability to turn those years of source-finding and note-taking into a compelling and credible narrative.

Biography lies at the intersection of history and literature

The biographer's oeuvre

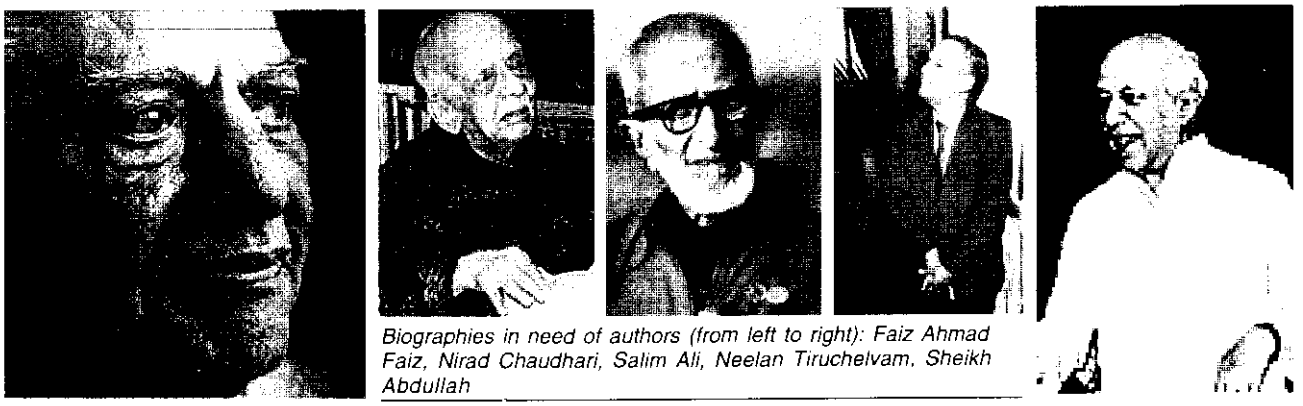
In his *Questions for a Biographer*, the Bombay poet Ranjit Hoskoté nicely captures the essence of the enterprise:

> How to phrase what must be told,
> how force the seals, twist back the locks,
> burgle the cabinet of the soul?
> How to rifle his cupboard of masks
> and then to squeeze into the damp
> between costume and true colours?

The biographer is an artist, but as Desmond MacCarthy long ago pointed out, he is an artist under oath. He stays close to his sources, and while he may plausibly speculate on his subject's thoughts and moods, he cannot invent. The novelist-turned-historian is thus most likely to write good biography, as is the case with AN Wilson, who has written a riveting life of Tolstoy as well as biographies of CS Lewis and Hilaire Belloc, and more recently, of Jesus and Paul.

Wilson is British, as is my own favourite biographer, David Gilmour. Gilmour is a historian who trained at Balliol College, Oxford, under the great Richard Cobb. He is also a published novelist. Besides, he is no Little Englander. He is a cosmopolitan scholar who has worked in West Asia and travelled extensively in Asia and southern Europe. Gilmour has written lives of three rather dissimilar characters. He began with Giuseppe di Lampedusa, a Sicilian aristocrat who lived a life of complete obscurity, spending his days reading and, towards the end, writing. A couple of years before he died, Lampedusa completed the manuscript of a novel. He could not find a publisher in his lifetime, but this book, *The Leopard*, posthumously won recognition as one of the finest novels of the 20th century. Based on a hoard of previously undiscovered letters and papers, Gilmour skilfully reconstructs the life of his subject, writ small against the social and political context of 20th century Sicily.

From Lampedusa, Gilmour moved on to a man who, by contrast, always sought to live a very public life. Very early, this man acquired a reputation for insolence. As the Balliol rhyme went, "My name is George Nathaniel Curzon/I am a most superior person/My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek/I dine at Blenheim once a week". He seemed destined for high office, and did serve as viceroy of India and as a cabinet minister in several conservative governments. Like his close contemporary, Winston Churchill, he was a prolific and best-selling author and, like Churchill again, closely connected to America (both his wives came from there). But unlike him he never became prime minister, an of-



Biographies in need of authors (from left to right): Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Nirad Chaudhari, Salim Ali, Neelan Tiruchelvam, Sheikh Abdullah

fice that his contemporaries had always thought would be his. Curzon's was a life rich in incident and achievement as well as controversy, these captured with elegance and understanding by his biographer.

Gilmour's most recent book is *The Long Recessional*, subtitled 'the imperial life of Rudyard Kipling'. It looks at the poet's complicated views on empire and the encounter of races. This is in some ways a revisionist book, seeking to show that Kipling was not always the gung-ho cheerleader of imperial expansion that leftist scholars have portrayed him to be, and that he had an abiding love for India and for at least some Indians. The 'poet of empire' was often sharply critical of British policies, and while an admirer of generals and rulers refused always to accept any favours from them. His artistic integrity was uncompromised. In this, as in Gilmour's other books, the industry is massive, but carried lightly. Judgement is nicely balanced with exposition, with the poems and letters quoted to effect, but not to excess.

My own enthusiasm for Gilmour stems perhaps from his being more than a narrowly 'literary' biographer. He probes his subject's emotions, as he must, but also displays a sharp awareness of his place and time. When writing about Curzon he can grasp the complex structure of colonial administration in British India, when writing about Kipling suggestively explore the ideologies of empire and the rivalries between the European powers. His books combine scholarship with style, the analysis of politics and policy with the delineation of personality.

Gilmour's biographies have won many awards, but as much as those prizes he might cherish a line in Jan Morris's review of his Kipling book. This wise writer (and sometime biographer) termed *The Long Recessional* a "fine, fair and generous work", where, "in hundreds of pages of dense narrative, there is never a flaccid line, and never a hasty judgement". Gilmour's other works are marked likewise by solid research and a fine style, but also by balance and proportion. He knows what to say and how to say it, but also what to leave out. This sense of balance is indirectly manifest in the length of his various works. The life of Lampedusa, a fascinating but ultimately marginal figure, extends to 223 pages; the life of Curzon, a more important man by far, runs to 684 pages, including notes and the index. Kipling is perhaps as or more important than Curzon, but unlike him had already been much biographised. Gilmour's book on the poet sought not to be 'definitive' but, rather, to focus on a particular if contentious aspect of his life and legacy. In context, its length of 351 pages seems about right.

"You have to be a genius to sustain a biography of 900 pages", wrote AJP Taylor once. I would add: to justify that length either or (preferably) both biographer and subject have to be geniuses. Some Indians have not heeded Taylor's warning, nor have many Americans. In that country there is a long tradition of the multi-volumed life, going back at least to Carl Sandburg's six-volume study of Abraham Lincoln. American biographers tend to throw everything into their books. The urge for comprehensiveness keeps historical judgement in abeyance. Their books are often too long and sometimes too solemn. Paradigmatic here is Robert Caro's life of Lyndon Johnson; three published volumes thus far, all of 2000 pages, and we still have not got to Johnson's presidency.

There is no question in my mind that the British make the best biographers. One could add, to the names of AN Wilson and David Gilmour, those of Richard Holmes (biographer of Shelley and Coleridge, and also a superb essayist on the art and technique of biography), of Michael Holroyd (biographer of Lytton Strachey and George Bernard Shaw), of Victoria Glendenning (biographer of Anthony Trollope and Vita Sackville-West), of Francis Wheen (author of a wonderfully entertaining life of Karl Marx), of Hilary Spurling (author of lives of Matisse and Paul Scott), and of Ray Monk (biographer of Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell). Intriguingly, most of these biographers are freelance scholars without a university position. This might not be an accident: it might have helped them escape the tyranny of academic fashion, which typically scorns biography and, where it deigns to allow it, subjects it to the canons of political correctness, with lives ultimately judged with regard to how they retard or further the biographer's own chosen cause.

Human resource undeveloped

Now, 55 years after the British departed these shores, South Asian scholars look to the universities of North America for inspiration. Anglophilism is passé. Young Indians or Pakistanis are hardly likely to read the British writers I have here praised, their ignorance constituting another hurdle to the writing of good biography. And there are still other hurdles. For one thing, South Asians are careless about keeping letters, records or historical memorabilia. For another, they are absurdly sensitive about their heroes. In this age of identity politics, which non-dalit would dare to write a dispassionate study of the extraordinary dalit leader BR Ambedkar? And which Delhi-based publisher, dependent like others of his ilk on government patronage, would willingly publish a critical biography of the leading 'Hindutva' ideologue MS Golwalkar? Lives of political icons, be they of the left or of the right, risk being suppressed or burnt if they are too candid or too argumentative.

When they do venture into biography, South Asians are generally too genteel and fastidious to attempt to burgle the souls of their subjects. We somehow do not know how to deal with tension and contradiction, with our subjects saying one thing while meaning another, with them showing a healthy regard for their self-interest, or (especially) with their falling in love or failing in their careers. In most cases, reverence and respect comfortably supersede analysis and understanding.

> Hinduism and Marxism both grossly undervalue the individual human being

Hinduism, Marxism, Anglophobia, the indifference to record-keeping, the fear of giving offence; to these impediments now add the very complexity of the craft, its unique combination of art, industry, scholarship, and literature. Still, the poverty of biographical writing in South Asia must be reckoned a pity. For the region is hardly lacking in men and women of character and interest. In a recent collection of his essays, Edward Said has written feelingly of how his friend Eqbal Ahmed took him to meet the legendary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In a Beirut café, Eqbal and Said listened as Faiz spoke, mournfully at first – he was in enforced exile – but then with passion, as he moved from politics to poetry. Not long after I read Said's piece I came across a lovely essay published many years ago by the veteran human rights activist of Delhi, RM Pal. This was a tribute to the social worker Akhtar Hameed Khan, at that time (the 1980s), being persecuted by the Pakistani government. Pal wrote of his own early encounters with Khan, in Comilla in present-day Bangladesh, where he was pioneering a new approach to rural development. This was the second of Khan's careers; the first had been in the Indian Civil Service and the third in the slums of Karachi, where he inspired the admirable experiment in community living known as the Orangi Project.

In an intellectually alert and sensitive world, Edward Said's cameo on Faiz Ahmad Faiz, and RM Pal's on Akhtar Hameed Khan, would inspire younger scholars to research and write full-fledged biographies. Certainly, both Faiz and Khan figure at the top of my own personal wish list of South Asians whose lives need to be more fully documented. This list of mine does not include figures of high political authority – the Nehrus and the Bhuttos – who will be written about anyway. Nor does it include the truly 'subaltern' – the workers and peasants who do not usually leave a trail of personal papers and thus, regrettably, have to be usually written about in the aggregate. Rather, my list privileges the fascinating intermediary figures: the men and women in the middle, the scholars and activists whose lives are noteworthy in themselves and provide a window into the great social and political issues of our time.

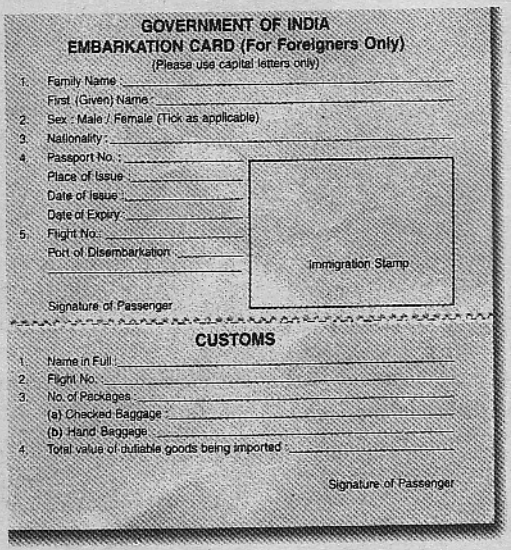
Thus, a writer interested in the tortured history of Tamil-Sinhala relations in contemporary Sri Lanka might take as his theme the life and endeavours of the Colombo lawyer, scholar and statesman Neelan Tiruchelvam, killed by a Tamil suicide bomber for seeking to make peace with the 'enemy'. A historian of Indian science and conservation could do worse than approach the topic through the remarkable self-trained ornithologist Salim Ali. A feminist might choose as her subject Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade), the daughter of an English admiral who went to jail with Gandhi, fell in and out of love with a Sikh revolutionary, did pioneering environmental work in the Himalaya and ended her days in the Vienna woods, listening to Beethoven. A like-minded Bengali could tell the tale of Nirad Chaudhuri, the unknown Indian who became a well-known Englishman. A young and radical scholar might write in some depth of Gadar, the remarkable folk poet and singer whose career has been so deeply interwoven with the bloody politics of his native Andhra Pradesh. In each case the life would be richly illuminative of the times. In any case the best days of South Asian biography lie ahead of us. △

ERRATA

The September 2002 essay, 'Roads to Lhasa' by Kabir Mansingh Heimsath, had an error in the summary. It should have read: "Notwithstanding years of Chinese rule, Tibet remains Tibet. There is no grand strategy to extinguish Tibetan culture but Beijing's misinformed policies lead to the misplaced suspicion that there is". In the print edition, "the nation" appeared in place of "Tibetan culture".

– editors

THE INDIAN immigration service gives international air travellers embarkation cards of different sizes, and the demand for information is not always uniform. Chhetria Patrakar has done a fair bit of flying in and out of Indira Gandhi International Airport lately, and once was given a card that was so small it would require Lilliputian fingers to fill. Reproduced here in actual size is the embarkation card for the reader to try filling out. *Aisa kyon hota hai*?



GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
EMBARKATION CARD (For Foreigners Only)
(Please use capital letters only)

1. Family Name :
First (Given) Name :
2. Sex : Male / Female (Tick as applicable)
3. Nationality :
4. Passport No. :
Place of Issue :
Date of Issue :
Date of Expiry :
5. Flight No. :
Port of Disembarkation :

Immigration Stamp

Signature of Passenger

CUSTOMS

1. Name in Full :
2. Flight No. :
3. No. of Packages :
(a) Checked Baggage :
(b) Hand Baggage :
4. Total value of dutiable goods being imported :

Signature of Passenger

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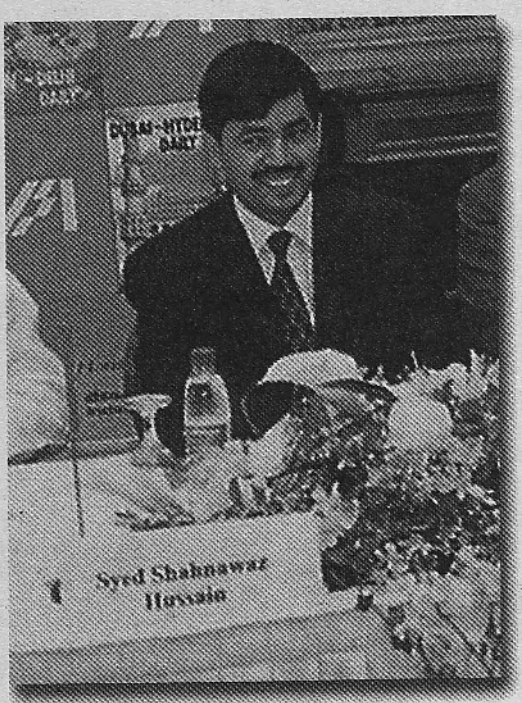
AND THEN, on the Indian Airlines flight departing from IGIA for another South Asian destination, flipping through the in-flight magazine *Swagat*, one realises that the carrier is still sucking up to the neophyte minister of civil aviation, Mr Syed Shahnawaz Hussain. Chhetria Patrakar had earlier reprimanded the magazine (produced by an NRI company based in Bangkok, but that apparently is another story, ask the editor of *Pioneer*) for having been cloyingly obsequious to the minister, who is a 'token' Muslim in the NDA government of Atalji. But even so, *Swagat* writes in its September 2002 issue in an article titled 'Soaring to the Occasion', which is supposed to review the successful first year in office of Shahnawaz, "Despite global recession and the aftermath of September 11 terrorist attack, the modern and youthful minister steers his ministry to further heights".



The pictures all focus on Shahnawaz, at an Air India function, inaugurating the Indian Airlines' Jabalpur flight, inspecting the servicing of an Indian Airlines aircraft, at the Institute of Aeronautics, at a tourism meet in Dubai, and inaugurating the "security hold area at Mumbai". Give us a break, please, *Swagat*, I beg of you.

■

SOME TIME back, the redoubtable Laloo Prasad Yadav of Bihar, making his maiden speech in the upper house (Rajya Sabha), thundered at the BJP-led government, "*Tumhare ahankar-rupi Lanka mein main aag lagaane aaya hoon*". (I have come to set fire to your arrogant Lanka.) The reference of course is to Hanuman (the monkey trouble-shooter of raja Ram) who burns down Lanka as he is leaving there after a search mission for the abducted Sita. Which is all good, but the demonisation of Ravan and his kingdom should perhaps be handled with more circumspection in these days of SAARC amity. Will someone go tell Laloo? Particularly because there is soon to be (one hears) a direct flight linking Bihar and Sri Lanka.

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THE PROBLEM of anything that has a South Asian provenance being called 'Indian' the world over is indeed... a problem. Particularly for a Bangladeshi or Pakistani, it is galling, because they go back to historical India. So, a company named Shaheen's Palace in Jackson Heights, New York City, has come up with an answer that should keep everyone happy, if somewhat awkwardly so. It produces Malai Kulfi™, packaged in a plastic pack, and has the originality to announce it as, "The Most Authentic Natural and Freshest Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi Ice Cream". Well, that takes care of that problem. Plus, did you want to know what your average stick of *kulfi* contains? Well, here it is:

Item: Kulfi
Weight: 101gm
Calories: 250
Fat calories: 170
Total fat: 19gm
Total Carb: 17g
Sat Fat 11gm (55 percent)
Cholesterol: 53 mg
Sodium: 45 mg

You apparently also get a

dose of vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron. We did not know it, but the kulfi is Health Food!

But even as a problem of political identification is resolved, a problem of cultural identification threatens to throw a spanner in the works. New York health officials are sending crack teams into the *mithai* shops that line the streets of Jackson Heights. The contraband that is expected to be recovered is nuts. (Yes, nuts!) Peanuts, pistachio, almonds, all used in South Asian sweets to delicious effect, can cause anaphylaxis which may result in asphyxiation. Food and Drug Administration officials want a warning on the sweets about the potential dangers of imbibing *pista barfi*. Locals protest that there is no way someone from 'our' culture does not know what is in the sweets. The best way to deal with this: do as is done with pretzels post-Bush-choke.

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ON THAT happy note, now, for the rest of this Mediafile, we shall focus on Bangladesh.

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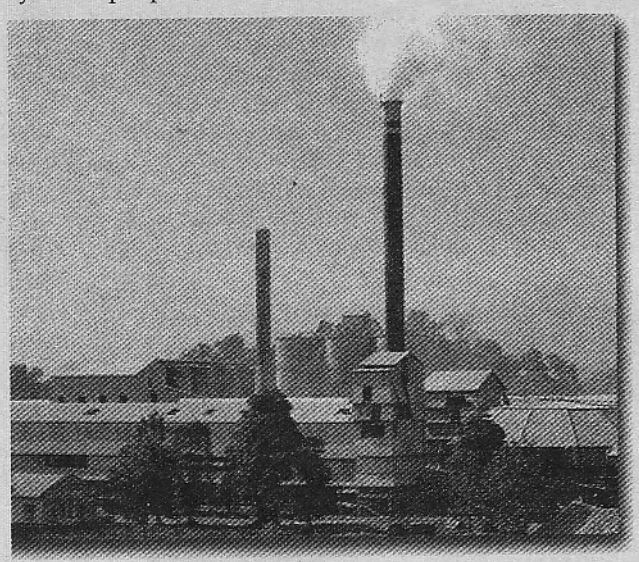
THE BANGLADESH Parjatan Corporation, the 'national tourism organisation', tries hard to attract tourists. The brochure for Sylhet, the right arm of Bangladesh on the map, provides interesting information on the Gour Gobinda Fort, the famous waterfall of Madhabkunda, and the Manipuri dance still performed by tribal people. But then the frustration of not having enough tourist attractions shows through. So, you have the "rolling stones of Jaflong" that tourists may want to observe, which essentially is rocks from the riverbed that are being mined in order to feed the concrete fever of largely mud-made Bangladesh. The tourist is also advised to consider a visit to the border at Tamabil, from where "one can also have a glimpse of the waterfalls across the border", in Meghalaya. The visitor is then directed to the Haripur Gas Field, which is 22 km from Sylhet town. Also, "About 35 km northwest of Sylhet, linked by rail, road and river is Chhatak, the seat of Assam Bengal Cement Factory". If all this excites you, and why not, contact the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation at tel: 880-2-817855-59.



Chatak cement factory

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INNOVATION IN naming chocolate products finds fertile ground in Bangladesh. There is a company named Haque, (the logo looks suspiciously like that of an Indian confectionary company whose name begins with 'P'), which specialises in producing candy and light edibles. Haque produces the "Royal Bengal Tiger – A Taste of the New Millennium". Highly recommended, especially because of the "cocoa solids and milk solids and permitted emulsifiers" used to ensure that the chocolate does not melt in the deltaic heat and moistness of Bangladesh. Besides, it is *halal* – really, it says so on the wrapper – so, all you god-fearing chocoholics out there need have no fear to indulge the pangs.

■

EKUSHEY TELEVISION, ETV, which used to broadcast terrestrially using Bangladesh TV transmission, was setting high standards for programme content. It was in the private sector, and derived a certain slickness from that, but was also doing 'socially responsible' coverage. What is more, it was attracting an audience of millions. But the Supreme Court pulled the plug on ETV last month, and the policemen went over and turned the transmission off in mid-programme. Many fine journalists lost their jobs. The lesson in this is – when you want to start something good and raise people's expectations, make sure that the groundwork is also proper. Apparently shortcuts had been taken by the Ekushey promoters (including an American multinational) in the registration process back in the Sheikh Hasina years, and the present Begum Zia's government was not about to help Ekushey along. So, a good thing disappears. But do not rest in peace, Ekushey! Instead, reincarnate!

—Chhetria Patrakar

Dolphin of the Ganga

Once the susu was found along the entire stretch of the Ganga system in the plains, but now it is limited to pockets where the flow is large and pollutants sufficiently diluted.

by ***RK Sinha***

Dolphins are the most uncontroversial of popular motifs of contemporary times, promoted on television and Hollywood movies alike as symbols of wholesome fun, innocence and gentle intelligence. The exposure, however, is biased towards marine dolphins. Freshwater dolphins, in dire need of public sympathy and protection, have gone largely neglected. Most people are not even aware of the fact that that some species of dolphins (or cetaceans) are found in habitat other than seas and oceans. In fact, four of a total of about 40 species of cetaceans inhabit rivers; three of these are found in Asia, and, of them, two belong to South Asia.

The South Asian freshwater dolphins are the *Platanista gangetica minor (bhulan,* sometimes also referred to as *susu)* in the Indus river of Pakistan and the *Platanista gangetica* (susu) of the Ganga-Brahmaputra system in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The *lipotes vexillifer (baiji)* is confined to the Yangtze of China, and the fourth specie, *inia geoffrensis (boto)*, belongs to the Amazon.

While there is no conclusive fossil record, estimates are that the Gangetic dolphin has been around for about 20 million years. It was not until 1801 though, that the susu was first scientifically documented and christened *Platanista gangetica* by William Roxburgh, a Scottish botanist who was at the time the superintendent of the Calcutta Botanical Garden. The dolphin that was thus identified lives in the highly turbid waters of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Meghna and Karnaphuli rivers and their tributaries. It inhabits these rivers from the estuarine area to as far upstream as is navigable by them, depth and the evenness of the riverbed being crucial determinants. The Gangetic dolphin is found in Nepal too where the rivers are comparatively clear.

The Ganga dolphin has a sturdy and flexible body, large flippers and a low triangular dorsal fin. In the Ganga, on average, the maximum length that an adult female dolphin may attain is 2.5 metres while the male attains a maximum length of 2.1 metres. After a gestation period of 10 to 11 months, a fully developed calf is born that is usually about 70 cm long. Adult dolphins are light grey in colour whereas the calves are dark chocolate brown. The jaws of an adult are lined with over 130 prehensile teeth meant for capturing small fish usually not more than 10 cm long; the lower jaw is longer than the upper one.

The susu has a narrow gullet and cannot masticate its food, as a result of which it can prey on only small fish. When the dolphin breaks the water surface to breathe through its blowhole (a nasal opening on the head) at intervals that can last from 10 seconds to several minutes, it produces a typical sound that is the basis of its various local names. The Sanskrit word for the river dolphin is *shishumachh* but this gentle creature is more usually called *sous, susa, sunsar, sus, susu, soonse, souns, susuk, hiho* or *huh* among other things. In parts of Nepal, the dolphin is called the *suongsu*.

Beaming dolphins

Since the Ganga river dolphin lives in muddy water, it is difficult to study the animal and little is known about its behaviour. It is known, though, that susu are solitary creatures, seldom found in groups.

Most toothed whales are thought to be able to interrogate their environment with sound. By bouncing sounds off an underwater target and analysing the signal they get back, a dolphin is able to accurately locate an object, determine whether and where it is moving, differentiate between object densities, say fat from bone, and tell whether the target is dead or alive. If alive and potential food, a dolphin may be able to stun it, and sometimes kill it, with a high-density beam of sound.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the susu is that notwithstanding the absence of crystalline lens from its eyes, which helps in forming images, and the absence of which renders the susu blind, it occupies the top level of the food chain in the Ganga river system. One hypothesis holds that the susu lost its vision due to its environment. Vision would not be of much use in the muddy waters of the Ganga, its habitat, so over the evolutionary course the susu lost its vision. Instead, the Gangetic dolphin seems to be a sophisticated user of 'echolocation', that is, emitting sounds and locating underwater targets by analysing the bounced reverberations.

Though it was discovered as long ago as 1942 that

dolphins are able to use sound for navigation and finding prey, and there have been many experiments since then, to this day we know very little about their echolocation system. We do know, however, that most dolphin species emit a single and narrow 'beam' of echolocation clicks, which gives them an acoustical picture of the terrain; the bottlenose dolphin, for example, has a beam of about nine degrees, a thin pencil-beam of sound. *Platanista gangetica*, though thought to be a more primitive species, emits a 65 degrees beam with two beams of clicks, which gives it two pictures. One beam gives the dolphins fuzzy 'big pictures' of the river channel environment while the other beam is reflected by an extraordinary projection of the back of the upper jaw, giving the dolphins a more detailed view of what is directly in front of their open mouths.

The first beam is most useful for navigating complex river channels, and 'looking' for fish, while the second beam works best for actually capturing fish. Part of the evolution of these creatures might have been a narrowing of the beam width, which would give them greater penetrative power for the same amount of energy. The concentration of energy in narrow-beam dolphins has become so intense that the prey becomes affected by it even as it is located, resulting in an entirely novel way of catching food. Dr Georgio Pilleri, of the Institute of Brain Anatomy at Berne, observed that the susu continuously emits trains of high frequency (15 to 150 kHz) echolocation clicks which are interrupted only by short pauses of 1 to 60 seconds.

The hydrological regime of a river has a direct bearing on the movement of the dolphins. There is constant daily local migration usually in search of food but in addition, there is also seasonal migration. The search for food leads the Gangetic dolphin to floodplains in the monsoon where most fish migrate in order to spawn and the prey is plentiful. Water levels also dictate migration patters. That is why in the dry months between October and April, the tributaries have barely any dolphins in them. A migration to the main river channels takes place, and a reverse flow occurs after the monsoon. However, barrages and dams on rivers have in many cases disrupted this pattern.

Barrage barricade

Of all the river dolphins, the *baiji*, as also the finless porpoise with which it shares the waters of the Yangtze, is the most critically endangered. It teeters on the brink of extinction with not more than a few score still alive. Compared to this, the susu population seems robust. In the Ganga, the major susu habitat, a total of 730 dolphins have been sighted in recent years between Bijnor, near the foothills of the Himalaya, and Farakka, near the Indo-Bangladesh border. A survey team sighted 152 dolphins in the river Bhagirathi-Hoogli between Farakka and Calcutta in 1995. About 400 dolphins have been sighted in the Brahmaputra, which is the other major susu habitat in the Subcontinent. It is estimated on the basis of various surveys that about 2000 dolphins survive in the Ganga system today. However, if not protected now, it is likely that the Gangetic dolphin will face the same fate as its cousin in China. Indeed, the Gangetic dolphin is in a precarious situation today, its survival threatened by a fast receding habitat that is increasingly fragmented.

About half of India's susu population is found in the waters of the Ganga and its tributaries within the state of Bihar. The latest survey, conducted by the Environmental Biology Laboratory of Patna University in 2000-01, counted 68 dolphins in a 60 km stretch between the Ganga-Punpun confluence at Fatuha (about 20 km downstream from Patna) and the Ganga-Ghaghara confluence at Doriganj (40 km upstream from Patna). One of the areas frequented by the susu, in fact, is the confluence of the Gandak and the Ganga, right by Patna University's riverside campus where the laboratory is located and where this writer works.

In the Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary between Sultanganj and Kahalgaon in Bihar, the only one of its kind in India, a total of 114 dolphins were sighted during a survey in 2000. In March 2001, 85 dolphins were sighted in the river Kosi between the Kosi Barrage at the India-Nepal border and the confluence with the Ganga at Kursela. Besides these major concentrations, dolphins have also been sighted in other tributaries of the Ganga.

While there are as yet significant numbers of susu in the main stem of the Ganga as it flows through Bihar, the dolphin's status in the Ganga tributaries of Nepal is a matter of great concern. Mostly, it is the barrages built across the tributaries in India to feed irrigation canals that affects the susu population. These barrages block the migratory passage of dolphins, which empties the rivers of the susu upstream in Nepal.

The Karnali river in Nepal (called Ghaghara in India) is the furthest upstream that the dolphins are found in the Ganga system, the species not being seen in the tributaries further to the west. In 1976, the Girija Barrage was constructed across the Karnali river, about 20 km into India. There are now about 30 dolphins upstream of the barrage, a majority of them in Indian territory, and the Karnali's flow in Nepal is thought to host

The susu in literature and legend

In India, there is enough historical and mythological evidence to confirm that the susu has been a close associate of humans for a long time. In the third century BC, the Maurya emperor Ashok passed a decree through what is known as the 'fifth pillar edict' barring the killing or hunting of the *"Ganga-puputaka"* – the Gangetic dolphin as it was known then. Dolphins are referred to by their Persian name *khokk aabi*, or water hog, in the *Baburnama*. Bhattasali, author of *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahminical sculptures in Dacca Museum*, identifies the susu as the carrier (*vahana*) of the mythical goddess Ganga. In some villages along the river Ghaghara in Chhapra district, Bihar, India, the riparian community worships the dolphins. They regard them, because they suckle their babies, as "cows of the Ganga".

According to one belief the dolphins are an incarnation of a royal beauty who drowned in the Ganga. As the legend goes the lady while bathing spotted her father-in-law riding along the bank. Out of sheer embarrassment she tried to veil her face with the rising waves and so went to a watery grave.

less than 10 dolphins. What seems to have significantly endangered the dolphins of the Karnali-Ghaghara, besides the impact of the barrage, is the loss of prey to over-fishing by humans.

In the case of the Kosi river, at the eastern end of Nepal, it is the massive Kosi Barrage, constructed in 1965 on the border with India that blocks the migration of dolphins and other migratory species. Only three dolphins were sighted in the Kosi on the Nepal side in 1993. In the same year, only one dolphin was sighted in the Narayani-Gandak river in central Nepal. Again, a barrage built at the border point with India in 1968 seems to have decimated the susu population in upstream Narayani. Today, there are probably no dolphins on the river. Barrages on the Mahakali (Sarda in India) at Banbasa on the Indo-Nepal border in 1928, and at Sardanagar in 1974 about 160 km into Indian territory, have similarly resulted in the extinction of dolphins from the Mahakali-Sarda.

As no systematic population survey of dolphins was carried out prior to the one undertaken by the Patna University team in the Ganga and its tributaries, no meaningful comparison with earlier population figures can be made. However, John Anderson, the first superintendent of the Indian Museum at Calcutta, reported in 1879 that even in the month of May, when the water level was low in the Yamuna at Delhi, there used to be a substantial number of dolphins visible in the river. It is unlikely that any susu survive this far upstream on the Ganga system now. Other than a susu carcass which was brought in from the Yamuna to the Delhi Zoo in 1967, there has been no sign of the susu in the Yamuna.

Reports of dolphin killings from different areas are disturbingly regular, and this together with habitat degradation has resulted in a decline in the population throughout the range of distribution. Moreover, a dolphin gives birth to only one calf at a time after a gestation period of about 10 months at an interval of about two to three years. The low natality means that, in any case, the regeneration rate of the dolphin is sluggish. It is clear that, despite the visibility of the susu in the mainstream of the Ganga in Bihar, the Gangetic dolphin is a threatened species.

The clock's ticking

Is the concern over the susu simply the result of environmental sentimentalism, or does the species have a utilitarian function that can justify its existence? Cynics have been known to ask such questions. The fact is that the Gangetic dolphin does play an important role in a river's ecology, and in that capacity it is of great assistance to humans and other species who draw sustenance from the water courses. Indeed, the susu is itself a valuable indicator of the health of the river, its presence indicating the availability of fish, besides which it is also a gauge by which to determine the levels of pollutants and toxicity in the water.

The use of organochlorine pesticides by agriculturalists has continually been on the rise in the Gangetic plains, and heavy metals also make their way into the river through untreated industrial and urban waste. Studies have shown alarming levels of these toxins in the body and organs of susu carcasses. Among the organochlorine pesticides, DDT and its metabolites are the most prominent compounds found in the susu, followed by other poisonous chemicals such as hexachloro cyclohexane, aldrin, dieldrin, chlordanes and heptachlor. One can surmise that these chemicals are prevalent in dangerous proportions in the waters of the Gangetic plains, India's most fertile area and the nub of its agriculture.

Toxic chemicals including Poly Chlorinated Biphenyles (PCBs) and DDT accumulate in the upper microlayer of the river water and phytoplankton. These toxicants reach the dolphins through the food chain. As a result, a dolphin accumulates a huge quantity of toxic chemicals, especially fat-soluble compounds. Due to biomagnification, some of these chemical compounds tend to increase at every level of the food chain, and dolphins, being at the apex of the chain, accumulate the highest amounts of these compounds. Such compounds are well known for having adverse effects on vital organs, and on the endocrine system, affecting behaviour, reproduction, fecundity, feeding, nutrition and response to diseases. Organochlorine compounds and heavy metals cross the placenta during pregnancy and are transferred from mother to calf. In such conditions even a newly born calf will have toxic chemicals in its system.

The Gangetic dolphin is not threatened only by pollution, however. Habitat degradation and fragmentation of population are also major causes of concern. Heavier siltation in the rivers due to deforestation and soil erosion in catchment areas, as well as the constriction of flow between embankments in many parts, have decreased the depth of rivers and made it difficult for dolphins to navigate. Barrages restrict the migration of dolphins in upstream and downstream locations, which affects spawning and makes the populations genetically isolated.

Besides, susu populations in their entire distribution range from the Brahmaputra to the Karnali face the threat of monofilament nylon gill nets, which are now commonly used by fishermen. These nets are made of very fine nylon thread that the animal fails to locate with its sonar devices. It therefore often gets trapped in the net, cannot come up for air, and ends up drowning. Up to some decades back, fisher folk used to harpoon susu because they considered the dolphin to be competing for the fish. The fact is that the susu feed only on small fish which have little commercial value, as well as molluscs and insect larvae. Increasing awareness of the provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India (1972), which protects the susu, has made fishermen give up the harpooning practice, but other causes of morbidity have become increasingly relevant.

Climax species

The susu has been declared an endangered species by The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and its inclusion in the wildlife act as a Schedule-I animal, makes possession of any part or product of it an offence. The animal is also included in appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES). However, the good that has come from the legal protection tendered to the susu has been negated by recent developments that make dolphin poaching a lucrative business. Oil extracted from the blubber (the thick layer of fat under the dolphin's skin) can be used to attract and catch some varieties of catfish. An adult dolphin of more than 100 kg can yield up to 30-35 litres of oil. This oil is sold at the rate of INR 100-300 per kg with the rate varying according to season, availability and the economic status of the customer. Changing food habits contribute their own pressure on the population: while earlier very few communities along the Ganga would eat dolphin meat, now many do. Dolphin meat sells at the rate of INR 25-30 per kg and so even one dolphin can make a fisherman a tidy sum of money.

A river with a good susu population is a healthy river, which translates also into a healthy habitat for humans. The presence of the susu indicates that the level of pollutants is low, that the river's flow is large, that there are enough fish for the dolphins to prey on, and that the riverine habitat has not been depleted by the diversion of water to irrigation canals, nor violated irrevocably by the intrusion of barrages and dams. There are still some stretches of the Ganga where one gets to experience the frolic of dolphins that our river-faring ancestors would have enjoyed. One such spot is where the Ganga meets the Gandak opposite the Patna University campus. Going out on a boat in mid-morning, one finds the confluence area well populated by susus. Every few seconds one comes up for air, gives a snort, and disappears into the muddy waters. Their smooth grey skins glisten in the sunlight as they emerge and dive quickly, possibly in hot echolocatory pursuit of fish.

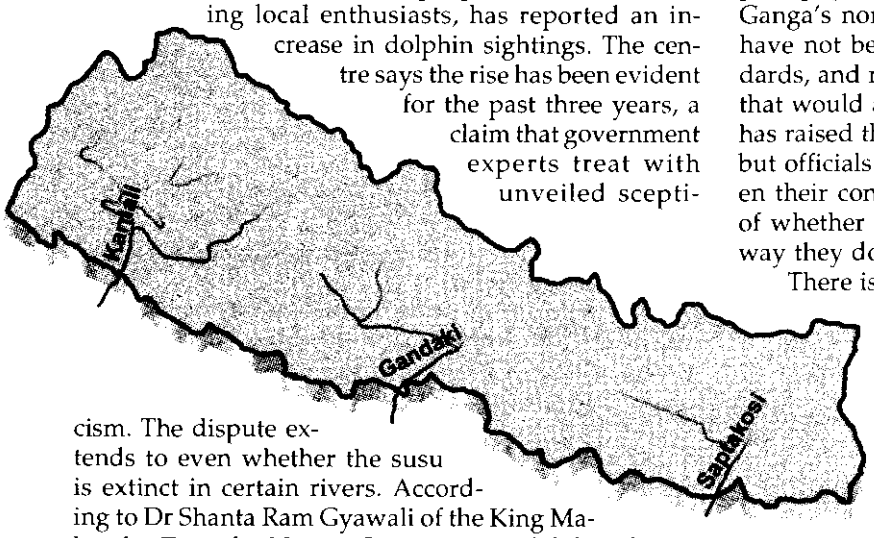
As they splash and dunk on the river by Patna city, these dolphins of the Ganga seem unaware of what is almost inevitable – that humans will continue to encroach on their habitat, polluting the river with urban and industrial waste, emptying the river of its flow to quench the thirst of agriculture, and otherwise making the river uninhabitable by the dolphin. Little do the humans know that what they do to the dolphin as a climax species of the Ganga today, they do unto themselves tomorrow. The susu is a symbol of the aquatic heritage of the Subcontinent and it is the responsibility of the people here to let it survive.

Thriving or threatened in Nepal?

by **Sarad KC**

Nepal's Karnali, Kosi, Mahakali and Narayani rivers were once home to a thriving *susu* population in the section of the Tarai plains before they enter Indian territory. In recent decades however, there has been a dramatic drop in Nepal's river dolphin population, primarily attributable to barrages, which block rivers' flow and impede fish and dolphin migration. But while all Nepali dolphin watchers agree that a drop has occurred, opinions on precise numbers are anything but unanimous.

While conservation officials in Kathmandu are declaring the virtual extinction of the susu in Nepali waters, the dolphin protection centre in Nepal's western Tarai district of Kailali, a unique private effort involving local enthusiasts, has reported an increase in dolphin sightings. The centre says the rise has been evident for the past three years, a claim that government experts treat with unveiled scepticism. The dispute extends to even whether the susu is extinct in certain rivers. According to Dr Shanta Ram Gyawali of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, dolphins have completely disappeared from the Mahakali and Narayani rivers in western and central Nepal. Additionally, he says that while 15 to 20 dolphins appear in the Karnali and Kosi rivers during the annual monsoon, only four to six inhabit them in the dry winter period.



The Kailali centre claims there are around 100 dolphins in the Karnali's various tributaries, including in the Pathriya, Kadha, Kandra and Mohana. While the government has not been able to confirm or disprove the centre's claims, officials look askance at these reports. Narayan Prasad Poudel, deputy director of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, says that while "the centre has done exemplary work in dolphin conservation at the local level, their claims of increases in the number of dolphins appear unscientific".

Gyawali, who served on a government census team during the 2001 monsoon, says the group was only able to confirm the existence of eight dolphins, despite its visit being timed to coincide with the annual peak presence of dolphins in Nepal. But Bijay Raj Shrestha, secretary of the Kailali centre, takes issue with the government researchers' methodology. "It was a short and incomplete research", he says. "If the government's officials come with adequate time, we will show them dozens of dolphins". Gyawali says his team plans to make a follow-up visit in a few months.

Susu survival?

One major stumbling block to rebuilding Nepal's dolphin population is the existence of barrages along the Ganga's northern tributaries. Critics say that barrages have not been built according to environmental standards, and most of them lack functioning 'fish ladders' that would allow dolphins to migrate upstream. Nepal has raised these issues with India at bilateral meetings, but officials in Kathmandu say New Delhi has not taken their concerns seriously. There is also the question of whether fish ladders would work for dolphins the way they do for certain species of fish.

There is no doubt that barrages on the Karnali, the Narayani, the Kosi and the Mahakali on or just south of the border have caused serious damage to the dolphin population of Nepal. In addition, dolphins in Nepal are also under threat from accidental killing in nylon gill nets, generic habitat destruction, possibly deliberate killings and water pollution.

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) classifies the susu as an endangered species and agrees with the assessment that dolphins are nearly extinct in Nepal and already gone from the Mahakali and Narayani rivers.

Nepal has signed the international charter of wildlife conservation, committing itself to protect endangered species like the susu. The government, however, says that it has cut back its conservation efforts because of funding shortfall. "Due to the current security scenario and resource constraints, there has not been enough study on and monitoring of the dolphins", laments one official. Nevertheless, just as the tiger became a symbol of conserving healthy forests, some say the dolphin could be promoted as a symbol of healthy rivers. If so, the Gangetic dolphin may just make a comeback in the rivers of Nepal. △

(Translated by Mukul Humagain)

BHULAN

What's in a name

by ***Rinku Dutta***

"One day, Plato defined humankind as the two-legged animal without feathers. The next day, they say, Diogenes dropped by at the Academy with a plucked chicken".

Known to locals as the *bhulan*, the Indus *susu* is today mainly confined to a 100-mile stretch of fresh water between two artificial constructions, the Guddu and the Sukkur barrages, across the lower Indus in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. The bhulan, even more than its neighbour in the Ganga, is threatened with imminent extinction. As is the case with the earth's other three river dolphin species, its fight for survival has not so much to do with adverse natural conditions as with problems manmade. Its diminishing numbers are a result of incidental and intentional exploitation by humans. A survey conducted jointly in 2001 by WWF-Pakistan, the Pakistan government wildlife departments and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society estimated that there are 1100 bhulans left in the Indus waters (*see survey map*). A total of 965 individuals were actually sighted.

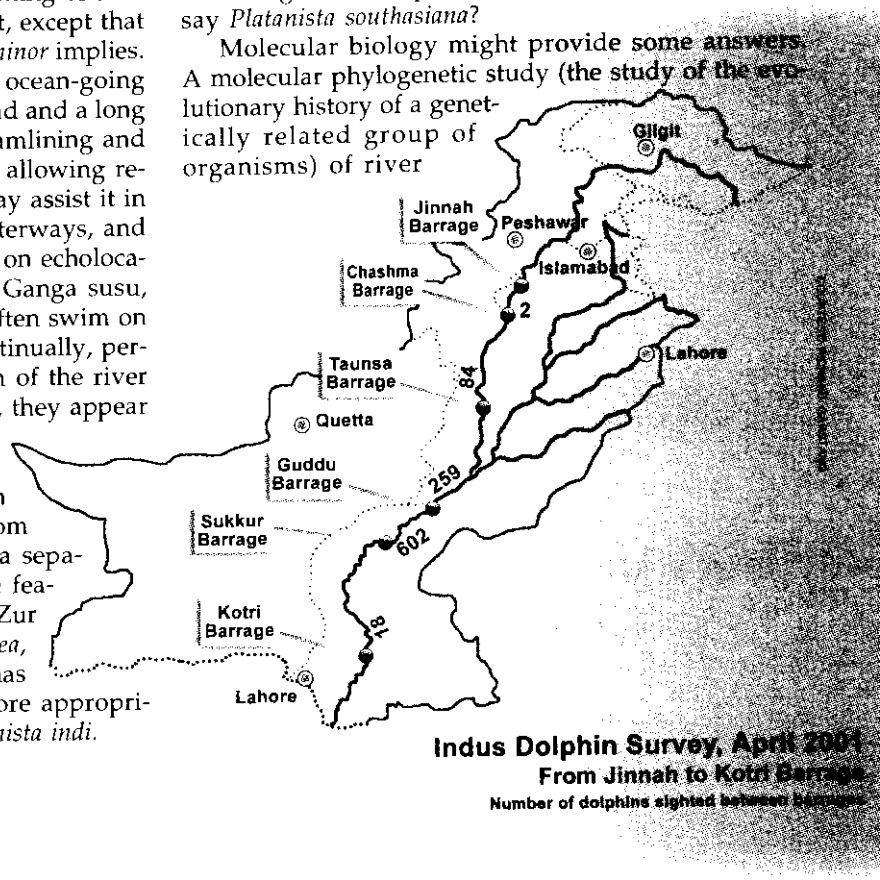
Confined to the fresh-water river system of the Indus in Pakistan, the blind and side-swimming bhulan resembles the Indian susu in every respect, except that it is slightly smaller, as the specific name *minor* implies. Like other river dolphins, and unlike its ocean-going relatives, the bhulan has a bulbous forehead and a long rostrum, its skull has not undergone streamlining and the neck vertebrae are not fused, thereby allowing remarkable flexibility of the head, which may assist it in capturing prey, navigating in narrow waterways, and in scanning its surroundings. It too relies on echolocation to navigate and hunt. And, like the Ganga susu, the bhulan is a slow swimmer. Bhulans often swim on their right sides, nodding their heads continually, perhaps to maintain contact with the bottom of the river with their right flipper. Being quite blind, they appear to navigate through touch, the flipper serving much like a blind man's stick.

Up until the 1970s, the Indus bhulan (*Platanista minor*) was not distinguished from the Ganga susu (*Platanista gangetica*) as a separate species. But, noting other distinctive features, G Pilleri and M Gihr in their paper 'Zur Systematik der Gattung *Platanista*', *Cetacea*, 1971, argued that since no size difference has been systematically documented, it is more appropriate to call the dolphin of the Indus, *Platanista indi.*

Other than by their range of geographic distribution, the two kinds of South Asian river dolphins are primarily differentiated on the basis of the anatomical details of their maxillary crests. These are flat, paired, oval extensions of the upper jaw-bone that grow upward and forward on the skull and occupy a horizontal position above and forward of the slit-like blowhole. As these differences are minor, some may still argue that the Indus and Ganga dolphins are the same species or are subspecies of a single species. Taxonomically, two groups of creatures are the same species if, in the wild, there is significant *gene flow* between the two gene pools (gene pool: the set of genetic information that defines a species).

Essentially, if two groups can inter-breed successfully they are the same species. Since the Indus and Ganga river dolphins are geographically isolated they are reproductively estranged. Still, if one adheres to Alan R Templeton's definition of a species "as the most inclusive group of organisms having the potential for genetic and/or demographic exchangeability", and in the case of the South Asian river dolphins there is such a situation, then is it not reasonable to club the Indus and Ganga river dolphins under one specific category, say *Platanista southasiana*?

Molecular biology might provide some answers. A molecular phylogenetic study (the study of the evolutionary history of a genetically related group of organisms) of river



dolphins conducted by G Yang and K Zhou in 1999, published in *Acta Theriologica Sinica*, established that the difference between cytochrome-b (*cyt-b*) sequences of the Ganga and Indus river dolphins was very minor. Cyt-b is an ancient gene that occurs in the mitochondria of all nucleated organisms. As mitochondrial DNA is maternally inherited and evolves much faster than nuclear DNA, mitochondrial genes are the first place where genetic divergence is reflected. Therefore, Yang and Zhou's observation that the cyt-b gene sequences of the Indus and Ganga river dolphins are not very different lends strong credence to the hypothesis that these two groups of riverine cetaceans have not diverged to an extent that justifies their being called different species.

Problems Southasiana

Dams across the Indus and its tributaries restrict the movement of the bhulan, disrupt migration patterns and divide their population. Reliable data on the bhulan's seasonal migratory behaviour still needs to be accumulated but there is some informed speculation on the subject. According to Richard Garstang, conservation advisor to WWF-Pakistan, "The Indus River barrages probably act as one-way valves, permitting inadvertent downstream movement but no return traffic". The greatest threat to the survival of the bhulan, though, is probably from the continuing decline in water flow, especially downstream of the Sukkur barrage.

The construction of three irrigation barrages, completed at Sukkur in 1932, at Kotri in 1955, and at Guddu in 1969, greatly reduced the volume of water in the river, causing the dry-season range of movement of the dolphins to shrink. New diversion structures in the upper Indus, and overexploitation of the ground water that has resulted in increased demand for irrigation water from rivers have further reduced flow. Chemical pollutants from agricultural and urban waste, and noise pollution from boat traffic are suspected to compound the problem of the degeneration of the bhulan habitat. Dolphin lives are also lost when they get entangled in fishing nets.

These threats to the survival of the bhulan are hardly typical to its case. River dolphins in the Ganga system too face the same hurdles to survival. Another argument then, for a common and concerted approach to the dolphins of the Subcontinent's rivers, whether they be in Nepal, India or Pakistan?

Youth Initiative for Peace

Mission Statement: We are a youth movement united in our efforts to build mutual trust and understanding for sustainable peace.

Youth Initiative for Peace (YIP) is linked with Initiative For Peace (IFP). Our goal is to create permanent conflict management programs and facilitate initiatives for peace by connecting people across the globe. Youth Initiative for Peace aims to remove misconceptions that have been created amongst the people of South Asia, by establishing a network amongst the youth of these countries.

YIP is a growing organization, already consisting of members from India, Pakistan and fifteen other countries. Till now our focus has been solely on the sub-continent. However, the Focus on South Asia peace camp is our first step towards expanding our activities into the rest of this region.

Focus on South Asia

Between the 14th and 22nd of December, Youth Initiative for Peace will bring together 56 young people from South Asian countries, for a peace camp to be held in Lahore, Pakistan. These countries are Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Through the use of visual and performing arts, we aim to improve communication, create understanding, and remove prejudices and indifference amongst the youth of the SAARC nations.

The camp will feature extensive workshops on the use of the media and various mediums of communication, such as Dance, Song, Drama, Literature and Creative Writing, Photography and Painting. Furthermore, various experts will give lectures and hold seminars about the different cultures, histories, conflicts and present socio-economic conditions of each of the South Asian countries.

Outcome

YIP aims to serve as a catalyst for further movements and initiatives as well as facilitate the empowerment of youth in South Asia and across the world.

Throughout the event we intend to motivate the participants to chalk out initiatives that can be taken by them in their home countries. We hope that these initiatives will be implemented as soon as possible.

Youth Initiative for Peace will assist and support the efforts of Focus on South Asia participants. In this way, we believe we will be able to achieve our goal of unity, peace, and co-operation within the South Asian region.

Admissions

Eight participants between the ages of 15 and 19 will be chosen from each country. Youth Initiative for peace aims to maximize the diversity of the participants, therefore translators will be available at the camp. However, a working command of English is desirable but not essential.

Applicants will be required to submit an application form, including the use of any medium of expression to show what they intend to do for peace, and why they wish to attend this camp. Essays, audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, etc are all welcome. CVs, giving details of their prior work for peace, as well as achievements in any medium of expression are recommended but not essential.

Participants will be selected by members of Youth Initiative for Peace, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, creed or financial ability. Female Candidates are encouraged to apply.

Application forms can be downloaded from our website, photocopied, or requested by letter or email. All application packages must be posted by Oct 15th 2002.

peacecamp@initiativeforpeace.org Fax: (92-21) 5897326
www.youth.initiativeforpeace.org

Falling off the world stage

When you left even the stones were buried:
The defenceless would have no weapons.
When the ibex rubs itself against the rocks,
who collects its fallen fleece from the slopes?
O Weaver whose seams perfectly vanished,
who weighs the hairs on the jeweller's balance?
They make a desolation and call it peace.
– Agha Shahid Ali, Farewell

THE WORLD began to change on '9/20', the day George Bush declared, "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists". Not wanting to be known as a friend of Osama and his in-laws in Kabul, even General Musharraf fell in line. The self-appointed president of Pakistan declared his country the frontline state of America's "War on Terror".

It is now almost a year since daisy cutters started to rain on the desert landscape of the Hindukush, but Bush shows no signs of slowing down. Unsuccessful in nabbing Osama bin Laden "dead or alive", the Texan cowboy is now set to vent his frustrations on Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq. The tone and tenor of Bush's warning to the rest of the world is still the same: do not dare question the White House. The right reigns in the United States, and American unilateralism rules the world.

In addition to making the global right unite under the American umbrella, the 20 September declaration initiated the process of suppression of all dissenting voices. So when Israel bombarded the Palestinian leader's official residence on a flimsy pretext, there were no protest rallies even in Sweden, home of the Nobel Academy that awarded its peace prize to Yasser Arafat in 1994. Just an announcement of intention by the White House that America may go after Saddam on its own was enough to transform prime minister of the United Kingdom Tony Blair into HE Blair, ambassador-at-large for the United States. More than 11 September, it is 20 September that seems to have really changed the world we live in.

Increasingly, no one else but Americans seems to matter in global affairs. Hence, it was entirely appropriate for the representatives of more than 100 countries, in New York this September for the annual General Assembly session, to proceed to the site of the terrible tragedy on the 11th to pay their homage. Each one present on that solemn occasion paid their respects to the dead in their own way. The Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, sprinkled the ground with the *gangajal* that he had carried across the seven seas.

South Asians are unfit to rule themselves

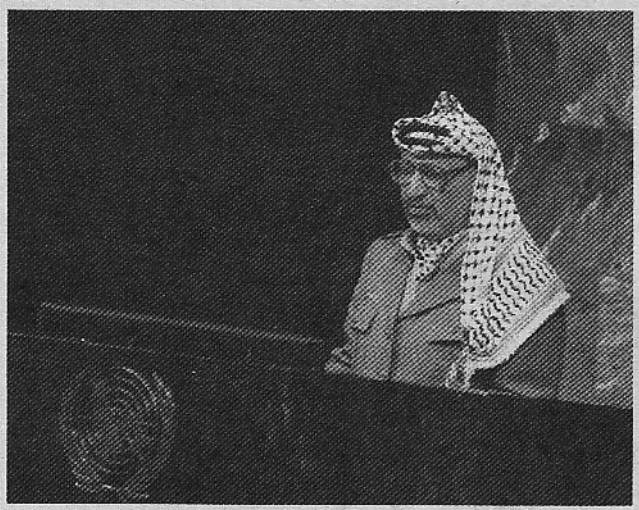
Busheshwar

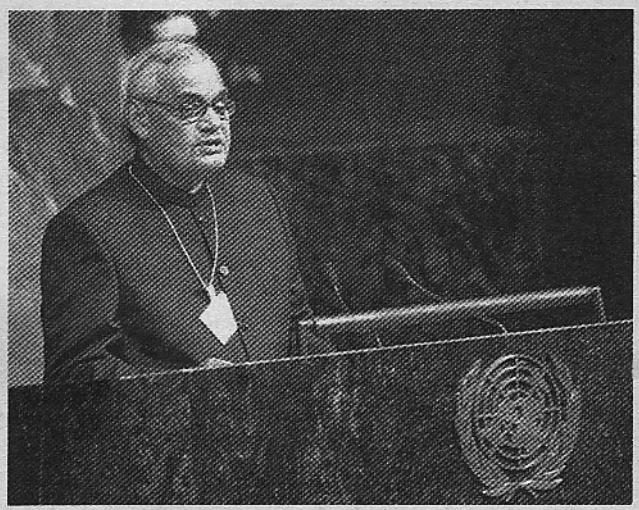
There is nothing inherently wrong in the head of government of an independent country making a pilgrimage to the site of human tragedy anywhere. Perhaps some day George Bush too will travel to Kashmir to pay his respects to the victims of 50 years of insurgent violence and state repression. By travelling to the WTC site, Vajpayee proved that he still has a poet's heart, even though this is less and less evident in his own country. But the real matter of concern is the near surrender of South Block to the foreign policy goals of the United States. Take it from me: India is no longer the voice of conscience of the countries of the third world, including South Asia.

Around a year ago, I heard former Indian diplomat Muchkund Dubey repeat the well worn mantra of practical diplomacy, "countries have no permanent friends, only permanent interests", at a talk fest in Delhi's India International Centre. Still, the downward slide of India's stature in the world does not cease to amaze me. This is bad news for all of us in South Asia, because if India loses its voice, it is unlikely that any one in the world will care to hear what Bangladesh, Nepal or even Pakistan has to say about issues of global concern. The irrelevance of India was more than clear at the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg (Aug-Sept 2002), where New Delhi failed to draw the world's attention to its concerns. While the foreign minister, Yashwant Sinha, gamely tried to respond to queries on globalisation, the head of delegation, TR Balu, was a far cry from Kamal Nath at the original UN environmental meet at Rio a decade ago. The only point made by the Indian delegation to Johannesburg seemed to be a petulant response to the United Nations Environment Programme report on the Asian Brown Cloud, which New Delhi believes is premature and the scientific credentials of which it questions.

Ever since he has been a member of parliament, Atal Behari Vajpayee has loved going to the General Assembly to relax in the relative anonymity of the United Nations. Not that this was afforded him as prime minister, but he may have thought of travelling to Johannesburg rather than New York City this year. South Africa takes pride in the fact that it was the site of the transformation of barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into Mahatma Gandhi, and the presence of an Indian prime minister would have added lustre to this showcase event of the Mbeki government.

As the head of government of the largest democratic country in the world, which also happens to be economically rather weak, by his mere presence the prime minister would have shown the despotic rulers of Africa that the poor value their political rights as much, if





Addressing the UN: Embattled Nobel laureate Yasser Arafat, Delhi-NYC frequent flyer AB Vajpayee.

not more, than the rich. Or could it be that he absented himself from Johannesburg because he could not bear to show his face in a country (South Africa) that has refused to go nuclear despite its ability to do so?

Meanwhile, back home, New Delhi has further improved its international citizenry by becoming the second largest buyer in the global arms bazaar – that too after going nuclear. By unequivocally aligning itself with the United States and Israel, New Delhi has vacated the moral high ground in global affairs (and, internally, it has begun to speak for the urban middle class rather than the rural masses that actually make up the country). India commands respect neither because of its military might, like Russia, nor its economic clout, like China. It stands tall in the comity of nations on the back of its democracy, but seems to value this less and less.

South Block diplomats now seem to have resigned themselves to the ignominy of being equated with Pakistan in global affairs. No wonder, even Musharraf's feeble protest against Bush's intentions of going after Saddam Hussein sounds more emphatic than the ambiguities and contradictions emanating from New Delhi. This must be galling for Indian foreign service officers, drawn from among the best and brightest of civil service recruits and socialised in Nehruvian foreign affairs philosophy.

It is not difficult to put a date to the process that has reduced India's stature from spokes-country for the third world to regional geopolitical power – May 1998, the month of Pokhran II, which invited the response of Chagai. But when foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, offered India as a base to the United States to conduct their 'War on Terror', New Delhi was practically prostrating itself at the feet of Bush*eshwar*. Even as the White House deity snubbed Singh and went with Musharraf, India lost its independent, questioning voice. Pretty soon, the saffron strongman LK Advani, now deputy prime minister, was publicly singing paeans in praise of Benjamin Netanyahu, the former right-wing prime minister of Israel, and the role of India in Arab affairs was reduced to zero, the original contribution of Bharat to Arab arithmetic.

Region on the margins

It seems none of the leaders of South Asia have any illusion about their role in world affairs, and this was evident in the way they shunned Johannesburg. Nepal's prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, left for Johannesburg with much fanfare, planning to make a mark as the current chairman of SAARC. But he stopped by in Belgium (it seems to finalise an arms deal), went over to London for a private visit, and came back home on the pretext of a hastily arranged breakfast meet with the Thai premier in Bangkok. Begum Zia too could not make it to Rio+10, just as she had been unable to attend Rio itself in 1992. Sri Lanka obviously had other priorities, as did General Musharraf. So South Asia had to be content in Johannesburg with the prime minister of Bhutan promoting the message of his king about the importance of Gross National Happiness. Luckily, President Gayoom was there to speak passionately for environmental goals (as he always has) to keep his archipelago from being swamped by global warming.

Countries of the region have also lost the ability to help each other in times of trouble. Tamils and Sinhalas of Sri Lanka are talking in Thailand, and the facilitator is a Norwegian. Ever since Deuba got a *darshan* of Busheshwar at the oval temple, all manner of American advisors have been advising Singha Durbar on ways of tackling Maoist insurgency.

Not that there is anyone in Nepal who is listening (least of all Deuba, a terrible communicator) and with good reason. Begum Zia desperately wants buyers for her natural gas hoard, but she does not want to sell it to India. Bhutan too may finally lose the will to finagle and resist, and finally accept its exiled citizens back – but only if, say, Germany or Japan intervenes. Do not

expect New Delhi to try and roll back the unjust situation that keeps a hundred thousand Lhotshampa refugees languishing in the southeast Tarai of Nepal. Was the diehard colonialist Winston Churchill right that Indians (by whom we mean most South Asians of today) are unfit to rule themselves?

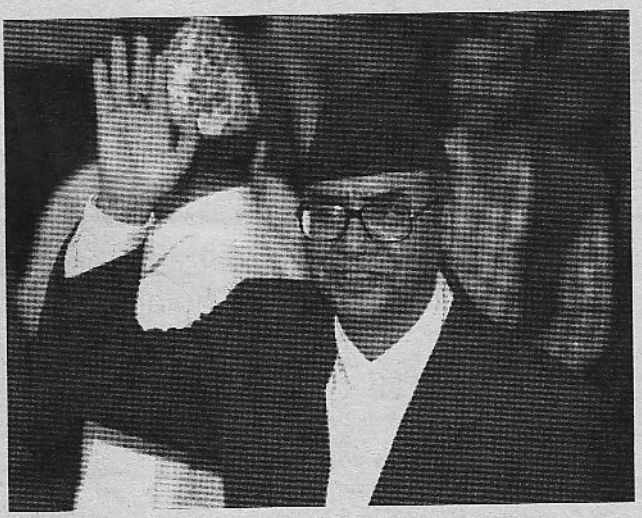
It is not just politics and diplomacy, even the intellectual leadership required to reaffirm the bonds of unity between the people of South Asia is singularly lacking. If we accept that Mahatma Gandhi's ideology was a product of his experiences in South Africa, then it is difficult to find even one person in the modern era in this entire region that thought and lived like a South Asian, and was not just a 'proud' citizen of any one of our artificially constructed nation-states. Nepal's BP Koirala may perhaps have been the exception, but he spent his entire life struggling to establish democratic rule in his own country, and was unable to give much time to regional imperatives.

The question that BR Ambedkar asked more than half a century ago is still valid: Despite an intellectual tradition millennia old, why could brahmins not produce a single Voltaire? Intellectuals of Islamabad, Dhaka and Colombo too are merely brahmins without the sacred thread, and they too need to mull over this matter as much as the twice-born elites of New Delhi, Ahmedabad, Trivandrum, Guwahati and Kathmandu. As long as the region cannot come up with its own political and diplomatic agenda, our countries will be forced to follow the path chosen by the power of the day, even if that happens to be Bush junior.

India and Pakistan are adamant in their posturing, and they are happy that this is attracting a bevy of American interlocutors every other month, Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca being the most recent trippie. Ostensibly, she was in the Indian capital to attend a conference of chiefs of missions of the South Asian region. But who is to say that she was not carrying a diplomatic gun to get South Block to endorse US plans for Baghdad. Unfortunately, that is an offer neither Musharraf nor Vajpayee can afford to refuse, whatever their convictions may be. But are we not ourselves responsible for such diplomatic impotence in our leadership?

Once the Soviet Union had to intervene to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table. To defuse Kargil, the president of the United States had to use his clout in Islamabad. If Musharraf and Vajpayee do not start talking to each other now, it will not be long before Zhu Rongji will feel obliged to invite them to dinner. As it is, India is paying a heavy diplomatic price to keep Beijing in good humour – recently, it had to abstain on a UN vote that decided to bar Tibetan groups from Johannesburg after fierce lobbying by China.

A region with more than one-sixth of the world population and at least 6000 years of civilisation needs to move by itself rather than under the directions of a deity in a faraway land, or his nemesis saint Osama near-



Deuba ditched Jo'burg.

er home. But, as we all know, South Asia must get its act together at home before it can begin to make a difference on the world stage. South Asia will have come into its own when its most powerful country is able to raise objections at Ramallah being turned into Tora Bora.

– CK Lal

Seventy years of *Hindoo Holiday*

Exploring today's India with the help of a book written 70 years ago by a young homosexual man from England.

by ***Hemant Sareen***

Consider this. A young Hindu boy's only objection to being kissed on the mouth by an Englishman is that the white man eats meat. Unbelievable as it may seem today, this is a true encounter from 1920s India, recorded in a book that is now 70 years old – JR Ackerley's *Hindoo Holiday* (The Viking Press, 1932). Quite expectedly then, considering its content and considering the India of today where homosexuality is still considered a perversity and is illegal to boot, in Indian bookshops *Hindoo Holiday* is stacked alongside tourist guides and the *Kamasutra* where the average Indian seldom dares to tread. With its candid approach to a subject that is largely taboo, *Hindoo Holiday* addresses a niche readership that is not put off by its seeming 'decadence'.

Since Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), a vicious trashing of Indian culture and its society's excesses, and Lajpat Rai's largely justified strident counterattack in *Unhappy India* (1928), it has become easy to dismiss any attempt to explore or expand on the idea of India as malicious anti-national propaganda. The far-right *Hindutva* brigade cheerfully disrupts the screening of films about lesbian relationships, rewrites history texts and bans books providing evidence for that well acknowledged truth that Hindus once ate cows. Four months ago, in June, when burnt bodies, lying on the ground like pieces of an art installation, shared the pages of the newspaper with the repartee of nuclear threats between India and Pakistan, I picked up *Hindoo Holiday*. Reading about the strange yet familiar place India was, makes you wonder, what good is it, and why even bother, evoking an ultra-bowdlerised *Bharatmata*, a squeaky clean Mother India, who, in all likelihood, never even existed?

In 1923, Joseph Randolph Ackerley, English and 27 years old, came to India at the suggestion of his friend EM Forster, and spent a little over five months in the small principality of Chhatarpur as the "English private secretary" to the maharaja there. *Hindoo Holiday* was the product of the journal that he maintained during his stint in India. Its people, the maharaja with his homosexual subtext, and his retinue of a prime minister, a secretary, five Englishmen and women, the ubiquitous flunkies and some off-stage conspiring relatives,

CHARLES D'OYLY, VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Imperialism without apology.

make for a cast of the usual suspects, but it is Ackerley's treatment of them that has something valuable to offer. Depending on historical and cultural contexts, a reader will take various views of and from the book. Its initial publishers found the account so scandalous, they insisted that the more risqué ponderings on the maharaja be edited out and the name of the state be fictionalised. As a result, Ackerley's Indian holiday is located in 'Chhokrapur' – translated, that would mean Ladsville, or "City of Boys". And, in India today, the book is stacked way back in the section that storekeepers think will attract only depraved and/or curious Westerners, looking for a 'quickie' while they travel through the Subcontinent.

The book finds the appellation 'funny' tagged to it by pleased readers and the knee-jerk reaction is to think that the Indians in the book are being ridiculed. Ackerley, as an Englishman, occupies a superior position: apart from the fact that he belongs to the colonising race, his personal circumstances also are much better than that of most of the characters. One knows that even the maharaja, despite his wealth and status, would have given his right arm for the Oxbridge education Ackerley carries so lightly. However, on reading

through the book as opposed to merely looking at the blurbs, one finds in the patiently recorded conversations that ridicule of Indians is certainly not its aim and Indian readers suspect derision instinctively only because of their own complexes.

Ackerley's approach is that of an anthropologist on a busman's holiday. No clash of civilisations, no race consciousness is discernible in his book, just faithful records of sincere relationships between men from different backgrounds. How minimally racial and cultural superiority impinges on the account gives the book a contemporary feel of course, but more importantly, it highlights a neglected aspect of the British political and cultural scene in the era India gained independence. Indian independence is either attributed to the Herculean efforts of the Mahatma and his notable generals such as Nehru and Patel and the martyrdom of many foot soldiers, or to the weakening of the imperial resolve in the wake of the second world war. Few accounts of the Indian struggle for independence explain, lest British villainy and the glory of the heroes be mitigated, how the British political and social milieu had undergone a sea change in the course of the inter-war years.

GEORGE HAYTER

Imperious Victoria.

Indian theories of independence fail to explain how left-liberals came to matter so much to British politics and society

The Oxford movement had put the religious faith of a whole generation on the rack; the Bloomsbury group growing ever more influential at the time had redefined the ways art and literature would react to new realities, rejecting ossified norms of a defunct Victorian society and ethos, which they held responsible for the first world war. Virginia Woolf, with her uninhibited stream of consciousness, was a product as well as the prime mover of the group. So was the iconoclastic Lytton Strachey whose *Eminent Victorians*, that trendsetter in the biographical oeuvre, had influence beyond literary circles. A pacifist and homosexual, Strachey seems an ideal role model for Ackerley, who was in all likelihood inspired by the group and its fresh creed. This was a time when the British left's anti-imperialism was changing the politics of the land. India's locally nurtured theories of independence fail to explain why and how left-liberals such as Stafford Cripps, Bernard Shaw, TE Lawrence and Maynard Keynes, whose views were anything but imperialist, came to matter so much to British politics and society.

Placed in such a context, Ackerley scarcely seems the odd man out. He does not carry the white man's burden like the protagonist of George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (who shoots a *mast* elephant in a bazaar impelled by fear of ridicule and native expectations). But, in the context of the Raj, Ackerley hardly jells with mainstream British society in India, which carried the torch of imperialism without apology, often even with pride and a sense of duty right until 1947. The classic outsider, he simply does not have much truck with the British who are the maharaja's guests. He can barely tolerate their conversations about impudent but easily cowed-down natives, their pelting stones at pie dogs and septic boys. He writes, "I found this kind of conversation so remarkable that I began to note it down on the back of envelopes under cover of the table". His amusement and keenness to take the mickey out of his kind lends a balance to the narrative and forecloses the potential for an invidious reading of the later part of the book when the Indians are the primary subjects of his narrative. Whether he is seriously trying to undermine the empire after an agenda or whether it is British self-deprecation at work, is moot. All said, while this view of the empire may sit awkwardly beside popular Kiplingesque accounts of the Raj, the modern reader appreciates its irony and perhaps even sees something redeeming in the British spirit. Ackerley never joins the society of the other English, never participates. He only observes, and records.

The slippery path

Ackerley's account of India contrasts sharply with the preoccupation of Western media, art and literature with monuments and things Indian, making those Indians disappear, as if by the rope-trick, who are regarded as the grey, suffering mass of humanity – awkward, inarticulate, and unresolved. Rudyard Kipling's Indians, like terracotta figurines, vessels for his set notions about the Indian character, are mere details in a frieze of contorted and wily beings suffering at their own and fate's hands. EM Forster, incidentally homosexual like Ackerley, could have seized the opportunity missed by Kipling. Unfortunately though, in *A Passage to India* (1924), he chose to please European sensibilities loath to be surprised with flesh and blood natives, and content with stereotypes. Aziz, the Muslim physician who is the protagonist of *A Passage to India*, though based on a real person (Sir Syyed Ross), is at best a vehicle to carry the symbolism of 'awakened self-esteem'.

Ackerley's Indians are as cleanly and delicately etched as his accompanying pen and ink drawings in *Hindoo Holiday*. They are treated without condescension and with an empathy that is often, surely mistakenly, attributed to his homosexuality. Indian readers of the book come face to face with long dead ancestors and relatives whose sepia-toned photographs catch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Englishman and Indian servant: Intimate relations?

dust in a crusty album or on a mildewed wall. There is little curiosity expended on monuments or the history of Chhokrapur as Ackerley relentlessly pursues his characters.

No louche Caesar, as one would expect, the maharaja is a gentle, curious, insecure chap barely able to cope with the redundancy of his political class that has been effected by British rule. His decay and emasculation finds expression in mindless confused utterances: "'Why are ruins beautiful?' ... 'And what is beauty? Is it the cloak of God?'" Hard times brought on by British overlordship mean that even the wings of his lightest fancy, building a section of the palace in the style of a Greek villa, must be clipped. The possibilities for the maharaja's decadence are thus limited to a petulant lust for boys, especially one 12-year-old who plays hard to get and is known by the endearment "Napoleon the Third". There is also Abdul Haq, Ackerley's Hindustani tutor, the recognisable toady who projects extraordinary potency onto white skin. His pestering of Ackerley for a job he is not really qualified for or asking him to arrange for the maharaja's car so that he can show off his prize Caucasian catch in town is behaviour not unfamiliar to Indians.

What really makes Ackerley's account of India nonpareil though, is the moral ambiguity of *Hindoo Holiday*. The vagueness is achieved by mimicking recognisably Indian subterfuges and evasive tendencies in the literary style. This non-judgemental stance towards most things he witnesses is typified in the rather droll observation: "The washstand contained a little water and a drowned mouse". Ackerley uses irrelevancies that force readers to interpretations to make the text suggestive and create faux-depth.

It is this linguistic subtlety that lets Ackerley's sexual orientation slip into the reader's mind unnoticed. His innocuous exposition of Brahma as "neuter" who developed "a triple personality, three *masculine* [italics mine] deities", in a take on Hinduism, is a deliberate slip. The ruse is also used in a description of a temple frieze: "a long file of soldiers marching gaily along, and another smaller, more elaborate design, which was frequently repeated. They were both sodomitic [sic]". It is only quite late into the book that the reader fully realises that the text is dotted with signals pointing out the author's sexual preference. Nonetheless, when the real thing comes one is already subconsciously prepared for it.

As if to educate us about the laissez faire society India was, Ackerley informs the reader that Narayan, the guesthouse clerk, has already had many relationships before marrying a girl of 12, his 14-year-old wife. He then lets the cat of his own sexual preference out as he proceeds with a report of his conversation with Narayan about Sharma, the maharaja's valet:

Ah, Sharma! I said, smiling, *He is a shameful boy.*

He Maharajah Sahib's lover-boy, Narayan said.

Does he like that? I asked.

No, he does not like.

Then why does he do it?

I do not know. He is half-made.

You don't approve either, do you?

No, I don't like. It is bad, wrong. But what can I do?

You get much love from Sharma one time, said Narayan, after a pause, smiling at me.

What did he tell you? I asked.

He tell me *"The sahib try to kiss me".*

And what did you say?

I say he must kiss you if you want.

This conversation is highly illustrative of the moral and literary tone of the book. When one reads the entries pertaining to the maharaja's lusting after the boy, there is little for the reader to judge whether Ackerley approves or disapproves of the whole thing. Next thing we know he himself is trying to kiss, and later even manages a mouth-to-mouth with Sharma, the clerk. Ackerley chooses to be as reticent and coy as his Subcontinental company when tricky matters like homosexuality are to be dealt with, the resultant teasing effect of these incomplete revelations is familiar to Indians. All the while we are fooled into suspending our own moral judgement and fail to notice that it is not just consensual homosexual sex but also paedophilia that is being is being described in the pages. The book

becomes almost the literary precursor to Vladamir Nabokov's *Lolita* by offering, like the later classic, the humanity of an experience rather than soliciting the reader's judgement. Like Nabokov's anti-hero Humbert Humbert, Ackerley too takes the reader down a path that is morally and ethically very slippery. Charmed by them, the reader empathises with them in their obsession with the nubile nymphet or lissome boy as the case may be, momentarily experiencing moral disorientation.

Uncut India

One could put the moral and literary ambivalence, both reflective of India, down to the repressiveness of Indian society but one realises that Ackerley's India was less hung-up about sex than India today. India used to be the place that represented the morality of amorality. Unsurprisingly then, the first uncut version of *Hindoo Holiday* to be published was the Indian edition in 1979. In fact, an unexpurgated version of the book did not come out in the West till the New York Review of Books brought out an edition in 2000.

Many social trends noticeable in today's India were current in Ackerley's India: the continuing preference for 'Indian treatment' (*ayurvedic*) over the 'Western/ European system' (allopathic), or the pragmatism that makes Babaji Rao, a strict vegetarian, put aside his qualms and administer "Brand's Essence of Chicken" (his "face puckered with disgust as he uttered these dreadful words") to his ailing son. Even the disregard for the caste system among the liberal elite, though that has become suspect post-Mandal (1990), is reflected in the book, as is the desire for self-improvement and hunger for education, which are still seen as a means of material and spiritual uplift.

On the flip side, on view are the warped Indian sense of judgement, a morality easily inveigled by expedience and an exaggerated sense of dignity marked by an inclination to servility. Women were the inconsequential gender in the Indian scheme of things, hardly visible. "Don't notice them! They don't exist", an Englishwoman cautions the debutant Ackerley against seeking the company of Indian women. India may be the land of cohabiting opposites: sex with abstinence, snake with mongoose, deification with desecration, modernity with orthodoxy. Hardly an easy picture to understand, but, nonetheless, a true one. Ignoring the evidence of who we Indians are and how we once were impoverishes and diminishes our humanity – perhaps our only significant contribution to the world. △

The ethnographic draughtsman

I don't like catalogues, I don't even like the *word* catalogue, said Dr Michael (Mark) Oppitz, Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Völkerkundemuseum at Zürich University, as he leafed through Robert Powell's *Himalayan Drawings*. And after taking in the 300 pages of this 'retrospective panorama' of Powell's work, I can see why Oppitz might resent the term.

Far from being a catalogue, *Himalayan Drawings* is a total book, a complete meal in published format that edifies the visual senses as much as it does the intellect. The high quality of the photographic reproductions match the intensity of Powell's art, and the full page plates, which make up two thirds of the publication, have a depth of colour almost indistinguishable from that of Powell's originals drawings. The most prominent feature of Powell's signature style, now frequently seen in the posters adorning restaurants and middle-class homes in Kathmandu, is his unique form of fantastical hyper-realism. On first viewing, many people take his drawings to be doctored photographs, only later realising that the life-like shadows and hairline cracks were created by pen and brush. It is all the more fitting, then, that the printed reproductions of Powell's work that appear in the beautifully produced *Himalayan Drawings* should be so true to his original works. When studying the House of Tsuk, for example, which graces the dust jacket, one is hard-pressed to remember that this is a photographic replica of a pictorial representation, and not the house itself.

The publication of *Himalayan Drawings* was timed to coincide with the first ever retrospective of Robert Powell's oeuvre. The exhibition, with the same title as the accompanying book, was organised by and housed at the Ethnographic Museum of Zürich University in Switzerland and ran from 13 July 2001 to 3 March 2002. While previous shows of Powell's work, both in Kathmandu where he lives and works, and at the Sackler Gallery in Washington DC, have focused on specific geographical locations depicted in his art, the *Himalayan Drawings* exhibit was more expansive in its vision. On display were 142 pieces spanning 25 years of Powell's work in the Himalaya (Nepal, India, Pakistan and China), which he had created using a range of different media (watercolour, ink and pencil).

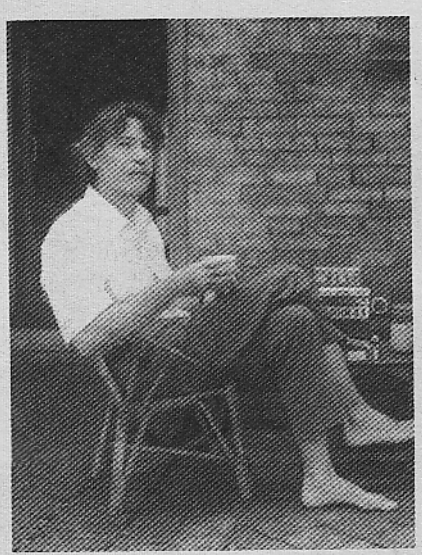
Himalayan Drawings
Drawings by Robert Powell
Edited by Michael Oppitz
Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, 2001. 304 pages, 283 colour illustrations, 59 black and white, 1 map. ISBN 3-909105-41-6. Price: Swiss Francs (sFr) 78, approx. USD 50

reviewed by
Mark Turin

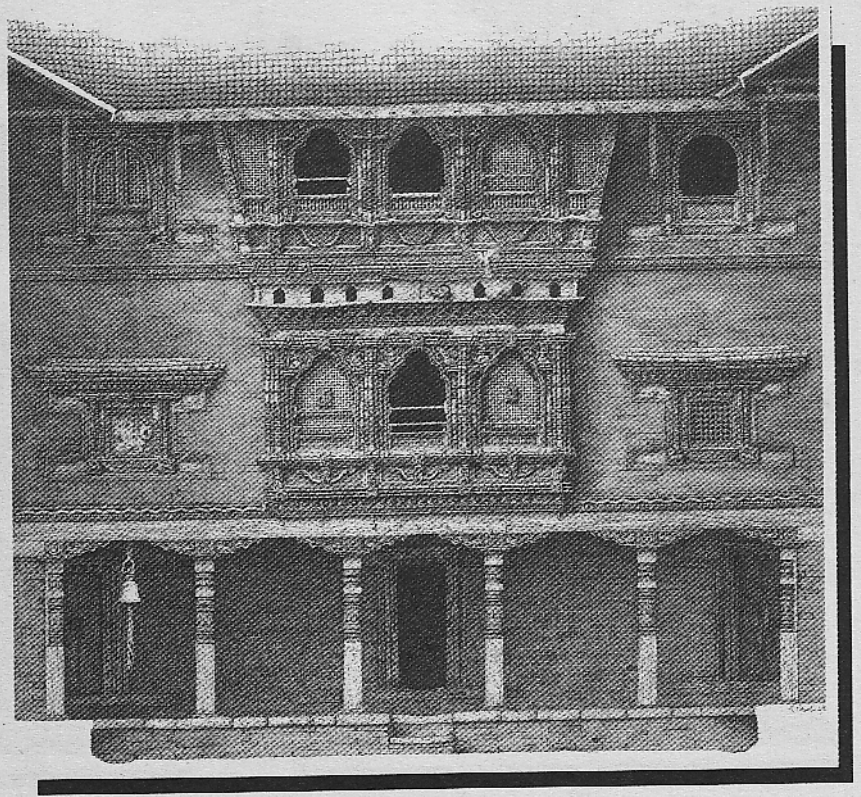
It becomes apparent when reading the book that Powell's admirers are also his patrons, benefactors, clients and critics. The exhibition was organised by Michael Oppitz, a long-time friend of Powell's, who also edited the publication and contributed one of its longest chapters. The exhibit was opened on 12 July 2001 by Niels Gutschow and Gotz Hagmuller, both respected architects and scholars and sometime residents of Nepal, and key figures in Powell's professional life and development as an artist. On reading the captions for the plates, one cannot help noticing that a significant number of the pieces are owned by none other than Michael Oppitz, Gotz Hagmuller and Niels Gutschow.

While readers unfamiliar with the lifestyle of expatriates in Nepal between the 1960s and 1990s would be forgiven for finding these overlapping coincidences a little too self-referential, the explanation is really quite simple. As becomes clear from the personal recollections shared in the chapters of *Himalayan Drawings*, the atmosphere of Kathmandu during this era was one of convivial cohabitation, with expatriate scholars, writers, travellers and artists intermingling and working on exciting new projects together. It comes as no surprise to learn, then, that the very same people who commissioned Powell's drawings should be the ones to appreciate them. In his personal preface, Michael Oppitz describes the contributors to the book as a "well-matched team. Some are old companions of the artist about whom they write. Others have joined the club later".

The first chapter is by Peter Herbstreuth, an art critic and curator, who masterfully intertwines excerpts from an interview he conducted with Powell and his own intellectual appreciation of the artist's work. According to Herbstreuth, Powell "extracts pieces from his real surroundings, reconstructs them and shows the detail on the picture surface", a technique which Herbstreuth himself emulates in his writing. The interview with the artist is fascinating, and Powell comes across as modest and thoughtful. According to Powell, in "any traditional architecture you see the pas-



Robert Powell



Kuthu Math Courtyard facade, Bhaktapur

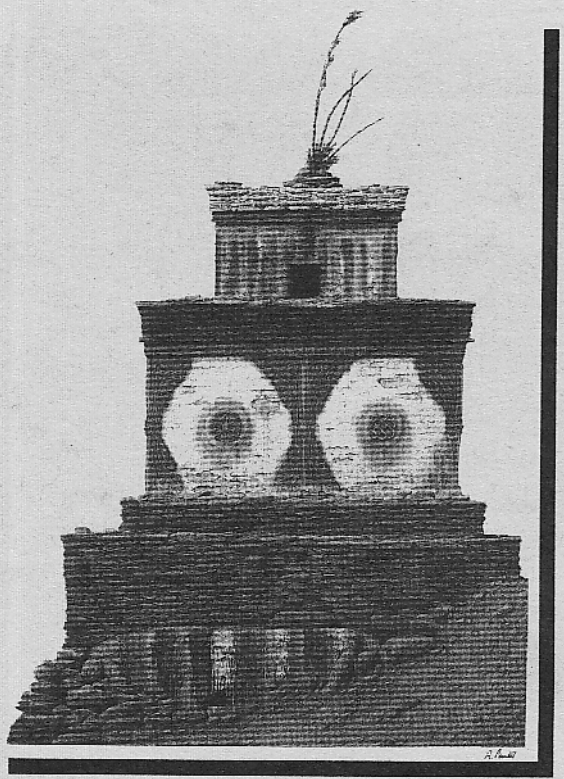
sage of time. And that is what I found boring about so much modern architecture. There is nothing designed within the building to allow for the effect of time on a structure". With Powell's comment in mind, it is hard to disagree when one looks at the modern skyline of Kathmandu. Later in the interview, Powell touches on a central feature of his work to which many commentators call attention: the notable absence of humans. Powell's explanation:

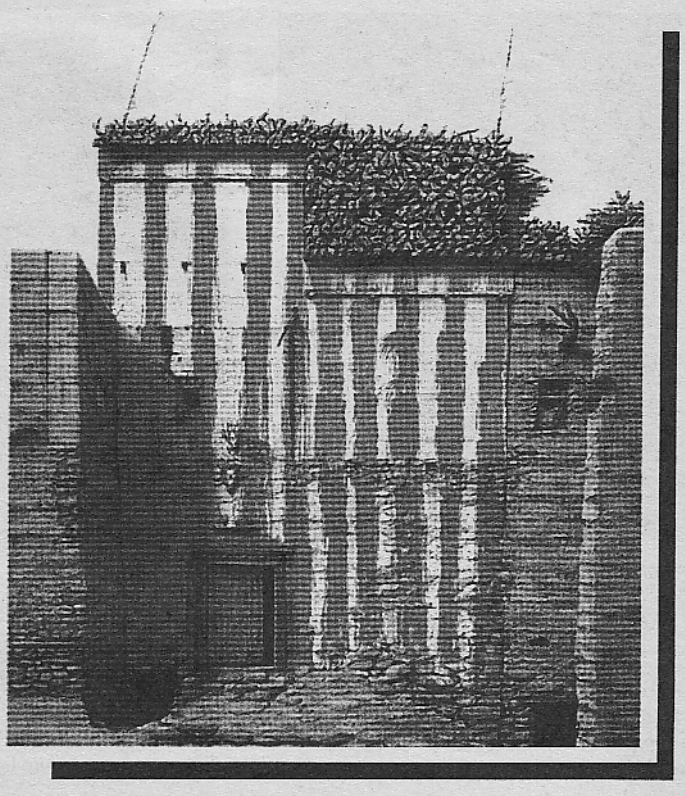
> They [people] distract from the basic image of the building and it becomes too easy. It becomes picturesque with that 'some-locals-in-costume-in-front-of-the-building' type of thing. This is not what I mean to show.

The absence of human figures in Powell's work is indeed striking, but perhaps only because the structures he depicts are so clearly shaped by humans. To return for a moment to the dust jacket, which bears the House of Tsuk: everything about the painting speaks of human involvement and daily use, and the absence of people from this painting comes as quite natural, in fact, since their presence is so palpably felt and acknowledged in the structure itself.

Herbstreuth concludes his chapter with a carefully worded critique of the clichés that abound in popular Western imaginings of Mustang, representations which are partially fuelled by the exoticising and sensationalist press reports of the region as a land of mystery. While art critics and journalists are quick to conscript Powell's Mustang paintings for their Orientalist imaginings, Herbstreuth makes a persuasive case for reading Powell's art as precisely the opposite: "Contrary to their ascribed 'mystery', Powell's works demonstrate clarity and legibility. He has grasped the architectural culture in precisely constructed pictures". For Herbstreuth, then, Powell is an artist who addresses transformation: he creates "a picture taken from a reality that insists on its verisimilitude, without being veristic".

The architect and conservation expert Niels Gutschow structures his chapter around the theme of "imaginary documentation", a phrase coined by Robert Powell to describe his own work. For Gutschow, Powell's "imaginary documentation" actually "crosses the line of the imagination to achieve a narrative quality". Gutschow offers a tightly written overview of architectural documentation, surmising that measured drawing is not truly documentary since "every line on paper requires a decision". He uses this brief discussion as a reflective backdrop onto which he projects Powell's drawings and paintings. Detail is of the essence in Gutschow's presentation, and the reader learns that Powell counted the courses of bricks in the courtyard facade of Kuthu Math in Bhaktapur in order to maintain the correct scale in his drawing. Echoing his earlier comments to Herbstreuth, Powell confides to Gutschow that ..."traces of decay produce a texture that attracts me"... a feature particularly apparent in his drawing of the Panauti Agamachen. Furthermore, Gutschow is highly attuned to the technical aspects of Powell's art. He observes that light always enters from the left in Powell's drawings, and that while perspective makes a brief appearance in Powell's earlier





A lhato *(god-place), on the pass above Gelung village (left);* House of Tsuk, *in the Narshing Chu valley, Mustang, from an "imaginary viewpoint".*

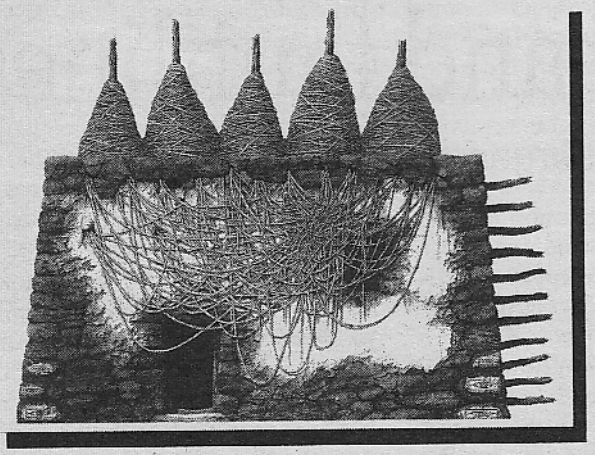
work, it only resurfaces many years later in his Mustang collection. Documenting Mustang was clearly an exciting challenge for Powell, and one which encouraged him to experiment more freely with water colours and fine pencil outlines. The contrast between the architectural techniques and styles of urban Newar buildings and the wildness of Mustang is mirrored in Powell's work. After working in Kathmandu valley for many years, Mustang offered Powell "something more basic, almost modern architecture".

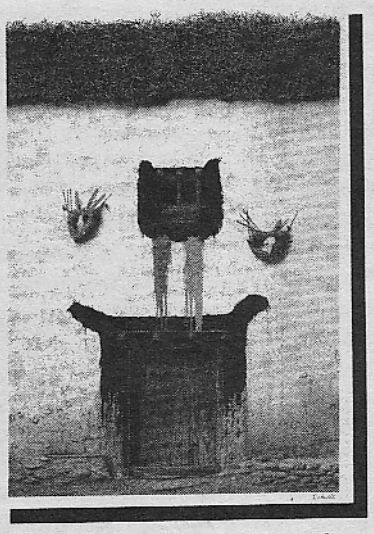
In his chapter titled 'Fact and Fiction', Gotz Hagmuller analyses 11 of Powell's flights of fancy: drawings and paintings which lean rather more heavily towards the "imaginary" in the "imaginary documentation" continuum. HagmŸller states at the outset that "visual documentation of the material aspects of a culture is never without a degree of subjectivity and imaginary content", challenging the misconception that Powell's work can be neatly divided between the super-real on the one hand, and the illusory on the other. He points out, "while Bob is certainly a meticulous draughtsman, even his documentary pictures go beyond the reality they depict".

Hagmuller, the chief architect of the palace turned museum at Patan, goes on to narrate a charming anecdote. During the 1995 exhibition of Powell's Mustang paintings held in Patan, visitors from Mustang attending the show asked the artist where certain structures could be found in their villages. Powell was obliged to reply that some of them existed only in his own mind and "on paper".

Clare Harris, a specialist in visual anthropology, concentrates on Powell's images of Ladakh. She takes the reader on a brief historical jaunt through the ages by invoking the imperial draughtsmen who documented places they never actually visited. Harris finds some of Powell's work reminiscent of an "archaeological excavation in which the artist has used his eye to unearth the significance of each rock and object encompassed by his vision". Her insights are compelling, and she concludes that while "human presence is rarely represented figuratively in Powell's Ladakh pictures, we are presented with the material evidence of thought and action". Heather Stoddard's short contribution is an artistic treatise rendered as a personal monologue. The eminent Tibetologist's stream of consciousness is punctuated with observations and insights about Powell's methods and aims.

In 'Art without Artists', the anthropologist and Tibetologist Charles Ramble begins with an overview of the history of Mustang and a discussion of the difference between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Through a careful analysis of Rigsum Gonpo, or protectors from the three Buddha-families, pervasive architectural features in both the territory of Mustang and in Powell's depictions of this landscape, Ramble illustrates how anthropologists' preconceptions about mean-





An imagined house of string; Wall of the Protectors, *Lo Monthang, Mustang (right).*

ing and continuity are not always shared by locals. Ramble's chapter is brimming with context: from the environment in which Powell's art may be viewed, to the dusty and harsh reality of daily life in Mustang which contrasts with many foreigners' perceptions of an enchanted land. He muses:

> The exactitude of the reproduction tricks us into thinking that we should observe them with the same clinical detachment as convention once enjoined on frock-coated visitors to ethnographic museums. And then we remember that, unlike our grandfathers, we aren't obliged to hide our enjoyment.

Annegret Nippa's chapter offers an intensive examination of a mosque that Powell documented in the spring of 1980. Nippa, director of the Museum of Ethnography in Dresden, uses her comparative and historical learning to demonstrate that the mosque of Gabral Jaba, located in Swat Kohistan, is an extraordinary construction with a remarkable heritage. Powell's instinct was spot on when he chose to focus his artistic attention on this mosque which, while not the biggest or most spectacular by any means, did have something very special in its atmosphere, its remote location and its evident non-Islamic details. According to Nippa, Powell's images of the structure preserve a secret that has remained hidden from the missionaries. "Gabral Jaba reminds people of the old days and the old gods".

Michael Oppitz's chapter, the final one in the collection, is one of the most rewarding. In this contribution, Oppitz does what he does best, blending detailed ethnographic insight with comparative anthropology, and topping it off with his deep understanding of the visual arts. Oppitz and Powell first collaborated in the 1980s when the anthropologist asked the artist to illustrate a book on the northern Magar population of Nepal. Oppitz singles out one of Powell's drawings to show how the artist's focus on documentation resulted in the artistic aspects of the drawing being understated. The emphasis lay in its "auxiliary service to ethnographic explanation. In a sense, the painting was on its way towards mutation into a descriptive chart".

> "Many in the modern art scene think my work is old-fashioned... they are stuck in this 1960s idea of what it should be"

However, Oppitz points out that Powell's creations are often images beyond the documentary, which collapse space, cut through solid walls to expose structural features of buildings, or simply capture angles impossible with a camera. In some of Powell's drawings, in fact, the viewer can find back the photo that he should have taken but never actually did. Oppitz punctuates his analysis with pairs of images, usually a photograph of an object accompanied by Powell's rendition of the same, and the author shows how time after time he prefers the artist's interpretation to the photograph. Discussing a *gagri* water container, for example, Oppitz concludes that Powell's ink version "had more material presence than the corresponding photograph", a presence which is actually intensified through its decontextualisation. Oppitz points out that

> Unlike corresponding photographs which cannot but catch everything upon which they are focussed, Bob's drawings are extremely selective, radically omitting anything secondary. They stand alone on the sheet, undisturbed, undistracted, demanding an exclusive and solitary dialogue with the observer, on the isolated ethnographic subject they capture.

After comparing drawings with photos, Oppitz further contrasts Powell's drawings of Kalash material culture from Chitral in Pakistan with the same objects drawn by Uwe Topper in 1962. The profound differences in understanding on the part of the two artists, each of whom perceive patterns of geometric lines in Kalash culture quite differently, reinforces for Oppitz that writing, seeing and drawing are all "acts of conceptualisation and interpretation". Engaging with the debate on Powell's representation of people, Oppitz concludes that "the human

body appears in the finished works of Bob Powell only where he attempts to copy (and transform) given pieces of art". And while Powell is primarily a studio artist, Oppitz coins the catchy term "ethnographic draughtsman" to describe the artist's way of focussing in on images of intrinsic anthropological interest, while, at the same time "humbly following the rules of likeness".

Oppitz concludes his stimulating chapter by turning to Powell's Mustang oeuvre, which he notes is considerably larger and more colourful than his earlier drawings. Colour is central, argues Oppitz, in understanding how Powell conceptualises Mustang. The artist collected samples of Mustang soil used by local colourists to extract pigment, examples of which are reproduced in the book. We further learn that Powell does not "*paint* white; rather, he *leaves blank*, so that "white" is the white of the paper". Even more than in earlier work, the physical conditions and travel restrictions of Mustang obliged Powell to paint in his studio in Kathmandu. Nevertheless, the photographs that he necessarily took of his objects of study never extend beyond the functional. As Oppitz writes, "for Powell photography will always be a research tool, an auxiliary activity to his vocation as draughtsman".

As the reader learns from this wonderful collection, Powell would rather use a careful brush, a precise hand and his fertile imagination to assist him in his imaginary documentation. While some may find Powell's adherence to realism and accurate representation outdated, the artist himself is not unduly concerned: "In Kathmandu many in the modern art scene think my work is totally old-fashioned. They are stuck in this 1960s idea of what modern art should be". The publication of *Himalayan Drawings* comes a long way in illustrating both how and why Powell works in the way he does, and in so doing provides the reader with a feast for the eyes and mind. △

Fault and faultlines

Exploring insurgency in India's Northeast

Contours, a compilation of journalist Jaideep Saikia's recent articles on security in India's Northeast, draws in readers with short and crisp pieces that are picturesque and evocative. Writing on the Northeast is characterised in general by a dearth of on-the-ground reporting, and Saikia has made a commendable effort at beginning to fill that vacuum. *Contours* establishes him as a serious student of security affairs and as one of the few 'experts' on Northeast India who attempt to combine fieldwork with analysis.

A collection of 46 short articles on the Northeast originally published in the leading English dailies of Guwahati, *Contours* also includes several interesting narratives on the author's experiences in the Kashmir Valley as a Fellow of the National Foundation of India. Saikia has appropriately arranged the book's contents so that its many transitions are effected with ease, from "thick descriptions" of Kaziranga Reserve forests to militant operations in various parts of Northeast India to observations on human security in Kashmir. This ordering of thematic moods broadens the book's scope beyond singular considerations of security issues. Instead, it weaves a rich tapestry of images, interspersing colourful snapshots with serious deliberations on security affairs. It is both an introduction to strategic issues for interested lay readers and an entry point for more serious reading in the harrying maze of contemporary Northeastern security studies.

The Indian Northeast, composed of the multicultural states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, is connected to the rest of India by a 20-kilometre wide 'corridor' near Siliguri. On all other sides it is boxed in by the international boundaries of Bhutan, Tibet (China), Burma, Bangladesh and Nepal. Geo-politically located on India's fringe and home to a number of unique ethnic communities living cheek by jowl, these eight states, with the exception of Mizoram and Sikkim, have for the last two decades witnessed considerable ethno-political unrest and armed violence in the form of ethnic secessionist movements.

Armed violence in the Northeast has long had significant connections with insurgencies and arms proliferation, which in turn have strong extra-territorial linkages. As such, it is only natural that its dynamics have been considerably affected by post-11 September security developments and strategic shifts in the Subcontinent. This has added areas of concern. Will the global 'initiative' against terrorism, which the West has vigorously pursued and which already holds significant implications for Kashmir, have any impact on the situation in the Northeast? Or will New Delhi's preoccupation with Pakistan and Kashmir result in a loss of initiative on this front and further delay the handful of peace processes that seemed to have been moving towards stable settlement? The answers are far from clear. Other than statements from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) about willingness for talks, little has been forthcoming.

Indian paradigms

The standoff between India and Pakistan and both countries' obsession with Kashmir have ensured that attention and initiative have

reverted to the 'western front'. Expected moves in the Northeast have either slowed down or stalled, as the Indian political elite remains riveted to the military mobilisation along the Pakistani border. The Northeast has once again become a low priority, leading to fears that the only dispensation New Delhi will consider will rely on military measures.

The recent enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2002), a piece of legislation widely condemned for its potential for gross misuse by police and security forces, partially confirms these suspicions. The effect of this act has been to make civilians even more vulnerable to violations by security forces. Although the present government in Assam has given assurances that the legislation will not be implemented in the state, such guarantees are little comfort for communities constantly vulnerable to the state's raw coercive strength.

Further, the carnage in Gujarat and the despicable role that state's administration played in that monumental human tragedy is certain to inspire organised armed resistance in the long run among minority communities elsewhere in India. This is of particular significance in the Northeast, considering its substantial non-Hindu, non-Hindi population. The rise of insurgency in north Bengal and the raging Maoist militancy in neighbouring Nepal, developments that do not appear to have received serious assessment as yet in Indian corridors of power, complicate matters further. Strategic shifts within the Northeast have also undermined attempts at resolution. The Bodo insurgency, which appeared until recently to be moving towards a settlement supported by a range of political interests with the state government acquiescing to the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) under the 6th Schedule of the Indian constitution, is once again faced with another hurdle. The strident opposition to the formation of the BTC by organisations claiming to represent the large non-Bodo population in the proposed BTC area has rekindled fears of violent clashes and ethnic cleansing.

There have been a few positive developments, such as the ULFA's and the NDFB's expressed willingness to negotiate on the condition of state sincerity, the unilateral ceasefire to facilitate possible negotiation, and reassurances by the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) to patiently resolve difficulties arising from the BTC's creation. What remains to be seen is whether Dispur, saddled with near bankruptcy and struggling to find basic operating funds, can seize the initiative and make concrete progress on these fronts. With no money for development, the underlying factors for unrest will remain unresolved and any peace secured is unlikely to last long.

Contours: Essays on Security and Strategy
By Jaideep Saikia
Sagittarius Print, Guwahati, 2001
Price: INR 100/USD 20

reviewed by
Anindita Dasgupta

Shades of security

It is against this background that books like Saikia's assume significance. The world and New Delhi need to develop a better understanding of the northeastern region. And who better to offer an explanation than fieldworkers and researchers who live and work in the Northeast, as opposed to armchair writers in the metros of India's 'heartland'?

Saikia's collection begins with 'Kaziranga Hoofbeats', a series of stories about Kaziranga National Park in Assam. He spent a few days with the men who tend and guard the park, and he presents their stories in a two-part series, which provides an enthralling setting for some of the more serious articles that come later in the collection. In 'Bravehearts', the next section, the author relates his experiences with the men of 6 Kumaons' 'D' company, an Indian Army strike force. Along with a cinematographer, Saikia accompanied the soldiers on a few patrols and at one point witnessed a near encounter with militants. In a fascinating narrative, Saikia unfolds the stories of ordinary people in Assam's Darrang district. He explains, "almost everyone we met told us that they were tired of the unrest, that their lives are threatened by militants, that the army's presence was encouraging". Some of his stories are poignant, like that of Rakesh Singh from Uttar Pradesh, a soldier posted in Darrang. "When I asked him how long did he think it would be before he went home to his newly-wed bride and aged mother, tears welled up in his eyes and he said 'Na Jaanu' (I don't know)".

In 'Swadhin Asom-Brihot Bangla?', Saikia lightly touches on Islamic militancy in Assam's fertile Brahmaputra floodplains and the alleged assistance offered to fledgling groups by Pakistani and Bangladeshi security agencies, themes that reappear in several later pieces. In 'Security, Strategy, Summations', Saikia observes:

> security concerns among our beleaguered strategicians have seldom permitted a measure of long term formulation in our midst. Most strategic agendas are but responses to a situational imperative. But the imperative of the hour is glasnost, an interface with the citizenry, or at least with some of its representatives outside officialdom.

A group of short essays follow on the author's experiences during a visit to the Indian army's 5 Jam-

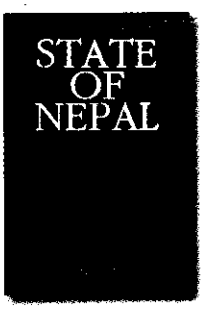
mu and Kashmir Light Infantry regiment, which is responsible for counter-insurgency operations in the better part of Nalbari district. On the night of 30 March 2000, Saikia followed a foot patrol conducted by the battalion's 'A' company and was impressed by its dedication, precision and tenacity. The next series, 'Wail of the Chinar', discusses Saikia's research experience in the Kashmir valley, and subsequent pieces comment on diverse issues such as arms proliferation, the counter-strike strategies of the insurgents, Thuingaleng Muivah, the first Asian revolutionary from Nagaland, insurgent camps across the India-Bhutan border and insurgent surrenders. The concluding essay discusses more recent political developments involving the ULFA, NDFB and BLTF.

While agreeing with his interpretations for the most part, one wonders why Saikia chose to remain uncritical of the role of the Indian army in conflict management and treatment of civilians in the conflict areas, or why he did not offer a serious critique of the controversial powers bestowed on the military, such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. By and large, it is fair to say that the Indian state's response to the insurgencies has been more militarist than political. The Indian army and state-supported paramilitary forces have been employed to deal with the challenge, and in the process extreme methods have been introduced into the fabric of everyday life. Many of the charges of abuses by security forces are solidly documented by human rights organisations and newspaper reporters. The New York-based academic Sanjib Baruah is only one to have made such a critique by arguing that "the means the Indian state has used to deal with ULFA violate global and Indian human rights standards and seriously undermine respect for India's democratic institutions, the rule of law and the project of pan-Indianism". Saikia's stories, therefore, tell only a part of the story. Also, these being more journalistic than academic essays, one is left wondering about the sources of Saikia's information, as none are revealed or credited. Certainly, as a "strategic analyst" (as he is described in the book), Saikia is entitled to his opinions but any academic or policymaker would desire qualification for statements which appear sweeping at places.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Contours* is a readable account of events in today's Indian Northeast. One looks forward to some weightier academic work by Saikia in the near future. While stories like this trigger interest in Northeastern security affairs, it will take more serious writing from Saikia to get the attention of the academic and policy communities. If these essays are any indication, that should not be too formidable a task. ∆

Social Science Research Capacity in South Asia: A Report
by Partha Chatterjee et al
Social Science Research Council, New York, 2002
pp 160, price not indicated

This is a survey of the existing capacity for social science research in South Asia's 'big five': Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The task has been undertaken by nine social scientists, five from India and one each from the rest of the countries, and led by Partha Chatterjee of the Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta. Among the themes covered in the book are the history of some of the well-known social science institutions of the region and an analysis of the reasons they are in crisis. It contains information such as the number of research institutes in each country and the number of social scientists working in them, and interesting nuggets such as the discipline- and region-wise breakdown of articles that have appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* over a period of three years. There is also a general overview of the activities conducted in social science research in the region besides a look at other factors at play such as funding, government interference and so on.



State of Nepal
edited by Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran
Himal Books, Kathmandu, 2002
pp viii+310, NPR 490
ISBN 99933 13 22 X

This is a collection of essays that seeks to expand upon and explain the internal convulsions that have gripped Nepal as it goes through a process of modernisation, particularly since the second coming of democracy in 1990. Dealing with subjects as wide-ranging as religion and literature, Maoism and monarchy, ethnicity and economy, education and development, among others, the book serves as a useful conspectus on the country for both the initiate and the 'Nepal expert'.

The Beauty Game
by Anita Anand
Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2002
pp xviii+205, INR 250
ISBN 0 14 028341 2

India entered the world of beauty contests emphatically in 1994 by winning both the Miss World and Miss Universe titles. The years since have seen protests from various quarters of Indian society. The conservative right has been decrying the concept of beauty contests as demeaning to the essence of 'Indian womanhood', the left sees in the sudden success of Indian women in these shows a marketing ploy by the multinational cosmetic industry, while some others object to the commodification of women. In the middle of the debate stands the ordinary woman with her own idea of beauty and who perhaps sees no harm in taking recourse to the vast range of cosmetics to feel and look better. Journalist Anita Anand delves into these various factors in exploring the link between beauty and Indian women.

Competing Nationalisms in South Asia
edited by Paul R Bass and Achin Vinaik
Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002
pp xiii+297, INR 525
ISBN 81 250 2220 X

These essays, dedicated to the renowned Indian scholar Asghar Ali Engineer, focus on the preservation and promotion of secularism and democracy in South Asia. The book is divided into four parts. The first deals with nationalist thought and practice; the second questions of secularism and Hindutva; the third consists of observations by two scholars on their vision of India as a nation; and the fourth deals with the ongoing struggles within India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka on the definition of the nation.

The Maverick Republic
by Jawid Laiq
Roli Books, New Delhi,
pp xii+240, INR 295
ISBN 81 7436 213 4

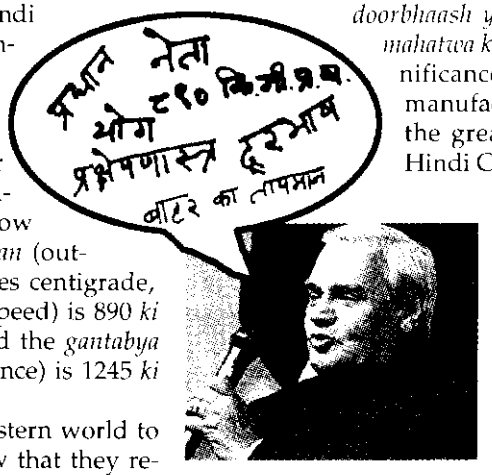
A collection of reports, commentaries and analysis pieces that Indian journalist Jawid Laiq has written over 30 years appear in a volume that captures the shifts through the time. Values of secularism, the dreams of social equity, material progress and a political voice for all have fallen by the wayside in the face of an individualistic political elite maintaining a vicelike grip on power and the country's resources. The reports are arranged in easy themes, and it is clear in this book what the concerns of Delhi liberals are. Vignettes from the past in the author's engaging voice.

Compiled by Deepak Thapa, Social Science Baha, Patan

Baahar ka taapmaan

Us Third Worlder South Asians are always look-ing for a hint, an indication, that the rest of the world takes us seriously. It does not matter if it is about Pakistan or India or Bangladesh, the collective pride rises to just under the surface when something is said or done by the West which acknowledges that any one country of South Asia has made it, such as when Bill Clinton visits Bangalore or Swraj Paul is knighted.

And so, South Asians in general must celebrate regardless of caste, creed or national origin when Swiss International Airlines (successor to the late lamented Swissair) provides not only Hindi and Tamil films as part of its in-flight entertainment, but the flight information is also provided in chaste sanskritised Hindi. Together with seeing where your plane is on its trajectory from Zurich to Delhi, you can also now know that the *baahar ka taapmaan* (outside temperature) is – 42 degrees centigrade, while the *bhutaal gati* (ground speed) is 890 *ki mi prati ghanta* (yes, kmph), and the *gantabya sthan par doori* (distance to distance) is 1245 *ki mi*.



It would do well for the Western world to provide other examples to show that they regard us South Asians as equals rather than just a source of readymade garments and cyber coolies. For example, turning to the United Nations in New York, when are you guys going to start simultaneous translations in Hindu and Urdu? What? You do not think we have the numbers? Then make it Hindustani and you will have a cool 500 million, plus a cool another 200 million who profess they do not understand but do, thanks to the almost imperialist invasive virus known as Bollywood. If you can have Chinese and Arabic, besides English, Spanish and French simultaneous translations from the UN conference booths, surely Hindustani deserves a head nod rather than a noncommittal waffle?

I will tell you what, the moment the Kashmir tangle is resolved, the first thing Islamabad's chief executive and New Delhi's *pradhan mantri* should do is to tie themselves together and sit on *dharna* outside the UN Secretariat at 43rd and 1st, demanding the inclusion of Hindustani. If rebuffed by Mr Coffee Anon, they should engage in a relay fast, that interesting South Asian invention, where you can even break for coffee. The Secretary General would surely get the message when two formerly warring partners join together for the sake of linguistic representation.

Look at the embarrassment we have to face otherwise. Atalji addressed the General Assembly and insisted on speaking in Hindi, losing the edge to an eloquent Musharraf*saab* who had left his Urdu back in Islamabad and delivered his address in his crisp, clipped English. Atalji had his speech simultaneously translated and read out by his personal adviser Mr Kulkarni (a little bird told me), but the punchlines were all messed up.

In the Brand New Bharatiya World, George W Bush would be brushing up on Hindi terms to impress Atalji – try *prkschypnnastra* (missile), which is the world's longest string of consonants (p-r-k-s-c-h-y-p-n-n, stupid!), *doorbhaash yantra* (telephone) and *adhik saamarik mahatwa ka rashtra* (country of great strategic significance, ie Bharat). In the selfsame BNBW, manufacturers would have become aware of the great and expanding market that is the Hindi Cowbelt and would position their products accordingly. The next branded PC with Pentium XI processor would be called Droot (superfast) and the new Toyota would no longer go under such an awful name meant to tease our lack of intelligence as Qualis (*arrey bhai, arrey sahab, arrey bhaisahab*, why could you not have called it the Qawalli?). Instead, the new four-door sedan targeted at the upwardly mobile family from, say, Samastipur, would be called... Agni!

No, son, that's already taken, by the Defence Research and Development Organisation for the prkschypnnastra, remember? How about... Prithvi! Sorry baba, also taken by the DRDO. Okay, then, how about Gauri (as in Shiva's consort) just to thumb our noses at the Ghauri prkschypnnastra across the border? Don't you understand, son, that the name of a prkschypnnastra should be slightly, how do you say, *phallic*? Ahhh.

Then let us name the sedan Shaktimaan! Nope, there's already a military truck by that name that's been toiling over the Himalayan roads for three decades, besides there is that superman character on television who takes off from buildings. Give us some real macho suggestions that also exude the sanskritic Hinduised culture of which we are all so proud.

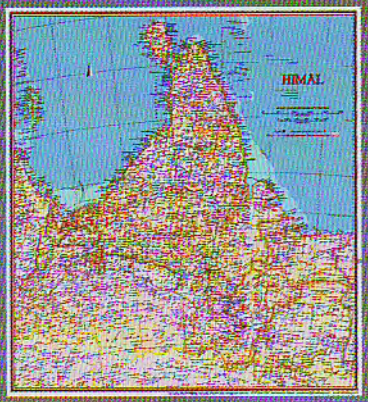
Okay, will try. Mahaan (great, alternatively, glorious). Neta (leader). Pradhan (chief). Rashtrapati (president). Rastradhyaksha (el presidente).

Nice try, but none of these quite have the zing, you know, son. How about Yog without the 'a', to make it completely indigenous even if the car is only assembled here?

Now, that's a thought.

Kanak Dixit

Get your own piece of South Asia!



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POSTER: Designed for the September 2001 Himal cover by Kathmandu artist Subhas Rai, 'Krazy Kathmandu' provides an intimate portrait of the city's hectic life. Matt-finish. 55 X 41 cm

POSTER: Originally published in 1916 and provided as an insert in the September 2002 Himal, this high-quality image of Lhasa is by John Claude White. Matt-finish. 80 X 21 cm

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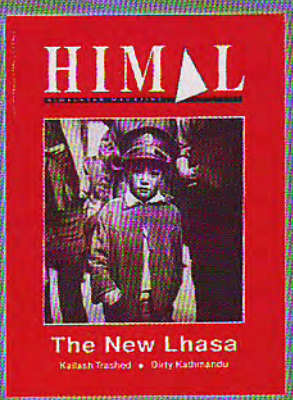

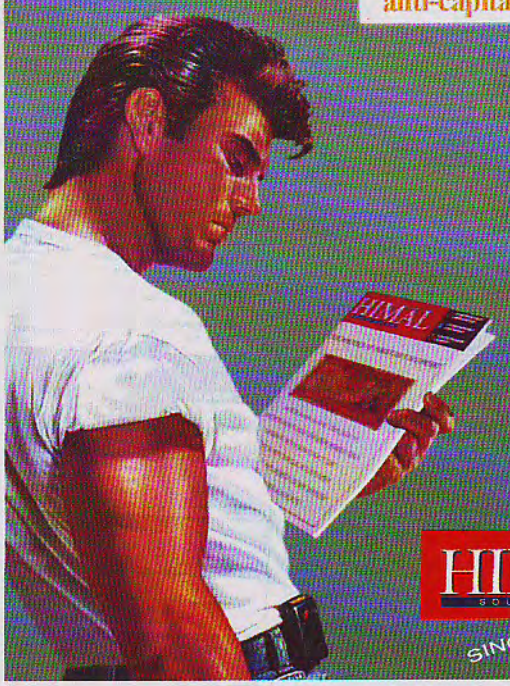

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