December 2002

HIMĀL

SOUTH ASIAN

The hunger cartel

Globalising beauty

Knickerwallahs

Leaving 'India'

Diasporic South Asia

HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

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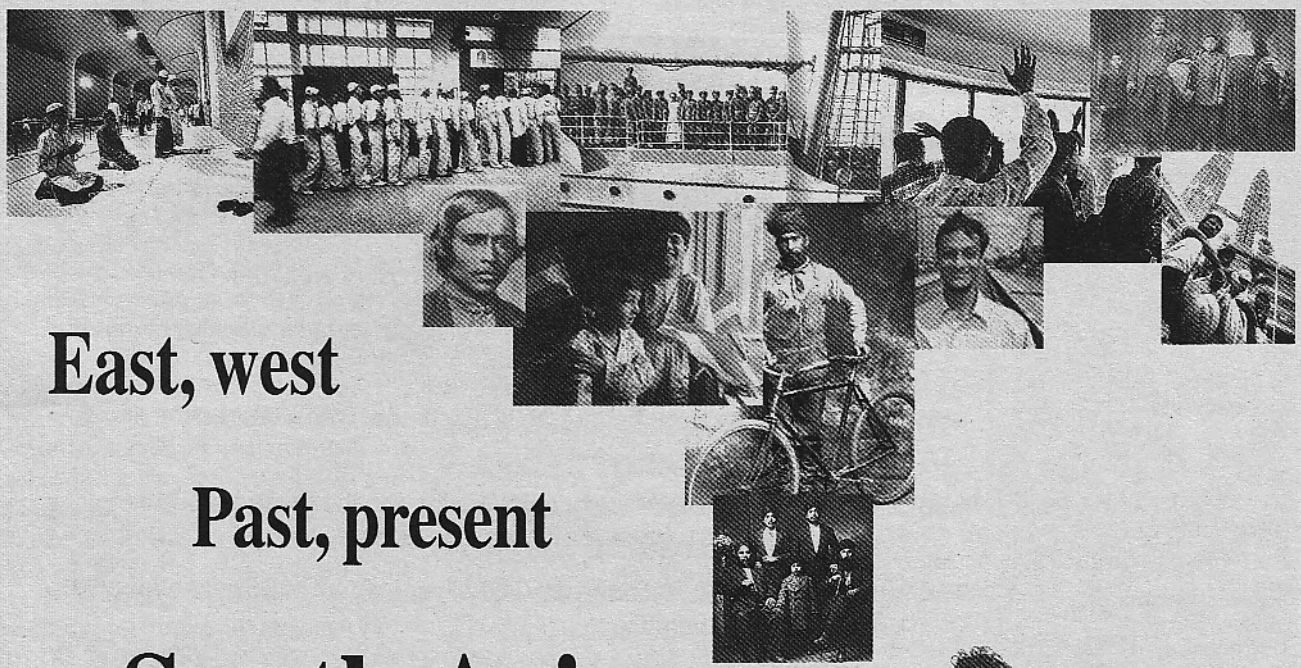

East, west

Past, present

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Cover design by **Chandra Khatiwada**

Biased and incorrect

CK LAL'S article '"Let the people go to hell"' (*Himal*, November 2002) is not only unashamedly biased but also historically incorrect. Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah was the greatest advocate of democracy of his time in South Asia. His entire political career was guided by principles of democracy and law, as recognised even by his adversaries. The unverifiable claims of a National Conference Party hack cannot stand up against the Quaid's illustrious record as a democrat spanning over four decades.

Indeed, if the Kashmiri people have been forced "to go to hell", then the responsibility lies with the leaders of the "world's largest democracy", who have not only prevented a UN-mandated plebiscite in Kashmir but unleashed a reign of terror on the Kashmiri people for the past 12 years.

As far as Mr Lal's biased claims go, consider his assertion that one general in Pakistan can allegedly manipulate the results of an election in the country, but "free and fair polls" can be held in Kashmir occupied by 700,000 Indian troops. Mr Lal has obviously chosen to ignore reports by Indian and foreign journalists about election rigging in Kashmir as well as reports about the transparency of the polls in Pakistan by numerous international observer groups.

Such biased and false commentaries do little to enhance the reputation of your journal.

Kamal Ahmad
First Secretary
Embassy of Pakistan, Kathmandu

Ne Win and two "Burma boys"

THE FOLLOWING stories of two "Burma boys" may supplement the *Himal* October 2002 issue on Burma, by way of providing personal sagas and individual traumas suffered by Burmese men and women subjected to General Ne Win's no-win, lose-all Burmese path to socialism.

This story begins in 1962 at St Joseph's College, North Point, Darjeeling. I was a freshman at North Point, a cosmopolitan college with 14 nationalities of teachers and students at one point. Among the foreign students, the "Burma boys" were among the richest and the best. They were brainy, they had the latest clothes and fashions, had the best guitars and amplifiers, their families sent them the latest records and magazines. This, in an India of Nehruvian socialism, where even information and entertainment were meagrely doled out, and people had to tune in to the Ceylon Broadcasting Corporation and their 'Binaca Hit Parade' and 'Binaca Geet Mala' to listen to the week's top 10 international hits and top film songs.

In this dry and dreary landscape, at North Point the Burma boys were beacons of light. As a junior student and a budding musician, I looked up to two senior Burma boys in the college. I borrowed their newest records and fine guitars. To say the least, they were generous and kind, especially to a local freshman who had the guts and necessity to beg for their help in nurturing his tender musicianship.

The two Burma boys were Desmond Aye and Bobby Leong. If Desmond was the Elvis of North Point with his guitar-slinging pelvic gyrations and *Blue Suede Shoes* pouts and pirouettes supported by such musicians as Louis Banks and Austin Plant, Bobby was the Cliff Richards of our college. Both had a large fan following, and they employed secretaries to reply to their mail, each letter accompanied by autographed photographs. They were the fabulous teen pop idols of Burmese television – yes, Burma had TV as early as that! Burma also had the best football team in Asia then, years before the North Koreans made waves at the World Cup. Burma was a surplus rice exporter, its teeming forests had the best and strongest teak, oak and mahogany, and the mines were rich in ores and minerals, precious and semi-precious stones. In short, Burma was Will Durant's utopia: its dynamic economy steered by English-literate capitalist captains of industry, commerce and businesses sustaining the country's rich culture, literature, arts, music, sports and providing for modern needs and necessities. Young and rich, Desmond and Bobby in their early 20s represented such a Burma at North Point, and I enjoyed their patronage.

> Amidst Indo-Chinese tensions, students from Bhutan and Burma disappeared overnight... The Bhutanese students returned, the Burmese never came back

The year 1962 brought a turning point at North Point, and for me. It was the year of the Indo-Chinese conflagrations. *"Hindi Chini bhai bhai"* turned out to be empty rhetoric, for the Chinese attacked India along the borders, entered Indian territory at places, and then left.

Amidst the Indo-Chinese tensions, the students from Bhutan and Burma disappeared overnight from the college one day. People said it was due to the war, and because all able-bodied men had been recalled by their governments to defend their countries. The Bhutanese students returned after two or three weeks: they had no geopolitical problems with China.

But, the Burmese students did not return to North Point ever again, not a single one of them. Desmond and Bobby too disappeared. I had borrowed Desmond's

Xavier Cugat long-playing (LP) record. The Cugat LP remained with me long, worn, torn and finally forgotten. Those were the last notes of 1962.

General Ne Win had taken over Burma. That was the reason for the disappearances of the Burma boys from North Point and my life.

Fast forward to the year 2002. 40 years down the line, many North Pointers from Bangkok to Bangalore, from Calcutta to California, from New Zealand to Nepal hatched the idea of holding college reunions. An NP website was floated, which supplied the email addresses of many NP alumni. I chanced upon Bobby Leong's Canadian e-address. He said he did not remember me as it was "40 years ago and memory doesn't serve me right at this point of time". While reacquainting myself with him, I also thanked him for his past kindness. That was the beginning of some discoveries.

In Ne Win's Burma, princes were reduced to paupers

For those, back to 1962 again. Desmond Aye's father lost his banking empire to General Ne Win's nationalisation. Bobby's family lost their holdings all over Burma. These young men, not yet 22, were dispossessed, deprived, and displaced in their own land. From princes and heirs, they became confirmed paupers and were rendered destitute. With his generations-old lifestyle undone by a single dictatorial sweep, Desmond became the victim of his own disillusionment and disorientation. Among many things, he was charged with knifing his girlfriend and tried in the Burmese military courts.

Suddenly Desmond is discovered in Bangkok, trying his Elvis act in hotels and restaurants when Elvis is already long passé. He has transformed into a violent, drunken and brawling man, cantankerous and temperamental. He finally settles down in Chiang Mai with a Thai wife. The gentle, friendly, rich and civilised Desmond of Darjeeling, with his Bond Street apparel and umbrella, and the previous day's *The Statesman* tucked under his arm is thus but a distant memory. When Bobby Leong met him in Bangkok sometime in the 1970s, Desmond asked him to send him books and materials on guerrillas and guerrilla warfare. Perhaps he was planning to reclaim Burma from Ne Win and his military junta, and Bobby killed contact with him for obvious reasons. Desmond, not yet 60, had long become impossible, and he died just a few months ago in his adopted Thailand amidst his impossible dreams and delusions. One of Ne Win's victims perished in this way, as a refused Burmese and a refugee.

Bobby Leong and his wife Bela, five months pregnant then, also eventually decided to leave their beloved Burma. They trekked along eastern Burma from Rangoon by night and entered Thailand many days later. They trudged along Indochina's tracks and trails in what were to later become the notorious 'killing fields'. Their getaway from a closed Burma was possible only because a kind and understanding Pakistani diplomat had agreed to smuggle out their papers and whatever cherished belongings they decided they would need. Bobby furthered his technical education in Bangkok and migrated to Canada where he has been working for a Chinese tycoon's Husky Oil Company. His last email to me said, "...however, our children don't understand what we went through to be where we are now".

This is what Ne Win won by losing Desmond Aye and Bobby Leong, two prime Burma boys among many who lived and have spent two-thirds of their productive lives outside Burma.

"Let us remember Desmond Aye for the noble qualities he had at North Point", wrote a friend from Los Angeles when I proposed that a memoriam dedicated to Desmond Aye be produced. Perhaps the other Burma boys will do it one day, perhaps very soon. After all, Desmond Aye's fantastic 1962 ditto of Elvis Presley's *Blue Suede Shoes* is still a living memory and legend at St Joseph's College, North Point, Darjeeling.

***Peter J Karthak**, Lalitpur*

SRI LANKA

ATTITUDINAL SHIFT IN LANKA

THE HIGH profile fundraising effort undertaken by the Sri Lankan government in partnership with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has raised many issues. Unsure of the rapprochement with Jaffna, critics of the move, including several opposition parties, denounced the prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, for sharing a stage with LTTE spokesman, Dr Anton Balasingham, at the 25 November Oslo meeting with international government representatives. Even so, this historic partnership represents what might be described as a paradigm shift in which former foes are now constructively dealing with each other.

What it also represents are this government's leadership qualities. Since its election in December 2001, Wickremesinghe and his ministers have been considerably ahead of the rest of society in evolving a relationship with the LTTE. By sitting with Dr Balasingham at the Oslo meeting, the prime minister has substantially elevated the status of the LTTE in the eyes of the international community. This has been difficult to accept for those who continue to see the LTTE as an enemy of the Sri Lankan state. In the past two decades of war, the LTTE has assassinated many Sri Lankan leaders and attacked the island's civilian population, the economy and the military. It is easy to understand why old patterns of thinking have a continuing appeal – the present ceasefire, though the longest ever, is not yet a year old.

However, with the rapid evolution of political life and ground realities, there is at least now some willingness to countenance new strategies. The proceedings at the recent annual convention of the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, Colombo, on human rights, peace and democracy bear out this assertion. The opening session's panel, comprising ethnically representative and non-partisan discussants, devoted itself to analysing the two-decade-old conflict. As the chairman of the panel, Colombo University political scientist Dayan Jayatilleke pointed out, the panellists ranged from those who have criticised the present negotiation process as conceding too much to the LTTE to those who supported it as the only feasible option. But the common element, he said, was that they all believed in the necessity of a negotiated settlement, whereas the old polarisation was between those who advocated a brokered settlement and those who supported a military solution. As indicated by recent opinion polls, Jayatilleke's observation on the attitudinal shift holds true for the Sri Lankan public as well.

Talking peace: PM Wickremesinghe.

Objections

According to surveys carried out by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, more than half the respondents are unhappy with the concessions being made to the LTTE. Most prefer a harder bargaining stance. Regardless, the vast majority (over 80 percent) believes that a negotiated political solution is the only way to solve the ethnic conflict, and only about 10 percent place their faith in a military approach. In other words, after experiencing 20 years of war, the overwhelming majority of Sri Lankans is convinced that the bargaining table, and not the countryside, is the place to sort out differences.

The weakness of the political parties is that they have been unable to better the negotiation strategy of the government. Their general critique is simply that the government has conceded too much to the

The LTTE must stop recruiting children and allow for their rehabilitation

The fight continues over the LTTE's use of child warriors.

LTTE. Concerning the Oslo meeting in particular, they have raised three objections to the government's decision to sit with the LTTE. The first is that the LTTE's presence at the meeting will enhance its image and, among other things, lead to the lifting of the international bans placed on it. The second is that the government, by so awarding the LTTE equal status, is paving the way for a separate LTTE-led state. The third is that the LTTE continues to commit human rights violations in the north and east, which are ignored in an effort to keep the dialogue alive.

The first two objections reflect the persistence of the old belief that the LTTE is the enemy of Sri Lanka. While it is true that the LTTE's presence alongside the government at the Oslo meeting will strengthen its credibility, it must not be forgotten that this boost arises from within the framework of an internationally monitored peace process that has a united and democratic Sri Lanka as one of its primary objectives. The LTTE is not receiving help for dictatorship or war, but for democracy and peace. Further, any pledge made by the LTTE will be monitored internationally, making it difficult for the LTTE to renege on its commitments.

Outdated thinking persists in the south, as well as in the north and east

People's well-being

The concern about enhancing the LTTE's legitimacy is shared by several opposition parties. As an un-elected body, and one branded internationally as terrorist, the Oslo meeting's status-conferment is important to the LTTE. But its gain will not be the Sri Lankan government's loss. The LTTE has a long distance to travel before it can overcome the reputation it has with the international community; in order to gain legitimacy, it will have to demonstrate a respect for human rights and the electoral process, in not only words but deeds. The Oslo meeting is only a step towards acceptance; until the LTTE contests and wins elections, it will not be a legitimate political organisation by international standards.

There is no question at this time that the Sri Lankan government will remain the representative of the country in the eyes of the international community. Indeed, the government's bending over backwards to avoid a breakdown of the peace process will only generate further international support for Colombo. A government that gives top priority to peace and the well-being of its population will enjoy the greatest degree of international legitimacy.

It is in the context of the people's well-being that the third objection concerning human rights violations has the most validity. At the second session of peace talks in Thailand, the LTTE pledged to recognise political pluralism in the north and east. But this message, which represents a paradigm shift for the LTTE, a hitherto authoritarian military organisation, has yet to be transmitted to all levels of the organisation. The LTTE needs to be held to its word in this matter. Civil society organisations and the international community must place pressure on the LTTE, and also the government, to see to it that respect for human rights and democracy prevail in the north and east in the post-war period.

In particular, the LTTE must end its continued recruitment of children, and the rehabilitation of the children who have been recruited must begin. The LTTE leadership must desist from its attempts to forcibly oust Tamil political parties that have opposed it, such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party. The harassment of Muslims and the setting up of LTTE police stations in the north and east without consulting the government is another indication that the LTTE has yet to think about the interests of all.

Clearly, outdated thinking persists not only in the south of the country but also in the north and east. LTTE leaders who continue to recruit children and repress dissent are locked into the old paradigm of thinking 'enemies' rather than 'partners'. Members of opposition parties who attack the government for engaging with the LTTE are also thinking in outmoded ways. The new thinking of partnership, mutual respect and acceptance has yet to seep through to all levels of society, in the south, north and east.

–Jehan Perera

Tracking death in Nepal

Himal's use of the term 'Maoist' reflects Defence Ministry statements. – *editors*

1) **KANCHANPUR** 18 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Jonapur. 2) **DADELDHURA** 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 3) **BAITADI** 3 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Gokuleshwor area; 23 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 4) **DOTI** 13 Nov: 14-year-old killed by bomb. 5) **DARCHULA** 3 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Sipti area. 6) **SURKHET** 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 7) **ACHHAM** 28 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 8) **BARDIYA** 3 Nov: 10 Maoists, including area commander, killed in Chandanpur area; 11 Nov: 1 Maoist killed; 19 Nov: 14-year-old killed in Bhimapur VDC-4 by Maoists for "spying"; 19 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Rajapur by Maoists in internal dispute; 21 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Rajapur delta; 25 Nov: 2 soldiers, 1 civilian killed by Maoists in Bhurigaon. 9) **DAILEKH** 20 Nov: 3 Maoists killed in Narayan Municipality. 10) **KALIKOT** 15 Nov: "At least a dozen" Maoists killed attempting to cross Jumla-Kalikot distict border. 11) **MUGU** 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 12) **JUMLA** 14 Nov: Battle results in 37 security personnel, "as many as" 300 Maoists killed (confirmed Maoist deaths totaled 105), NHRC later accuses Maoists of "indiscriminately firing on civilians". 13) **RUKUM** 26 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 14) **PYUTHAN** 28 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 15) **BAGLUNG** 11 Nov: 10 Maoists killed in Gwalichaur VDC; 13 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed; 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 16) **MYAGDI** 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 17) **PALPA** 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 18) **MAKWANPUR** 10 Nov: Postman beheaded in Hetauda; 14 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Aam Bhanjyang VDC. 19) **KATHMANDU** 9 Nov: 1 Maoist killed in Budhanilkantha; 11 Nov: 1 Maoist killed; 15 Nov: Maoists reportedly claim responsibiliy for the murder of 2 US embassy guards; 19 Nov: 1 policeman killed. 20) **BHAKTAPUR** 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 21) **SINDHULI** 11 Nov: 1 retired policeman killed in Hatpate VDC. 22) **RAMECHHAP** 3 Nov: 1 Maoist killed in Tilpung area; 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed. 23) **BHOJPUR** 24 Nov: 3 Maoists killed in Gupteswore. 24) **SANKHUWASABHA** 27 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Khandbari.

LAMJUNG 23 Nov: "At least" 50 Maoists killed.

GORKHA 14 Nov: Battle claims the lives of 23 security personnel, "about five dozen" Maoists; 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

NUWAKOT 16 Nov: 4 soldiers killed in Bhadrutaar by landmine; 17 Nov: UML activist killed in Mumari VDC; 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed; 28 Nov: 5 Maoists killed.

SINDHUPALACHOWK 14 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in accidental bomb blast in Sangachowk VDC.

DOLAKHA 14 Nov: 2 civilians killed in landmine explosion near Lankuri Danda

TAPLEJUNG 9 Nov: 1 Maoist killed near Phungling; 10 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Sanghu VDC; 11 Nov: 1 Maoist killed in Fulbari VDC; 23 Nov: 2 civilians killed in Dhungesanghu VDC; 26 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

PANCHTHAR 17 Nov: School teacher killed in Barbung, UML activist killed in Nagi VDC; 23 Nov: Abducted boy murdered; 26 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

As the number of deaths mounted through the month, we did not have space in the map to accomodate the guide lines for all the districts.

KAILALI 1 Nov: At least 4 Maoists killed in Pahalmanpur; 9 Nov: 2 Maoists killed; 10 Nov: Maoist district commander killed; 11 Nov: 1 civilian killed in crossfire, 1 Maoist killed; 14 Nov: Former MP killed in Dhangadi; 16 Nov: 3 Maoists killed during night fight in Dhangadi; 17 Nov: Retired policeman killed in Tikapur; 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed; 20 Nov: 1 civilian killed in landmine blast in Shripur VDC.

GULMI 7 Nov: 2 Maoists killed.

ARGHAKHANCHI 10 Nov: Authorities announce September battle killed 62 Maoists, 70 soldiers; 19 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

DANG 14 Nov: 9-year-old from Chainpur killed when bomb explodes in his hands, 4 Maoists killed in Fulbari VDC; 20 Nov: Army bus driver killed by sniper near Buauri; 21 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Tribhuvan Municipality-1; 26 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed; 29 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Saudiyar.

SARLAHI 4 Nov: 2 civilians killed near Ganeshchowk when suspected Maoists hurl petrol bombs at bus; 10 Nov: 2 civilians killed in landmine explosion; 11 Nov: 1 civilian killed in public execution; 26 Nov: Local Maoist leader killed; 30 Nov: 1 policeman killed in Sangrampur.

BARA 16 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Dummarwana VDC.

CHITWAN 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

KAPILVASTU 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed; 29 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Champaran.

KAVRE 11 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

MAHOTTARI 10 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Kanti bazaar.

SIRAHA 9 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Gauripur VDC-9; 11 Nov: 2 Maoists killed in Botechaur area; 27 Nov: 3 Maoists killed in Phulkahakati, 1 in Gauripur; 28 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

JHAPA 11 Nov: "Suspected Maoists" killed in Gherabari VDC; 28 Nov: 1 civilian killed in Bahudandi.

ILAM 17 Nov: School teacher killed in Gajurmukhi VDC.

KHOTANG 23 Nov: At least 1 Maoist killed.

NOTE: IN SOME CASES, DATES REFLECT THE DAY ON WHICH A KILLING WAS ANNOUNCED AND MAY NOT BE THE ACTUAL DAY ON WHICH THE DEATH OCCURED.

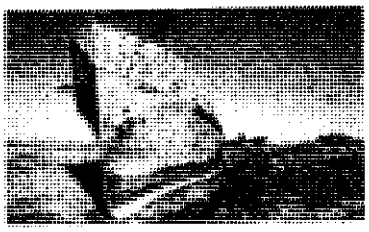
SOURCE: THE KATHMANDU POST.

Another disaster in the making

New Delhi's grandiose water projects fail because they ignore the basic laws of nature and the interests of India's villagers. The revival of plans to 'interlink' the rivers of India can only be brushed aside as nonsensical.

by ***Rohan D'Souza***

Drought in India's rural hinterland is centrally a political issue and not exclusively a meteorological effect. For over a century, colonial and post-colonial governments in New Delhi have been slowly starving the Indian countryside and the majority of its rural populace with policies and technologies that have systematically eroded the ecological viability of village units. The creative traditions of rainwater harvesting, cropping strategies to cope with rainfall variability and the careful tapping of drainage basins have been relentlessly snuffed out. What we are witnessing today is not drought per se but rural India's extreme social and economic *vulnerability* to meteorological variation. A technology-first central bureaucracy has rendered it unable to respond creatively, locally, to varying levels of rainfall.



Aral Sea: Just invite this disaster to the Subcontinent.

Simultaneous with the dramatic transformation of the rural ecology, urban myths about the agrarian world and its productive possibilities have flourished. Notably, the idea has been promoted that there is an intrinsic worth to indiscriminately extending perennial canal irrigation, cash crop monocultures and increasing crop yields by industrialising agricultural inputs and operations. If anything, the drought of this year has clearly revealed that there is a heavy ecological price tag on the sustained reorganisation of the countryside as a colony of the city. Further, highly skewed property and power relations in the village, along with a sharp imbalance in the terms of trade between the rural and urban sectors, have also significantly sapped the ecological resilience of India's vast agrarian hinterland. In other words, the national economy's relentless demand for a specific type and level of agricultural productivity is undermining the fragile equilibrium of land, forest, river and field.

The Indian prime minister's recent plea in parliament that the opposition not 'politicise' the issue of drought is another attempt to sidetrack a potentially important debate on the future of rural India. Thus, an essentially political issue is being unfairly projected as a technical problem, with the absurd claim that the interlinking of India's rivers through a canal grid is the "only solution to drought". Responding to a petition by a Delhi-based lawyer, on 31 October, the Supreme Court of India directed the government to constitute a task force to look into the possibility of realising the plan by 2012 instead of 2046 as had been originally envisaged. What the judiciary, the executive, the bureaucracy and the legislature do not seem to understand, or perhaps wilfully ignore, is that a river is not merely a mass of water moving with a certain velocity. It is primarily a geomorphologic phenomenon that feeds into several biological and chemical processes. Rivers nourish, link and sustain a variety of ecosystems which span various grades of floodplains and wetlands. Hydrologists have for long pointed out that tampering with flood patterns or altering the water's temperature with dams or barrages can negatively impact flora and fauna, besides irrevocably damaging habitats.

Dehydration assured

The argument heard over and over again, that there are rivers with 'excess' water and others that suffer from deficits is entirely spurious. Flow regimes, especially of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, are highly variable, and both peak flows and troughs serve different ecological functions. The Farakka barrage, for example, which diverts flows from the main stem of the Ganga, has caused a great number of ecological problems for Bangladesh. The reduction in stream flow has resulted in seawater ingress into the delta and a decline in fisheries, and the resultant absence of a good flushing action has led to 'drainage congestion' and the silting of the channels of several distributaries.

The Aral Sea catastrophe is the most striking instance of a river-diversion disaster. Several decades ago, Soviet planners diverted the waters of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya away from the Aral Sea to irrigate an area of roughly 8 million hectares under cotton production. The Aral Sea has subsequently lost two-thirds of its 1960 volume, resulting in the total collapse of the local fishing industry and a rise in salt concentrations in the Amu Darya and Syr Darya. There are many other such examples where diversions have undermined a river's capability to carry out vital ecosystem services such as purifying water supplies, maintaining fish and

wildlife habitat and regulating climate.

Since independence in 1947, successive governments in New Delhi have spent over INR 500 billion on water projects, especially on a large number of expensive multi-purpose river valley schemes. Yet, to this day, there has not been a single independent review that has meaningfully assessed either the economic consequences or the ecological impacts of such huge investments. The political rhetoric since independence has, unfortunately, sought to waylay the public imagination into believing that supply-side solutions such as large dams, surface irrigation schemes and the proliferation of pumping devices are a way out of hydro-scarcity. Meanwhile, there is the increasing salinisation (almost 7 million hectares) and water-logging (currently threatening 2 million hectares) of vast areas of prime agricultural land due to excessive irrigation, the rapid depletion of ground water levels and the unchecked pollution of streams and tributaries. Added to this is the growing number of inter-state water disputes, which are not only becoming flashpoints for violence but, more significantly, are throwing up new, difficult challenges to both the courts and the constitution.

In effect, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Indian government to build itself out of its current water crisis. We have moved into a period of absolute scarcity rather than relative scarcity.

There are no short cuts to tackling drought. If things are to change for the better there will have to be a comprehensive initiative towards revitalising the Indian village. In essence, the strategy would need to be political in that the intense social and economic inequality that prevails in villages has to be tackled head-on. Simultaneously, there must be a drastic reconsideration of soil management, and techniques such as water harvesting must be encouraged. In the last decade, a large number of popular initiatives have forced a re-evaluation of New Delhi's highly inadequate water policies. The Tarun Bharat Sangh in Rajasthan and the Centre for Science and Environment in Delhi have done considerable work in advocating the adoption of small-scale water harvesting systems as part of an embrace of both genuine democracy and ecological integrity.

The idea of interlinking rivers is not only absurd from a hydrologist's or ecologist's perspective but reveals, most alarmingly, that the current dispensation in Delhi does not have the political will to reverse or reign in supply-side interests. In other words, with this project, a gargantuan water bureaucracy in cahoots with contractors will hope to get a fresh lease of life. Billions of rupees will flow downwards and then move sideways into private pockets and enterprising construction firms and, ultimately, help win elections for those who care not for the people.

Ayodhya's anniversary
Donations for barbarism

A US-based scholar concludes that overseas Hindutva is using pretence to raise the cash that funds mayhem at home.

by ***Vijay Prashad***

Ten years ago, on 6 December 1992, a fascist spectacle was on show in northern India. In the small town of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, a well-organised band of *Hindutva* activists demolished a 16th century mosque erected by Mir Baqi. Soon thereafter, blood flowed from the outskirts of Delhi to the centre of Bombay. The Hindutva forces' contempt for law and order matched the disregard for the Indian constitution shown by Indira Gandhi and the Congress party in the mid-1970s. Neither cared for the rules or for peace; both were interested in the exercise of power.

When asked why they thought the site of the mosque was the site of the *Ram Janmabhoomi* (translated, the birthplace of the Hindu god, Ram), some Hindutva cadre told the filmmaker Anand Patwardhan that they were "just sure" that it was. Patwardhan then asked them what century Ram had been born in, but they had no answer. The need for empiricism tends to muddy the certainties; besides, the excitement of religious activism far outweighs the basic protocols of historical method.

Ayodhya propelled the Hindutva agenda to the centre of Indian politics and, even as the religious right remained a minority force it was elevated to the controls of the nation-state. Influential Non-resident Indians (NRIs) recognised the trend before many and decided to swim with the tide. A group called 'Concerned NRIs' took out full-page advertisements in the Indian-American and Indian press, lauding the acts of the fascist band, enthusiastic that this display would energise India towards that ineffable process called 'progress'. Failing that, at least their advertisements and their cringing servility would, they hoped, earn them a few contracts and investment deals when Hindutva began the 'privatisation' fire-sale of India's public sector assets.

Many of us across the NRI world, distressed by the tone of Hindutva and its disregard for human dignity, formed secular and democratic organisations. Along the Atlantic seaboard, there were dozens of such groups, meeting each week, planning events, bringing speakers from India, trying desperately to counter the Hindutva juggernaut that was rolling through the overseas landscape.

One of the most important facts learnt in the early months after Ayodhya was that the Sangh Parivar (more appropriately, given its predilection for war, the *jang parivar*) had raised significant funds overseas for its activities in India. The bricks that went towards the construction of the temple, and the *shilapujan* ceremonies, where the building blocks of the planned Ram temple were put through ritualistic worship, were funded with rupees converted from dollars.

The problem in those years was finding proof. Now we have it.

Pretences

In mid-November 2002, a full decade after Ayodhya, an NRI group called the 'Campaign to Stop Funding Hate' released a report in New Delhi entitled *The Foreign Exchange of Hate* (available at *www.stopfundinghate.org*). The report targets the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), a non-profit organisation started by a World Bank official in 1978. IDRF raises millions of dollars in the US and ships it to organisations in India affiliated to the Sangh Parivar whose work, it turns out, is directly related to such murderous acts as the spate of attacks on Christians in 1999 and the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat in 2002. The evidence against the IDRF is incontrovertible, and the rather tame response from the organisation shows as much. It turns out, as well, that corporations such as Cisco, HP, Oracle and Sun have been donating money to the IDRF, although now at least Cisco has vowed to stop thus funding hate.

Why do we, as NRIs, give funds to these organisations without care for how our money is used?

The most common reason why we donate for the development of India is: we love the country that produced us. But, because we live elsewhere, our patriotic feelings are coloured with guilt. The Indian exchequer bankrolled our education (especially of those who went to institutions such as an Indian Institute of Technology, the graduates of which make up much of the NRI upper class today), and the Indian ethos shaped our personalities – and we abandoned the territory via one massive brain drain. Some may argue that the lack of development chased us away to better climes, but even

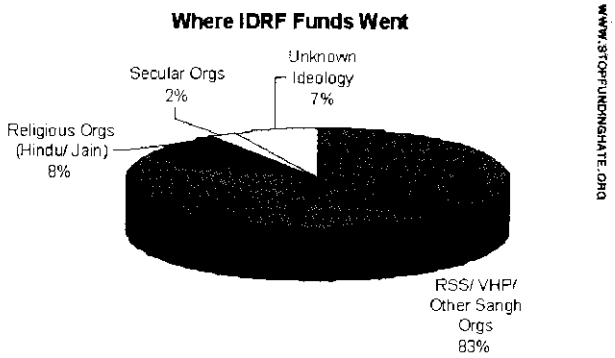
Excerpts from www.stopfundinghate.org:

"IN THE years from 1994 to 2000 for which the data is available, roughly 75 percent of the IDRF's total disbursements (over USD 3.2 million) went to the IDRF–designated organisations.

"A vast majority (in excess of 80 percent) of the IDRF designated funds were sent to Parivar organisations, especially those affiliated with or controlled by the RSS, the VHP and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA). This should be contrasted with the finding that for the same period, only 10 percent of the donor-designated funds were earmarked for Sangh charities"...

"As with other charities, donors to IDRF can earmark their gifts for specific organisations in India (these are called donor-designated funds), or leave it up to IDRF to disburse the funds in ways its deems appropriate (IDRF-designated funds). In the former case, the IDRF only accepts donations of USD 1000 or more, and assigns 10 percent of the donation to Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (a Sangh organisation)...

- "In the years from 1994 to 2000 for which the data is available, roughly 75 percent of the IDRF's total disbursements (over USD 3.2 million) went to the IDRF–designated organisations.
- "A vast majority (in excess of 80 percent) of the IDRF designated funds were sent to Parivar organisations, especially those affiliated with or controlled by the RSS, the VHP and the VKA. This should be contrasted with the finding that for the same period, only 10 percent of the donor-designated funds were earmarked for Sangh charities.
- "Further, it is clear the IDRF disburses its funds in a highly sectarian manner favouring the Hindu community. None of the organisations funded can be identified with any minority community, though 8 percent (in addition to the 83 percent that are Sangh affiliated) are clearly identifiable as Hindu or Jain religious organisations. Only 2 percent of the organisations funded can be recognised as secular organisations...."



Funding Hinduisation

"An analysis of what the primary aim of the IDRF-designated organisations reveals that the majority of them are indeed, not involved in what is commonly understood as 'relief' and 'developmental' work.

"Nearly 70 percent of the IDRF funds go to organisations dealing with education (largely in adivasi/ rural areas), hostels, 'shuddhi'/reconversion programs, and Hinduisation efforts; about 8 percent goes for health and welfare work; 15 percent goes for relief work, and only 4 percent towards what is normally understood in the NGO world as rural development".

those who adopt this extreme position admit that we have to give something back.

Hence, our desire to donate money for the relief of those Indians in desperate circumstances – either survivors of earthquakes or droughts, or else of starvation, abandonment. Or towards the development of the country in sum – through the support of education, cottage industries, women's rights, the promotion of better agricultural practices. Many of us give our money to unimpeachable organisations such as ASHA or CRY, or else through small effective overseas outfits such as V Raman's Connecticut-based Volunteers to Service in Education in India. Such international philanthropy is laudable and should be promoted.

To tap into this desire to support the home country, the forces of Hindutva have set up innocuous sounding development and relief organisations whose real agenda is to wreak mayhem back home.

Few NRIs are *kattar* (doctrinaire) Hindutva*waadis*, and most indeed have an aversion to this brand of politics. Some businessmen may opportunistically turn to them to secure access to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders in India, but even these people bow before saffron only for immediate gain and not out of any real belief in the project. In all my interactions, I have found only a small minority that favours the values of the Sangh Parivar. Five years ago, many NRIs opposed the Congress, but only because corruption scandals had tainted the party. Often, these people supported the BJP, but only because they wanted a change and could not brook support for the socialism of the United Front. There is no substantial support for Hindutva overseas; the money that the IDRF procures, therefore, has been taken under false claims.

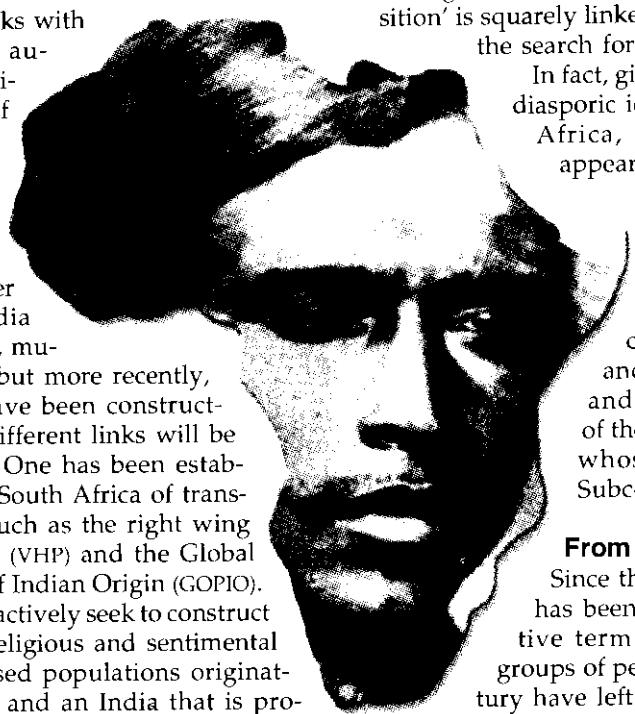
Hindutva is like the mythical golden deer in the *Ramayan*, actually the disguised rogue, Mareech, come to lure Ram and Lakshman away from the forest homestead. Sita is overawed by the deer: magical, many-coloured and strong-limbed (*"naanaa varna vichitra angah"*), and sends the brothers out to capture it. Ravan then enters the picture to kidnap her. The Sangh Parivar is like that golden deer – shape-shifting, able to connive to get to our hearts, only to do its own devious work with our money.

Diasporic dispositions

'Coolies' and 'Asiatics' no more, the Indians of South Africa recoil from India even as they reach out for Indian-ness. Attempts to sublimate the experiences of people of Indian origin – from descendents of indentured labourers to the newest wave of middle class migrants to the West – cannot work.

by ***Thomas Blom Hansen***

The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa from the 1990s onwards led, among other things, to an intensification of the links between India and South Africa. The boycott of apartheid-era South Africa imposed by the government of India since 1948 had constrained official exchanges but did not prevent wealthy Indians of South Africa from visiting the Subcontinent regularly. The Indians in South Africa are a socially heterogeneous and relatively 'Westernised' group of people, now haunted by fears of being marginalised and stigmatised in 'new' South Africa. Forging links with India, or searching for authentic cultural and family roots, has for some of the more affluent sections emerged as one of several ways to cope with a bewildering situation.



Even during apartheid there were a number of linkages between India and South Africa – films, music, religious teachers – but more recently, new 'diasporic' links have been constructed. Two of these very different links will be explored in this article. One has been established by the entry into South Africa of transnational organisations such as the right wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). Both these organisations actively seek to construct and maintain cultural, religious and sentimental ties between the dispersed populations originating in the Subcontinent and an India that is promoted as a cultural motherland and the source of Hindu culture. Both these organisations enjoy extensive support from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in New Delhi.

The other form of constructing this connection is 'roots tourism' to India which has been growing from the mid-1990s. Such visits are undertaken either in search of the ancestral village and family members or more generally in search of spiritual roots, often in connection with neo-Hindu movements like the Divine Light Mission, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Sai-movement.

But these activities notwithstanding, 'diasporic identities' are not very evident in contemporary South Africa. The search for a spiritual homeland, the idea of a diasporic political identity, or the search for comparative economic advantages of trade and investment in the Subcontinent are incidental and contentious issues among Indians in South Africa. The 'diasporic disposition' is squarely linked to upward social mobility and the search for middle class respectability.

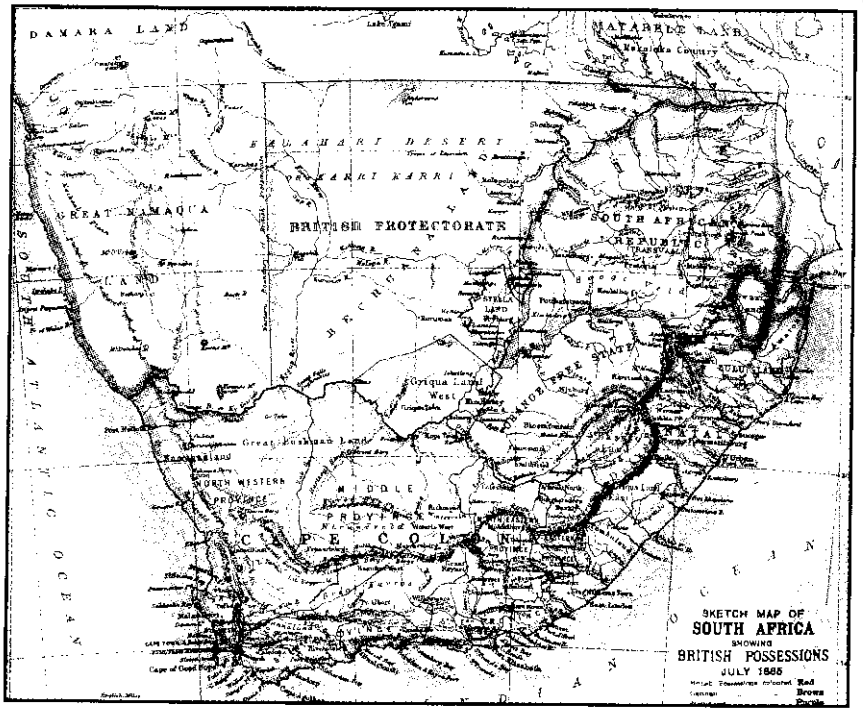
In fact, given the limited interest in Indian diasporic identities in contemporary South Africa, the very category 'diaspora' appears inadequate and flawed, being increasingly driven by conservative political interests claiming to speak on behalf of 'Indians', unwilling to concede the existing divisions of class and community and unable to grasp and absorb the complex identities and varied historical experiences of the very different groups of people whose ancestors came from the Subcontinent.

From migrant to diasporic Indian

Since the late 1980s, the term 'diaspora' has been used as a neutral and descriptive term for the dispersed and varied groups of people who since the mid-19th century have left the Subcontinent as indentured labourers, traders, students and professionals in search of livelihoods abroad. But the term diaspora, originating in the Jewish experience, refers to suffering, to being forced to abandon the ancestral home, and to often heroic attempts to compensate for the loss of a homeland, as well as sustained attempts to reconstruct cultural and religious forms of community in exile. There is no doubt that the term diaspora applies more mean-

ingfully to the experiences of South Asians who left the Subcontinent under the system of indenture in operation from the 1830s to 1910-11 than to the experiences of the numerically much larger emigration of South Asians to mainly Europe and North America in the last few decades of the 20th century.

However, the term diaspora only gained common currency in the 1990s among social scientists, intellectuals of the 'diaspora', as well as political entrepreneurs of Indian origin and the government of India, and received greater attention when the BJP came to power in 1998. The term 'diaspora' not only transmits a certain sense of shared destiny and predicament, but also an inherent will to preservation and celebration of the ancestral culture, and an equally inherent impulse towards forging and maintaining links with other migrant groups as well as the 'old' country. These assumptions about an almost inherent diasporic instinct are often reflected more or less openly in much of the available literature as discussions of how various Indian communities in the UK, in Fiji, Guyana or North America have been able to retain their cultural practices, and how much they have been modified and transformed by the 'alien' environment; how much the political and cultural dynamics of the subcontinent has shaped, or not shaped, their distinct identities as Sikhs, Hindus, Tamil, etc.



South Africa, 1885.

This is not to suggest that such inquiries are irrelevant or uninteresting. Insofar as they start from investigating how local ideas of 'Indianness', or Hindu or Muslim identity, have been encouraged by colonial authorities or missionary organisations from India, they serve an important purpose. What is objectionable is the attempt in such writings to impose on the 'first generation' of indentured migrants the sentiments and modes of connecting to the homeland characteristic of the recent generations of Subcontinental migrants (1950s and 60s labour migration, and post-1980s white collar). The power of the Jewish idea of diaspora cannot be understood without taking into account how the Zionist movement successfully framed the idea of the loss of the original homeland and nation at a time of untold suffering and persecution of Jews in many parts of the world. Likewise, the idea of an Indian, or Pakistani diaspora – both as an idea and a network – is inextricably linked to the modern nation states of South Asia. The second and third generation of migrants leaving India and Pakistan grew up in nation-states, were imparted a strong sense of national affiliation and identity, and many were well-educated people from higher castes identifying themselves with a generalised 'great' tradition of Hinduism and Islam, rather than with the local forms of religion of the indentured labourers a century earlier.

The first generation of migrants, the 'coolies', did not leave a nation but various districts and areas in a vast colonial territory, heading for another colonial territory. The relative lack of any clear 'diasporic commitment' or identification with the 'motherland' has often been attributed to the assumed lack of a high cultural tradition among the migrants. Some scholars have suggested that the sea voyage and the labour regime and patterns of habitation on the plantations, from Fiji to Natal to Guyana, broke down and subverted distinctions of caste and community, encouraged inter-caste marriages and forced a new sense of equality upon the 'coolies' who were treated more or less equally in spite of differences of name and birth. While this is indeed plausible, it did not altogether remove the cultural logic of segmented social existence, which continued to play itself out along the lines of sect, occupation and language. To forge and maintain links with one's place of origin was not only difficult, it was also often seen as less desirable in terms of livelihoods and prospects. The South African authorities, for instance, devised a range of repatriation schemes for 'Asiatics' from 1910 until the late 1940s, but very few Indians found the economic incentives of the schemes and the prospects of returning to India comparable to the possibilities that South Africa offered.

The fall of apartheid from 1990 onwards coincided with a growing interest in organising and networking within the 'Indian diaspora' worldwide. After India

lifted sanctions against South Africa in the same year, the number of South Africans who had embarked on trips to India grew. But, these were not trips driven by a long suppressed, or by any means natural, urge to seek cultural roots in India. Not only had South African Indians developed their own identity, tied to South Africa and disentangled from the Subcontinent, but they were also separated from the worlds of India by differences of perception, moral conduct, expectations and notions of the self. Many South African Indians who visited India conceptualised this cultural gap as that of their own modernity versus the backwardness of India. This may well also be true of other populations of Subcontinental origin elsewhere.

Indians and Indian-ness

Indians came to South Africa in two ways. The vast majority came between 1860 and 1890 as indentured labourers to work on sugarcane plantations in the fertile coastal land of Natal. Most labourers belonged to lower caste communities from the northern districts of present day Tamil Nadu, the southern districts of contemporary Andhra Pradesh and the Bhojpur region of north India. They spoke Tamil, Telugu and Bhojpuri Hindi respectively. After completing their indenture contract many labourers bought or leased small patches of land and began farming or market gardening in and around Durban and along the coast. By the 1940s, most of their descendants had moved to Durban or other cities and had emerged as the backbone of the industrial workforce in the province. This period saw the formation of large Indian working class neighbourhoods in Durban, the emergence of a rich popular culture, and the growth of a range of cultural and educational initiatives. Indians were at the forefront of labour organisations and the struggle against the new racist legislation that came into existence in the late 1940s.

> The category 'diaspora' is driven by conservative political interests speaking for 'Indians'

The Indian working-class culture was dislocated in many ways as apartheid's instrument of space management, the Group Areas Act, came into force in the late 1950s. Most of the Indian neighbourhoods in Durban were cleared and turned into open spaces or industrial estates and the majority of Indians relocated to large township areas south and north of the city. Similar areas were created in Johannesburg and other cities in the country, located as buffer zones between the huge and tightly policed African townships outside the cities and their white centres. This piece of grand social engineering created an enclosed, regulated spatial and social grid, with housing suitable for nuclear families, plots for temples, churches and mosques, community halls, schools, sports grounds and shopping centres.

In these new social spaces, conscientiously governed and maintained by the city's health department to prevent Indians lapsing into what was seen as 'unsanitary habits', they developed a new township culture. This was more 'South African Indian' in the sense of being socially compressed and isolated from the Africans and whites. At the same time it was also less 'Indian' as the use of the vernacular tongues dwindled, conversions to Christianity increased, and Western popular culture and 'white' habits became the more dominant sources of entertainment and identification. The expanding economy of the country provided better jobs, educational opportunities multiplied and a large middle class developed in the densely populated Indian townships. By the 1980s, large sections of the 'Indian community' had achieved a standard of living and level of educational qualification next only to that of the whites in the country.

A much smaller group of 'passenger Indians' (approximately 15 percent of the migrants from the Subcontinent) arrived from the 1880s onwards from Gujarat and north India in search of trade and business opportunities. The majority was Gujarati-speaking Muslims and north Indian and Gujarati Hindus. This resourceful group established the entire Grey Street commercial area in Durban city and quickly spread into the interior, particularly in the towns and villages in Transvaal province and around the gold fields of Johannesburg. Known in local parlance as the 'merchant class', these traders provided both political and cultural leadership for the wider Indian community for many decades.

This original class division remained in place through most of the century and still marks a division among Indians, a rift deeper and more enduring than racial divides, as Ashwin Desai, the noted South African activist and academic, has argued. Wealthy businessmen sponsored educational institutions, religious shrines and cultural events, and were instrumental in maintaining links between South Africa and India through trade, family relations and cultural exchanges. However, the cultural and social unity of the 'Indian community' was far from self-evident. Wealthy Muslims sought in the early decades of the 20th century to distance themselves from the mass of dark-skinned 'Asiatic' labourers and gardeners, and to be re-classified as Arabs. Similar and much more successful attempts to Arabise and 'de-ethnicise' Muslims of Indian descent have since the 1970s been carried out by a range of very influential and conservative international Islamic movements, such as the Tablighi Jamaat. Today, most Muslims of a certain economic and cultural standing refuse to be identified as Indians and insist that they are first and foremost Muslims.

Along with the creation of new racially separate townships for Indians in the 1960s in Durban, Johannesburg and elsewhere, there was also a systematic strat-

egy of education and shaping of cultural life in what became officially known as the 'Indian community'. In 1961, the apartheid state granted citizenship to Indians – after more than a century in the country – and began a strategy of incorporating them as prospective 'junior partners' of the white community in the larger project of race rule. This included a measure of self-governance, separate institutions, separate education for promoting Indian culture and languages, and a relatively privileged position in the labour market. This long period of almost 30 years of incorporative strategies had profound effects in terms of forging a sense of a lived, spatially bounded 'Indian community'. There was a substantial improvement in living standards in the Indian areas, a process of 'gentrification' that turned a large number of Indians into owners of homes, cars, telephones, and gave many a good education. Another effect was that contact with African communities was reduced. This Indian (self)enclosure contributed to a pronounced fear of Africans, which is seen in the marked antipathy among Indians to the African National Congress (ANC) in the post-apartheid period and their preference for conservative 'white' parties in recent elections.

This official strategy of depoliticising Indians and linking that to institutional benefits was devised in the face of two rather serious obstacles. Firstly, the Indian government enforced a policy of academic and artistic boycott, which made it difficult for Indian academics and classical artistes to work or perform in South Africa. However, artistes performing a lighter Bollywood-inspired repertoire and other forms of popular entertainment had much easier access to South Africa, merely having to sign a document in India that their shows would be open to non-Indian audiences. The government of India clearly wanted to limit access to academic and high cultural 'prestige goods', whereas dissemination of films, music and religious goods were low-profile areas of popular culture outside the purview of international organisations and foreign governments, and hence administered with less rigour.

The other serious obstacle was that a highly articulate section of the educated Indian elite and middle class refused to accept this incorporation into the structures of apartheid. They were not prepared to celebrate their own Indian-ness which they, in keeping with the non-racial and universalist ideals enshrined in ANC's Freedom Charter from 1955, denounced as 'ethnic'. One of the many paradoxes of the post-apartheid scenario was, however, that this eloquent 'non-racialism' quickly gave way to a new form of liberal multiculturalism bent on the celebration of cultural roots, difference and authenticity. By the late 1990s, many erstwhile secular and 'de-ethnicised' Indians were publicly praising 'Indian culture' and deplored what they saw as an increased marginalisation and sidelining of Indians by black nationalists of the ANC.

Scrambled egg discourse of origins

The VHP, the powerful worldwide Hindu nationalist organisation that acts as fundraiser abroad, and lethal front-organisation in communal clashes in India, had no presence in South Africa until 1995, when Krish Gokool, a wealthy businessman, opened a branch in Durban. The attempts of Gokool and others to establish the VHP as a new coordinating body in the religious field has, however, faced stiff opposition from existing organisations, notably the South African Hindu Mahasabha, an important umbrella for all Hindu organisations in the country for decades. The latter regards itself as a non-political organisation and has, indeed, always cultivated a good relationship with the authorities, both during and after the era of apartheid. As the dismantling of apartheid began, the question of the representation of the 'Hindu community' vis-a-vis the government gained new actuality.

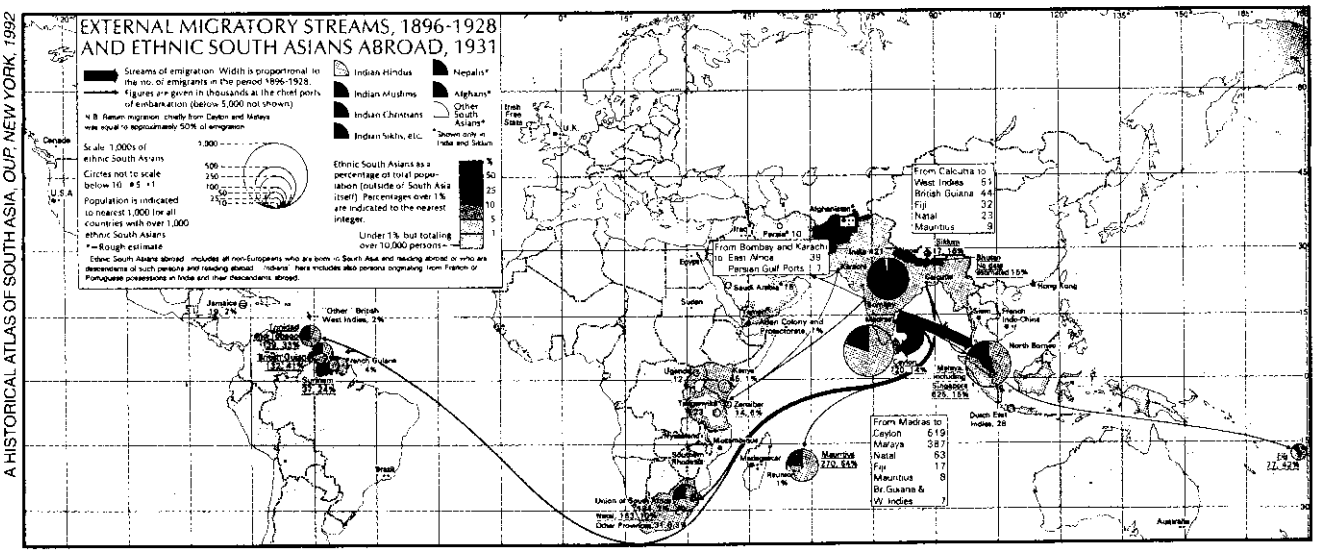
Most of the Hindu organisations in South Africa are averse to 'importing India's problem into South Africa', as the leader of the influential Hindi Shiksha Sangh (education association) put it. They regard the long-standing trend of conversion to Christianity, 'Westernisation' and the adoption of 'white culture' as more urgent challenges. In keeping with their traditional preoccupation with language, culture and religion, Indian organisations in South Africa seek to assert pride in Indian culture, promote a taste for Indian music and a knowledge of Indian languages. According to an activist of the Hindi Shiksha Sangh:

> Although some of our people like to believe that they will be accepted as part of white culture if they have the right accent, become Christians and adopt white culture uncritically, it will never happen.

The resistance to the VHP is motivated by anxieties about the way in which the association with India could be forged and publicly represented. Gokool emphasised that although he felt strongly about the Babri Masjid episode:

> ...we cannot import that kind of politics into this country. It would never work here. I have started this association called Friends of BJP here, but I'm not too happy with their politics in India. I would like to see India become a Hindu state, but not in that way. ... we Indians are a minority here and we need to be careful and prudent in politics ... just like the Muslims sought protection of their rights and religion within the Congress, we need to do the same with ANC here. For Indians to organise politically along ethnic lines here could well prove to be suicidal. We must learn from history.

Despite such cautious sentiments, the politics of the Indian Subcontinent do tend to get transferred to South Africa in various forms. On 19 May 1993, a bomb de-



stroyed a Hindu temple in Lenasia in Johannesburg. It was believed to be retaliation for the demolition of the Babri Masjid in north India on 6 December 1992, five months earlier. Other South Asian examples haunting South African Indians are the assertion of a separate Tamil identity, and the protracted sectarian clashes within the Indian Muslim community, between the Deobandis and the Barelvis whose rivalry has its roots back in 19th century reform movements in South Asia.

To Gokool and other activists of the VHP, the danger does not lie in conversions per se, but in the internal divisions among Hindus, especially the tendency among people of Tamil ancestry to organise separately in Tamil federations, South Indian business fora among others, and develop their own independent links to global Tamil organisations. Such anxieties about Indian unity have also been echoed by A Rajbansi, the foremost 'collaborationist' politician of the apartheid era who in the 1990s reinvented himself as a populist leader of the Minority Front, a political party that in 1999 forged a close association with the ANC. In the 1999 election campaign, Rajbansi coined the slogan 'We are Indians without apologies', adopted a quite effective anti-white rhetoric, and asserted that the Indians, like Africans, were victims of white exploitation and contempt.

These perspectives on Indian unity in the face of the South African transformation, however, rarely had any explicit link to the notion of India as a cultural or religious homeland. The more explicitly political and strategic links between South African Indians and India articulated by the VHP constitute a qualitatively new attempt to 'diasporise' Indians in the country.

The Hindu nationalist agenda has appeared in South Africa since the 1990s in two different forms. One is the appearance of a 'modern', globalised, diasporic and 'thin' notion of Hinduism as the emblem of a shared civilisational identity competing with Islam and Christianity. This is the concept of modern Hinduism, which the VHP has pursued with great success particularly in North America and Europe. It has also found expression in the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) which, apart from its broader philosophic and pragmatic concerns about defining Indian origins and promoting business interests, also cultivates notions of Indian-ness based on modern Hinduism and a strong attachment to India as the motherland of all Hindus.

The second takes the form of a more purist and directly translated version of Hindu nationalism, represented by the local subsidiary arm of the militant Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with proliferating local units in the greater Durban area. As in Kenya, Fiji, Mauritius and elsewhere, this militant, purist and assertive Hindu nationalism has emerged from milieux influenced by the missionary work of the Arya Samaj, a 19th century reform movement, and by north Indian culture more broadly.

GOPIO was formed in 1989 in New York on the initiative of businessmen in the United States, Canada and the Caribbean who felt that Indians abroad should be organised along the lines of other diasporas such as the Jewish, the Anglo Saxon and the Chinese. The official homepage reads:

> The People of Indian Origin are one among the main diasporas of the world. The others are Anglo-saxon, Jews, Japanese, Malays and Chinese. All these other main diasporas are organised and networked as a group. Together the PIOs are a diaspora of strength and substance; separated, you are minorities around the world. The new Millennium is a globalised world of diaspora civilizations. The Indian diaspora has a contributing role in the development of the world.

GOPIO's objective is to provide networks for business people, educational facilities for people of Indian

origin around the world, and create fora to strengthen and maintain the cultural identity of Indians abroad. Since its inception, a string of conferences have been organised in various countries, with delegates from Indian communities in many countries in the Western world, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific. The GOPIO homepage states that "...no matter where Indians live and for how long... they are Indians in body and spirit. Almost all of them maintain their Indian cultural traditions and values".

In 1996, Krish Gokool formed a South African chapter of GOPIO in Durban. In the beginning, it only attracted a limited number of academics and business people. But with Durban hosting the 1998 annual GOPIO conference, the organisation began to be noticed in the Indian press and among political and public figures in the province. The conference, with its 600 delegates, attracted the attention of Indian academics and cultural activists and was broadly interpreted as a welcome initiative to strengthen connections between South African Indians and constituents of the Indian diaspora elsewhere and so break the isolation that apartheid had forced upon Indians in South Africa.

GOPIO attempted to inscribe the Indian experience in South Africa into its global, heroic narrative of how Indians, against all odds, have established themselves in a variety of countries and have through hard work, education and enterprise worked their way up to successful positions in the economy and the wider social structure. GOPIO's South African president, Haseem Seedat, the only Muslim representative from the country, told a reporter prior to the conference:

> The community has persevered against all the odds apartheid placed in its way, and built mosques and temples and promoted their culture and religion. The resilience of the pioneers must be greatly admired and should set an example to minority groups elsewhere in the world.

The varied, contradictory and fundamentally class-based divided experience of Indians in South Africa and elsewhere was now being homogenised and merged into a single rags-to-riches narrative of ridding themselves of the shackles of colonialism. To observers like Ashwin Desai, GOPIO only reinforced old structures of domination, now in an ostensibly progressive garb:

> The official rainbow nation ideology of South Africa allows dominant groups such as the Gujarati merchant class to claim that they too are heirs to the indenture experience. The real story of how these people exploited Africans, their contempt for the ordinary coolie and their desire to be accepted by the whites is hidden and forgotten.

GOPIO is broad-based and heterogenous enough to harbour many different views about the purpose of its new global 'diasporic' network. To someone like Seedat, GOPIO could contribute to re-create a cultural pride and to retrieve the richness and linguistic treasures of Indian culture: "We must unite the people of Indian origin to make them realise the strength of their diversity. We must undo the 'scrambled eggs' created here as the colonisers suppressed our languages and custom".

Other members of GOPIO differ. Gokool found the conventional linking of language, religion and Indian identity altogether outdated and detrimental to the Hindu community in South Africa: "The language issue is outdated. Do you really have to be able to read Sanskrit to be a good Hindu? That is rubbish. Let us translate scriptures into English and make our religion accessible to young people. They simply don't want to learn such a difficult language. ... What is wrong with English? Isn't it our mother tongue here?"

But these differences on cultural objectives aside, the common focus pervading the GOPIO seemed to be to provide networks for business, trade and easier access to economic opportunities in India. The claim that "the income of the 22 million people of Indian origin around the world exceeds India's GDP" appears repeatedly in GOPIO material. It is an argument used by many Indian business people as to why India should give preferential treatment to Indian investors from overseas and accord them the respect and influence that corresponds with their actual economic power. GOPIO is campaigning for permanent representation in the upper house of the Indian parliament, and for voting rights for Indian expatriates.

This is the type of grandiose self-projection consistent with Benedict Anderson's comments on the desire for recognition in the old homeland that economic success in 'exile' seems to bring out. The 'PIO dream' articulated by Indian businessmen in Durban revolves around their own mastery of modernity, financial power, technology and discipline as opposed to the 'disorganisation' and 'backwardness' of India. One of their more fanciful projects was to institute a solely PIO inhabited 'village' near one of the Indian metropolises, a complete settlement created, designed and run by PIO business people that they could use for vacations and business trip. The man behind the idea clearly had a vision of kick-starting development in India through a 'rationality shock' when confronted with the capability of the PIOs.

In early 1999, the government of India began to issue so-called PIO cards to people of Indian origin and their spouses, granting holders quasi-citizenship rights in India – multiple entry for 10 years, right to do business, transfer foreign currency, own land and property, get admission to educational institutions on par with Indian citizens, etc. With this the Indian state has in practice adopted the principle of *jus sanguinis* (where blood or ethnicity is the defining element) for recognising citizenship rights in the country. In turn, this also

raises a range of questions regarding the actual racial determination of who exactly is an Indian. None of this has yet been given a formal legal codification.

So far the PIO card has mainly been a success among Indians in Europe and the USA, and GOPIO has now started a campaign for extending PIO rights to émigrés going back six generations so as to include descendants of indentured labourers. GOPIO is also campaigning for dual citizenship, and India's right wing government seems in favour of such an arrangement. A newly appointed Additional Secretary (NRI) in the Ministry of External Affairs, JC Sharma, showering praises on GOPIO, explained what the government of India expected from them. "We view the overseas community as more than just investors. The government expects them to play a role of unofficial ambassadors acquainting the people of the host countries with the life and culture of the motherland, its potential, problems and needs".

In January 2001, the largest GOPIO gathering ever was held in New Delhi. It was inaugurated by Prime Minister Vajpayee who told the delegates, from all segments of the 'diaspora', that "... from the tears and sweat of the indentured Indian labourer to the intellectual achievement of the Indian software community in Silicon Valley, the odyssey of the Indian community at large is a reflection of the potential of our people. We aspire to make India a knowledge superpower by the year 2010: you can help us fulfil this aspiration". The prime minister also announced the formation of "a high level committee on the Indian Diaspora" headed by LM Singhvi, a former high commissioner to the UK.

Like in Malaysia and Fiji where Indian identity strategies are subjects of dispute, opinion in the Indian community in South Africa is divided on the PIO card. Some found the card an excellent idea, a gesture from the Indian government that it cares for people of Indian origin and looks at them as quasi-citizens in whose favour it would intervene if need be. Others found that, given widespread anti-Indian feelings, it would be ill-advised to embrace such a scheme. As a businessman in Durban said:

> It would leave the backdoor open and people from the majority here could say, "Look, India is only waiting for you, pack up and go home". ... Let us face it, nobody wants to live in India. It is a very difficult life there, and I know that when people return from India to Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg they say, "Thank God we are back again". That also happened during apartheid.

GOPIO has yet to evolve into an influential factor among South African Indians. It has to tread carefully, and remain sensitive to dominant discursive trends in the country and the latent suspicions of Indians. The celebration of cultural origins in South Africa must, therefore, remain firmly nested within the larger narrative of the anti-colonial struggle, which always celebrated the autochthony of Africans and their right to rule their own country. In South Africa, the Indian myth of origin can, therefore, only start at Addington Beach where indentured labourers disembarked in 1860, and in the brutalities of the indenture system, while India itself must remain an abstract, historical and non-political entity. The potential importance of GOPIO lies in the possibility that it can to some extent evade the issue of direct identification with India as a 'homeland' and instead offer an identification with a virtual, multi-local 'diasporic community', whose lifestyle and cosmology provide more intelligible objects of identification than India itself.

Seeking ancestral roots

The difficulties in identifying with India are amply clear in the stories of Indian South Africans embarking on 'roots tourism' to India. I met Mr and Mrs Pillay first in October 1998 at the Durban Archives where they had come to check 19th century ship registers in the hope of locating the village from where Mr Pillay's great grandfather had come. As Indians, they felt that since they could now afford it, their first foreign trip should be to India. On their return several months later, they had mixed feelings about their Indian sojourn. They seemed pleased but also on the whole somewhat troubled.

Mr Pillay was clearly puzzled by the place. He had suggested to their travel agent in Madras that they could perhaps look up the village in the telephone directory to check whether there were any Pillays there. The travel agent had just smiled and said, "I think this is your first visit to India, sir". It had taken many hours to reach his native village. The village was poorer than anything he had seen in South Africa in all his life. There was the smell of cow dung in the air, the animals walked about without purpose and the children were naked and quite dirty. To add to the disappointment, it turned out that there were several Pillays in the village – like in Durban! They enquired of many Pillay families if they had relatives in South Africa. A very old lady remembered talk about a distant uncle called Muruga who had left the village many years before her time.

The visiting Pillays spent a day with some native Pillays related to Muruga. This family of farmers was not very educated, and there was no direct conversation between them. The farmers had no idea which country the visitors were from and the visitors were not even sure that these were relatives. On being shown pictures of their house in Durban, the old lady of the house just kept beaming and repeating "America" all the time.

Mr Pillay feels strange about what happened in that village. In his discussion, there was one theme he returned to repeatedly, what he called the lack of 'work culture' in India. He also bemoaned that in some respects, notably in the tendency to fight among themselves, South African Indians were "becoming like these fellows in India!" Mrs Pillay on the other hand thought

it had been a wonderful trip. She liked the village. Even though it was poor and not very clean it was quiet, peaceful and beautiful. Their children did not like India much. They would have much preferred to go to Australia or Mauritius.

For the Pillays, as for so many others of their kind, their brush with India was an encounter with something disturbingly unknown, a place that made them feel very alien, very South African and very modern. It made them realise just how different they were, how 'white' they were in their 'work culture' and their habits, and how 'inauthentic' their Indian-ness was. Yet, the encounter with India was to Mr Pillay also a confrontation with elements of his own community and everyday life in Durban that he detested as negative marks, or residues, of the 'Indian' – internecine strife, petty politics, narrow-mindedness as opposed to what he saw as the inherently rational approach of 'whites'. This was a disturbing encounter with a sense of a cultural essence he denounced but could not ward off completely. Mrs Pillay experienced India within a truly 'orientalist' framework: as authentic, a place imbued with a certain inner beauty and harmony, and a place that exuded history and timelessness. These features neutralised or outweighed the lack of modern amenities. The lack of a modern organisation of life was of course the very precondition for maintaining the orientalist idealisation of India. This elevation of India's material deficiencies to a spiritual virtue is even more pronounced in Rashni's story.

> The Pillays' encounter with India made them feel very South African, very modern

Finding spiritual truth

Rashni's family decided some years back to become proper modern Hindus. As her father explained, "Like so many Indians we took to the white lifestyle – drinks, parties, *braai* (barbecue), outdoor life... but some years back some friends took us to the Sai Baba ashram here in Durban and that changed our lives. We are Indians, we were brought up like Indians and we should not deny that. We will never be accepted by the whites, that is one thing I have learned".

More than 10 years back, the family had moved from their apartment in the sprawling Indian working class township of Phoenix to a house in the prestigious Reservoir Hills. As the family turned towards the Sai movement seven years ago, it became vegetarian and teetotaller. It also decided to send the daughters for extra classes in Tamil and the classical dance, Bharatnatyam.

The family decided to visit the Sai Baba ashram near Bangalore. The ashram was simple and basic, but clean and well organised, unlike Bangalore. They could not quite understand how Bangalore could be the Silicon Valley of India. But the week at the ashram was a beautiful time.

After that they spent four days in Bombay, which they found to be similar to Johannesburg, a big, rude place where all they care about is making money. But unlike Jo'burg, they found Bombay crime-free. The one thing they could not understand was why the streets were not kept clean. "You can say many things about the white man, but he knows how to run a place. You can see how Bombay must have been beautiful in the past, in colonial times. Now it is a mess. Again it makes me think of Jo'burg. Have you seen what has happened to it now? Homeless people all over, bonfires in the streets and these young black guys behaving as if they owned the place".

The family's narrative resembled those normally expected of most 'Western' tourists and travellers in India. There was nothing particularly 'diasporic' about the idealisation of the purified and sublimated 'Indian-ness' and spiritual community manufactured through elaborate rules in the ashram outside Bangalore, and replicated in Sai ashrams elsewhere in the world. Various neo-Hindu movements have made big advances among upwardly mobile families in Durban, which are attracted to their apolitical assertion of Indian spirituality, disentangled from what many Indians see as 'backward' and 'ethnic' features of the traditional ritualised worship of earlier generations. But Rashni's family too expresses misgivings about the encounter with what is seen as an excess of the stigmatised marks of 'backward' Indian ethnicity: disorder, chaos and dirt.

Catalysts of modernity

Anil's story displays an interesting tension between the assertion of Indian cultural pride on a global scale, on the one hand, and a simultaneous embarrassment about 'Indian' backwardness, particularly in what he sees as traditional and stifling systems of rank and hierarchy governing life in India. Anil is from Tongaat, a prosperous town north of Durban, located in the sugar district. The city is almost entirely Indian but as with all urban areas in South Africa, it has a number of densely populated African townships located outside the city proper, which service the Indian population. Tongaat has a strong Hindi-speaking community that takes pride in having descended from some of the first indentured labourers and traders who came via Calcutta to Natal from the Bhojpur region of north India more than five generations ago. Anil supports the ANC "...because there is no alternative for a minority like us", as he puts it. But he despises what he calls the "ANC Indians", who are "communists who discard their own background".

Anil first went to Delhi with some people from Hindi Shiksha Sangh. Though he felt it was nice to be in a place where everybody spoke Hindi, sometimes people spoke it in dialects he could not understand. He spent

a lot of time with Arya Samajis and people from the BJP and the RSS. He admires their educational work, their selfless attitude and their sense of history and pride in their own culture. Indians in South Africa are, by contrast, a bit ashamed of their own culture, he feels, because so many still believe that 'white is right'.

On the other hand, there are things about India Anil does not approve of, such as the Indian attitude to women and their hatred of Muslims and Pakistan. Such things would never work in South Africa. "That is not something we need here. We have enough problems and why should we not work with our Muslim compatriots". He believes that RSS activities in South Africa are "dangerous and stupid", because the Indians do not stand a chance if the Zulus turn against them. The fear of Zulu-Indian hostility has a long history from the riots in Durban in 1949, the destruction of Gandhi's Phoenix ashram in 1985, to the frequent accusations by Zulu leaders, intellectuals and artists that Indians are unpatriotic and racist.

Anil's subsequent visit to Bombay was purely professional and personally mortifying. He had gone with his boss, an engineer, to visit two companies manufacturing machine parts, in order to purchase pumps. His boss found the engineers in India to be very good, but they did not know anything about production. In India, the engineers would never do the dirty work. They were suspicious of the financial arrangements involved in the transaction, nobody would make any decisions without consulting the owner, and the pumps supplied by the firm were not up to the mark. All this was very embarrassing for Anil. In India there is no professionalism and no pride in the job, according to Anil.

Anil shares with many well-educated, successful and culturally conservative Indians in South Africa and elsewhere the desire to purge Indian-ness and Indian culture of what they see as a backlog of conservatism and parochialism. Indians must assert themselves and the only way to do that is by adopting modern forms of knowledge, a modern work ethic, and a more self-confident attitude to the challenges of modern urban culture without discarding Hinduism or language.

There is in all these different encounters a marked ambivalence towards India. There is no commodified nostalgia of the kind that is visible among the first and second generation non-resident Indians in Europe or North America who belong to more recent waves of migration. There is, instead, often a conscious attempt to disown what are seen to be the more reprehensible aspects of India. To that extent, barring the more abstract identification with a broad civilisational entity there is not a very concrete attempt to recover an authenticated and certified cultural heritage from India.

Long distance nationalism

Converting of the experience of migration into a diaspora experience, that is, cultivating sentimental, cultural, political and economic links with the country of origin as well as other groups living away from 'home', is neither a natural nor a logical process. The formation of diasporic sentiment and the cultivation of ties between India and various migrant communities have been pursued throughout the 20th century by organisations such as the Arya Samaj and other more orthodox groups. The VHP has continued this work but has, since the 1980s, attempted to become an encompassing organisation for all Hindu groups, merging religious and national identities. GOPIO promotes a not dissimilar vision of India as a homeland in cultural, economic and political terms. The consistent support from the government of India to GOPIO predates the formation of the BJP-led government and is driven by a desire to mobilise expatriate capital for foreign direct investment, the way China has done with such astounding success. The BJP has boosted these efforts and has added to them a new systematic attempt to foster long-distance (Hindu) nationalism among people of Indian origin across the globe. In the context of South Asia, the term 'diaspora' has today become inseparable from such political strategies, and inseparable from the celebration of the expatriate Indian, which only emerged with the emigration of elite communities to the Western world.

But the stories told to me by Indian South Africans suggest, furthermore, that the quest for creating a more authentic and pure identification with one's cultural origins, or simply with one's family history is squarely linked to upward social mobility, education and the pursuit of respectability. Rashni's family and Anil are attracted to organisations promoting various forms of neo-Hinduism and their desire to go to India was clearly mediated by the ideas of purity and origins promoted in these organisations. The term 'diaspora' presupposes the continued significance of the cultural and religious forms that migrants brought with them. But is this a valid assumption? Are there 'exoticising' mechanisms at work in these assumptions about South Asians? Would one make the same assumptions about, say, fourth generation Germans or Russians in North America? The stories above indicate that religious identification is only one factor, and that the alienation felt by South African Indians in their encounters with India had everything to do with asserting their own competence in modern living and organisation, as against Indians in India who are 'backward'.

In light of the history of incorporation of Indians into South Africa's society and economy, it is perhaps less surprising that cleanliness, work culture, discipline, individuality and urban management – all essential to the sense of being 'modern' – are what South African Indians find India lacking the most. Much the same would perhaps be true of Indians from other parts of the so-called 'diaspora'.

The 'Madrasi' in Malaysia

Indian Tamils, Ceylonese Tamils, working class Tamils, middle class Tamils... the 'Indians' in Malaysia live in a divided house. Many are poor and will remain so.

by ***Anindita Dasgupta***

The world of Malaysian middle class Tamils is curiously free of much of the complexity that marks the life of diaspora. There is barely any trace of the cultural chaos that qualifies a lot of immigrants elsewhere, as Malaysian Tamils, whether 'Madrasi' or Ceylonese, betray little nostalgia for the legendary homeland or the green coconut trees there. While Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed's vision of 'Bangsa Malaysia' (a united Malaysian nation) by 2020 CE may be a long way from becoming a reality, Malaysian Tamils already have more in common with their Malay neighbours in Petaling Jaya or Brickfields than with their extended families in Madras or Vavuniya. And, while they do face a cultural predicament, it is one that has little to do with their relationship with 'home'.

The cultural divide in this case has more to do with such fine points as the use of coconut turmeric gravy versus *sambar* in the delicious *puttu mayam*. And the debate still rages on whether *appam* tastes better when made with hot coconut milk or a mix of cold coconut milk and flour. The strain is between the two overlapping, yet distinct groups that constitute the fledgling middle class Tamil diaspora in Malaysia: Tamils of mainland Indian origin and Tamils of north Ceylonese origin, each with its own culture, class, and home-grown recipe for traditional Tamil cuisine. The Ceylonese have sought to distance themselves from the Indian Tamils along class lines and the Indians, in turn, detest their one-time close association with the British colonisers, leading to pejorative jokes, chides and cultural prejudices within the community. Since the Sri Lankan Eelam war in 1983, there has been some sense of a unifying cause, but the old differences continue to fester.

But in spite of this tussle, there is a striking similarity in the way the middle classes of both groups come together to maintain a careful, calculated distance from the teeming masses of working class Tamils, almost all of Indian origin, who constitute the overwhelming majority of the Tamil community in Malaysia. A large number of them are still employed as rubber tappers and palm oil plantation labour. They continue to demand fixed minimum wages, basic human dignity and equal opportunities on par with other Malaysian citizens, even as their adopted country moves on with the 'can do' chant of "Malaysia *Boleh*" (Malaysia can).

Arguably, all Tamils – Ceylonese or Indian – are of the Indian diaspora since all of them migrated at one time or the other from India, but the Ceylonese rarely see themselves as such. A minuscule professional class, they are loath to come under the common label 'Indians'; in Malaysia, where this grouping serves as a racial tag, all South Asian immigrants were clubbed together as Indians in colonial times. Now, officially at least, the Ceylonese come under the label 'Others'.

Migration to Malaysia began in the wake of the British acquisition of the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, Singapore) in the late 18th century, with colonial officers actively encouraging immigration into Malaya. It intensified with the extension of British rule over the remainder of the Malay peninsula, particularly because the expansion of plantation agriculture resulted in an increased demand for cheap labour. And continued till the outbreak of the second world war, giving rise to an extraordinarily diverse colonial society where immigrants and indigenous people constituted near equal numbers.

Most first generation immigrants from Ceylon migrated in the early 20th century to fill up posts in British administrations all over the empire. Many came to Malaya, their English education enabling them to serve the British alongside others from India and China. Over a period of time, many of them climbed the ladder to command senior positions in the government services. In contrast, most Indian Tamils were brought to Malaya by the British as indentured labour and subjected to low wages, long working hours and unenviable living conditions in the shacks on British estates. Indentured labourers were largely drawn from the ranks of socially deprived 'Madrasi' Hindus (mainly Tamil, but also Telugu and Malayali), generally belonging to the lower castes. The disadvantages of such a start were compounded by a lack of emphasis on education so that the generations that followed the first were unable to lift themselves out of their blue-collar environment. The financial standing of the working class Indian Tamils, never good, was only

aggravated with the passage of time, and they gradually emerged as the poorest section of Malaysian society.

Today, the Indian Tamil community is seen as a marginal minority, most members of which are still working in the plantations. It is weak in terms of political and economic clout, afflicted with all kinds of social problems and worst of all, it is a community prone to social violence and urban criminality. To cite a typical example, when Letchumi Venkataram started tapping rubber in Negeri Sembilan in the 1960s, she was paid 250 ringgits a month: 30-odd years later she had earned a pay hike of just 50 ringgits. The 60-year-old widow lost her job in 1993 after her employer sold the estate to a property developer. Although the plantation companies by law have to provide alternative housing for workers when they close down plantations, Letchumi has not yet been allotted a new home. "I am old but I will fight until I get that house I was promised", she says defiantly. The fledgling middle class of Indian Tamils is too caught up in its own ambitions to rally behind the less-fortunate members of the community.

After more than a 100 years in Malaysia, the majority of Malaysian Tamils remains poor, patronised and marginalised in its own country

Despite Malaysia's brilliant economic success in recent years, working class Tamils have limited access to housing, education and jobs. About 54 percent of Malaysian Indians, mostly Tamils, work on plantations or as urban labour, and their wages have not kept up with the times. A Malaysian Indian scholar terms them the "new underclass of Malaysia". There is little doubt that the Tamil working class is the underside of Mahathir's Malaysia. Even within its own community, it faces unconcern and even a degree of scorn from the small circle of Tamil professionals, Indian and Ceylonese, who have been in a position to take advantage of better education and the Asian economic boom. After more than a 100 years in Malaysian plantations and factories, the majority of Malaysian Tamils remains poor, patronised and marginalised in its own country, one that boasts one of the highest per capita incomes in Asia and markets itself as "Truly Asia".

The race for class

A society of two or more elements of social orders which live side by side without mingling into one political unit is a plural one (JS Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 1956).

British Malacca, 1854.

Malaysia was a classic example of such a plural society, and the issue of 'pluralism' has prompted keen debate among scholars and commentators within as well as outside the country. In the conventional view, the most important divisions in the country today are between the 'indigenous' Malays, who monopolise political power, the 'immigrant' Chinese, who control the economy, and the Indians, who constitute the working class. The different ethnic groups still live side by side in their separate enclaves and are involved in different economic activities but rarely interact with each other except, literally, at the marketplace.

The plural society is, by and large, a colonial construction. In Malaysia, it came into being after the British imported indentured labour in the late 19th century from south China and south India. Today, almost half a century since the end of colonialism, of course, the description 'multiethnic' has replaced 'plural society' in a Malaysia where for a significant part ethnicity drives class identities and determines roles in the marketplace. And, although an aerial view may still throw up images of each ethnic group as having a homogenous identity, a closer examination of contemporary Malaysia reveals that the reality is not quite so simple.

The economic growth promoted by the New Economic Policy, introduced in 1970, and its corresponding socio-political development, has led to the emergence of a new system of social stratification in the country. With the slow breakdown of cultural divisions and economic specialisations, there appears to be an interplay of ethnicity and class in politics and society. The current way of understanding the new stratification is to imagine a set of vertical lines representing ethnic divisions, across which run a set of horizontal lines representing class divisions creating neat little 'identity' boxes. Most Malaysian experts have begun to see the necessity of hyphenating ethnicity and class, and this stratification explains to a large extent the internal differences within the Tamil diaspora which for long had its ethnic aspect in the beam of public light while its class aspect remained in shadow.

This new stratification is marked by obvious trends of convergence and contestation among the three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. The best example of this is the popular *medan selera* (food court) in the Malaysian malls and supermarkets, including the well known Petronas Towers at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre. Spread over almost the entire floor of the mall, the medan selera offers a smorgasbord of aroma and delicious spicy food that Malaysians so love to eat any time of the day. At first sight, the stalls seem to be selling three distinct kinds of food: Malay, Chinese and Indian. But a closer look reveals that much of the food is of mixed variety. An Indian stall sells fish *sambal* (a Malay red chilli paste) or the Malaysian favourite *nasi lemak*; a Malay stall will serve prawns curried in mustard paste in distinctly Indian style; the Chinese will have stir-fried *bhindi* seasoned in south Indian style with curry leaves. If there is constant inter-ethnic cleaving and convergence anywhere in Malaysia, it is at the medan selera. The sight of an upper class Malay Muslim woman in a *baju kurung* and head scarf sharing a platter of seafood with a group of assorted non-Malays at a Chinese wedding is no longer surprising, as is not the fact that the Chinese will ensure that the food served at festivites is *halal*. At the International Islamic University on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, all female staff and students regardless of their religion or ethnicity are required to cover their heads and yet, traditionally attired Malay Muslim men serve alcohol in the many bars in Malaysia.

Tunku Abdur Rahman and Mahathir Mohammed.

This, of course, is not to say that ethnicity has lost its salience in public life. In fact, it is a defining factor in politics and public policy formulation. The importance of Malaysian multiculturalism can be gauged from the ethnic mix of the Malaysian population, which in 1998 was 22.2 million (including 1.6 million non-citizens). The majority is made up by the *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil), who constitute 57.8 percent (Malays 49 percent, other bumiputera 8.8 percent) of the population. They are followed by the Chinese at 24.9 percent, Indians 7 percent, Others (including the Ceylonese Tamils) 3.1 percent, while non-citizens or aliens, mostly Indonesian migrant workers, constitute the remaining 7.2 percent.

AS PER a study conducted by the Socio-economic and Environment Research Institute (SERI) on the socio-economic status of Indians living in Penang, north of Kuala Lumpur: 50 percent of the private companies do not employ Indians; 30 percent of Indians are squatters or live on temporary occupation license land; 75 percent of Indians in the manufacturing sector are low-level workers, only 25 percent are in professional and technical fields; 80 percent of Indian students drop out after fifth form (class 10); 60 percent of Indians, who make up 10 percent of Penang's 1.25 million, are low income earners.

Source: www.IndianMalaysian.com

"THE ASPIRATIONS and demands of the Malaysian Indians need to be made current and popular at this juncture of Malaysian history for three critically important reasons. A heightened perception of a large section of the community of the marginalisation and powerlessness of the group. The political opportunity that is available today to frontally confront the problem of marginalisation and powerlessness of the Indian community. The opportunity to transform the aspirations and demands of the Malaysian Indians from a communal issue to a national issue that needs active governmental attention and intervention..."

Source: Aspirations and Demands of Malaysian Indians for a Better Future, *Group of Concerned Citizens, Kuala Lumpur.*

Trinity

When Malaya obtained its independence from the British in 1957, the main ethnic groups in the new state were only from Malaya or what is now West Malaysia: Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and minority bumiputera, such as the tribal Orang Asli. With the inclusion of the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysia in 1963, Malaysian multiculturalism was extended to incorporate the predominantly non-Muslim bumiputera groups from the region, such as the Kadazan Dusuns, Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu and others, into the circle of its citizenship. (Singapore also joined the confederate state in 1963, but opted out in 1965.) The Malays and other bumiputera groups taken together are considered the indigenous people of the country. The non-bumiputera Chinese and Indians who migrated to Malaya for the most part only after the second half of the 19th century have however, with time, become an integral part of Malaysian society, contributing immensely to the country's economy and development.

The transnational migration during the colonial era and in recent decades of workers has been a major factor in the making of modern Malaysian society. Its multiculturalism today can be seen to be characterised by the existence of, as a Malaysian Indian scholar commented, "the Malay-Chinese-Indian trinity in everything, from skin colour to religion, schools, dress and public policies". This rings true as one detects that there are, indeed, three distinct 'types' of Malaysians: the 'polite, respectful, laidback' Malay, the 'aggressive, efficient, and money-minded' Chinese and the 'talkative, lazy, mischievous' Indian! Stereotypes, good-humoured racial jokes and mimicked accents abound in Malaysia, and the talk of each ethnic community about the others is at times not above either thinly disguised racism or patronising condescension.

The three Malaysians: the 'polite, respectful, laidback' Malay, the 'aggressive, efficient, and money-minded' Chinese and the 'talkative, lazy, mischievous' Indian

The official political tradition in Malaysia has been to protect the bumiputera, privileging them as the rightful owners of land, and to treat the Indians and Chinese as 'transients' or second-class citizens preoccupied with making money. That the three major ethnic groups, or races as they are called in Malaysia – Malay, Chinese and Indians – survived the colonial period insulated within their own social and cultural spheres was the result of British divide-and-rule policy. Administration, education, land and labour policies were all formulated to ensure that ethnic divisions persisted and survived. By and large, the British were able to maintain a peaceful society through coercion.

The horrifying experience of the second world war and the Japanese occupation (1942) disrupted the calm and forced the locals to think of their future in new and different ways. The pro-indigenous nationalist policy of the Japanese allowed a section of Malays access to limited political power and space, and allowed the targeting of the Chinese as their principal opponents by singling them out as communists. The Japanese occupation had a major impact on inter-ethnic relations. After the Japanese surrender, the British imposed military rule until 1960, first as the British Military Administration and then with the emergency of 1948-60 when the communist insurgency was ruthlessly suppressed. Between 1945 and 1960, politics and society underwent a change such that after much bargaining among ethnic groups under Tunku Abdur Rahman, who called himself the prime minister of "the happiest country in the world", the policy shift was made from 'pluralism' to 'multiethnicism'. The central pillar of the 'ethnic bargaining' process was modern electoral politics, where ethnic-based parties were allowed to function and contest in elections, but only as coalition partners. The subsequent successful adoption of the constitution of postcolonial Malaysia was perhaps the most significant outcome of the bargain.

The constitution has since then been periodically adjusted to suit bumiputera – which by virtue of relative demographic strength translates into mainly Malay – interests, as well as to protect Malay political supremacy. Nowhere is this clearer than in Malay special rights in politics, education, employment and issues involving Islam and the Bahasa Melayu language guaranteed in the constitution and institutionalised in the New Economic Policy (NEP). In his much-quoted book, *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir Mohammed, the prime minister of Malaysia since 1980, writes, "In Malaysia, there can be no denying that the status of the Malays differs

from the non-Malays. The Malays and the Red Indians of America are more or less in the same category. Malays are accepted as the indigenous people of the country, but the country is no longer exclusively theirs. However, in order to protect and preserve their status, certain laws are necessary".

The constitution of 1957, most Malaysia watchers believe, struck a bargain between the two big ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese, where Chinese predominance in the economy was conceded in return for a Malay preponderance in politics and other state matters. The Indians, who did not constitute a majority in even a single electoral constituency in Malaysia, were too small a population to be considered in the bargain. Thus, while the constitution accorded the bumiputeras a series of special rights, and the Chinese a special dominance in the Malaysian businesses and enterprises, the Indians were the only ethnic group to leave the bargaining table without any gain. With an institutionalised differential incorporation of Malaysian citizens, they became second class citizens, surrounded by poverty in working class conditions, and felt caught in a vicious cycle from which they saw no way out.

This frustration is particularly marked among members of the younger generation who feel bitterly discriminated against in all fields, from education to employment, and enjoy none of the economic confidence and comfort that enables the Malaysian Chinese to mostly take this discrimination in their stride. Some scholars accuse the Malaysian state of practising racial policies in taking affirmative action on behalf of the majority Malays that put disadvantaged communities in an even more disadvantageous situation. But Mahathir Mohammed defends his laws by saying, "Clearly, unless special provisions are made, the chances are that the Malays will never go beyond an elementary education, and will never obtain jobs other than those of the lowest grade in this country".

The minority partners of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) in the ruling multiparty coalition the Barisan Nasional (National Front), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), continue to accept their subordinate position within the political formation in which the UMNO is undoubtedly the dominant partner. Although these two parties have succeeded, from time to time, in protecting non-Malay interests threatened by popular Malay demands, they have done little to advance non-Malay causes. They are seen as 'patronage machines' that give members of the non-Malay middle class access to the Malay dominated government and bureaucracy but offer little benefit to constituents from lower levels of the class hierarchy. "Racial inequality continues despite the law", admits the prime minister, "but it is an inequality that can only be aggravated by removing the laws. The unfortunate position of the Malays which prompted the laws in the first place, has not been completely corrected ... and certainly, without these laws the Malays will slide back into worse situations and increase existing inequalities" (*The Malay Dilemma*).

Colonial era Nattukottai Chettiar migrants.

Thus, in Kuala Lumpur, the chances are that the taxi driver at the dazzling Sentral Station, or the salesgirl at Petrosains, the waitress at a restaurant, the sweepers at the public toilets, the youngsters distributing handouts of *peri peri* chicken to passers by at Imbi Plaza and the porters at the busy Pudu Raya bus station will be Indian.

Not Mahathir's Malaysians

The teeming masses of Malaysia's Indian Tamil population are certainly far from being Mahathir's Malaysians. Though they form only 7 percent of Malaysia's total population, they account for 63 percent of those arrested under the emergency ordinance (1969) for violent crimes. They also constitute 41 percent of beggars and 20 percent of child abusers in a long list of alarming statistics, which indicate social and economic marginalisation. Indians rank the lowest in national elementary school examinations and about one in every 12 Indian children does not attend primary school. "With the strong push for bumiputera economic development, the minorities were neglected", writes a prominent social scientist from Kuala Lumpur. "Indians used to be well represented in the civil services but their numbers dropped in the wake of the New Economic Policy quotas for bumiputeras. Unlike the Chinese, the Indians did not have the economic clout to counter the NEP's impact; they were also too few in number to wield much political influence. The result today is a nation divided as much along race lines as along class lines".

Some blame the violence in Indian films for its adverse impact on the psyche of the youth, others blame what they feel is 'racism in development policies', and yet others say that the youth feel marginalised and trapped in poverty, and deprived of a caring and sharing government. The overwhelming feeling within the community is one of exclusion – from schools, institu-

There are Tamils, and there are Tamils

IN KUALA Lumpur, Indians are everywhere. The girls wear prominent *bindis*, locally called 'pottu', with trousers and shirts, while the boys are conspicuous in their gold earrings, knee-length shorts and amazing criss-cross haircuts popularised by African-American television stars. *Salwar-kameezes*, locally called 'Punjabi suit' are worn without the mandatory *dupatta*, and a lady wearing a sari to work is good-naturedly accused of overdressing. But few of the Jaffna Tamils can be seen outside their air-conditioned offices or arty homes, where they are occupied with entertaining Vietnamese delegations, signing software and financial deals. Or else, they are busy delivering memorial lectures on political geography or cultural politics, dining at the posh Madam Kwan's in KLCC, spending lazy weekends at seaside resorts in Port Dickson, visiting the uptown clubs and driving around in shining Mercedes-Benz cars.

The Ceylonese 'Jaffna' Tamils, mostly from the northern parts of erstwhile Ceylon, retained a strong sense of exclusivity until well after independence, refusing to identify themselves with the wider Tamil community. The Ceylonese were drawn overwhelmingly from the dominant Vellalar caste and like the Chettiars practised Agamic 'great tradition' Hinduism.

In spite of having a lot in common, the Indian and Ceylonese middle classes have between them a yawning gap. On the whole, the Jaffna Tamils claim to be more religious, speak a more 'refined' version of Tamil, eat the same food but prepare it differently, follow many different rituals and most of all, maintain a certain 'apartness'. "We *kottes* are somewhat biased", admits a software consultant of Ceylonese Tamil origin. Their efforts at maintaining distance are ridiculed by the Indian Tamils, who let no opportunity pass to point out the common roots. "After all, all Tamils are originally Indians, no matter how badly they want to forget the past", insists an Indian Tamil professor.

The Ceylonese Tamils are also differentiated from their Indian brethren in their widespread practice of dowry. The thriftiness in many Ceylonese Tamil families has pretty much everything to do with the dowry they have to give away with their daughters at marriage. From the moment a girl is born into a family, the element of saving is a natural process. Though the practice of dowry is not as rampant as before, it is still prevalent among the many conservatives.

tions, enforcement agencies, government and the corporate world. The youth tend to seek a defence mechanism to overcome their problems; organising themselves into gangs or groups provide the Indian youth a sense of belonging, particularly if they are able to develop links with forces of power and money and so promote and protect themselves.

Opinions differ on how to solve the 'Indian' problem. The community does not consider the petty schemes that are handed out by the MIC and its associated wings sufficient. But most feel that the current gap between the working class and the educated and influential Indian middle classes must first be bridged if there is to be a change in the socio-economic conditions of the community. It is believed that the beleaguered working class needs role models to emulate and draw lessons from.

Recently, the leading English newspaper of Malaysia, *The Star*, published a news report on a questionnaire that was forwarded to a cross-section of private firms in Malaysia. When asked if they would employ an Indian, most said they would do so only after first considering a person from the 'Others' category. When asked if they would award promotions to an Indian, they admitted it was a not a priority. When asked why Indians were usually unsuccessful in getting jobs, the corporations claimed that during job interviews, Indians presented themselves poorly. Most social activists felt that one reason for these responses was that so far, the lower class Indians have been mingling only amongst themselves and that individuals from the higher classes should play a role in helping to develop their community. This involvement was more important and would yield better results than demanding development projects from the government or the MIC.

A first step in this direction seemed to have been taken in June 2002, when the middle class gave up two days of World Cup football to attend 'The Malaysian Indian in the New Millennium' conference in Kuala Lumpur at their own expense and stayed on throughout! A quick sampling of the 500 or so participants showed up teachers, lawyers, students, retired civil servants, social activists and entrepreneurs. It was possibly the biggest show of middle class support that the Indian community has seen in recent history. The critical question is, why now? Perhaps the rising criminality that threatens the entire community is a reason. The *New Sunday Times* reported on 9 June 2002: "The new and notable middle class involvement brings with it a psyche that demands respect and recognition because it is Indian and not despite it". Whatever the reason for this sudden solidarity, hopefully it portends well for Malaysia's Indian working classes.

After the first wave of indentured labour, subsequent immigration was largely clan-based, with a higher proportion of women and families than single men, and tended to be socially variegated. Thus, it was more likely to include people from the higher castes. A later wave brought the Chettiars, a Tamil merchant caste. Although only a small number of Chettiars migrated to

Malaya, they exercised a disproportionate influence in the development of its commerce and economy, and even in the establishment of Agamic 'great tradition' Hinduism. Nattukottai Chettiars, who worshipped Murukan as a clan *deva*, built and maintained many Murukan temples in Malaysia and Singapore, imported Brahmin *kurrukals* and Brahmin orthodoxy, advised on the proper practices associated with Murukan worship and the conduct of Murukan festivals, and have underwritten many Malaysian religious activities. There were also some professional and clerical migrants, mainly well-educated Dravidians, largely of Tamil origin but also a large number of Malayalis from Kerala. Most of them sought employment in Malaya through the 1920s and 1930s, and many became involved in the post-war Tamil revival in Malaysia and Singapore. Clearly, middle class Indians have significant influence in their milieu, and have the potential to similarly inspire the community.

The recent unprecedented move of the middle class and professional crowd in willing to let go of the status quo and be together with 'a different sort of crowd' has redefined the prospects for the Indian community. Paradoxically, the conference of Malaysian Indians also brought into the open another problematic issue: it failed to come up with a standard definition of the term 'Malaysian Indian'.

'Who is the Malaysian Indian? What is his or her language, colour, religion?' were questions that kept coming up but drew no clear answer. Several Punjabis and Bengalis refused to call themselves Indian, as this term has been almost completely monopolised by the Tamil-speaking population. So much so that the words 'Indian' and 'Tamil' have become synonymous in Malaysia and Singapore, much to the chagrin of the tiny non-Tamil Indian middle class population, which feels this issue must be addressed urgently along with other working class issues.

Vision 2020

Perhaps the greatest challenge before Mahathir Mohammed as he begins to think of his legacy is the creation of an united Malaysian nation, or Bangsa Malaysia, in which different ethnic groups should be able to share a common 'national identity', maintain a high level of ethnic toleration and march towards greater economic success. But the rate of political liberalisation has not kept up with the pace of economic growth, and this may be the biggest hurdle in the path to that professed goal. Industrialisation and rapidly changing market forces driven by state-led modernisation over the last few decades have resulted in both material and ideational changes. And yet, Malaysian politics and public policies continue to be trapped in the outdated parameters of racism and majority reservation. It is not only the Indians, but also the minority bumiputera and other smaller groups that continue to be marginalised in a political system that doles out support to only the majority.

Malaysian politics and public policies are trapped in the outdated parameters of racism and majority reservation

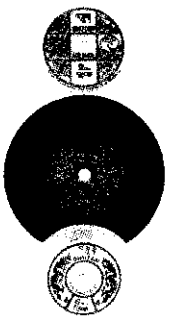
Over the period of a century and a half, the descendants of indentured immigrants from South Asia have emerged as vibrant diaspora communities in different parts of the world. Their experiences in different countries have been different: from being marginalised in Jamaica, being in bitter ethnic confrontation in Guyana and Suriname, to gaining political visibility in Fiji and Canada, and a position of near dominance in Trinidad. With the second or third generation of native-born members of the diaspora growing up amidst an assimilating culture, it is generally seen that the cultural bond between the diaspora and the home country becomes weak enough to be forgotten. What assume greater significance are the factors and forces that shape their differential socio-cultural situation and political-economic position.

The largely Tamil Indian community in Malaysia which was grateful to be granted citizenship in the 1957 constitution – itself an exercise in 'ethnic balancing' – is now restless and troubled as it realises that most of Malaysia's poor today are Indians. While globalisation and economic development have introduced major changes in society and the economy, unchanging 'ethnic' arrangements in politics have led not only to the fragmentation of Malaysian society but have also limited career options and growth opportunities for Indian youth. There still exists a discriminatory ethnic division of labour together with what a social activist calls, "a sort of ethnic glass ceiling". Unable to change a socio-economic environment they did not make and have no power to influence, the youth resort to random acts of violence instead of engaging in the popular politics of mobilisation.

In subscribing to an 'Asian style democracy', validated by certain 'Asian values', government leaders such as those in Malaysia and Singapore believe there is nothing universal about democracy and human rights, both of which are deemed to be culturally structured. To them, economic development must take precedence over such rights, and discipline and conformity to group values are more desirable than individuality and freedom. The price of such politics, of course, is paid by many of the minority groups in those countries; the Malaysian Indian working class is a good example of this.

Sticking with it

BHUTAN MAY be small in size, but its philatelic output is Himalayan in scale. The Druk state has been playing the commemorative stamp-issuing game with a zeal that renders all competitors, at least in South Asia, virtually third-raters. In 1997 alone, for instance, Thimpu issued 59 stamps immortalising various insects and animals – from the *Apis Laboriosa smith* (the world's largest honeybee, found only at high altitudes), to four stamps of dhols, an endangered Asiatic canine, captured in different stages of work and play.



In fact, Bhutan's penchant for philatelic thoroughness extends even into the realm of transportation. Given the country's verticality, it should come as no surprise that it has issued a stamp in praise of trekking guides, but the scope of its philatelic obsession with methods of transport borders on the encyclopaedic. Thus, one can start with Captain Cook's 18th century Pacific wanderings and reach Neil Armstrong's 1969 moon walk in a

stamp series that zigzags from the world's first bicycles and automobiles to Norwegian steam engines and even downhill bobsleds. With its preferences for animals and transport, it should come as no surprise that Thimpu has even cross-bred its stamp themes by issuing a Donald Duck postal mark featuring the cartoon legend commanding a boat.

The most famous stamp issue of Bhutan, of course, is the series of records it released in 1973. A record of what? Records of the country's national anthem, folk music or history, the seven stamps in the series can be played on a phonograph. Really! △

A map you can (finally) use

HOW DO you get from Mullaittivu, on Sri Lanka's northeast coast, to Colombo, tucked into the southwest corner of the island? Just a year ago, the answer was you did not – Tamil-majority Mullaittivu was under the LTTE's control and Colombo lay on the other side of a landmass divided by patrols. But now the answer is simple. Take highway 34 west out of Mullaittivu until it merges with highway 9, the principal north-south corridor cutting straight through Sri Lanka, and follow that to Kandy, where you can pick up highway 1 to the nation's capital. Or, if you prefer a seaside drive, take highway 12 across to Puttalam on the west coast, then cruise south along highway 3, which will take you all the way to Colombo. Or, if you have the time and a sense of adventure, why not plod along the island's back roads, stopping along the way at Wasgomuwa National Park and Tangalla's beaches?

The wealth of options now visibly available to the Sri Lankan driv-

South and West Asians in the US

SINCE 11 September 2001, more than 1100 people have been detained by the United States government and held in secret federal custody. Most of the detainees are of South or West Asian descent, and almost all are Muslim. Only a handful are still suspected of any links to terrorism, and only one – Zacarias Moussasoui – has actually been charged with conspiracy relating to 11 September. More than 8000 young men who have entered the US in the past two years from South and West Asian countries have been interviewed. Attorney General John Ashcroft has also announced a massive programme to fingerprint over 100,000 South and West Asian immigrants, even though as individuals they are not suspected of any wrongdoing. And for those captured abroad in the military campaign in Afghanistan, President Bush has invested himself with the authority to try these individuals in military tribunals, rather than civilian courts, thereby defying provisions of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs.

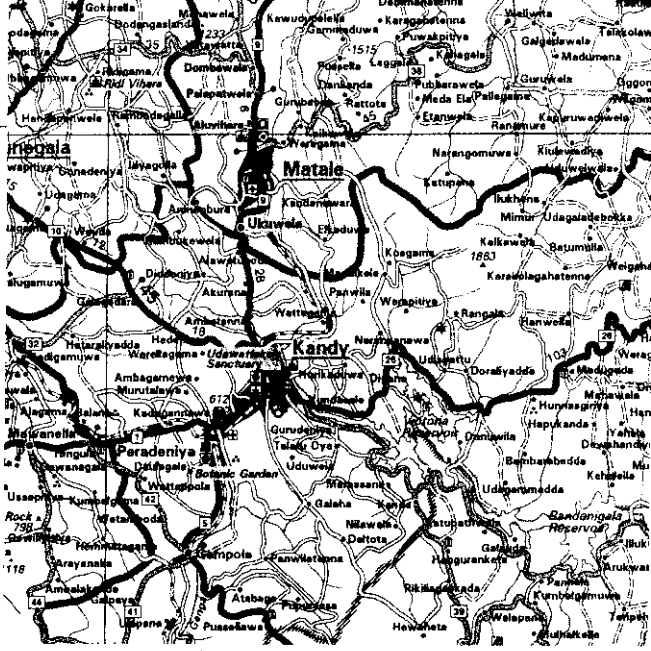
The US has changed in many ways since that horrific September morning, one of the most profound being a massive outpouring of patriotism. In the year after 11 September, for example, roughly three times as many US flags were sold as in a typical year. This patriotism, by itself, is not necessarily a bad thing. The patriotic sentiments expressed by members of diverse ethnic and religious groups, for instance, have helped to bridge some of the cultural gaps that have long plagued American society.

But patriotism, combined with fear and a sense of vulnerability, can be a dangerous thing. The Bush administration has taken advantage of this emotional hybrid to justify its targeting of South and West Asian Muslim immigrants. In addition, it has used patriotism to warn off critics of its more indefensible policies. Thus, on 6 December 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft took civil libertarians to task, admonishing that: "...to those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's

er is an outcome of the island's peace process, yes. But if you can actually begin to plan a trip 'up-country' and beyond, you do need a map. That is where Michael Griesbaum comes in. A Kathmandu-based cartographer, Griesbaum, who first visited Sri Lanka in 1981 on a student map-making project, has been concentrating on maps of South Asia ever since. His company, Mopple, sells driving maps of India (divided into four parts) and Nepal, and will be issuing a Sri Lankan road map in March 2003.

"I was in Sri Lanka just before the conflict. At that time, I could travel to Jaffna easily", Griesbaum explains. Then came the big, long war. Sensing peace in the offing a couple of years ago, he decided to work on a road map that drivers could use to navigate the island's once-treacherous by-ways, and he thinks he has a market for his product. "I heard that Sri Lanka at the moment has a tourism growth rate of 30 percent a month".

Griesbaum has spent most of the past two decades in Nepal, where he has worked on maps of the country's 75 districts in addition to a national road map and tourist maps of Chitwan Park, the Kathmandu valley and Kathmandu city. He says the most difficult part of working on maps of Nepal is verifying the roads and footpaths that appear on the printed page. It is possible, for example, to take a fairly direct bike ride from Kathmandu through the hills to neighbouring Daman, but most people only know about the major roadway that connects the two places along their western edges. The only way to make sure the map is right is by taking to the hills and finding out in person.



While he says he has not had any trouble with Nepal's Maoists yet, Griesbaum once found himself caught between LTTE and government forces while crossing the Badulla dam in Sri Lanka. In 1992, at the height of the island's conflict, he had to turn around at the top of the structure and walk back to the government side. If mapping Sri Lanka has proved risky on occasion, it has also provided its unique rewards. Back in 1981-82, Griesbaum studied the island's topography by satellite and discovered a plot of land that the Swiss processed food giant Nestlé had illegally cleared for cattle grazing.

In the future, Griesbaum says he wants to work on maps of Tibet (divided into two parts) and Southeast Asia. But while he is starting to look beyond South Asia, his detailed maps of this region are still available for sale. Contact Mopple at karto@wlink.com.np if your cartographic curiosity is piqued. △

enemies and pause to America's friends". Coming from the US' highest custodian of civil liberties, these comments are shocking, but hardly surprising given the context of judicial policies since 11 September.

It should come as no surprise that the future of 'target' minorities in the US has become more imperilled in other ways as well. On 26 October 2001, the president signed the USA Patriot Act, a bill that significantly expands the power of law enforcement to detain non-citizens on the basis of mere suspicion, conduct secret searches without a warrant, access personal records such as medical and financial bills, and investigate American citizens without establishing probable cause, all with diminished judicial supervision. The Pentagon has started work on a programme to track people inside the country, and even transportation workers can assist in the hunt for 'terrorists' by reporting on the activities of 'suspicious persons', a thinly veiled effort to expand the racial profiling net.

It is difficult to discern if these measures make the US or the international community safer, as the Bush administration claims. But what is clear is that these policies exact a profound cost in terms of civil liberties and constitutional values in general, and pose a significant threat to the freedom and liberty of South and West Asian migrants in the US in particular. If history is to repeat itself, the US will look back on these years apologetically and critically, realising how its targeting of minority communities in the 'war on terror' echoes its treatment of Japanese-Americans during the second world war and African-Americans during slavery and the era of segregation. The experiences of South Asian societies, be it India during the emergency or Pakistan during its many periods of military rule, demonstrate that sacrificing liberty for security is a dangerous, and ultimately ineffective, practice. △

Fatema Gunja
New Haven, Connecticut, USA

Money goes to bed with money

MONEY FLEXED its brute muscle at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (late August-early September 2002). It reduced the summit to a series of frenzied negotiations for development sub-contracts. Money naturally, only goes to bed with money, and damn those who try to get in the way. Money could travel. Invite. Eat. Entertain. Money could threaten not to do all of this. Money found partners.

Across the five venues around the city, partnerships were forged at the speed of thought.

Every venue had its own set of simultaneous events and it was logistically impossible for cash-strapped outsiders to keep pace. The confusion, a veteran summiteer confided, was essential to facilitate the 'process'. The 'process' was so complicated it could have belonged to the world of global finance. Perhaps it actually does.

The formal process of wrangling over the 'text' (the political declaration) between state parties took place at Sandton, in the richest part of Jo'burg, which is a grand replica of San Francisco. Select groups from 'civil society' were also in attendance to moan for the 'people', and against 'lack of access', 'exclusion' and 'powerlessness'. The alternative process at Nasrec, 90 minutes by bus from Sandton, was a civil society circus.

The alternative to the alternative was held at the St Smithians College in another part of the city. Vandana Shiva and Riccardo Riverro held their rebel court here. Greenpeace, perhaps to show its independence, set up its base independent of all. Radicals raided meetings and protested with crafty innovation. Some marched from the poorest ghetto in the city to Sandton sparkling with the ornaments of global capital, some whistled shrilly, others raided meetings at the Waterdome. Few had the resources to travel in the city, but cell phones helped to stay in touch, while smart comps caught all the online updates.

Rasmussen mulling the whole mess over.

I looked at it all with watery eyes. In fact, I had gone there to follow water, freshwater actually, inscribed in Chapter 18 of Agenda 21, the sole earthly remains of what once was called the spirit of Rio. Freshwater is not to be confused with seawater, which is different because the sea is a separate 'natural resource' and 'sector', just like energy and so many others mentioned in Agenda 21.

It was difficult to hold back the tears of 'gratitude' in the face of so many 'moral obligations' pro-

Incarnate-in-exile speaks

BHUTAN'S RELIGIOUS leader-in-exile, Shabdrung Jigme Nawang Namgyal, recently lashed out at Thimpu's rulers in an interview given in Kalimpong, West Bengal. A 14 November *Kathmandu Post* article reported the *Shabdrung* (religious leader) as calling the Bhutanese government "the most tyrannical regime" in the region. He asserted that Nepali-speaking 'Lhotshampa' refugees had done nothing wrong but are now "not being treated as human beings". "They must be given due respect. Bhutan has done no justice to them. Mere talks cannot solve the refugee problem".

The Shabdrung's tirade, coming as it does from a prominent religious figure with a strong following among Bhutanese citizens and

Shabdrung Jigme Nawang Namgyal

exiles, provides an interesting turn in an ongoing saga of political struggle (or the lack of it) in Bhutan. The institution of the Shabdrung originated with the founder of the Bhutanese state, Ngawang Namgyal, who arrived in Drukyul in the early 17th century as a refugee fleeing the domination of the (Dalai Lama's) Gelugpa sect. A skilled political operator, he outmaneuvered local rivals and survived five Tibetan-Mongol invasions, along the way establishing himself as Bhutan's first Shabdrung. During the course of his reign, Ngawang Namgyal evolved the *Chhoesid* power-sharing arrangement where authority was divided between a secular *deb raja* and a religious *dharma raja*. After his death in 1651, which remained a closely guarded secret for years, reincarnations were regularly recognised to continue the line.

This so-called system of 'dual monarchy' lasted a little under three centuries, eventually succumbing to the authority of Ugyen Wangchuck, a regional leader who, with British backing, took control of the country

nounced by kindly men such as Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the president of the European Union and Danish prime minister. At the introduction to the EU Water for Life initiative of the summit he carried the cross bravely. "We have the technology and talent. We have to act", he said sombrely. And act they did, declaring "a one-off expense of USD 200 billion" to save humanity. Want some of the dough, become a 'partner'. Few could refuse. Fewer did.

United Nations bureaucrats talked with World Bank bureaucrats. CIDA bureaucrats made coy partnership overtures to bureaucrats from developing member states. MNC bureaucrats courted civil society (NGO if you wish) bureaucrats. Media stars met delegation heads. Heads of states met each other, that is those who did go there. Others, someone said, did not come for they were asked by 'somebody' not to come. The US, of course, did not deem the context fit for Bush. But all those who were present talked partnership. All talked money too. Some wanted to give. Most wanted to take. The process of Sustainable Development went along proposing partnerships.

The UN is already in the 'compact'. Partnerships for water extended only to member states. But, even the confusion of the process could not hide the mismatches. The sociology and geography of the partnerships stood out oddly. The rich were proposing, at meetings where the poor were not even present, for partnerships to be located in poor countries. The money, it was presumed would eventually iron out all the cultural, sociological, geographical and political anomalies!

All refused to talk about the real threats to environment and its relationship with development. All agreed not to mention the yin yang of consumption. All wanted to manage. Nobody wanted to change. So the European compulsion to stay in partnership with the US forced them to send proposals to the poor.

The poor have enough experience in handling indecent proposals from kings. They are used to the forced relationships. They have the stamina to continue. By wedding the WSSD to the WTO, the Europeans have managed a relationship that promises to increase consumption in the pursuit of a growth which is manifestly unsustainable.

The oldest partnership on this planet is the one between the man and the woman. The biggest lesson that it teaches is one that bureaucrats refuse to learn. Partnerships do not work one way. △

Khalid Hussain
Multan, Pakistan

in 1907 and established a hereditary throne now occupied by his great-grandson, Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Despite thus being deprived of its legal legitimacy, the institution of the Shabdrung persisted as an uncomfortable presence for the rulers in Thimpu. The present Shabdrung reincarnate, who was taken out of Bhutan by Delhi during the 1962 India-China war as insurance policy in the event of dynastic collapse in Thimpu, grew up in Himachal Pradesh and has now established a monastery 25 kilometres from Kalimpong. He has remained out of the newspapers as a critic during the decade that the Lhotshampa refugees have been in exile. Until, that is, now.

The Punakha Dzong, Ngawang Namgyal's palace (top); Ugyen Wangchuck.

The Shabdrung's attack is particularly embarrassing for Thimpu and comes at an interesting moment. The Lhotshampa refugee issue has refused to disappear even while Bhutan's rulers are struggling to define the role of the monarchy within a constitutional system. And while he calls on Thimpu to resolve the refugee issue, the Shabdrung says he has no plans to return to his birthland. Dissent, he says, will not be tolerated by Thimpu's leaders – "it is worse than terror, so it is extremely dangerous". While the rest of the world may not know who the Shabdrung is, within Bhutan his outburst-in-exile would be more than a matter of passing interest. △

Starvation amidst surplus

For predominantly agrarian societies, importing food is equivalent to importing unemployment. The Subcontinent needs to aspire to self-sufficiency through protecting its genetic inheritance and distributing the 'excess' foodgrain that curiously fails to reach those in need. It also needs to be wary of the spin doctors of development.

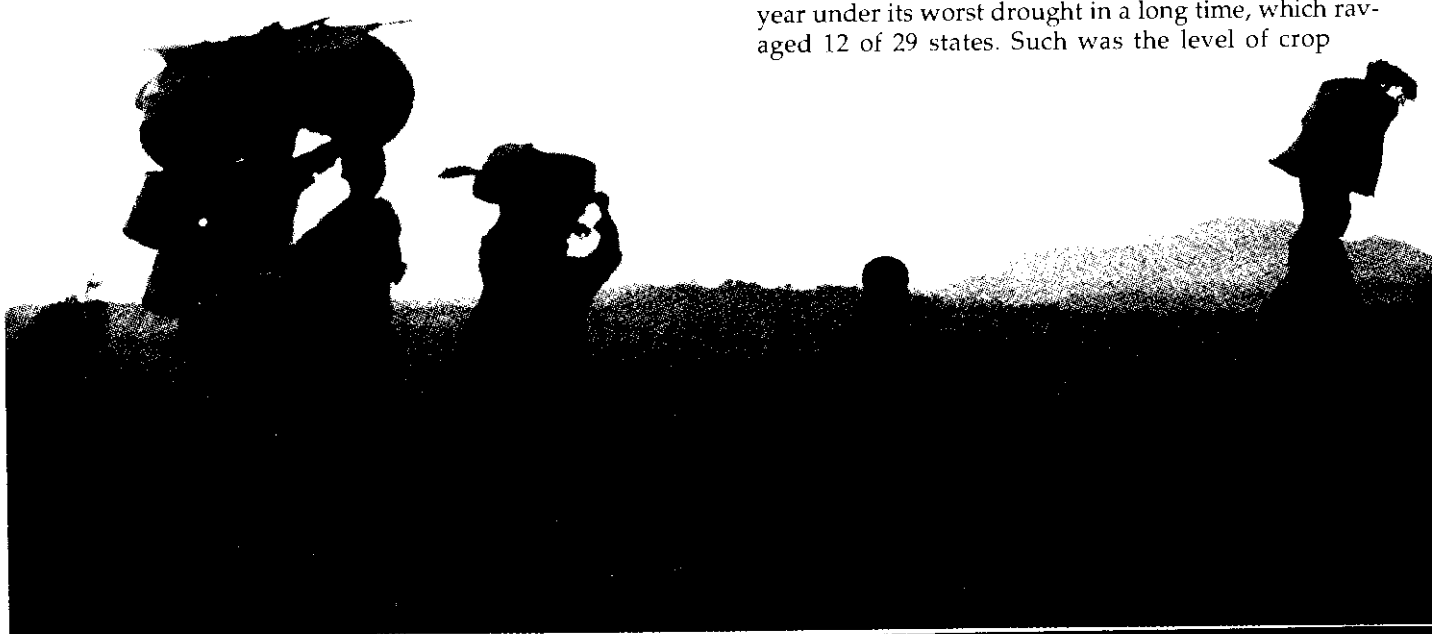
by ***Devinder Sharma***

At first glance, the reports appearing in the American media last summer sounded very much like news about drought-stricken villages in the Indian hinterland. Till, of course, you saw the dateline and carried on reading in utter disbelief about desperate farmers and rural residents praying for rain in the United Sates of America. Since presidential help on the expected scale was not forthcoming, it was perhaps inevitable that god was called upon to do the needful. *The Washington Post* reported that President George Bush was unwilling to spare more finances for drought relief than had already been set aside in the USD 180 billion farm bill that he had signed earlier in May. The president, however, emphasised his commitment to helping farmers under existing programmes, including the agriculture department's decision to make USD 150 million worth of surplus milk – "spoilt milk" as the Democrats called it – available for use as animal feed in four drought-stricken states.

A drought of this magnitude is unprecedented in the recent history of the US. Crops have withered and fodder has become scarce, hence the need to feed milk to livestock. There is a scramble for new water sources even as urban residents have been asked to stop watering lawns and washing cars. Ranchers have sold off herds rather than let them starve for lack of pasture on their heat-baked fields. "I have never seen it like this and I'm 60 years old", said Richard Taylor, who owns 37,000 acres in Texas and New Mexico but had to sell off much of his cattle herd.

Serious hydrological problems have developed with wells, reservoirs and streams going dry and groundwater depleting drastically. Wildfires have broken out in many areas, scorching an estimated 4.6 million acres, twice the average acreage burnt in the previous decade. "It is pretty dire", said Mark Svoboda, a climatologist with the National Drought Mitigation Centre. From southern California to South Carolina and from Montana to New Mexico, there have been reports of extraordinary levels of damage. Not since the great "dust bowl" days of the 1930s, so poignantly described in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, have US farmers experienced so extensive a crisis of production. Wheat output is expected to fall to its lowest level in close to 30 years. In July, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calculated that 49 percent of the US' contiguous landmass was suffering from 'moderate to severe' drought conditions. 'Exceptional drought' conditions, the most acute form of all, prevailed in 13 states, including New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Utah.

By strange coincidence, India too was reeling this year under its worst drought in a long time, which ravaged 12 of 29 states. Such was the level of crop



damage that rice production this year is expected to touch an all-time low. Unlike the American story, however, the Indian one is not exceptional. Drought is just one of the many seasons of the Subcontinent and crop failure is inscribed into the lifecycle of the farmer. But the American story comes as a rude shock to those who have been taught at universities to greatly appreciate the US farm model and its unmatched capacity for success. One year of drought has been sufficient to demonstrate its vulnerabilities. The vaunted drought-proofing of American agriculture that we have heard so much of is obviously not quite what it is made out to be.

Of agrarian India there are no claims to systemic sophistication. It is a known fact that Indian agriculture falters because of its complete dependence on the monsoons. The fragmentation of land holdings, subsistence farming methods, poor productivity and low levels of exploitation of the natural resource base have cast serious doubts about the sustainability and viability of farms. Consequently, the only escape for the country, we are invariably told by agricultural scientists, is to follow the American model, with its industrialised technology, scale-driven economies, massive investments and surpluses so huge that the government must pay farmers to keep producing output in excess of domestic demand. Yet, the reality is that just one drought has been sufficient to demonstrate the inadequacy of this scientifically sophisticated industrial farm model for agrarian economies in the semi-permanent grip of drought?

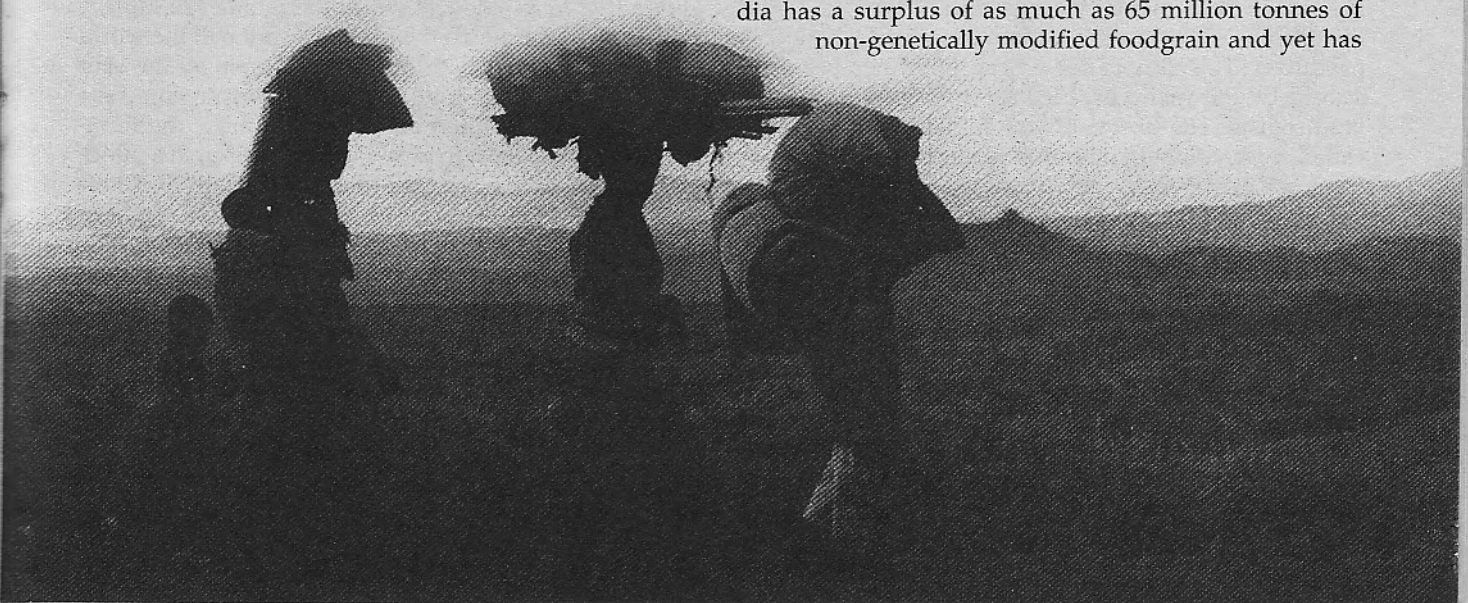
Biotech generosity has as little to do with 'humanitarian intentions' as food surpluses with the mitigation of hunger

World food summitry

Rather than quelling the din, however, the technological virtues of agrarian America are still being peddled not just for dealing with drought, which is a sporadic rarity in the global North and a seasonal fixture in the under-developed South, but also for allegedly solving that pernicious and scandalously permanent third world condition – hunger and chronic malnutrition. For years it has been the fashion in the rich man's club to prescribe a naïve technological fix for the problem of starvation on a world scale. For instance, last year, hundreds of people in the United States, mostly agricultural scientists, signed an AgBioWorld Foundation petition appealing to the multinational seed giant Aventis CropScience to donate some 3000 tonnes of genetically-engineered experimental rice to the needy rather than destroy it. (Destroying food for various reasons, including protecting farm productivity from the negative effects of weak demand, is a time-honoured policy ritual of rich nations.) There is good reason to believe that this appeal was less about concern for feeding the hungry, and more a public relations exercise to lend humanitarian lustre to the biotechnology community's predatory agendas.

Aventis, for its part, never tires of expressing concern about the hungry of the world. Driven by this concern, it is "working hard to ensure that US farmers can grow abundant, nutritious crops and... hope[s] that by contributing to that abundance all mankind will prosper". At the same time that Aventis was out to save all mankind, the AgBioWorld Foundation did not fail to capitalise on the opportunity provided by the starving masses to convey its "disapproval of those who, in the past, have used situations similar to this one to block approved food aid to victims of cyclones, floods and other disasters in order to further their own political (namely, anti-biotechnology) agendas".

Eradicating global hunger is no doubt a pious intention, but the humanitarian credentials of those leading the crusade to achieve it through biotechnology are seriously in doubt. The US agri-biotech industry and the scientific community affiliated to it have raised no end of a hue and cry about the breathtaking generosity of donating a mere 3000 tonnes of genetically modified (GM) rice, the human health risks of which have still not been ascertained. But when they were told that India has a surplus of as much as 65 million tonnes of non-genetically modified foodgrain and yet has



Profits of hunger

THERE IS money in hunger and malnutrition. For the Indian government, exporting 'surplus' wheat and rice brings in much-needed hard currency. And for private companies, it is immensely profitable to convert traditional animal feed into value-added nutritious food for chronically malnourished Indians.

The paradox is compelling. While the government plans to export 'surplus' and 'unmanageable' rice and wheat stocks, an American company, RiceX, has entered into collaboration with the multinational agribusiness giant, Monsanto, to produce and test its patented technology for nutritious food. Simply put, the technology is being field-tested for the first time on Indians.

RiceX has developed a process to extract and stabilise nutritious rice bran from raw rice kernels. The El Dorado company sees third world rice-growing countries as a profitable market. And it has reason to. After all, the number of the hungry and malnourished in rural India alone has been steadily rising, from 224 million in the early 1990s to 250 million in the mid-1990s. This corresponds to an almost constant increase in the incidence of rural poverty and a slow decline in the incidence of urban poverty, as confirmed by a World Bank report.

In three to five years, if the tests prove successful, the conversion of rice bran into 'nutritious' human food will yield a projected revenue of USD 400 million a year. That will be a welcome contrast to the company's USD 5 million loss last year. Company chairman Daniel McPeak is reported to have said that the deal calls for RiceX and Monsanto to split the cost of sending two processing units, a container ship of US-grown rice and staff to India. RiceX employees will process both US and Indian rice bran there during a six-month test phase.

The Monsanto-RiceX project will convert abundantly available rice bran, which is normally used as low-grade animal feed, into nutritious food for Indians. Says Charles F Hough, business development chief of the nutrition and consumer division of Monsanto, "We are keenly interested in expanding our activities in India. The RiceX proprietary technology could be a vehicle for Monsanto to contribute significantly to the nutritional well-being of the people of India".

In effect, India will be simultaneously importing food to feed the poor and exporting food to feed cattle in the West. In any other country, including the United States, food exports are allowed only after the nation's food requirements have been adequately met. In the US, for instance, the government spends USD 54 billion to make food available to an estimated 25 million people languishing below the poverty line. In India, on the other hand, food buffers are built essentially by keeping the food away from the reach of the poor. With food prices continually rising, and with a large percentage of the population earning less than a dollar a day, more and more people are finding it difficult to meet their daily food needs. The result is obvious: India will feed Western cattle with human feed while the West will feed the Indian poor with cattle feed!

a staggering population of some 320 million people who go to bed hungry every night, those who signed the appeal did not seem to register the paradox. Clearly, biotech generosity has as little to do with 'humanitarian intentions' as farm productivity has to do with food surpluses, and food surpluses have to do with the mitigation of hunger.

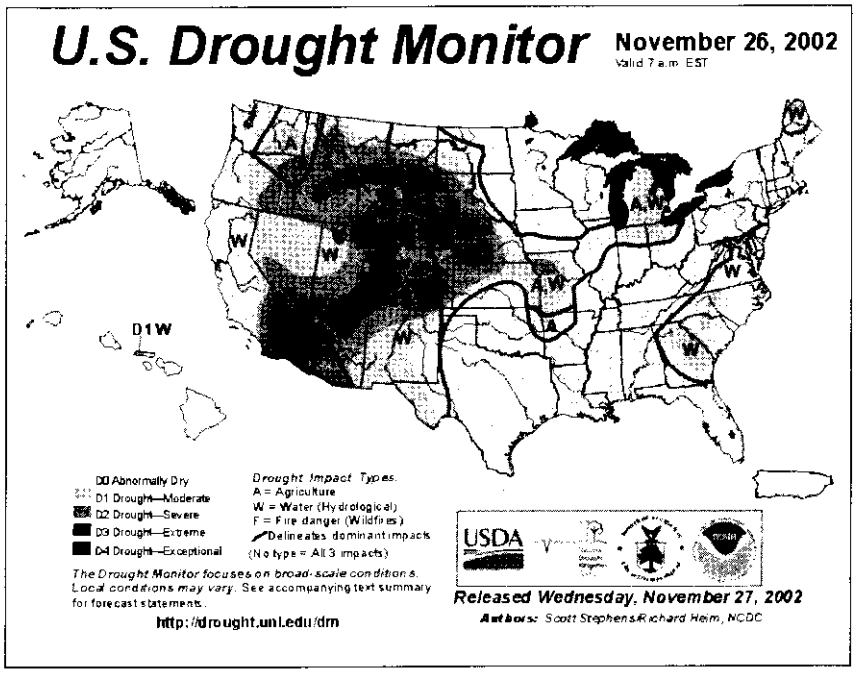
The problem is not a simple one of just production. It is more fundamentally a question of how to define the surplus, who produces that surplus and how it is produced. This simple yet crucial point has been obscured by too many profiteers masquerading as philanthropists. The problem with hunger is that the so-called international community, which is at the forefront of a great many dubious campaigns to profit transnational corporate interests in the guise of bringing welfare to the masses, has been using its political clout to pursue devious agendas. At the first World Food Summit (WFS) in Rome in 1996, heads of states of all countries of the world had "reaffirmed" the right of all people to have access to "safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger". They considered it unacceptable that more than 840 million people throughout the world did not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs.

These leaders consequently committed themselves to halving the number of hungry people by the year 2015. They would need another 20 years to provide food to the remaining 420 million people. In other words, the task of feeding the world had been postponed indefinitely, since the eminent leaders had obviously forgotten that in an unequal world the number of hungry people is constantly on the rise. Not only will the world fail to halve the number of hungry people by the year 2015, but also by the time that year dawns to haunt the luminaries of the international community, the number of hungry people to be fed will have risen to a mind-boggling 1.2 billion, a figure that exceeds the entire current population of India.

The heads of state convened again in Rome in June 2002 for 'WFS plus Five', to take stock of the progress since they met five years earlier. A quarter of the time frame set to halve global hunger had already elapsed and no substantial improvement had been registered. Every day, some 24,000 people were dying from hunger, starvation and related diseases. Strangely enough this entire period was also a time of plenty in terms of

food surpluses.

Hunger stands at the confluence of too many vested interests, and is a precondition for corporate profits to free ride on governmental and multilateral expert group recommendations for biotechnocratic solutions. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that the lack of political will to find independent and locally relevant solutions only accentuates hunger and destitution. There is also no recognition of the fact that political power is being exercised to promote technologies and strategies that actually reinforce the imbalances responsible for hunger in the first instance. Instead, at these global fora, the political elite joins hands with industrialists and agricultural scientists to celebrate the miraculous capacity of genetic engineering to boost food production and so do away with hunger and malnutrition.



Hence, the tedious repetition of the virtues of US agriculture, despite its demonstrable vulnerability not just to drought but also to corporate monopolies, and the plea to replicate it even in those parts of the world where farming is undertaken by capital-starved marginal farmers in drought-prone and semi-arid conditions. But this campaign to solve hunger by generating surpluses through biotechnological infusions is itself part of the contradictory mix of global nostrums that include free trade, elimination of protection, unrestricted competition and the abolition of subsidy, even as the attempt is made simultaneously to push in highly subsidised products from the protected OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development) agricultural sector into the rest of the world. These subsidised food imports have already resulted in the further marginalisation of small farmers and the loss of supplementary livelihoods and other poverty-coping mechanisms for millions of agricultural workers in the developing world. Since importing food is like importing unemployment, in the climate of 'liberalised trade' the reason for at least a part of the hunger in the third world lies in precisely those quarters of the developed world that are allegedly committed to eradicating it. Hunger is not just a matter of productivity and surplus, as the co-existence of huge surplus stocks and a large hungry population in India only confirms.

Free trade and market-led agriculture are precisely the reason why food does not reach those who need it most. Market processes in the developing countries are geared towards supporting commercial farmers and the export of crops. Projections for various time horizons indicate that the market demand for foodgrains can be met largely from output within countries. Strengthening self-reliance in foodgrain production within the developing world should therefore be more of a priority than imports from the developed world. Food-insecure populations need income through employment generated in the production of food.

This is the where the current orthodoxy of economic development parts company with common sense. Its twin engines of growth – the technological revolution and globalisation – will only widen the existing gap between those who are food-deficient and those who control the food surplus. Corporate biotechnology will only push more people into the trap of hunger while the gung-ho celebration of engineered seeds diverts attention and resources away from the ground realities.

Un-development programme

The argument that GM technology has the potential to complement other more traditional research methods as the new driving force for sustained growth in agricultural productivity is based on some very narrow assumptions. For one, it assumes that growth of agricultural productivity is the only factor of significance if the world is to produce enough food to provide for what is likely to be a stable but large population in this century. Numerous projections over different time horizons have been prepared to assert the necessity for urgent biotechnological intervention. This is then generalised into the belief that the only solution to the larger question of poverty is to harness 'technology to address specific problems facing poor people'. And in an environment in which biotechnology comes wrapped in ever-stronger intellectual property rights packages, the way is paved for depriving farmers of any real control over seeds and denying developing countries the op-

Hunger accompanies harvest.

portunity to undertake research based on their own specific needs. Add to these the destruction of the traditional rights of farmers and the introduction of 'genetic use restriction technologies' (GURTS), and the technological dominance of the corporate world is complete. In effect, while the local farmer continues to be under the control of the middleman in disposing of his output, he now is also brought under a regime of corporate monopolies in acquiring his input.

Even the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) once-respected annual *Human Development Report* (*HDR*), in its 2001 version, appropriately titled 'Making new technologies work for human development', has succumbed to the vogue despite taking note of a very obvious contradiction. In a rare moment of lucidity, the controversial report conceded that "technology is created in response to market pressures – not the needs of poor people, who have little purchasing power" and, yet, it went on to make a strong sales pitch for flogging a high-risk technology on the resource-poor communities of the South.

Hunger stands at the confluence of too many vested interests

The report insists that emerging centres of excellence throughout the developing world are already providing hard evidence of the potential for harnessing "cutting-edge science and technology" (the euphemism for biotechnology) to tackle poverty. To say, as the *HDR* does, that "if the developing community turns its back on the explosion of technological innovation in food, it risks marginalising itself", is in reality a desperate effort to ensure that corporate interests are not sacrificed at the altar of development. Such is the desperation at the growing opposition to the genetic engineering industry and transgenic food, that all manner of permutations and combinations, including increased food aid to Africa's school-going children and force-feeding GM food to hungry people in southern Africa (while non-GM food is available in plenty), are being attempted.

The problem arises because at almost all genetic engineering laboratories, whether in the North or in the South, the focus of research is on transgenic crops, edible vaccines and bio-fortification by incorporating genes for Vitamin A, iron, and other micronutrients to address the problems of malnutrition or 'hidden hunger'. But if hunger is not removed in the first instance, hidden hunger cannot be eradicated. Those mandated to develop the under-developed are proposing ad hoc and symptomatic solutions with the sole aim of assisting corporate giants recoup their investment. But market-friendly development cannot eradicate market-led underdevelopment, and hidden hunger is not an issue anymore once hunger is taken care of.

In India, which is technically speaking 'self-sufficient' in foodgrain production, reports of hunger and starvation pour in regularly from the infamous Kalahandi region and, more recently Kashipur, in Orissa. Kalahandi, with a population of 20 million, suffers from hunger and malnutrition despite being a very fertile and surplus-producing district. Kalahandi today is the biggest contributor of surplus rice to the central food reserves. Between 1996 and 2001, the region provided on average some 50,000 tonnes of rice annually to the Indian buffer stock. The reason why people die of starvation and hunger in Kalahandi is not the lack of food but the lack of resources to buy the food. No amount of biotechnology can put purchasing power in the hands of the rural poor. Unfortunately, UNDP apparatchiks are either oblivious of or indifferent to these obvious realities of rural South Asia, namely that the question of productivity becomes relevant only when the capacity to purchase food in the market becomes a generalised fact.

Instead of grappling with this problem, the spin doctors of development have gone so far as to stretch the truth to its limits and claim that biotechnology offers the only 'tool of choice' for marginal ecological zones – left behind by the green revolution but home to more than half of the world's poorest, dependent on

Golden rice

IN A desperate effort to repair its damaged credibility, the genetic engineering industry is all set to unleash its 'secret weapon', and that too on millions of unsuspecting, destitute smallholders in the developing world. In India, through an Indo-Swiss collaboration, 'Golden Rice' technology is to be made available to the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Indian Department of Biotechnology. The project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Swiss government and the European Union to the tune of USD 2.6 million over seven years, aims to engineer pro-Vitamin A genes into local varieties of rice. Golden Rice is being touted as the miracle which can allegedly meet the micronutrient requirements of the starving masses of the South. However, Golden Rice is not all that it is made out to be by its promoters. It can provide at best a tiny fragment of micronutrient needs. The remaining intake will have to be met from other nutritional sources. In India, for instance, rice is consumed invariably with a combination of pulses, which provide the essential proteins and vitamins that the human body requires.

Unfazed by such empirical constraints, the Swiss firm Syngenta's representative, Adrian Dubock, recently claimed that "the levels of expression of pro-Vitamin A that the inventors were aiming at, and have achieved, are sufficient to provide the minimum level of pro-Vitamin A to prevent the development of irreversible blindness affecting 500,000 children annually, and to significantly alleviate Vitamin A deficiency affecting 124,000,000 children in 26 countries". He also stated that each month that the entry of Golden Rice into the market is delayed will result in 50,000 children going blind. However, a simple calculation based on recommended daily allowance (RDA) figures shows that an adult would have to eat at least 12 times the normal intake of 300 grams of rice to get the daily recommended amount of pro-Vitamin A from Golden Rice.

Micronutrient deficiency in human food is nothing new. Societies over the centuries have evolved dietary systems that take care of the nutrient balance that the human body needs. What is perplexing in this instance is, who has decided that Vitamin A is the most essential micronutrient that should be incorporated in rice? Why not Vitamin B complex? After all, several hundred million people in India alone suffer from malnutrition (as compared to only half a million people worldwide who go blind from Vitamin A deficiency). In India, some 12 million people suffer from Vitamin A deficiency, but the number of people who are Vitamin B complex deficient is several times more.

ICAR's tryst with Golden Rice is in reality a blind experiment and a desperate attempt to regain its lost pride in agricultural research. Suffering from a credibility crisis in the absence of any significant breakthrough after the initial phase of the green revolution, ICAR's aim is to drum up some recognition. But the process only serves to distract attention from more pressing problems confronting rural society. A majority of acutely malnourished people, who the proponents of Golden Rice claim to be targeting, cannot afford to buy rice from the market. If these poor people cannot afford to buy normal rice, how are they to buy Golden Rice? If these hungry millions were able to meet their daily requirement of rice, there would be no malnutrition in the first place. The problem, therefore, cannot be addressed by providing nutritional supplements through genetically modified rice but by bringing in suitable policy changes that ensure food for all. Until now the problem for the hungry was that their needs were not being attended to. Now that such 'sympathetic' attention is being showered on their needs, their problems are set to multiply.

agriculture and livestock. The UNDP's valiant crusade is part of a two-pronged approach to selling a technology, which, if left to market forces, will not find too many takers. Consequently, extra-market forces are made to work to ensure its survival. Multilateral agencies create the necessary ideological smokescreen of expertise behind which lurking corporates and non-accountable governments plight their troth to promote the state-led development of transnational capital.

Simultaneously, corporate trouble-shooters take it upon themselves to look after the nuances of the implementation, such as the 'education' of crucial members of the domestic elite. (This is now a regular practice among those firms that have the necessary resources. When Enron set up shop in Maharashtra, it successfully educated the Indian decision-making establishments of the executive, legislature, judiciary and the 'free press' to the tune of USD 20 million. See *Himal*, March 2002.) Since many countries maintain a semblance of democratic appearances, it becomes necessary to ensure that certain key institutions such as the judiciary are not allowed to squander the national benefits of this technology simply for lack of requisite information. This is a particularly sensitive matter for the industry since biotech products have a rather persistent habit of coming up for litigation. Adverse judicial decisions can create a crisis of confidence in products that have already been subject to searching scrutiny and criticism. Fortunately for these companies, the judiciaries of many third world democracies are not too finicky about being educated in technological matters so long as appropriate financial incentives are provided.

Such is the unseemly haste to ram through the technology in India, before farmers, consumers and the odd people of credibility within the policy establishment can publicise possible negative consequences, that very

Scenes of suffering: Present-day India and 1930s America.

'transparent' efforts are underway to co-opt the judiciary. Almost a year ago, a visiting US delegation of 10 judges and scientists met the then-chief justice of India, AS Anand, to impress upon him – and the rest of the judicial fraternity – the benefits of biotechnology. Dr Franklin M Zweig, president of the Einstein Institute for Science, Health and the Courts in the United States, an advocate of genetic engineering and a prominent speaker at the 88th session of the Indian Science Congress in New Delhi in January 2001, denied that the two-hour long meeting with the chief justice was to 'influence' the judiciary, but clarified that it was to 'educate' judges about the basic principles of public information for use by courts and court systems. The delegation invited the chief justice to the US and offered to hold 'workshops' in America for the judges of the supreme court and the high courts to enlighten them about transgenics, and safety protocols in biotechnology research.

When judges and journalists are given the hard sell, what is omitted from the heroic saga of the technology's many triumphs is the progressive elimination of biodiversity as farming practices come increasingly under the more or less total control of corporate decision-making. The irony is that genetic diversity in particular species, which is the fundamental prerequisite for ensuring stable levels of food productivity in much of the world, is being severely compromised. Genetic contamination has already severely affected regions of Spain and Mexico, and while the scientific community had previously been at the forefront of protecting genetic diversity, it has since taken up the biotech industry's cause. For instance, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT), which houses the world's largest collection of wheat and maize germplasm, rationalised the genetic pollution of maize in Mexico's Oaxaca province by arguing that the contamination would actually increase genetic diversity by offering plant scientists more traits to choose from. Such an assertion is completely at variance with the principles of conservation and utilisation that are supposed to guide CIMMYT's policies, and indicates the alarming direction in which sponsored scientific research is heading (See *Himal*, September 2002).

This abdication of responsibility by the non-corporate scientific establishment is appalling. Agricultural scientists once collected plant varieties for preservation after the FAO recognised the threat posed by genetic erosion in 1963. It is a measure of modern folly that plant varieties have been evacuated from the fields and pushed into conservatories controlled by technocrats to whom biotech corporates have more access than the real cultivators of food do. It is bad enough that hundreds of millions of dollars have to be spent to artificially keep alive plant varieties that are being systematically destroyed through modern agricultural practices. It is worse when agricultural technocrats wilfully endorse the continued corporate contamination of the remaining varieties that grow or are grown freely.

> Third world hunger is the creation of the same developed world that is allegedly going to eradicate it

It should have been clear enough to the professionals entrusted with the preservation of biodiversity that the industry's aim is to undermine that objective by ensuring the contamination of existing natural reserves. Once genetic contamination reaches a critical level, the world will be left with no other choice but to rely on genetically engineered crops. And this is the final defeat of the campaign to eradicate hunger. No matter what the UNDP says, the generalised use of modified seed will only replicate the current situation, where food is being produced in excess but the number of hungry people is increasing. To compound matters, the entire agrarian sector across the world will have been reduced to a corporate pawn.

Blocking research

The US Supreme Court's crucial ruling of December 2001 upholding 'utility patents' over plant varieties is only a *de jure* confirmation of a reality that has already arrived to haunt the world. The US ruling effectively forbids farmers from saving seeds, and comes at a time when, at the other end of the spectrum, India recognises the right of the farmer to save seeds under the newly introduced Plant Variety Protection and Farmers' Rights Act, 2001. In India, there is no other option but to permit not only the saving of seed but also its sharing and free sale,

since a majority of the country's estimated 110 million farming families are small and marginal landholders.

It is only a matter of time before these two opposing perspectives on farming rights, particularly on so basic a matter as seed rights, clash. The conflict is bound to have a profound impact on farming communities in the entire third world, where seed saving has been a practice ever since the beginnings of agriculture. With the biotechnology industry throwing its weight behind any and every move that strengthens monopoly through patented control over plant varieties and their genes and cell lines, it may not be long before the trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) under the World Trade Organisation are re-interpreted.

'Utility patents' have been in vogue for a while but what is alarming is the rate at which nature is being depleted and then privatised through administrative measures. Hundreds of utility patents have already been granted to seed multinationals like Monsanto and Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc. Such patents have been the greatest hurdle to crop improvement. There is the classic example of a utility patent awarded for a hybrid maize variety. At a time when the CIMMYT was making available semi-dwarf improved varieties of wheat to developing countries to launch the green revolution, a single-cross hybrid variety of corn was denied to India, since this variety, which was responsible for the growth of the corn sector in America, was covered by the utility patent. As a result, though India was the seat of the green revolution, maize production in the country never really picked up.

The number of utility patents issued has increased rapidly in the US in recent years. By December 1994, 324 utility patents had been issued for new plants or plant parts and 38 for animals. Most of these were awarded to the private sector. Thus, the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) regime has encouraged private control of farm techniques. But what is even more worrying is the speed at which life sciences firms are drawing patents on genes, gene sequences and cell lines. For instance, Monsanto owns US patent No 5,159,135 covering all GM cotton. In addition, there are another 228 cotton gene sequences that are also patented. In 2000, *The Guardian* reported that there are 25 patents on pineapple, 25 on raspberries, 21 on grapes, 11 on oranges, nine on apples, eight on pawpaw, six on kiwi, four on strawberries and cherries, two on grapefruit, and one each on tamarind and peach. There are 43 patents on silk genes, including on the golden orb-weaving spider, which makes the strongest and finest thread.

In the case of wheat, which is regarded by many as the greatest nutritional hope for mankind, gene companies have already acquired patents on 228 gene sequences. Meanwhile, 152 patent applications are pending for rice. These patent applications cover 584 genes or partial gene sequences. The US giant Dow has applied for patents on 655 maize gene sequences, which adds up to a stupendous 30 percent of the total number of applications. DuPont has applied for another 587, Affymetrix (US) for 418, Monsanto for 102, AstraZeneca for 83. The top five maize companies have nearly 85 percent of the total 2181 applications between them. The monopoly implications of genetic control on this scale are obvious.

Grapes of Wrath: Reliving the 'dust bowl' in the global South?

> UNDP apparatchiks are oblivious of, or indifferent to, the obvious realities of rural South Asia

Much of the focus of corporate interest is on cereal crops with huge global commercial value like rice, maize, wheat, millet, sorghum, soya and cassava, and patent protection covers not just genes and gene sequences, but also their compounds and properties. This will have a profound effect on the future of agricultural research in the developing countries. Take the case of rice, which is broadly classified into two categories – *indica* and *japonica*. The names themselves are indicative of the regions from which these particular kinds of rice originate. The Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR), the world's second biggest farm research infrastructure in the public sector, recently bought a cloned rice gene from Japan at a cost of INR 3,000,000. The gene was inserted in Indian rice varieties but failed to show positive results.

The compulsion to purchase genes for rice from foreign agri-business companies and institutes compromises the possibilities of research in developing countries. Buying genes at prohibitive cost just for biotechnology research without even the assurance of any success is not a feasible option for poor countries. With product and process patents in agriculture already coming into vogue, the third world is fast heading towards scientific isolation.

Produce and perish

Meanwhile, as the developed world and its firms strain

themselves tirelessly to sell techniques to increase productivity in the third world, developing countries such as India are finding it difficult to deal with the 'surplus' that they already produce. After the paddy harvest in September 2000, hundreds of thousands of farmers in the frontline agricultural states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh waited in vain for over three weeks to sell their output before government agencies stepped in to purchase 'excess' stocks. Three weeks is a long time of post-harvest uncertainty for most Indian farmers. At least a hundred farmers, unable to bear the mounting losses, committed suicide by drinking pesticide. In Andhra Pradesh, in south India, there were no buyers for over five million tonnes of paddy. In the poverty-stricken belt of Bihar and Orissa, the story if anything is worse.

Farmer suicides are a reflection of the breakdown of institutional safety nets, which in the past have cushioned the impact of agrarian crisis. This crisis is not a supply side problem but a demand side problem. In 2000, India had a record food surplus of 20 million tonnes over and above the 24 million tonnes required for the buffer. In 2002, the total surplus had grown to 65 million tonnes. It was not a problem of real excess production, but because more and more people were unable to buy the food. The problem is so serious that the government of Andhra Pradesh has publicly requested farmers not to produce more paddy. In Punjab, the citadel of the green revolution, farmers are being asked to shift from staples like wheat and paddy to cash crops.

The paradox of plenty is not confined to India. Till recently, Pakistan, Bangladesh and even Indonesia were overflowing with food grains. In Pakistan, farmers had to burn the harvested grain lying in markets because the prices were too low. In Indonesia, farmers waited endlessly to sell their rice while the government proceeded to import it from Vietnam. And in this dismal scenario of unsold food, the food professionals of the world want farmers to go on producing more foodgrain.

Clearly there is no one to seriously take on the challenge of eliminating hunger, the root cause of which is poverty and lopsided economic development. Instead the task has been left to the market. There is obviously something terribly wrong with the reality on the ground and the agrarian strategies that are being thrust on farmers. On the one hand, planners and policymakers want to increase productivity through technology. On the other hand, policy implementers want farmers to produce less food. Either way, those who live in hunger are doomed to die of hunger. If there is no one to look after their needs, then for the sake of decency, they should at least be left alone to die in peace.

Ved Mehta's tempest of self-revelation

The Subcontinent is woefully short on good biographers. But one author from the region sets the standards for telling the story like it is, with élan.

by ***Hemant Sareen***

Hunting for a good read in the college library, I studiously avoided the row of volumes written by a Mehta, a fellow Punjabi, which invariably had Indian familial sobriquets for titles. There was no chance a person from my own community could a) conjure the steaming sex we all looked for in weekend reading to ward off the ennui inflicted by prescribed classics, or b) open doors to a new world, or even to one beyond Punjabi sub-cultural confines. Further, learning that the writer was blind only strengthened my resolve. My cultivated distaste for such crude corruptions of language (both Punjabi and English) as 'daddyji' meant the books of Ved Mehta were not half about to find their way to my bedside table.

Having since read a handful of Mehta's books I found how wrong I was on the second count and how spot-on on the first. Now, after reading his recently published autobiography, *All for Love: A Personal History of Desire and Disappointment* (Granta, 2001), I have been proven somewhat wrong even on the first: still no steaming sex but sexual relationships do make a belated appearance, their delay in coming speaking simultaneously of authorial discretion and social conservatism.

All for Love is that rare account of the love life of a Punjabi male. In India, where the phenomenon of a 40-year-old virgin is not the stuff of bawdy humour but a lesson in a morality lecture that common Western view would find moribund, this would be taken as an ironic comment. Sex before marriage, *especially* between consenting adults is considered egregious and dirty. Virginity is a prize, a virtue; its loss, ignominy. 'Relationships' for the most part still require the social sanction of marriage in a society where matrimony is less a union of two individuals, more a 'memorandum of understanding' between two families, with the boy and girl being only part of the traded consignment.

Ved Mehta, a peerless chronicler of the life and times of middle class Punjabis who migrated to India around partition, is particularly adept with records of the Mehta community. This society that cannot convey its sorrows and joys without saccharine sentimentalism has found in the New York-based Ved an objective and eloquent historian. Far from highlighting its parochial tendencies, his narratives are infused with such universality and humanity that the Mehtas in fact assume a new dignity. Long after my college days were over, I realised after reading *Daddyji* (1972) and *Mamaji* (1979) – stylish, unsentimental diptych-accounts of the life of Mehta's parents in a turn of the century death- and disease-ridden Punjab – how far I had underrated my own world and how pathetic my disavowal of my Punjabi roots had been. In Delhi, where I grew up, we children were taught Hindi and English to protect us from the cruder inflections of Punjabi culture. By not masking it in the rarefied circles of New York's literati, Mehta made being rooted a desirable, even essential, thing for Indians writing in a second language, and Punjabi*yat* (-ness) and regional identities respectable, even hip.

Insights

In what was perhaps the most defining event of his life, Mehta lost his sight in early childhood to a brain fever. His mother, never able to reconcile herself to his blindness, commonly considered self-inflicted retribution, sought the help of healers and black magic practitioners to rid the child of his karmic burden and restore his vision. Not yet five, he was virtually snatched from her embrace at the Lahore railway station and sent screaming and kicking, escorted by only a teenaged cousin, to a school for the blind in distant Bombay. The incident remained so deeply imprinted in his mind that it is part of most of his narratives, repeated and relived sometimes through his father's eyes and sometimes his mother's. Mehta has not used his blindness to garner pity but as a tool to explore and understand his world, both outer and inner. He bears his handicap lightly in his literature, making it appear as simply an incidental part of his being.

Ramachandra Guha writes about the inability of South Asian biographers to write anything but unreadable hagiographies (*Himal* October 2002). Mehta, however, seems to be an exception. There is a caveat though; he restricts himself to his family's histories. (One must acknowledge that the immediacy and intimacy of such a subject has its own challenges.) Ved Mehta's reputation of being a fine stylist is built on his ability to juggle 'voices' and perspectives. In *Daddyji* and *Mamaji* (and in an earlier autobiography, *Face to Face*, 1957), he convincingly uses the voices of both parents. This polyphony and mimicry is best captured at the end of *Daddyji*, where he switches from his father's limpid voice, the self-congratulatory tone of an overbearing Punjabi, to his own trademark one. Mehta's style, which can be identified from *The Photographs of Chachaji: The Making of a Documentary Film* (1980), is distinctly urban American, and his usage is modern and Hemingway-esque.

In the 1960s, when exotic India was all the rage, Ved Mehta was offering a homely everyday India – and to eager takers too – balancing the more far-out images of India wildly popular then. It is just that homely everyday India is the site of fairly wild occurrences, complicated intrigues of sex and sensuality that labour under countless social taboos.

South Asians have in common the experience of difficulties in recounting national and personal histories. Partly to blame is their wanting sense of the past, and the desire, after their respective freedom struggles, to carve out a unique identity that downplays a shared past with the neighbouring nations. Inhibitions that come from and perpetuate social repression also play a role in thwarting candid portrayals in personal histories. Mehta's searing honesty means that his biographical and autobiographical works suffer from none of these shortcomings.

One wonders what Ved Mehta's family makes of his disclosures. Considering some of these would be the ruin of a family's reputation, does he take their permission before, as per the Subcontinental expression, 'cutting their noses off'? Is the extended Mehta clan in uproar every time someone announces: "*Ved di navi kitab chhappi hai*" ("Ved's new book is out!")? He is the nemesis of the narrow-eyed secretiveness and hush-hush repression of the Indian family, writing with a disarming candour that recalls Gandhi in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927). Sample this: "When I was a child that had never stopped me from wishing that a *mem-sahib* would take me in her arms and whisper sweet English endearments to me". I can feel the heat from the blush coming on in the faces of many a male Indian reader.

The master of introspection.

Unlike Gandhi in *Experiments* however, which is dismally thin on descriptions (a point picked up by VS Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, 1979), Mehta belies his lack of sight through rich tactile, olfactory and visual details of even facial expressions and colours. Also, the difference in the two worldviews is quite evident: Gandhi's blinkers of food and bowel movement (what Mehta's shrink would call oral and anal fixations) make his autobiography torturous reading in stark contrast to Mehta's, whose worldview respects variety and pleasures in the senses.

Ved *di navi kitaab*

Mehta has now for the first time written about his adult life, adding a crucial link in his multi-volume autobiographical 'Continents of Exile' series exploring a personal history spanning "many continents, real and imagined, that [he has] inhabited and from which [he has been] exiled". *All for Love* is the account of a blind Mehta's passionate love for four women, the loss of each that left him anxious about his ability to hold a woman, and his attempts to come to terms with those losses. He insists he loved them because they colluded with him in maintaining the delusion that he could see. Mehta takes pride in his "facial vision", and uses neither the white stick nor a guide dog. He alludes to his blindness once at the beginning and then towards the end of the book, letting us forget the extent of his disability as we read about the young lad who cycles around the courtyard of their Lahore house with his younger brother and sister in pillion, or vaults over roofs to chase falling kites.

There is something biblical about the book and the suffering of the Job-like Mehta. Its structure may be seen as a perversion of the accounts of the four apostles, who each tell a tale about the same character; Mehta narrates the story of his love for the four women who relate to him in similar ways. The interactions are marked by recognisable patterns and coincidences. Three are white; the exception, Lola, is half Punjabi and half German. All, except the Jewish ballerina, Gigi, are from dysfunctional families. All four are in awe of his status as a writer for *The New Yorker* and an established author. They are all floored by his good taste, especially by the English furnishing in his apartment. Two of them, Lola and Kilty, had baby sisters who died in freak accidents. Upon this trauma, that never really leaves them, Mehta believes is predicated their self-destructive behaviour. The narrative of his tempestuous relationships is followed by a final chapter on his psychoanalyst whose diagnosis of the doomed relationships also acts as an analysis of Mehta's writing and its driving forces: "...deprivation and discontent had made me a writer and I was fearful of tampering with the sources of my craft". The Book of Revelations after the four Gospels in a way.

Mehta's relationship with Lola is typical of the other three affairs. Mutual attraction, lunches, sex, the other man and, finally, the break up. However, she takes up more space in his life and consequently in the book than his other loves, perhaps because like him she is such a schizoid mix of the West and the East. Her material circumstances are appalling: Mehta observes "the municipal refuse heap and the *nullah* with raw sewage" that fronts her mother's flat and the dissipated atmosphere of the flat in which Lola lives in Delhi without letting it affect his opinion of her. Unlike his Westernised father who had reconciled himself to the fate of an almost uneducated wife, Lola's lack of college education puts him off. She tells him that she did not go to college because she "had no good clothes", and "didn't want to look like a poor cousin... [of] Indian girls from good families". But she has the verve and intelligence to move in sophisticated circles, so much so that she

eventually finds work with the United Nations in New York and charms his recherché circle.

Nevertheless, an Indian reader, imbued with middle class mores, would be scandalised by Lola who lies naked in the sun in Spain to avoid tan lines, a half breed living on the fringes of a conservative society, an easy pick up. Hours after kissing her other boyfriend (what a shock for Delhiites), she is blasé about sharing a room with Ved. At one point Mehta writes, as if competing for the 'worst sex scene' category of some anti-literary award:

> We changed mechanically and hurriedly. Lola let down her hair... We got into our charpoys. I haven't said goodnight to her properly, I thought, and reached for her cautiously, stroking her hair. She responded warmly. I felt charged with animal energy, and I moved on to her charpoy.

If you take a cosmopolitan view, perhaps Lola is okay. But the whole experience is so trashy (like a scene from a B-grade Bollywood film), one suspects Mehta might have given in to the temptation of easy sex with all the vigour of a pushy Punjabi yuppie.

Later Lola falls for a Caliban-like uneducated no-good Punjabi called Gus, and becomes pregnant, with whose baby, the author is not certain. Mehta captures the agony remarkably well, recalling his febrile thoughts with an astonishing immediacy:

> She says she was desperate to have that baby, yet she got rid of it behind my back, as if I'd had no part in it. Of course, she was perfectly right in thinking that if I had known at the outset that she was pregnant with my child I would have done virtually anything to make her have it. But I couldn't have forced her – I couldn't have. Didn't she know that! Then why not let me be part of it! Gus must have been at the hospital monitoring her condition and stroking her hand. I wish I could at least have been at her bedside in order to say goodbye to my child – to give a benediction.

The bad child?

Considering that he has one foot in Delhi (his family's adopted city), unusually missing from Mehta's reasoning are questions of morality. Giving benediction is not exclusively a cultural prerogative of India; that is a universal gesture, but the stigma attached to a child born outside wedlock is not. In middle class India, an illegitimate child is enough to warrant social boycott.

The deeper he digs into his memory the more schizophrenic Mehta becomes, as his ingrained Indian-ness collides with his Western values and attitude. Lola has been sleeping with others, he knows, but he still wants to possess her. But when she becomes pregnant with what could be Gus' child, he is confused. He finds alibis in his Indian identity to escape his predicament, invoking the "perfidy of stepchildren" from Hindu mythology to anchor him in his moment of ambivalent anguish.

His plight draws the reader out in gushing sympathy, not just for the painful personal revelations he must make, including his insecurities about his manhood, but also for the blindness he feels compelled to ignore, and his yearning for progeny. He writes, "Rats would have baby rats, dogs would have puppies, the whole world would be giving birth, and I alone would grow childless". The irony that the wedding *vedi* (canopy) seems not in dear Ved's karma touches the reader. But his wish for his marriage to have "all those Hindu traditions, or, at the very least, a religious ceremony to sanctify my karma" sounds stuffy and inappropriate, for none of his relationships could possibly have been approved by the still conservative Indian society.

The accounts in *All for Love* prompt the question of how Indian Ved Mehta is. His experiences, a blind man living it up (holidays in Spain and three-piece suits bespoke in London), someone who has had not one but four women (something few able-bodied people in India could boast of), his morality undecided, would be alien to many Indian readers. A medieval attitude towards physical disability pervades even the most enlightened circles that subscribe to token political correctness. No wonder Mehta's father was driven by the nightmares of his blind son becoming a beggar or a helpless cripple at the mercy of an unforgiving society.

All said, Mehta has a breathtaking ability to contain within himself numerous contradictions. Just as he handles deftly various viewpoints in his biographical writings, he effortlessly juggles his own various personae in his mind. "[My] persona as a writer was as different from me as Prospero from Caliban", he writes. Different to the extent that in the last chapter, lying on the analyst's couch, he is in fear of resolving these conflicts and his controlled schizophrenia, which he regards as the source of his creativity. The last chapter is the key to understanding Mehta's art and life, both of which are laid bare with ferocious honesty. The relationship between his Caliban and Prospero (it would be interesting to see someone delve into his proclivity for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with whose characters he is endlessly identifying himself) or his life and art are for universal appreciation. Seldom does one find a writer as comfortable and confident in making himself as vulnerable to the world as Mehta.

In India, no adjectives equivalent to 'Rushdie-esque' have ever been coined for Ved Mehta nor do discussions on Indian writing in English make any significant allusions to him. Perhaps envy forecloses any meaningful discussion of his works; perhaps it even engenders a studied indifference. One day though, when attitudes have changed and honesty is appreciated, he will be accepted in the club. And be hard to ignore.

THERE IS never a dull moment in the northern half of South Asia. This time it is Bangladesh that has landed itself in a mess over the arrest of some members of a Channel 4 crew who were doing some clandestine filming on Bengali 'identity' against the backdrop of rising Muslim fundamentalism. The film crew had entered the country as 'tourists' in order to get their journalistic footage. And while the government and the filmmakers have got into a legal and diplomatic tangle they cannot easily extricate themselves from, a debate has been picked up by the media on the question of professional ethics. A leading light of the Channel 4 expedition has been circulating appeals and explanations, while veteran Bangla journalists have in turn questioned the claims made by her and berated her for arrogance that stems from being a mover and shaker in the West.

The questions asked of her are not without substance. It is a known fact that the Bangladeshi media is constantly harassed by the government. In the circumstances, for a media team to enter the country under false pretence, on the assumption that they would be refused a visa if they declared their identity, had the effect of dragging the local media into long-term difficulties. Besides, what the film crew came to report was not something so uniquely new as to warrant illegal entry into the country. Many others in Bangladesh have written and spoken about these matters. But such issues become important only when the Western media picks it up and gives it play. As a senior journalist put it, "All that the Channel 4 crew wanted was a sensational story from this unreported part of the world, full of potential terrorists. The issue is not that of a false visa, but being smart enough to get away with it or having the integrity not to use your passport to get away".

So, is it only the Bangladesh government that harasses the local media? Is not the international media doubly culpable for the plight of journalists in the country? The lady at the centre of the controversy is not convinced by these questions. According to her, this is not the time to make an East vs West issue, since the arrest of even one journalist is a dilution of the freedom of the press. Of course, she is singularly silent on the question of acts that dilute the responsibilities of the press. Observing all this, a sage from Bangladesh has this laconic comment to make: "The Western mind is the deepest insurgent". Come to think of it, that may actually be what it is all about.

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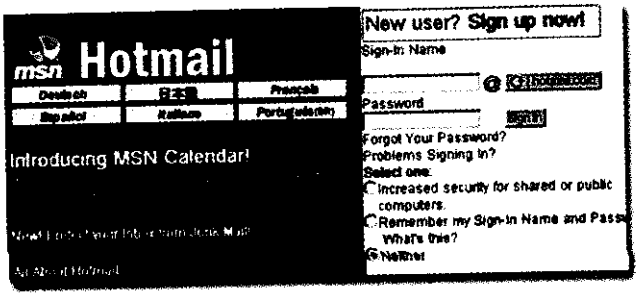
GREAT CARTOON from *The Economic Times* of New Delhi, by Salaam. HINDUstan. Well put.

■

WHEN YOU have South Asian names in the erotic spam that lands up in the computer, you know that we Subcontinentals are getting somewhere. I cite here the email from someone named M Chowdhury, a Hotmail



net passport holder, titled, "One of these girls sucking you off!" Unfortunately, our ability to distribute pornography on the Net does not match our enthusiasm for sending such stuff. Thus, Mr Chowdhury's email contained a blank when it came to the image. We will learn, we will learn, and perhaps in time we will be distributing more South Asian-ish pornography than merely copying from the 'occident'.

■

REPORTS THE organisation Reporters sans Frontiers: "One year after the flight of the Taliban from Kabul, 150 publications are being sold on the streets of the city. Electronic media projects are springing up and dozens of journalists are taking advantage of the various forms of training established by international organisations. The change is radical. After five years of Taliban domination, which had turned Afghanistan into 'a country without news or pictures', the Afghan press today enjoys 'unprecedented freedom', says editor Fahim Dashty of *Kabul Weekly*, the first privately owned newspaper to reappear after the Taliban departure. But this freedom has been achieved in the face of attempts to impose control on the part of the new government, which for the most part has its origins in the Northern Alliance. Furthermore, the situation of press freedom is still fraught in certain provinces such as Herat, where governors and warlords control almost all the news media and sometimes use force to muzzle journalists who criticise their power. The central government seems for the most part unable to stop these abuses, which have rarely been denounced by the United Nations".

REPORTERS SANS FRONTIERES

■

IF SOUTH Asia houses a sixth of the world's population, how

is it that South Asians are so far behind everyone else in making an international name? Something is obviously wrong when in spite of being, as a breed, in desperate need of Western acclamation, so few of us actually get it. Take the case of this year's Prince Claus Awards, which recognise "exceptional achievements in the fields of culture and development worldwide". The laureates this year are Youssou N'Dour (Senegalese musician), Marcelo Arauz (Bolivian cultural promoter), Ali Ferzat (Syrian cartoonist), Ferreira Gullar (Brazilian writer and poet), Amira Hass (Jerusalem journalist), Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial (Indonesian scholar of Islam), Virginia Perez-Rattaon, (Costa Rican art historian), Walter Tournier (Uruguayan animation filmmaker) and Wu Liangyong (Chinese architect). Do we detect a South Asian name in there? No siree! So, shall we also do a typical Subcontinental thing and accuse the Prince Claus Fund selectors of bias? Nope, that would not be right. Better that we accept this thing, and address the stark reality that in fact South Asia, for various reasons of past legacy and present structuring, just has not been producing cultural animators that can get movements going.

■

CONSIDER THIS: "There is freedom of speech mentioned in the constitution [of Malaysia] which is practiced by a lot of people. What the constitution does not guarantee is freedom AFTER the speech"... This, from the *Assessment of Human Rights in Malaysia* by Harun Hashim of the organisation SUHAKAM, which is the national human rights council of the country.

■

THE PAKISTANI government under Prez Musharraf, for a long time, had gone easy on press censorship and that was indeed one of the general's plus points. But, as happens with authoritarian regimes everywhere, however well intentioned, time catches up. Therefore, it was only a matter of time before someone got definitively censored, and this has fallen to the lot of the controversial editor-in-exile Shaheen Sehbai who now brings out the online *South Asia Tribune* from Washington DC. The Islamabad government has banned Pakistani news media from using or quoting reports published by the *South Asia Tribune*. A special announcement placed by the information ministry in the main Pakistani newspapers warned editors that in defying the ban they would leave themselves open to prosecution under an anti-defamation law that took effect on 1 October. What can Chhetria Patrakar say, but, *Et tu, Pervez*? We had hoped for so much better.

■

BANGLADESHI ACADEMIC Gowher Rizvi has just vacated his Delhi-based position with The Ford Foundation as representative for India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, and the foundation is said to be embarking on a "vigorous and extensive search" for a successor. The required qualification for this ultra-important grant-making position is "demonstrated leadership, planning, management and analytical skills, knowledge of the region's history and culture, in-depth understanding of development and social change processes". Not hard to find such a person, really, and one hopes that the FF understands the extreme importance of this position and goes only for the best. There is, after all, so much mediocrity around that will present itself for the picking.


Gowher

■

YA*TV IS a Colombo-based television service that is trying to draw the youth of Asia (more specifically, South Asia) into the cultural, environmental and social arenas with attractive short programmes and *avant garde* camerawork. But this is not working out. The domination of entertainment on satellite and terrestrial television is such that even savvy programmers are at a loss as to how to use the idiot box for socially responsible programming. What is stupefying is why NO ONE IS BOTHERED. The Interpress News Service (IPS) reports that YA*TV is facing financial difficulties, and is now planning to take developmental aid to try and tide things over. Now, that will surely do the channel in, though one does hope otherwise. With Ekushay TV in Bangladesh gone, and YA*TV weakening, what remains of television in South Asia? Is any one bothered?

■

THERE WAS a 'do' in New Delhi, if you recall, on climate change. A 10-day United Nations conference in which the activists were all riled about the United States' refusal to ratify the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Here is a press photo from outside the meet, comparing South Asian emissions to Uncle Sam's.

—Chhetria Patrakar

The oligarchs of Islamabad and Kathmandu

Nepal has been following the authoritarian lead of Pakistan since the 1960s. It is time to stop doing so.

Animals are shell-shocked
The bush is on fire
Vegetables can't even run away
Where is the switch for this inferno?
—From the Hindi poem, 'Switch',
by Ashtabhuja Shukla

THE PUPPETEERS of 'president' Hamid Karzai in Kabul must have heaved a huge sigh of relief. The resurgence of the Islamic right has somehow been checked for the moment in Islamabad. General Musharraf, the self-appointed president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, too has finally managed to find a puppet to play his executive role.

Not that General Musharraf needs to fear premiers anymore, at least not until Washington DC decides that he has outlived his utility. By decreeing some extremely controversial amendments – almost all mainstream political parties opposed these moves – he has concentrated wide-ranging powers in himself. He can sack the prime minister, dissolve parliament, and stack the all-powerful National Security Council. All in all, this gives the military a permanent role in the governance of the country.

At an operational level, the general-in-*sherwani* has the authority to appoint the chief of the armed forces as well as the provincial governors. The powers of provincial governors are no less sweeping – they too can send provincial cabinets packing, and dissolve provincial assemblies, but presumably only at the direct instruction of their boss. Indeed, Musharraf is increasingly looking like a latter-day Lord Protector, in the mould of Oliver Cromwell.

The general claims that he has transferred all executive power to Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, the new premier of Pakistan. Jamali, in turn, has vowed to give continuity to all the policies decided by the chief of the armed forces. This means, most importantly, that Islamabad shall continue to discharge its duties as a front-line state in the 'war on terror'. Apparently, Hamid Karzai can sleep in peace at his American-guarded presidential palace in Kabul for now; friends of the Taliban have been kept at bay by the general in Islamabad.

But he need not be sanguine about the future. In his attempt to cut the mainstream political parties of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto down to size, Musharraf has let the likes of Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the right wing coalition Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) gain political relevance. After the *sehari* and *iftar* of Ramadan is over, will the new *mullahs* of Pakistani politics go back to simply offering *namaz* five times a day, leaving Mir Jamali to shoulder the burden of Musharraf's blunders on the western and eastern frontiers?

"New *Musalmans* are more fervent *namazis*" goes an Urdu proverb, and if the MMA takes its opposition to the controversial constitutional amendments decreed by Musharraf to the parliament as well as to the streets, Mir Jamali's meagre mandate will not last long. Predicting the course of Pakistani politics is hazardous business, but let me venture that it is unlikely that the civilian government in Islamabad can last long by being true to the mandate of the people. It will have to be true to the general and armed forces instead.

> The newly-empowered *mullahs* of Pakistan will not now simply offer *namaz*

In this, the premier of Pakistan can learn a lot from his counterpart in Nepal. There are unique parallels between the situations of Mr Jamali, who takes his cue from the general, and the minister-in-chief in Kathmandu, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, who is beholden to King Gyanendra for his elevation. The questions over the 'mandate' of the Pakistani premier are reflected in the question of whether the Chand council of ministers has 'executive authority'. The general agreement is that it does not, particularly in the face of an amendment in the working rules of the cabinet, just approved, under which the Narayanhiti royal palace has arrogated to itself the power to hire and fire senior secretaries of the government.

Regarded as clean and competent by those who matter, Lokendra Bahadur Chand was picked up as prime minister once earlier when the palace needed a helping hand, in the penultimate days of the Panchayat system, in the middle of the people's movement of 1990. Going by his appearances on the television news, Mr Chand spends more time offering prayers than in Singha Darbar, his secretariat. With executive authority not really within his grasp, and having to shepherd a cohort of technocrats and discredited politicians in the council of ministers, the devout prime minister seems to have decided to spend his time more productively: attending the anniversary ceremonies of a Hanuman temple, participating in the birthday celebrations of the Sai Baba, or releasing the music cassette of an upwardly mobile Kathmandu socialite.

Columnist Ayaz Amir bluntly dismisses Jamali in

his *Dawn* column, "He is a nice soul – the last description of the spineless". If the SAARC summit were to be held on schedule (an unlikely prospect, given the attitude of the Bharat and Bhutan governments so far), Chand would get an opportunity to hand over the chair (which Nepal holds) to one of his own kind. If however, the summit is postponed, who knows by that time who will be playing the role of the executive authority in either or both countries?

And, it is not just the premiers; the ruling elites of Nepal and Pakistan too are alike. According to historian Ayesha Jalal, the Pakistani "state of martial rule" originates in its "political economy of defence". Something akin to this can be seen in Nepal where a 'king of martial traditions' has given birth to the 'political sociology of control'. Both tendencies thrive on the politics of keeping powerful institutions – armed forces in Pakistan and the palace in Nepal – away from the control of people-led politics. The elite of the Kathmandu valley is just as remote from the dirt of the village and marketplace as the Anglicised elite of Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

Power behind the premiers: Nepal King and Pakistan General.

Pakistani mob

Created a secessionist state (India inherited the unitary apparatus as the successor state of the British *Raj*), Pakistan has been a challenged state right from the beginning. Mohammed Ali Jinnah harboured visions of a secular and modern nation-state where Muslims would dominate, but other communities would not be discriminated against. However, ethnic cleansing during the process of partition ended any chance of translating those plans into reality.

Post-Jinnah, Pakistan came to be dominated by an ambitious Mohajir civil bureaucracy, a confident Punjabi military elite, and the feudal lords of Sindh and Balochistan. Together, they weighed heavier in the balance of institutional power than political parties. In the absence of visionary politicians, competent professionals, a questioning press, a vibrant civil society and an entrenched capitalist class, the military-bureaucratic elite of this new nation-state went about building a political economy of defence by hawking the eminent threat from Pakistan's 'enemy' in the east. To this day, Pakistan devotes a disproportionate share of its national income to defence-related expenses – 29 percent of the annual budget according to the World Bank.

In the geopolitics of the Cold War era, bright generals had pride of place in the American scheme of things designed to check the spread of communism to newly independent African and Asian countries. After the first military coup in 1958, the support of the Central Intelligence Agency has been crucial for almost all generalissimos in Islamabad. Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul Haq, and now Pervez Musharraf have all looked towards Washington for support in times of crisis. However, no democratic regime in Islamabad has ever been bailed out by the United States. Patronised by the first 'hyperpower' of the world, the MOB (military officers and bureaucracy) has almost edged democratic politics out of the mainstream of Pakistani society. The control of the MOB on the political economy of Pakistan has become self-perpetuating.

Keeping politics out of society has its price. Ready to meet the terms of Ronald Reagan's *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, Zia-ul Haq let loose the mullahs in the name of Islamisation. The Talibanisation of the baser elements and the criminalisation of the bourgeoisie in the wake of the easy money and free weapons that flowed into Pakistan through the better part of 1980s and 1990s made it impossible for any politician in Islamabad to remain untainted. Begum Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif were corrupted by the times, and rather provided the MOB elite ample ammunition to keep blasting at the entire political class.

Nepal's political sociology of control is rooted in its elite's fear of the masses. Formed by the military conquest of the Shah rulers in the later part of the 18th century, Nepal's expansion was halted by the British in India. With no enemy to fight on the frontiers, the formidable Gorkha fighting machine soon turned on itself, and transformed the palaces of Kathmandu into courts of intrigue.

The Nepali military became a ready tool for whoever happened to win the all-too-frequent internecine battles between the competing nobilities of the Kathmandu court. The Pandeys, Thapas, Ranas and Shahs – all these exalted Chhetri families severed each other's heads by turn, while the masses lit earthen lamps in the street for the winner. Another set of players in the power game were the Brahmin (*Bahun*) officials of the court, traditionally barred from the higher echelons of the military but not any less influential in deciding the outcomes of the family feuds of the Chhetri nobles for that.

These civil and military officers owned almost all the fertile farming land of the country through a system of *jagir* under which the court-faithful were granted large parcels of land in the tarai in exchange for services rendered to the rulers. With their monopoly of knowl-

edge and powers sanctioned by religion, Brahmin priests were quite often a deciding factor.

Nepali depoliticisation

Inspired by the independence struggle of India, Nepal did have a brief honeymoon with party politics in the 1950s, but the military-bureaucratic elite soon reasserted itself. In the winter of 1960, King Mahendra dismissed the prime minister, dissolved the parliament and put almost all the important politicians of the day in jail under the specious pretext of a 'threat to nationalism' being posed by the 18-month-old elected government of BP Koirala.

Nepal then implemented the Panchayat system, modelled on Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy, and it remained in place for three decades. During this period, Yahya Khan's ruthless suppression of all opposition inspired the rulers of Nepal to further tighten the noose on political activity in the 1970s. General Zia-ul Haq's Islamisation gave rise to a concurrent wave of so-called 'Nepalisation' in the 1980s. And it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's summary execution that prompted the fear for BP Koirala's fate in Nepal. Students in Kathmandu then went on a rampage, forcing King Birendra to call a national referendum on a multi-party system versus the Panchayat. The eventual outcome favoured the Panchayat, midst charges of rigging by opposition forces, but this *was* a major hiccup.

The Panchayat system in Nepal was modelled on Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy

Meanwhile, after the advent of what Bangladeshi scholar Rehman Sobhan calls an "aid-driven market economy" in the 1960s, under the aegis of the American Cold War, a business class was born in Kathmandu. This class made its money by manipulating decision-making processes rather than the creation of wealth through investment in productive businesses. What have since come to be known as 'commission businesses' (a euphemism for fixing deals) and 'export-import' (smuggling, in common parlance), gave birth to a class of businessmen that had a vested interest in the perpetuation of autocratic rule in the country. The military, officialdom and the business elite form the 'MOB' oligarchy in Nepal, and this is the principal tool in the hands of the palace to keep the emergence of a democratic society at bay.

Like its peers in Pakistan, the MOB in Nepal has been actively engaged in de-politicising society through the politics of keeping the real rulers above politics. A remittance-consuming leisure class has emerged in both these countries, which tries to suck up to the MOB elite in order to show that it does not belong to the unwashed masses anymore. The MOB elite exploits the inherent insecurity of the petit bourgeoisie to keep it at its command. Leon Trotsky observed in 1931 that the petit bourgeoisie was often the main constituency of fascism, and his insight of so long ago has proven to be true in many countries.

Ever since Musharraf alighted from his nearly-hijacked Colombo-Karachi flight and burst onto the Pakistani political stage, Nepal's elites have willed the king of Nepal to 'do a Musharraf'. Whether by accident or design, King Gyanendra is now in a position where he is an active political player, which is a dangerous place for a monarch to be. Generals mean less to countries than kings, which is all the more reason for Nepal not to emulate the Pakistani example this once.

–CK Lal

South Asian Classifieds

Conference
Ageing in Asia: Emerging Trends and Perspectives
Heritage Educational and Research Society
16-18 February 2003
HYDERABAD, ANDHRA PRADESH

This meeting will focus on the ageing trends in Asia - demography, services, research, innovations, advocacy, networking, programmes and home care services. Professionals working in the area of ageing including researchers, social workers, gerontology students and medical professionals are invited to attend. Register by 31 December. Contact KR Gangadharan at heritage@hd2.vsnl.net.in for more information.

Conference
Association for Asian Studies (AAS)
Asian Studies in an Internet Connected World: Evolving an Asia-Pacific Community?
June 19-22, 2003
East-West Centre
HONOLULU, HAWAII

Call for papers
AAS invites paper proposals for its June conference on the following themes: Impact of technology on Asian studies; education about Asia; Asian strategic affairs; globalisation; NGOs and Asian development; integration, devolution and national stability; Pacific Island states; society and the arts. Paper submission deadline 1 March. For more information, contact Conference Chair William Vanderbok at Vanderbok@ASPAC.org or see posting at www.aspac.org.

Conference
Third International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS3)
19-22 August 2003
SINGAPORE

Call for papers
The ICAS3 Organising Committee invites proposals for organised panels, individual papers, poster presentations and special meetings on all aspects of Asia research. For more information, see: www.fas.nus.edu.sg/icas3/call4pp.htm

Fellowship
Project for Critical Asian Studies
University of Washington in Seattle, WASHINGTON

This project will focus primarily on the narration of traumatic injustices in Asia and the impact on the arts and humanities of mass inexpressible injustice. Application deadline 10 December. Fellowship posting at http://depts.washington.edu/critasia/

To place a classified ad announcing a conference, write to advertising@himalmag.com

Tibetan cadres today
Collaborators or patriots?

I believe that when speaking of cadres in Tibet, the word 'collaborator' is not appropriate. Do you know this word? It was used in France to describe French people who cooperated with the Nazis in the war. But it generally means anyone who works with the occupiers of a country – and implies that they should be punished. But I believe that many of the Tibetan cadres are actually the best source of support for Tibetan culture and the best hope for the future. Some Tibetan exiles think that collaborators should be condemned. This is a complicated issue so let us look at the different types of Tibetans in Tibet today.

Liberal ethicists

A majority of the Tibetan population can be called 'liberal ethicists'. They are liberal because they believe that the culture, values and politics of Tibetans should change according to the time and political environment, and they are willing to adopt new measures to secure human needs. They are also ethicists because even as they are willing to adopt new ideas and new measures to change, they emphasise the ethical and moral value of every measure they are taking.

Although the liberal ethicists in Tibet are not against technological and scientific modernisation in general, they are not happy about the application of Chinese modernisation, which they see as the major source of the two cultures clashing. Any change in Tibet should satisfy these liberal ethicists, because they understand the needs of the majority of the population. As China's institutions and political system are becoming less favourable in Tibet, the Tibetan liberation ethicists' ideas, morals, values and institutions are becoming more popular and favourable.

The Tibetan masses are more trusting of, more comfortable with and have much more in common with these liberal ethicists than with the Chinese governments in Tibet. But the Chinese see the momentum of this development as a threat to Chinese unity. After seeing pro-independence demonstrations in 1987 and 1989, the Chinese are trying to control these developments. So, the Chinese put pressure on the liberal ethicists, stopped many freedoms, which the Tibetans enjoyed for a short period of time. From 1989 to now, the Chinese policy on Tibet has shifted from 'equality' to 'unity' and from a 'reconstructive approach' to 'market economy'. As China becomes a more open and liberal nation, the liberal ethicist approach towards politics, moral and social views are becoming very popular among ordinary Tibetans. Under current conditions, Tibetans are increasingly alienated by powerful Chinese economic, political and social domination. The liberal ethicists are becoming a powerful force to struggle with the Chinese.

New loyalists

New loyalists believe that Tibet should depend on China. They come to the conclusion that Tibet is small and economically and culturally backward. To change the fundamental backwardness of Tibet, Tibet must depend on this vast nation China, its technology, and even its culture. Although they are aware of some brutal Chinese policies in Tibet, they want to believe that some aggressive measures are necessary to transform Tibet from a dark, brutal and backward nation. Of course, this group of people receives a lot of support from the Chinese. The Chinese want to use these people to control Tibet. The Chinese government spends large sums of money to create a new identity, that of being part of China, with a new culture and new values. Even if they are vocal on the Tibetan political stage, this group of people has never been part of the Tibetan mainstream. Most of these people were born between the 1940s and the 1960s, and some grew up in China. Most of them were trained at schools in China from an early age so they had virtually no contact with Tibetan culture.

Opportunists

The opportunists have no special agendas and goals. They use any ideas, identities and beliefs to support their personal benefit, social promotion and for securing their positions in society. Many of them have come out of Chinese schools from the late 1970s to the present day. Their basic education is Chinese, but they have little Tibetan knowledge. Their philosophy of life, political belief and values developed during China's massive self-transformation. They see the weaknesses of Chinese culture, political system and values. They witness the weakness of the Tibetans under Chinese domination. The opportunists also hold the view that Tibetan culture could not save Tibet and neither can Chinese culture and values, so personal success is more important than anything else. Their education of China and Tibet serves as a tool of personal opportunity. Because of their education and articulate skills, these opportunists get some attention from some western humanitarian organisations and individuals. They are also attractive to Christian missionaries, who give financial aid to the opportunists to convert them.

Radical traditionalists

Radical traditionalists are nothing new to Tibetan history. In the 1930s, when the 13th Dalai Lama introduced political reform and set up British style schools in Tibet, radical traditionalists opposed these ideas, so political reforms were postponed and modernised schools were closed down. People who had new visions and new attitudes were put in prison. The Tibetan scholar Genden Chopel was a perfect example of this. He was jailed for four years for spying for an unnamed country. In reality, he was put in jail because of his revolutionary ideas and arguments. He predicted that if Tibet did not reform or find a new way to deal with new things, Tibetan culture and Tibet would be jeopardised.

Radical traditionalists believe that Tibetan ideas, beliefs and values should not be changed due to political aggressions. The Tibetan world runs according to Tibetan traditional culture. There are no reasons to change at all. China is the enemy, but China will lose or disappear in Tibet as the karmic wheel will turn against it. For this group of people, politics and the economy are not issues in Tibet.

Cultural revisionists

There are also some cultural revisionists. This sentiment and ideology was developed after the Tibetan writer Dondrup Gyal wrote some modern novels and poems in a modern style. Politically, they are pro-Tibet and they believe Tibet should have some independence, or at the very least Tibet should control her own affairs. Although they are titled 'new Tibetan youth' who love their people and nation, culturally they are pro-China or they are blaming everything, from Chinese domination to economic backwardness, on Tibetan culture. They are valuing Tibetan culture through Chinese eyes, so their conclusions and beliefs are not too different from the Chinese. They see Tibetan culture and belief as obstacles to modernisation, science and political independence. Their arguments and logic are sometimes identical to those of the young Red Guards in China during the Cultural Revolution. They simply believe that Tibetan culture is old-fashioned and old for a modern society. △

(Originally carried by Tibet Press Watch, *July 2002. The author remains anonymous for obvious reasons.)*

Sashaying through structural adjustment

"REACH FOR it" is Anita Anand's unapologetic advice. Just like the hype that it swallows hook, line and sinker, *The Beauty Game*, promises what it cannot deliver. The blurb claims that the book covers the middle ground between the critics and the apologists of the beauty business. Far from being a balanced synthesis, *The Beauty Game* is an unabashed plug for the beauty business and the creation of a branded paradise that offers consumers the vacuous choice between buying and perishing. It believes that a standardised mass produced idea of beauty is not an affront to intelligence, but a creator of opportunities, and the stepping stone to women's empowerment. Like the skin fairness cream that promises you self-esteem, and the shampoo that guarantees you the edge over others, this book echoes the myths of the beauty industry, and is in that sense as much a product of the multi-billion-dollar media and beauty world as any tawdry cosmetic on the market.

Focusing on changing notions of beauty and the growing beauty industry, the author claims to examine the nexus between liberalisation, beauty pageants, designers, fashion, media, women's aspirations and an expanding middle class. Anand begins on a personal note, placing herself in the narrative. We know her as a 50-plus woman with leucoderma (a skin disorder affecting normal colouration) and a weight problem. Research on the book led her to treat her leucoderma, a painful process by her own account, and to go to a weight loss centre. Her aspirations, the author concludes, were primarily based on how she saw herself and the trouble she could take to be acceptable to herself. After this confession there are very few surprises.

Anand argues that liberalisation created prospects for middle class women. Seeking to look good, they constituted a willing market for beauty products. Supply followed demand and, by meeting consumer need, the beauty industry burgeoned. The core idea of the book is simplistic rather than simple. Since not looking good in today's world gets women nowhere, the beauty industry has rendered a service by giving them knowledge about looking good and being self-assured. It is responding to a situation, not dictating it. Media and advertising merely give product information.

The Beauty Game
by Anita Anand
Penguin Books, Delhi, 2002
xviii+205, Price: INR 250

reviewed by Bela Malik

Celebrating the consumption of endless kilograms of cosmetics and the attendant manipulation of the human body, Anand stoutly denies that glamour is a modern invention. Anyone critical of the beauty business is clubbed as reactionary and undemocratic; her evidence – the violent protests by the Hindu right against beauty pageants and Valentine's Day celebrations. There is simply no attempt to engage with the much more nuanced arguments of the liberal-left critiques.

The book betrays a regrettable lack of logical thinking. The solecisms are too many and the axe is ground too loudly. Arguing that 'glamour women' are needlessly derided even though they are accomplished and capable women, no different from those in any profession, Anand seriously misrepresents intelligent perspectives, which have nothing against the beautiful people. These critiques are in fact less about the people who consume beauty, and more against those who make them consume it. Perhaps such misrepresentations are necessary, because Anand's sole purpose seems to be to laud the entrepreneurs of beauty (like Shahnaz Husain, who, incidentally, for tax reasons professes to sell *ayurvedic* medicines and not cosmetics), the achievements of an industry whose income has increased three-fold in one decade, and the triumph of cosmetic firms ("Maybelline's growth, like Revlon's is fascinating"). With such energetic brand promotion, it is a wonder that the book was not sponsored by the industry (assuming in good faith that it was not).

The Beauty Game then dwells with glee on the success of weight loss centres, gyms, beauty parlours and cosmetic treatment centres. Buying into the idea that a 'good complexion' is a fair complexion ("everyone craves for fair skin"), Anand uncritically presents 'facts' about the success of the fairness cream business and extols a loathsome advertisement for Fair and Lovely cream, which ends with a young woman who through diligent and unstinted application of the cream becomes fair and hence lovely and therefore is employed as an airhostess and thereby proves to her father that she is as good as a son. How much more empowerment does a woman need? Anand urges sceptics to gloss over the projection of the fair as lovely, and the lovely as employable. The cream after all created an opportunity, did it not? The saga then wends its way to the impressive role of the media (television and print) in giving disinter-

ested information about beauty products and enabling women to make educated choices. All good clean fun for the entire family. Quite predictably, the author forgets to probe the connection between disinterested information, informed choices and the advertising business in India, whose revenues grew three times as fast as the GDP did.

There is an entire chapter of interviews with a cross-section of women who participate in the beauty world. These seven 'representatives' of Indian women have only gained from their association with the business of beauty. The critique by so eminent a scholar as John Berger is refuted by the casual quotes of such scintillating intellects as Shobha De and Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar. Talk of Nijinsky and the carthorse, this one outdoes it by a length! As a clincher, the author endorses the Afro-American actress and 'Bond lady' Halle Berry's view that women should use their sex appeal to get ahead. The women's movement should have no qualms about using any weapon in its arsenal.

The consumer assembly line

In her attempt to go beyond the image of beauty, Anita Anand valiantly grapples with the world of business, of which she clearly does not have much of a clue. The inability to go beyond appearances, coupled with an irritating credulity lead to flimsy and meaningless arguments. Anand's naïveté derives from an outdated textbook understanding of economics, notably the idea that supply is always demand-driven. She fails to note that in a world dominated by giant conglomerates operating on a global scale, needs are created, tastes fashioned, and diversity obliterated, until there are a few overarching standards to which most people are forced to conform. Supply can dictate demand using powerfully intrusive media and advertising.

Because of Anand's absorption with the idea of free and informed choice, her blessings are with the ever-swelling ranks of prosperous urban teenagers uniformed in spaghetti-straps or tube tops, low-slung, tightly-hipped jeans that reveal the thongs and outlines of designer panties only to fall in flares over startling high-heeled footwear. She nods approvingly at the same armies leaving beauty clinics after rounds of waxing, bleaching and tinting. There is not a murmur over the increasing surgical recourse to breast, buttock and thigh lifts, breast augmentation and wrinkle removal.

Surely it must have struck her as being odd that so many people across the world do exactly the same thing. Whether in Buenos Aires, Jakarta, Johannesburg, Kathmandu, Montreal or Sofia, well-heeled teenagers consume soda and burgers, swear by MTV, and want to be 'cool'. There is now even a school in Japan

Anita Anand's blessings are with the ever-swelling ranks of prosperous urban teenagers

that specialises in instructing youngsters in how to be cool. These recruits to the army of transnational corporations exercise only one choice: the choice to join in or be left out. The creation of this consumer assembly line is not the accidental outcome of independently emerging demands. There is a systematic process to it, and it is achieved through the mass media. It is this connection between the media and global standards of beauty generating a uniform supply-driven demand that Anand either fails to explore or chooses to avoid.

In the last two decades, firms seeking markets beyond national boundaries could no longer afford the tag of 'multinational'. The prefix 'multi' meant that they would have to adapt to local habits. Instead they found it more profitable to call themselves 'global companies'. Their brands rode on the values and lifestyles they sought to promote. Since many corporations had to resist the charge of "American neo-imperialism", they were wise enough to incorporate an appearance of diversity in their promotional campaigns (Benetton for example). But, the net purpose and result was identical across vast regions. '*Thanda*' now means Coca-Cola in South Asia, and not *nimbu pani*, *lassi*, sugarcane juice, or just plain water. Likewise, being 'cool' means wearing one of a limited range of apparel brands, having a record company-led taste in music, having the right kinds of body shapes and various other attributes which cost a lot of money. Only the ubiquitous high-fives come free. The corporate world has even gobbled up 'opposition' and 'rebellion'. Rastafarians are hip and Che Guevara images the most flaunted fashion statement. Geographical and cultural boundaries begin to break under this onslaught of global 'taste' making. It is the managerial destruction of the public space for real cultural freedom and choice.

Correspondingly, tastes get standardised and cultural artefacts are bastardised to be marketed across cultural and social boundaries of a gradually homogenising class of consumers. The beauty industry is at the forefront of this management of demand by the creation of tastes, since this international enclave of global consumers is united by the common urge to 'look' the prescribed way, that is, by the common need of the hip crowd to look just like each other. Markets are obviously made by clever people who, unlike Anand, do not believe what the textbooks say.

Liberalisation helped the process, as the removal of tariffs ensured that the emotional and psychological demand for beauty products could actually become an effective demand once prices were allowed to fall within the range of middle class purchasing capacity. The reordering of investment priorities in the liberalised climate also

erased the distinction between luxuries and necessities in the economic philosophy of the nation and the social and moral philosophy of the consuming classes. The mass demand for beauty is the circular creation of marketing departments and media houses and not, as Anand thinks, the *sui generis* expression of some innate desire.

Product companies have growth and profit targets, while media strategists decide what and how to sell. Far from giving mere product information, the role of advertising has been about brand imaging. After all, apart from the brand, what is the special property that distinguishes one bathing soap from the next? Anand is obviously not updated with the developments in corporate marketing. The age of advertisements simply giving product information is long over. Mere product information is not sufficient to sustain the fortunes of mega-corporations. It only takes some common sense to bust the racket. Since a beauty cream scientifically cannot reverse the ageing process, it becomes necessary to ensure the suspension of disbelief. One of the techniques is to leave the actual product itself out of the focus of the sales pitch and create brand use, with or without any conviction in its efficacy, as part of a lifestyle definition.

This accounts for the enormous growth in advertising budgets. The growth in advertising expenditures in global business is an indication of how marketing departments have established control over affluent society and shaped its attitudes. According to the 1998 *Human Development Report*, the growth in global ad spending "now outpaces the growth of the world economy by one-third". Global ad spending currently stands at USD 435 billion, which is more than the GDPs of many nations. Brand loyalties have to be created and human billboards for Tommy Hilfiger and Esprit tee shirts found. Mere product information could not accomplish this feat, particularly since all these products are manufactured by exactly the same set of people. Since it is only the brand that distinguishes similar products, just product information cannot serve any purpose.

This inability to understand real economic processes is a blemish that stands out starkly. Anand gives details about the sponsorship of beauty pageants, but fails to analyse the significance of her own data. Philanthropic intentions do not lie behind large media and cosmetic houses promoting events like Lakmé India Fashion Week. The high-profile nature of the branded Miss India events, post-liberalisation, is not coincidental. Anand's views on pageants are nothing less than a rhapsody to beauty queens, and the book basks in the arresting statistic that in the 1990s, six winners were from the South, delighting in the fact that four of these were from India. Perhaps it is this obsession that prevents her from getting to the real soul of these events. It is not merely the need of pageants to find new areas of conquest that leads to so many winners of international competitions being from the overpopulated, underfed and newly liberalised parts of the world. The sponsors of these events are large media and beauty brands. Taking the beauty pageant to new territories and making beauty queens from countries with the right kind of market demography is geared towards bringing fresh entrants into beauty consumption through the publicity blitz that accompanies each such event. The industry thrives on the surge of interest in and consumption of the wares of the beauty world that these events evoke.

The uniform: spaghetti-straps, low-slung, tight-hipped jeans revealing thongs, flaring over startling heeled footwear

Standardising the beauty of representatives from each country is the key to the sale of products, since everyone can be made to have the same beauty needs. So Miss Philippines, Miss Venezuela, Miss Ukraine and Miss Greece, all of them equally branded, are all also of similar height and weight (5'9" - 110 lbs), have lower than 22 percent lean to fat ratio (the average for a healthy 20-year-old is 29 percent, this increases with age), and, barring unalterable minor differences in skeletal structure, are contrived clones of Barbie doll, with measurements of 33-23-33 (a slight variation since the projected measurements of a Barbie doll, if she were a full-sized human being, would be an impossible 36-18-33).

The rest of media-friendly womanhood is doomed to be in permanent competition with the minuscule band of emaciated supermodels who spend an inordinate part of their life grooming themselves. Since she is intent on prettifying the ugly world of beauty, Anand obviously did not see fit to interview anyone who lost out in the beauty business: the anorexic, the suicidal has-been or 'loser' who cannot, despite strenuous effort, match 'supermodel' proportions, or the girl hounded by the flesh trade masquerading as a modelling firm to cash in on the craze for glamour.

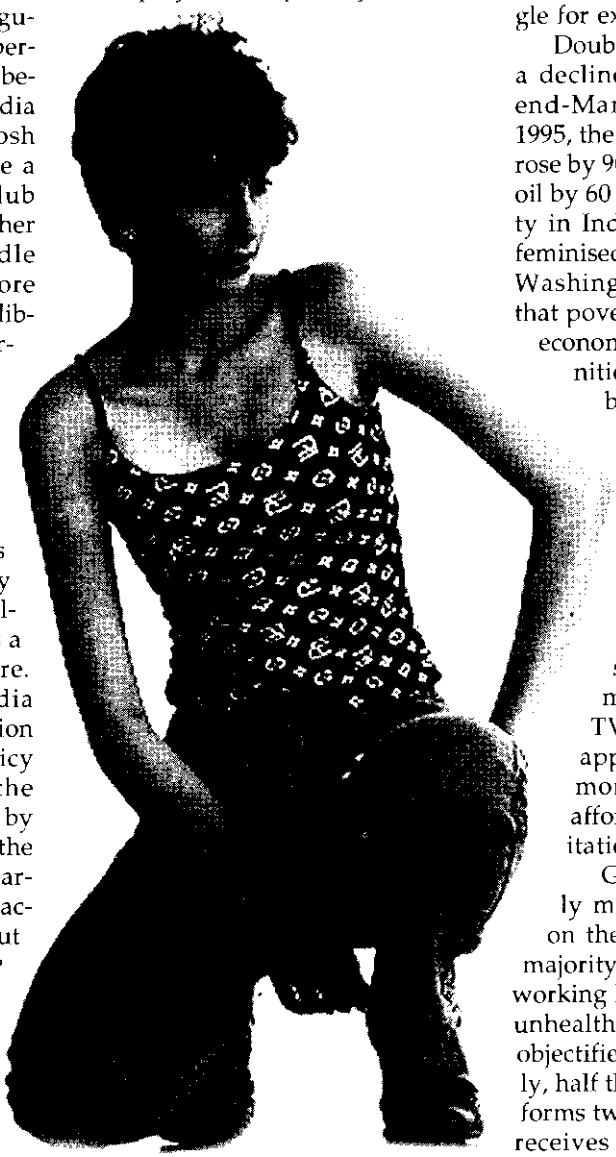
The targeting of middle-class youth by the global glamour business is not inadvertent. The global teen demography is 1 billion. Nepal's under-19s make up 50 percent of the total population of 24 million. The demographic structures of the developing world are convenient for the global consumer business. The young are particularly susceptible to the enticements of advertisements and the weight of peer pressure. Add to that the fact that they do not have family responsibilities that demand financial prudence and the stage is set for peer dictated profligacy in appearance and looks. Assisting them in their search for attitude and a sense of belonging, fashion and 'personal care' outlets become fertile grounds for hunting 'cool'. Corporations infiltrate

schools and colleges by sponsoring 'Ms Fresher' competitions and other exhibitionist activities. Elders in residential localities follow suit, organising beauty pageants for girl children who are coached to sashay into the future in anticipation of laurels at higher levels. Meanwhile, as the class with the disposable income preens in public, the gulf between those who can only watch the vulgarity and those who can participate in it grows wider. There is no empowerment through beauty for the dispensable class. Author Anand has nothing to say about this.

Miss India's India

As far as the empowerment argument is concerned, the author's perspective does not seem to travel beyond the tinted glass of the India Habitat Centre, located in a posh part of New Delhi, where, once a week, she met her "ladies' club drinking friends" who cheered her on. Whether the Indian middle class expanded or acquired more disposable income as a result of liberalisation is a moot point. It certainly became more consumerist and has come to dominate public policy. Whether women of this class have been empowered is debatable. Liberalisation has had an uneven impact on Indian women. Every process has its winners and losers. Moving away from the few successes to the multitude of Indian women presents a less sanguine wide-angle picture. Economic liberalisation in India was only a part of the stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) packages dictated by the Fund-Bank. It was accompanied by privatisation, fiscal 'discipline', the removal of subsidies in crucial areas, and globalisation. Enough macro-level evidence has been put out about the negative effects of SAP on Indian women. The gamble on the market has led to rising misery in a developing country that is home to the largest number of the world's poor. Perhaps it is time to put the gossamer dresses and perfumes in their place among these grim aggregates.

SAP no doubt reorganised the labour market. While employment may have got increasingly feminised, there was good reason for it. Female workers are flexible and cheaper. The terms of employment more often than not involve casual or part-time work, piece-rate payments, and a great freedom in hiring and firing. Among the consuming classes, women have of course been hired as front office or sales staff. Very few have broken through the corporate glass ceiling. The flip side of the feminisation of the workforce has been the feminisation of unemployment, especially since the economic slowdown of the mid-1990s.



Female unemployment rates have been consistently high. There is also the double burden of work in the household as well, the labour for which is unrecognised and unpaid. Several million Indian women do not have easy access to fuel and water, which adds to their labour time. Structural adjustment, while addressing the balance of payments deficit and the stability of the rupee, has not paid even lip service to the living standards of the bulk of Indian women, for whom fiscal and monetary issues have any relevance only to the extent that it has a bearing on their daily struggle for existence.

Double-digit inflation has led to a decline in real wages. Between end-March 1990 and end-March 1995, the price of foodgrain in India rose by 90 percent and that of edible oil by 60 percent. The face of poverty in India is getting increasingly feminised. While the followers of the Washington Consensus proclaim that poverty has been reduced, and economists quibble over the definition of and actual numbers below the poverty line, there is no doubt about mounting deprivation and hunger. In such a climate of hostile everyday conditions, household budgets are placed under great strain by the pressure of rising consumerism. Even as the models strut the ramps, and TV spins fantasies of well-appointed homes, more and more Indian women cannot afford shelter, clothing or sanitation.

Given the women-unfriendly macro environment, things on the whole are worse for the majority of Indian women who are working harder, earning less, living unhealthier lives, and being more objectified and victimised. Globally, half the world's population performs two-thirds of its work hours, receives one-tenth of the world's

income, and owns one-hundredth of its property. Nail varnish and lip-gloss do not help very much in the face of such cold and killing facts. Those mouthing praises of reform in the name of middle class well-being and seeing signs of progress in the manipulations of the beauty industry, must pause to consider whether it is only the middle-class upwards who qualify to be 'Indian' in a country where the annual per capita income does not fetch even a middling frame of Ray Ban goggles.

The title of Anita Anand's book betrays the ignorance of her arguments. Beauty, so far from being a game, is serious business. *The Beauty Game*'s inability to grasp the essentials of this business ends up as a caricatured understanding of Indian society and economy. Corporate-defined beauty offers an excellent lens through which to gain insights into such issues as social conditioning, market creation, product and gender profiling, and class differences. The possibilities have been squandered thanks to the infantile assumptions of this book and its author. To the final personal endorsement of the beauty world by the author (if her daughter wanted to contest in a beauty pageant, she would not stop her), may we remind her of the fate of Russia's Miss Universe who was recently ousted for "failing to carry out her responsibilities" and replaced by Miss Panama?

Oxana Fedorova, a 24-year-old police officer, was reported to have gained weight, become pregnant and married secretly after being crowned in May 2002. She defended herself on the grounds that the contract was in English which was not her first language and that her removal had been motivated by a dispute with the organisers over a two-month break to defend her doctoral dissertation. It is not all money and glamour in the world of beauty, but a fair bit of servitude too. And then of course, has Nigeria shown us another side?

Growing into their knickers

As Kali, a young ex-*swayamsevak* (volunteer) from Nagpur is asked, "Who was Shivaji?" we see him struggling to come up with an answer that gives the familiar-sounding name a place in history. The film then cuts to a moment, 10 years ago, when Kali, then a young school-going boy, is being instructed in his Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *shakha* (branch) about the greatness of Shivaji, a Maratha (Hindu) ruler famed for his defiance of Aurangzeb, the (Muslim) Mughal. The shakha's venue in a public park offers welcome distraction for Kali who spends his time playing with

The Men in the Tree
Documentary
98 minutes, Hindi/English/Marathi/Sanskrit with English subtitles, 2002
by Lalit Vachani

reviewed by
Sudhanva Deshpande

pebbles and pulling at grass while the session continues. The next shot takes us to the more 'formal' classroom where, in English, his teacher's inspired lesson is on how Shivaji fought Muslim rulers on behalf of the oppressed Hindus. As is customary, Kali is asked to recount the instruction at the end of the lesson. Clueless, he gets up and stares into space, pretending to think hard. Cut to the present, as the older Kali wracks his brain yet again for that elusive answer. "I don't know", he says finally, "but I think he had something to do with the Shiv Sena".

Kali features in *The Men in the Tree*, a 98-minute documentary on the RSS by Lalit Vachani. If the title is a little confusing, that is because the film is a sequel to *Boy in the Branch*, a much shorter film made in 1992. The earlier film documented the activities of one RSS shakha in Nagpur, where the organisation is headquartered. From the commentary, we know that Vachani went to Nagpur expecting to witness grandiose spectacles of fascist indoctrination commonly reminiscent of Nazi Germany. What he saw instead was simple in its ingenuity. Young boys came to the shakha and, under the watchful eye of the *shakha pramukh* (branch leader), they played games. These games were the first step in an elaborate chain of RSS training. One game began with the children shouting: "Kashmir belongs to us!" Another, a name game, is interesting in how certain names from Indian history were included (Sardar Patel, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Rana Pratap, Gandhi), how some were excluded (Ashfaqullah Khan or Akbar), and how some names were juxtaposed (Gandhi and, say, Golwalkar). These games helped create a sense of belonging to the RSS *parivar* (a 'family') and its extensions in the Hindu community. Through not-so-subtle means, the games also imparted other RSS 'virtues': discipline, obedience, reverence of authority, and hatred of the 'enemy' (which may be constructed as Muslim, Christian, or communist).

The Men in the Tree addresses the crucial question of how much of this indoctrination survives among the boys as they become older. Taking Kali as a representative, very little. For Kali, the demolition of the Babri Masjid is wrong, he has a complete disregard for the purported rights and wrongs of history,

and he does not think Muslims are enemies. Unfortunately, Kali is perhaps atypical. When Vachani went back to Nagpur in October 2000 to track the boys who had formed the central characters of *Boy in the Branch*, he found that Kali had attended the shakha for about two years, and then the shakha itself had wound up and Kali had drifted away from *Hindutva* into the more benign occupation of running a small shop. This was not the case with Sandeep, who sells *ayurvedic* medicine today after having worked six years as an RSS *pracharak* (full-time propagandist). Sandeep is the archetypal neighbourhood man: a gentle and affable family man with a winsome smile. *The Men in the Tree* takes its time to establish the 'ordinariness' of Sandeep as the person who does not seem the kind to engage in fundamentalism, quite unlike Shripad. Shripad is a building contractor, who used to be the physical instructor in Kali's shakha. Shripad fits the stereotype of the 'Hindu fanatic'. He tells us proudly, eyes gleaming, that he was among those who stood atop the dome of the Babri Masjid on that fateful December day 10 years ago. Sandeep had not been among those who razed the mosque to the ground. He was one of those, he tells us with his easy smile, manning the 'base camp'. Along with better-known national personalities like Arun Jaitley and Vinay Katiyar, Sandeep and Shripad, with their otherwise varied worldviews, stand united in allegiance to a fascist organisation.

Vachani also interviewed two other ex-RSS members. Des Raj Goel, author of *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, one of the few books by an 'insider' that exposes the truth about the extremely secretive organisation, talks in the film about his years in the RSS. The other 'insider' testimony is provided by Purushottam Agarwal, who teaches at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and who was a member of an RSS shakha in Gwalior as an adolescent. On crucial issues, their evidence is remarkably similar, though they were RSS members at different times and in different cities. On the question of Gandhi, for instance, whatever it may claim in public, it is clear that the RSS is ambivalent. There is antipathy on the one hand. Thus, the ex-*sarsanghchalak* (supreme commander) of the RSS, Balasaheb Deoras is reputed to have said that while Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse used the incorrect method, his concern itself was quite valid.

In the film, one of the few times that Sandeep looks distinctly uncomfortable is when he speaks about Gandhi. He tells us that Gandhi committed many mistakes, and while to err is human, when one's errors affect the whole society, it becomes a problem. Agarwal tells us that in his shakha, they used to be told that if Gandhi is the 'Father of the Nation', he is the father of Pakistan, not India. On the other hand, though, there is also an attempt by the RSS to co-opt Gandhi to the extent that RSS comic books show Gandhi saluting the RSS flag. Yet, the duality of the RSS attitude to Gandhi is clearly a front. Goel recalls how, in the late 1940s, as a young RSS activist, it was his duty to report Gandhi's speeches to his bosses. But the young Goel hated Gandhi so much that he listened to the speeches on the radio, rather than see the man's face. The only day that he planned to go to Gandhi's prayer meeting was on 30 January 1948, when the Hindu Mahasabha office was abuzz with expectation that something big was going to happen. When Goel reached Birla House, where Gandhi spent the last few months of his life, he saw people running out of the gate – Gandhi had already been shot. Goel was destined never to see his face live.

In the shakha, boys were told that if Gandhi is the 'Father of the Nation', he is the father of Pakistan, not India

The real insight into the RSS mind, however, comes when Goel asserts that the killing of Gandhi was the first step towards the creation of the fascist Hindu *rashtra* (nation). The statement is significant. He does not single out the demolition of the Babri Masjid as the first step. What this confirms is that Godse was not a lunatic, but the logical product of the RSS propaganda against Gandhi. It tells us that the RSS has a vision. The RSS project, ultimately, is not about its political front, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), coming to power. Indeed, the RSS was quite happy to even dissolve the precursor of the BJP, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, when it was given the opportunity by Jai Prakash Narayan to enter the national political mainstream as part of the Janata Party. So the electoral or other fortunes of the BJP do not per se form the main concern of the RSS. Essentially, the RSS is concerned with the refashioning of Indian society along exclusionist lines. As part of that, it eventually wishes to dismantle the very democratic set-up that has enabled the BJP and, through it, the RSS to rise to power in the first place. That is the real meaning of the Hindu rashtra. Though the term 'Hindu rashtra' has entered mainstream political consciousness relatively recently, it is of fairly old vintage.

Sandeep reveals how the electoral performance of the BJP is only one amongst many concerns of the RSS. When asked about the strength of the RSS, he replies without hesitation: "the shakha and the parivar". The greater the number of shakhas, the deeper the penetration into individual minds, and the more inclusive the span of the member-organisations of the parivar, the fewer the areas immune to RSS influence. Sandeep affirms that the BJP is only one, and not even the most important, member of the family.

To its long-term end, the RSS focuses, most of all, on the young. Sudarshan, the current sarsanghchalak of the RSS, told Vachani in 1992 that the RSS inducts children into the

shakha because they are at an impressionable age and easy to mould. For this, doctrinaire history becomes crucial. For instance, Sandeep informs us how we have only heard so far the distorted, Marxist notion of history and therefore are not aware that Akbar was actually a lascivious man who did many unmentionable things with women at Chandni Chowk in Delhi. Only through the creation of heroes and villains can the future be secured through remedial action in the present. Perhaps Kali's two-year stint with the shakha did not leave him with much because he did not pay attention to history lessons.

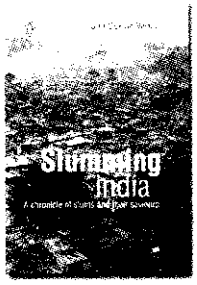
The strength of Vachani's film is that it lets the RSS expose itself. *The Men in the Tree* is a powerful work of political anthropology. While the filmmaker's ideology frames the film, it does not impede the procurement of rich footage. The footage of RSS activists on a house-to-house campaign in New Delhi is priceless. As a man opens the door of his house, the RSS activist begins: "We are from the RSS. We do not kill Muslims and Marxists". With footage like this, who needs commentary?

More significantly, Vachani gets both Sandeep and Shirpad, two RSS activists, to share on camera quite candidly their respective roles in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. The careful planning that went into the demolition of the structure is evident to all viewers. It exposes the portrayal to the Liberhan Commission and to the public, as a spontaneous act of devout Hindus, a case of the 'mob going out of hand', to be the falsity it is. *The Men in the Tree* underlines the RSS' emphasis on organisation and discipline.

> Simplistic talk of 'secularism' is not going to defeat a well-ordered attack

These two are indispensable to the cause of an ideology. Every detail of the demolition was obviously calibrated. The RSS has figured out that social change is only possible if led by an organised power. While the film does not overtly advocate this, it makes clear that anti-communal forces need to organise themselves if they are to keep societal space free from fascistic encroachment. Simplistic talk of 'secularism' is not going to defeat a well-ordered attack.

By the logic of the film, its ending is unconvincing. After having shown how the RSS is organised, to then conclude that the RSS is a self-limiting phenomenon, that the essentially tolerant Hinduism of the masses – or Gandhi's Hinduism for that matter – will eventually assert itself, is naive. While the number of shakhas may not have grown to the extent the organisation intended, there are still too many of them to justify optimism.



Slumming India: A chronicle of slums and their saviours
by Gita Dewan Verma
Penguin India, Delhi, 2002
pp 208, INR 200
ISBN 01 43 028758

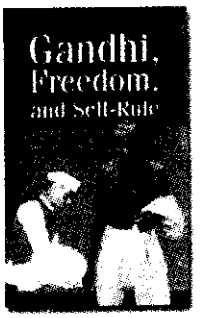
An urban planner turned development critic, Gita Dewan Verma explores the human landscape of India's marginalised urban communities in this volume. Aiming to avoid the 'false certainties' of development professionals, Verma contrasts the human misery of the Subcontinent's metropolises with the dominant theories of urban development, ultimately condemning theoreticians for "moral and intellectual bankruptcy". By focusing on real lives, and avoiding an over-reliance on statistics, the author attempts to paint a dynamic and realistic portrait of the life of the urban poor.

Azad Hind: Writings and speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose (1941-43)
Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002
pp 204, INR 495
ISBN 81 7824 034 3

In mid-January 1941, Subhas Chandra Bose left Calcutta by night and was driven to the Gomoh railway junction in Bihar. As part of the cover for his escape from India to take up arms against the British, he wrote several post-dated letters to be sent from his home on Elgin Road. These letters form the opening to this book, the 11th volume of Bose's correspondence and speeches. Given the continuing influence of 'Netaji' on India, and the persistence of the debate surrounding his role as leader of the Indian National Army, the entire series, and this volume in particular, are important historical records of a man who played a critical role in shaping nationalist attitudes throughout South Asia.

Licence to rape: The Burmese military regime's use of sexual violence in the ongoing war in Shan State
by the Shan Human Rights Foundation and the Shan Women's Action Network
SWAN, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2002
pp 127, price not given

Flanked by China, Laos and Thailand, and home to an ethnically distinct population, Burma's eastern Shan state has long suffered under a militarised society. In this volume, two Shan activist groups document the circumstances surrounding nearly 200 cases of sexual violence against Shan women between 1996 and 2001. With this evidence, including testimonial accounts of rape, the report makes a compelling case that sexual violence is used by Burma's military as a 'pacification' tool against civilians.



Gandhi, freedom and self-rule
edited by Anthony J Parel
Vistaar, Delhi, 2002
pp 176, INR 190/USD 7
ISBN 81 7829 1886

Bringing together the work of seven prominent Gandhi researchers and edited by University of Calgary scholar Anthony J Parel, this work is an attempt at contextualising Gandhi's varied concepts of personal and political freedom within an East-West dialogue. His four ideas of freedom – as a sovereign political expression, as an individual right, as the rising from poverty, and as the capability for self-rule – are explored against a backdrop of contemporary theory, ranging from debates on the nature of autonomy in the late modern world to a comparative analysis of Gandhian and Hindutva conceptions of *swaraj*.

Basic water science
by Ajaya Dixit
Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, Kathmandu, 2002
pp xi+420, price not given
ISBN 99933 35 45 2

While providing fundamental information on 'water processes' useful for engineering students and planners alike, this work also introduces key issues of social science related to water management. With an informed understanding of water becoming increasingly critical for present-day South Asia, this book is a useful reference work for all engaged in related fields. While the book makes use of water science as applied in Nepal, the thematic and broad treatment makes it useful for instruction all over South Asia and beyond. The publication is replete with original drawings, illustrations and box items, which aid the understanding of complex issues.

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

Note to publishers: new titles can be sent to GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal. Books are mentioned in this section before they are sent for detailed review.

"Please pass the cundum..."

There is one way to test whether a nation-state has a future, and that is by gauging its comfort level with condom ads. Flagrant unapologetic advertisements asking people (men, actually) to use condoms, as opposed to the 'coy' ones that hide their product either behind intertwined bodies (promoted by the private sector manufacturers of rubbers) or the message of government-backed red-triangled (in the case of India, two kids or one, *basss*) population control campaigns, usually indicate a country that has a bright future. Such as Nepal, believe you me.

What I refer to is a society's ability to stomach brazen reference in public to the use of the condom, including having the word 'condom' in common employ in mass media. This means much more than simply that the messages of family planning, child spacing and AIDS/STD prevention are being conveyed with directness. It shows that a society is flexible and healthily 'modern' in its response to changing times and mores. It indicates that prudery and middle-class morality has been kept at bay. It also reveals that such a society, despite all present-day evidence to the contrary, will surge ahead of others less inclined to shout, "Look, condom!" in public.

In Nepal these days, there is a condom advertising invasion under way; foreign-funded, and taking advantage of the total anarchy extant in the country, as a result of which the social and cultural conservatives have not been able to get their act together to utter even a word in protest of the ads, billboards and commercials.

On television, 12,000 times a day, a couple is seen prancing around in the pine forest that is often used by Kollywood (Kathmandu + 'ollywood) stars for in-the-woods numbers. This time, it is a virginal-looking hero who peeps out from behind a trunk. The lady, a petite, fresh-faced lass in hill peasant attire (which, with no *dupatta* or scarf to cover the blouse, is such a bonanza for film directors), comes swaying up-slope towards the hero. (The dialogue is in singsong.)

Lass: Hello, have you got on you a cundum-aaa?
Virginal Lad: Why do you need a cundum when I am around? [Lastpage: *what?!*]
Lass (snuggling close to VL, and waving an instructive finger at the audience): Use a cundum and the AIDS rog *goes right out the window.*

Or words to that effect.

There is a particular beauty to the Nepali encounter with the condom. The word already existed in the language (as *'cundum'*) before the prophylactic arrived, and it was synonymous with 'worthless'. A prominent Nepali lexicographer explains: "The term 'cundum' entered the Nepali language before the 'condom' was actually popularised by the USAID-funded family planning programme, in the pre-HIV era. But the link *is* to the condom, with someone (or some people), who had presumably tried rubbers in the outside world – Nepal still having been a forbidden kingdom in the late 1940s – having decided that they were worthless, for whatever reason either having to do with his (or their) personal preference, or the undesirability of the ultimate outcome, or perhaps having to do with misplaced prudery".

Boy, that is a mouthful from said lexicographer, but you get the idea.

But then, what have we here? Another lexicographer, who claims that 'cundum' entered the language, as in Hindi, as a corruption of the English word 'condemned', meaning worthless. That, too, seems plausible. Whatever. The point being made is that the existing usage made the job easier when the time came to popularise them.

The beauty in all of this is how Nepalis have claimed ownership of the condom by Nepali-ising the pronunciation. The American 'Khandaam' or the Anglo 'Khond'm' is converted to the 'cundum' or 'kundum'. The familiarity is so complete that in verse, they will even casually throw in the 'aaaa' after the last vowel, as and when required to fit verse and metre (see commercial segment above).

The upshot of all this is that the entire Nepali family – from mountain, hill, valley or plain – can sit around the radio or watch television together without being distracted by the thought of unmentionables popping out of the airwaves. It takes no more than two exposures to a condemn ad to become blasé, and no one is putting earplugs on their children even, it seems, in the most ritualistically traditional of *bahun* (Brahmin) families. By the third time they hear the spot on radio or see it on TV, they are ready to sing along, "Tell me, do you or do you not have on you a cundum-aaa!"

As you will hear at focus group meetings, it is a short hop from singing a cundum ditty to actually using a condom. Or so the development agencies say. And that is why one can presume that Nepal is ahead of its South Asian neighbours. Many of said neighbours would not be caught dead airing male contraceptive commercials (rather a failed state than one that calls a cundum a condom), and others have to use the family planning cover or revert to the sexuality theme. None of the straightforwardness of the Nepali condom ads, where Mr Condom stands tall, erect and upright.

A country that openly talks of using the cundum, progresses rapidly. Just check out Thailand, which takes nothing lying down...

Kanak Dixit

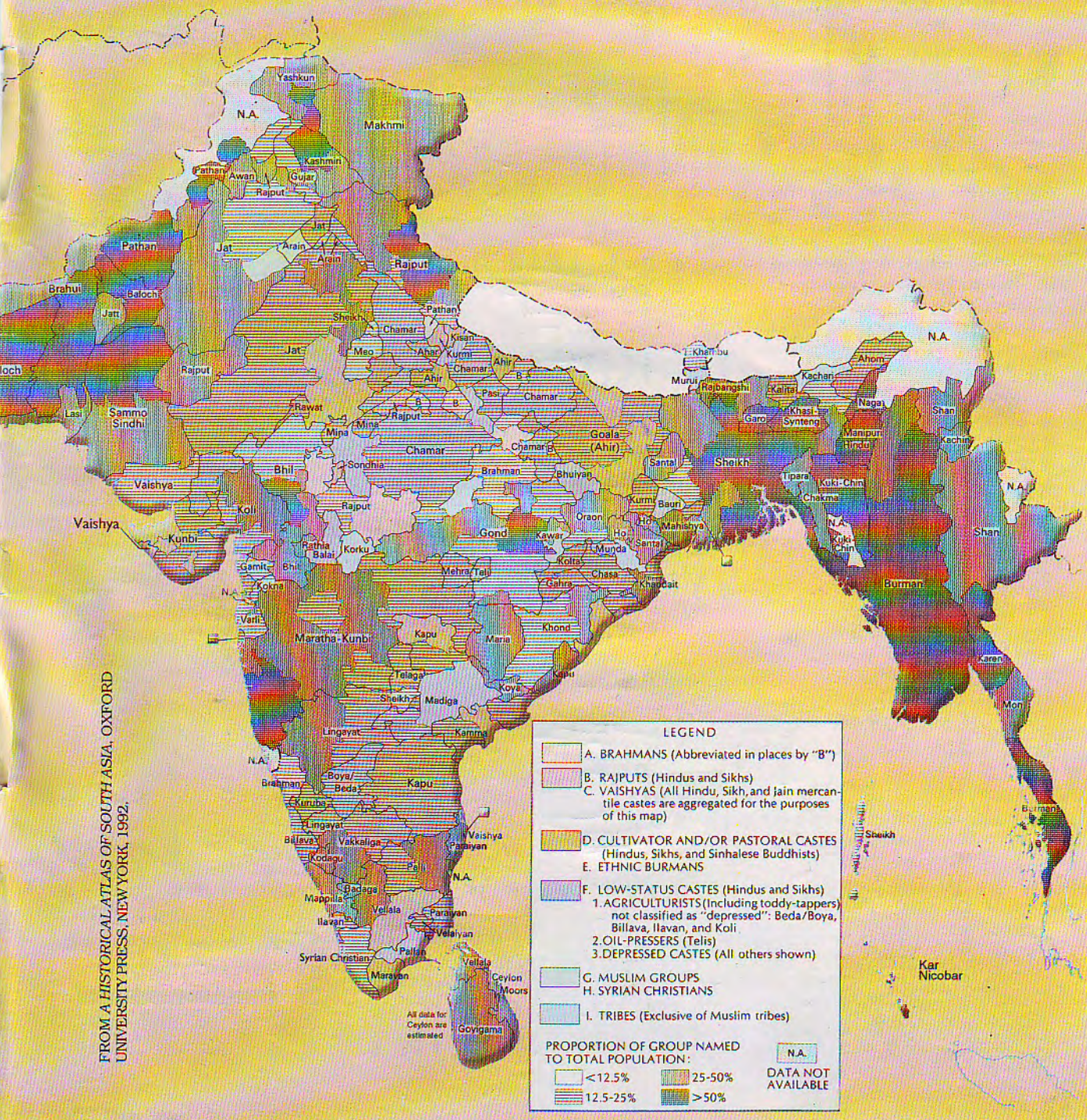
MOST NUMEROUS CASTE, TRIBE, OR OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

Classified by functional categories with proportion to total population of specific groups named

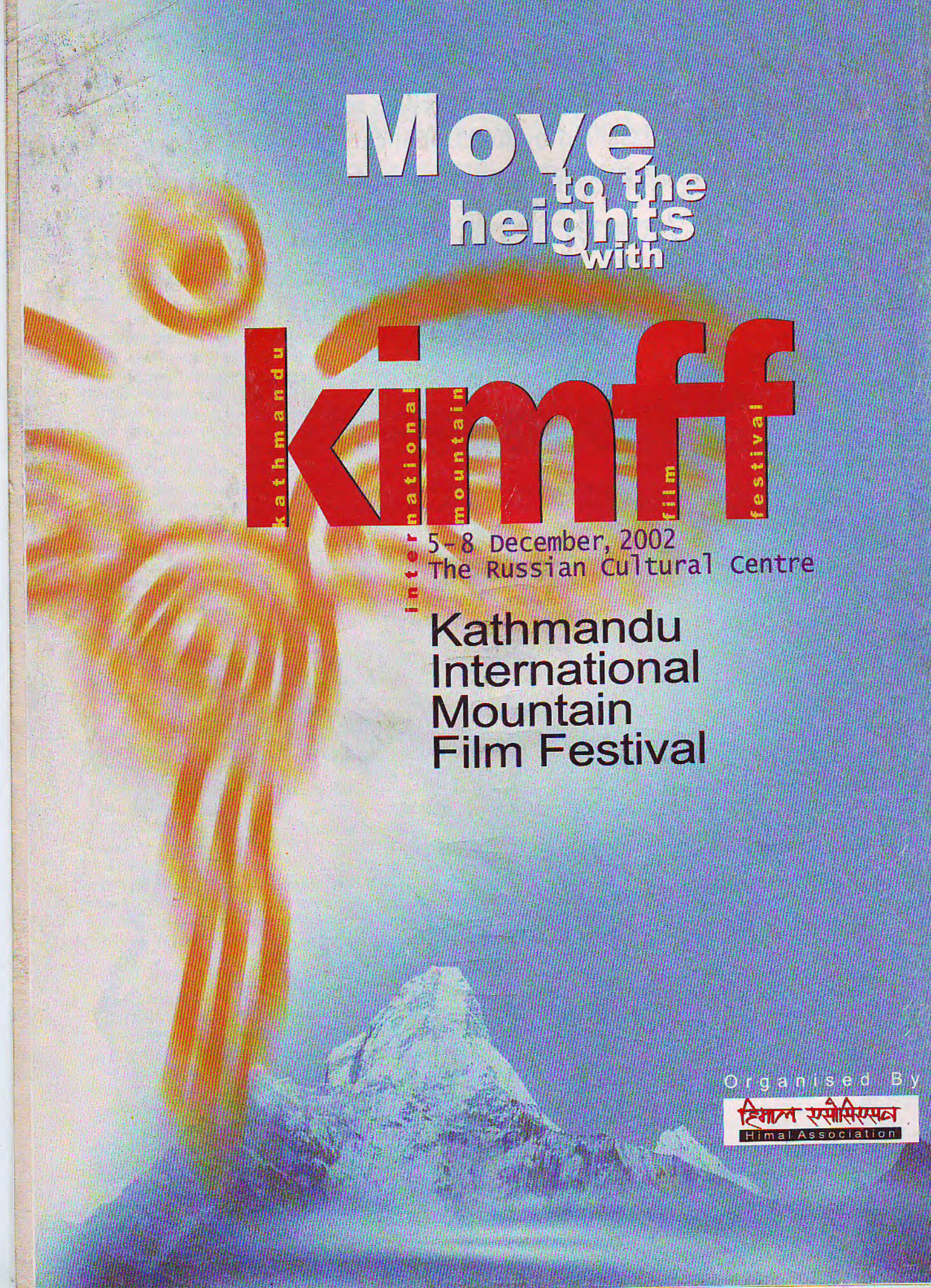
DATA BY DISTRICT, 1931

(1921 data for districts where 1931 data are incomplete)

Orthography conforms to usage of 1931 Census



FROM *A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA*. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1992.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