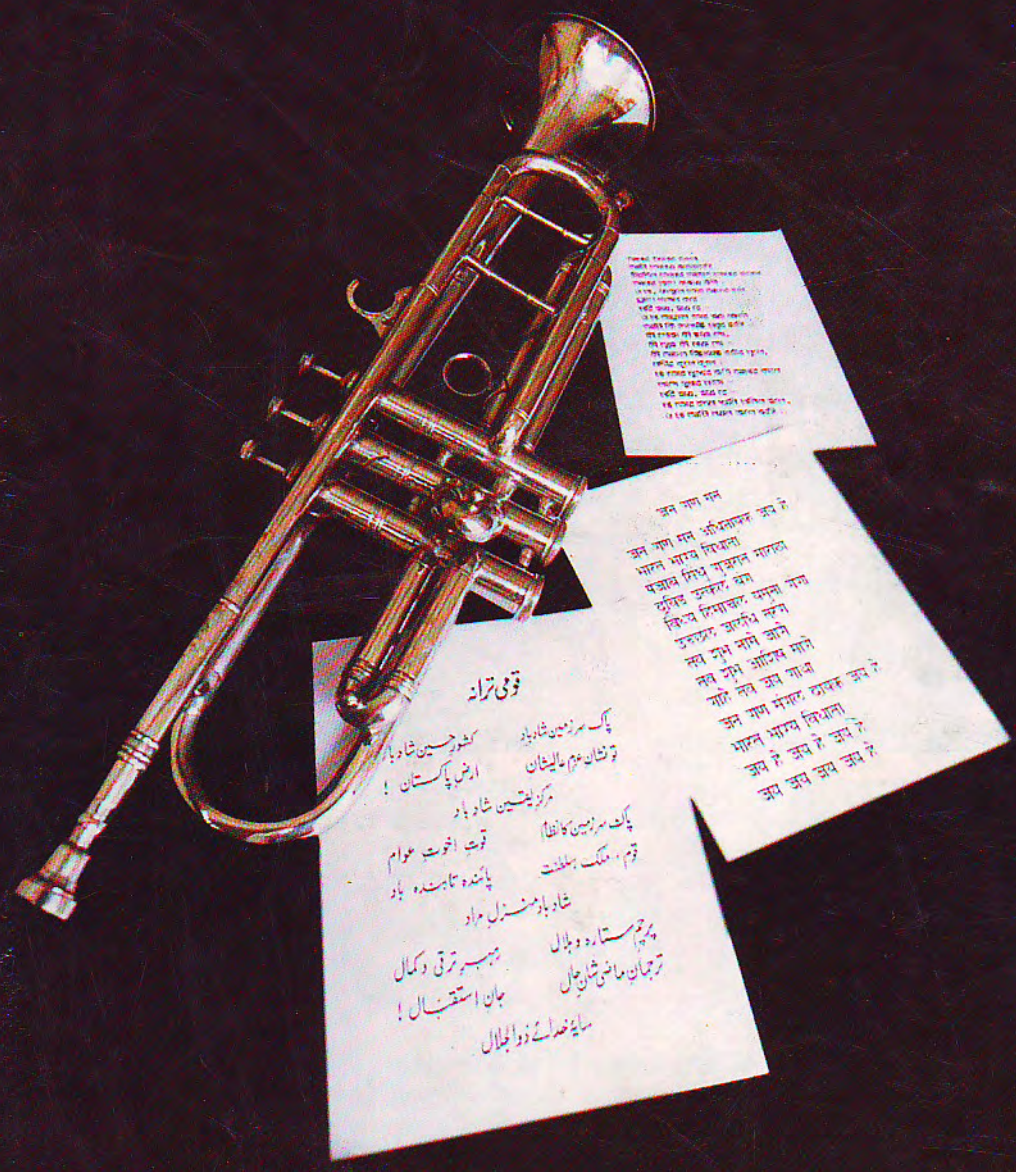
May 2003

HIMAL

SOUTH ASIAN



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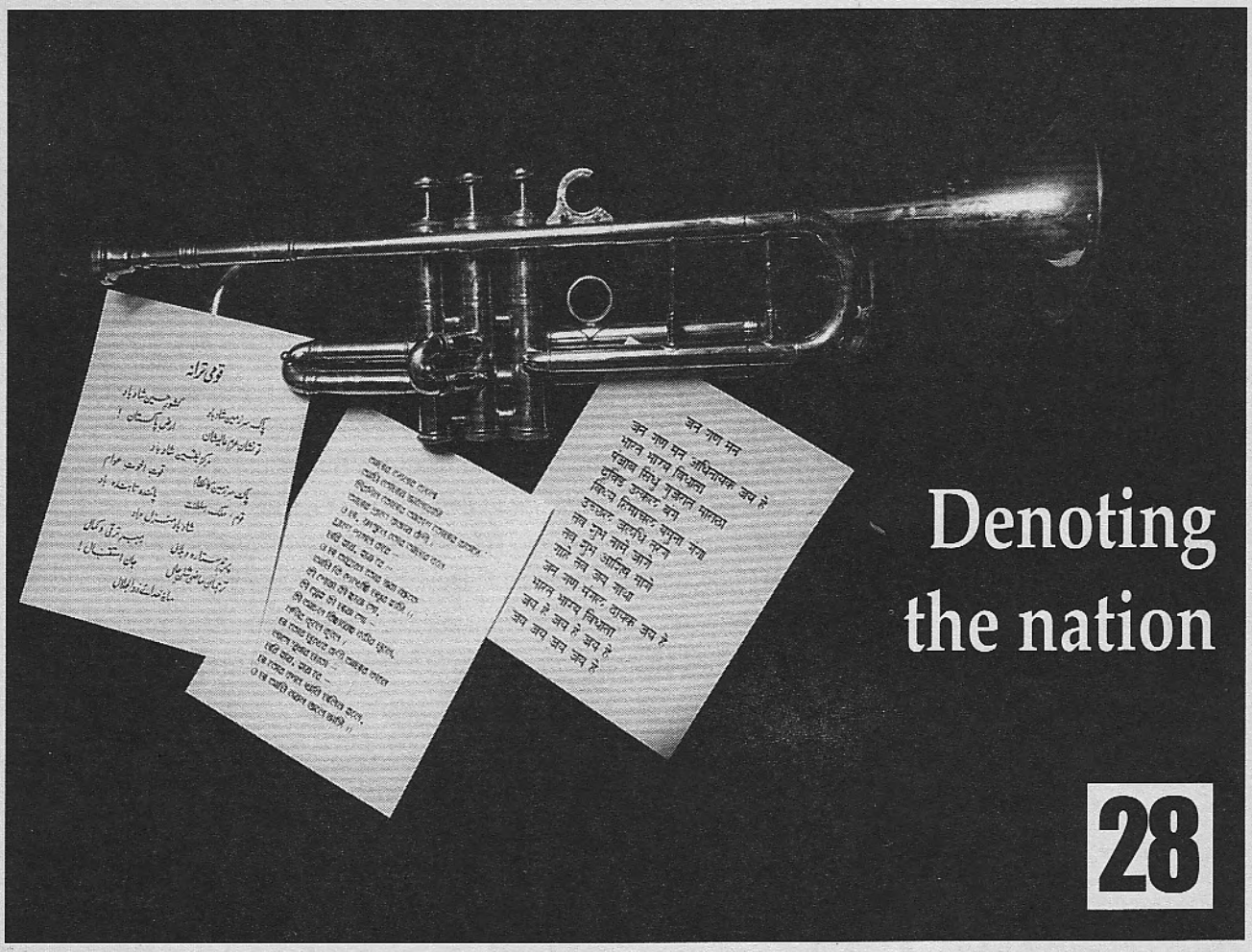

Denoting the nation

28

CONTENTS

HIMAL
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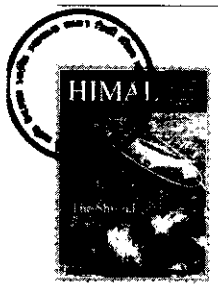


Hampered vision

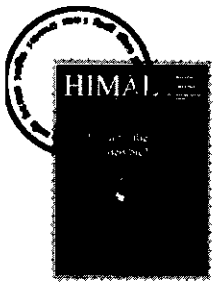
SHRUTI DEBI (*Himal*, March 2003) explores an unnoticed but very important environmental issue – fog and its implications for the Subcontinent. However, while the study is informative, a few points have not been highlighted.

First, the article has failed to indicate the causes of changing climatic conditions on the Subcontinent, particularly those that may have a bearing on the fog, such as the 'brown haze' over South Asia. The United Nations Environment Programme study of the brown haze reveals that it is mostly caused by the burning of biomass (refuse, firewood) and forest fires, and has a significant impact in reducing solar radiation to the earth.

Second, the writer says there is no scientific proof yet linking surface moisture (due to irrigation) and fog. Maybe irrigation has a role to play in the formation of fog in the region, but there is a proven role for air pollution – not only urban air pollution but also rural. While there are many initiatives to curb urban air pollution, rural air pollution remains forgotten. But this is a serious threat to human health, manifest immediately in indoor air pollution, and in the long run, in the accumulation of the pollutants in the air, even at the upper levels. It is important to remember that even if air pollution is low in Delhi, the weather in the city might still be influenced by air pollution in a nearby rural area.

Overall, I agree with the writer on many points, especially that the phenomenon warrants extensive scientific study.

***Anil K Raut**, Lalitpur*



Tainted journalism

IT WOULD be an error to suggest that everyone previously viewed the American media as the "exemplar of journalistic accomplishment". One need only recall the writings of Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, Robert W McChesney and Edward Said, among others, to make the point that for a long time, several analysts of the American media have demonstrated its complicity in narrowly policing the parameters of democratic freedom at home while furthering American foreign policy interests abroad, both on behalf of the military-industrial complex. These criticisms have certainly been available to discerning media practitioners in the South for some time. But they were unsuccessful in and of themselves in dispensing with the popular 'examplar' myth. While the coverage of the Iraqi invasion has made such criticism available to a larger population of viewers and readers, it is too early to write an obituary of this myth, given its ability to regenerate itself through various means.

As for "setting our own standards" suggested by the writer, we have to inquire how possible this is in countries such as Nepal under conditions of globalisation. If compulsions of the market and the state have exposed the erstwhile exemplar, then those forces are also certainly at work in Nepal and in other countries of the South. Unless we can claim to design the wheel differently, our so-called independent (aka private) media, increasingly dominant in our own mediascapes, is similarly susceptible to market- and state-led diktats. Hence, the political economy of media practice does not provide us with too many degrees of freedom to make our own standards.

Notching up our own standards is yet more difficult in a country such as Nepal because of its significant donor dependency. 'Nepali standards' are good to think of for the Nepali media, but in a situation where even the best journalists are implicated in patronage networks arising from the clout of donor-led dollars, setting our own independent standards is simply not easy. Northern countries – the ones whose media has been found wanting – routinely provide help (both in terms of money and training) to the media sector in Nepal in the name of enhancing the capacity of native media persons and institutions. Nepal's best media training institutions and production houses are shot through with donor imperatives and can refuse standards tied to the support they get only at their own peril.

Finally, the media's ability, independence and investigative zeal are linked not only to a set of journalistic skills but also to the recognition of diversity and respect for dissent within its own institutions. In Nepal and other countries of the global South, I have seen little evidence of mainstream media making even a modest attempt to make its news and analysis staff reflective of the demographic profiles of the societies in which it operates. And respect for dissenting imaginations is conspicuous by its absence in Nepal's private media. Media practitioners often refer to themselves as the last bastion of democracy in our societies, but they and the institutions in which they work are hardly democratic. In other words, they are steeped in contradictions similar to those embedded in the 'exemplar' myth.

Yes, we need to make our own standards, but our debates on this subject should start with a focus on the above details, among others.

***Pratyoush Onta**, Kathmandu*

Excerpts from other responses to 'Where are the war correspondents?', Mediafile, Himal, *April 2003:*

I DO not think US reporters 'cowered' before the elite out of fear of seeming unpatriotic. But I do think the 'herd' mentality that kind of drives newsrooms anyway completely got the better of the dailies. In general, they let the competitiveness of it stupefy them into agreeing to a bad arrangement in which they were too dependent on the military. I would guess that if you go immerse yourself in someone else's world, and take

notes, you can write a novel. But if you are writing news, you need to stand apart somehow, even if it is just a little, from the people you are writing about (and take notes). And the Iraqi missile in Kuwait *did* get more coverage than Iraqi casualties.

DK, Bangalore

HAVING VISITED America virtually every year since 1981, I have actually come to have a rather low opinion of American journalists, with just a handful of honourable exceptions. What was a far greater shock for me personally was to see how British journalists behaved. I had always considered them to be fair-minded and balanced but the BBC, on the whole, really behaved like handmaidens of the Americans.

TS, Delhi

YOU START with a wrong premise. US media has always been very biased in the way it has covered US wars and US foreign policy. It has largely rallied around the flag. Watergate and instances like that are quite different – they represent exposes of domestic corruption, and the targeting of one elite group (Democratic party leadership) by another. I think even the South Asian media is quite capable of doing that – witness for example the way they went after the Bofors scandal. Where I think there is an enormous difference is in the way the US media is able to present propaganda as objective news and be seen as credible at that.

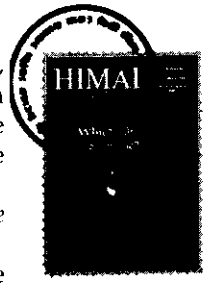
MR, Princeton, USA

LOOK AT the assumption behind the whole article... "When the time came for American editors, reporters, studio anchors and producers to stand up to the establishment and the mass expectation of the public, their feet turned to clay". Why assume that the 'establishment' and the 'government' are always misguided/wrong/corrupt/criminal?

Indeed, one of the great leftist narratives of the Cold War was of an America corrupted, willing to do anything to defeat the Soviets, even cast aside its own ideals.

So I do not really buy the crocodile tears this writer sheds for American journalism. And I am troubled by the article's nostalgic looks back at the halcyon days of the past, when America was supposedly loved by all. And just watch a White House or Pentagon briefing to see some pretty tough questioning... Or listen to National Public Radio and read *The New York Times*. There is more of a debate inside the US than the rest of the world would like to acknowledge. The first Gulf war resolution barely passed the Congress, and the press certainly painted out worst-case scenarios. Afghanistan was promptly labelled a "quagmire" by *The New York Times*, right before the Taliban broke in two. Indeed, this piece is not much for analysis, just the moral equivalency that is the now banal excuse for the failures of the rest of the world.

CV, Washington, USA



More than mothers

I READ the essay by T Mathew (*Himal*, April 2003) with interest. The writer has set himself the unenviable task of resurrecting a discourse that the world of project-running funding agencies and governments are more than keen to bury. To have to argue, in the 25th anniversary year of the Alma Ata declaration of comprehensive and integrated health care for all people, the basic and logical position that vertical health programmes fail to address the holistic needs of people's health is yet another bitter reflection on the times we live in. Mathew has engaged with the task comprehensively and one can only sigh and agree. However, as a paediatrician and health activist, I wish to add a few dimensions to his argument.

Whether from the point of view of women's empowerment or their health, neither is served by a focus on 'maternity' at the expense of the general situation of basic and fundamental rights. In a sense, to speak in terms of 'maternal health' is itself the problem. Women live complex lives trying to balance a multitude of roles, of which 'worker' and 'mother' often seem to be primary. These roles are sometimes complementary, sometimes in conflict. Given the fact that women face the entire gamut of socio-economic and political discrimination in addition to a strangulating gender bias, it is a gross and insensitive oversimplification of women's lives to focus on 'motherhood' and hope to tackle even maternal mortality, leave alone women's empowerment or health. (Incidentally, it is also worth recognising that as many if not more women die of diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis in the reproductive age group as of 'maternity'.) Healthy women will have healthy 'maternity'. Therefore, the overbearing focus and concern for women in the situation of maternity while shying away from basic services for food security, social security, health and education, must be fuelled by concerns other than the 'empowerment of women' or their health.

Mathew correctly identifies this situation as it relates to population growth and, more recently, the spread of AIDS couched in terms of 'reproductive health'. However, even if the agenda were to be openly acknowledged as a 'civilised' way of conducting and ensuring population control, the strategy is faulty. Providing for basic needs, especially health care and education, childcare and the lowering of infant mortality rates are the best contraceptive pills, as facts prove again and again. It is no accident that Kerala with its low fertility rate has never had a population policy. Yet, if budgets are analysed, 'family welfare', another euphemism for population control, gets the lion's share while primary health centres languish without proper staff, labs, drugs, ambulances, drivers, physical infrastructure and referral systems.

Another connection that must be made in this con-

text is the potential risk of combining the insidious policy of the 'two child norm' or 'one child norm' with the falling (or still unequal) sex ratios in the region. Since it is no longer possible to openly practice disincentives for larger family sizes thanks to international covenants, these policies are being introduced through service rules such as not giving maternity leave for the third child, suggestions to disallow housing loans or even access to public distribution systems of food through state population policies and through laws debarring persons with more than two children from standing for panchayat elections in India. Not only is this a potential for further unsafe and sex selective abortions leading to further maternal mortality and a skewing of sex ratios, it is also a gross violation of the rights of the child (to care and breast feeding) on the basis of birth order.

One wonders then, why strategies that are not only useless but downright harmful to women, to children and to populations (even in terms of stabilisation!) are being followed at such tremendous costs to the exchequer. The answers are perhaps to be found in the organisational plans of the agencies touting and funding vertical programmes and the textbooks of economics and political history rather than those of public health.

Vandana Prasad, NOIDA

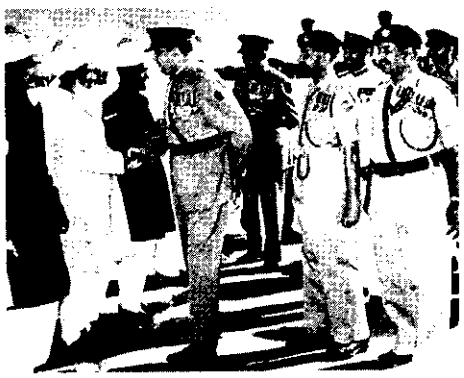
PAKISTAN

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK ORDER

THE NIGHTLY broadcasts of Pakistan's public network television channel, Pakistan Television (PTV), towards the end of April were dedicated to the standoff between the government and the opposition parties in parliament. The issue of contention was the controversial constitutional amendments package – the Legal Framework Order (LFO) – supported by Pervez Musharraf, which, among other things, combines in his person the offices of head of state and army chief. In particular, PTV was keen to point out that the six-month-old parliament is paralysed by the dispute, that billions of rupees of public money have already been wasted on sustaining a dysfunctional parliament, and that the prospects of reconciliation seem remote. The stage now appears to be set for dissolution of parliament by Musharraf.

A year after its genesis, the LFO continues to be a source of serious political instability in Pakistan. While described by Musharraf as a tame addition to the constitution of the country, in actuality the LFO has wide-ranging political, social and economic implications. Debates over it have taken centre stage in the country over the past few months since the reinstitution of parliament.

As is known to observers of Pakistani politics, the role of the military has been central in the affairs of the state virtually since 1947. This has been the case despite the fact that, for all intents and purposes, the new Pakistani state did not have an active army when it came into being. However, a combination of internal and external factors, including elite composition of the state structure and the geostrategic needs of the United States, ensured that the army soon came to be the main powerbroker in the country's politics.



Just the basics: Ayub Khan meets the people.

Musharraf is third in a line of Pakistani military rulers who tried to cement their grip on power through the manipulation of legal and political institutions. His devolution plan greatly resembles the Basic Democracy of Field Marshal Ayub Khan in the 1960s. His insistence on holding a presidential referendum to consolidate his arbitrary presidency mirrored the shenanigans of General Zia-ul Haq in the 1980s. The LFO is the icing on the cake.

Before dwelling on the peculiarities of the current situation, it is important to understand where General Musharraf came from and how he quickly came to be the western world's favourite liberal military dictator. The coup of October 1999 that toppled the elected government of Nawaz Sharif was greeted with widespread disapproval from the international community. The world was still cautiously warming to the good general when September 2001 rolled around.

Within weeks of 11 September, Pakistan was once again a frontline state, and an indispensable ally to gallant beacons of justice in a historic 'war on terror'. The rest of the story is predictable – it mimics all other stories of an imperialist power manipulating countries of the periphery to serve its own interests. The political 'legitimacy' offered to the Musharraf regime by the US and its allies translated into significant new deals with international financial institutions (IFIs) and systematic attempts to reintegrate the Pakistani economy into the global financial fold.

Since the presidential referendum of April 2002, Musharraf has harped on the need for continuity in the economic policies that his government initiated. His commitments to bilateral and multilateral donors have garnered reciprocal support for the regime. The IFIs and the US have been more than willing to overlook what even the European Union's independent election monitoring mission termed a "seriously flawed" election process last winter. And so the LFO, basically a heist, has been accorded legitimacy by the true powers of this world.

Khaki politics

This leaves the people of Pakistan to bear

the consequences of whatever the LFO brings. The re-emergence of the rhetoric about the ineptitude of corrupt politicians, the dominant motif whenever the military is running the government, illuminates the glaring shortcomings of mainstream politics in the country. Given the acute economic strain suffered by most people over the past few years due to policies intensified during Musharraf's tenure, and the clear support that the military has offered to the US in its wars on Afghanistan and Iraq (in defiance of popular sentiment), it would seem unlikely that the military could get away with imposing an order such as the LFO and still blame politicians for the country's woes. Yet it does, as it has done in the past, and as it can be expected to do in the future.

This flagrant disregard for the popular will is possible because of the manner in which society has suffered fragmentation over the past few decades. The failure of the popular will to find political expression is no more evident than at the present time. While the opposition has maintained a reasonably principled stand on the LFO over the past six months, there has been limited effort to leverage mass support on the issue. It would not have been difficult to link political manipulations by the military to the economic difficulties facing ordinary Pakistanis, or for that matter to the military extremism of the United States.

The inability of the opposition to engage in mass agitation reflects two important facts. First, the religious parties, who dominate the current parliament, for all of the hue and cry over the years are not seriously interested in rocking the boat. If they were, their relatively large mobilisations would go beyond just sloganeering against the evil US empire. Second, the mainstream secular parties, including the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), are so discredited after years of politicking with the military that they are simply not able to mobilise the general public, as has been proven on the few occasions that they have tried.

This being the case, it is the religious parties that would profit if the assemblies were dissolved. After all, were there to be elections again, the religious parties would benefit most from the anger of the general public against the secular parties. Such a situation would suit the military establishment as well, since the religious parties are unlikely to bite the hand that feeds them.

An outcome of the national security paradigm of the state, and the oppression and deprivation that have come along with it, is the development of a typically reactionary brand of nationalist politics. In the debate over the LFO, nationalist politics does not necessarily come to the fore. However, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that there are deep divisions in the country's politics, which are a function of the gradual fragmentation of society and the deep cultural divisions that such fragmentation engenders.

Politics for people

This is the dismal state of affairs facing the Pakistani people. The chances are that the assemblies will survive for now, and that the opposition will slowly but surely succumb to the LFO after all. It may succeed in opposing one or two parts of the package, but rest assured that the powers of the president, and the overall chain of command that the LFO establishes, will be retained.

It is difficult to imagine a way out of this dysfunctional situation. Nevertheless, the first thing that must be emphasised is the sanctity of the democratic process. So long as the military is able to dictate the affairs of the state, the situation cannot improve. While it should not be expected that the US would not also manipulate a military-free political sphere, there can be no question about the fact that a consistently functioning electoral process would, at the very least, temper the ability of the US to hold Pakistan hostage to its own interests.

> Mainstream politics offers very little to ordinary Pakistanis, the losers in the global capitalist order

That being said, there should be no doubt that mainstream politics in this day and age offers very little to the losers of the system – and ordinary Pakistanis are definitely losers in the global capitalist order. Liberal democratic parties such as the PPP or the PML-N would likely toe the neoliberal line, even if the functional democratic process compelled them to be more careful than the military about public interest. All said and done, however, the first priority must still be to get rid of the military government, because until this happens, moving from a neoliberal order to a genuinely democratic order is difficult to imagine.

How will this happen? It must be hoped

that the counter-cultural current that has received impetus from the resurgent global anti-capitalist movement finds a stream here in Pakistan. It may take a while, but there is every reason to believe that Pakistanis will eventually catch the bug. ∆

–Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

SRI LANKA

PEACE TALKS ON PAUSE

THE REASONS why the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suspended peace talks with the Sri Lankan government on 21 April were the focus of a late April meeting between LTTE political head SP Tamilchelvan and civil society representatives from the north and south of the country. The meeting, in the northern town of Kilinochchi, was arranged by the Association of War Affected Women, which has been lobbying for information concerning the fate of missing-in-action service personnel. The meeting transpired in the air-conditioned political headquarters of the LTTE around a long conference table no different from those found in ministerial offices in Colombo.

At the meeting, Tamilchelvan took pains to emphasise that the LTTE's decision to suspend the peace talks was neither a withdrawal from the peace process nor a hastily implemented action. According to him, the exclusion of the LTTE from a recent international donor meeting in Washington DC attended by the Sri Lankan government was only one among several reasons that had prompted the LTTE's move. The primary motivating factor, he said, was the absence of significant progress in alleviating the hardships of the people caused by the war.

Soldier patrolling Chavakachcheri.

This view is in contrast to the general belief that the LTTE's decision was motivated only by disappointment at being excluded from the Washington aid conference held on 14 and 15 April. Indeed, the LTTE may have been hoping that by honouring the cease-fire agreement for 14 months it deserved a place at that conference. Colombo has been a successful fundraiser of late, securing USD 800 million from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The LTTE's exclusion from the Washington meeting has demonstrated that the path to international legitimacy in a US-dominated world in which terrorism is anathema is going to be a difficult task.

With its refusal as yet to renounce violence, as the Irish Republican Army has in Northern Ireland, and its continuing practices of child recruitment and targeted assassinations of Tamil political opponents, the LTTE was destined to fail the US test. But the LTTE's position is not irredeemable, and there is much that it and the government can do together in partnership to ensure that the LTTE gains the legitimacy it seeks.

At present, however, the problem is that the LTTE's withdrawal is unlikely to be viewed favourably by the international community. Already the United States and France have urged the LTTE to return to the negotiating table. The Indian government has also expressed its wish that the peace process continue without delay. Despite its protestations that its decision to suspend participation resulted from deliberations over a long period of time, the LTTE's abrupt withdrawal has cost it international credibility. The imperative must therefore be for the LTTE to re-engage with the peace talks. If solving people's hardships is the goal, there is no alternative to the negotiating table.

Persisting pain

The visitors from the south could see for themselves the truth of Tamilchelvan's statement, however. Large parts of Jaffna remain in a state of devastation. The reconstructed Jaffna library stands alone in desolation amidst the ruins of other large buildings. Muslims who are trying to return to Jaffna took us to see their former homes. The walls of these houses remain for the most part, but the houses have been stripped of virtually everything of value, including their roofs. The leader of this once dynamic community, who has formed an organisation called the Displaced North Muslims Organisation, said that they were finding it difficult to return. For people to return they need a place to stay, something most returnees lack.

Night lamps could be seen flickering inside the wrecks of some dwellings. Those who inhabit such 'houses' are not categorised as living in refugee camps, though they live a bare and pathetic existence. There are also people living in refugee camps euphemistically known as welfare centres. These people number only about 10,000, but they live in very poor conditions. One camp we went to did not have toilet facilities for men, and only recently had women been provided with them.

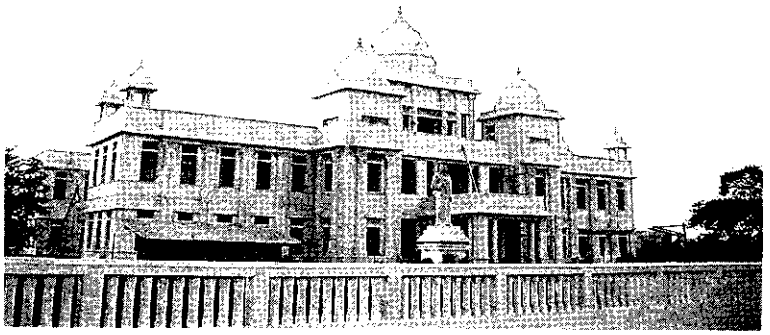
The most visible sign of material change in Jaffna after 14 months of ceasefire is in the number of guesthouses and lodges that cater to visitors from outside. Some of these are reasonably well furnished, with air conditioners and other modern amenities. Small businessmen cater to the high-end tourist traffic in part because both of Jaffna's big hotels have been taken over by the Sri Lankan army.

It is therefore not surprising that Tamilchelvan should have cited the lack of visible progress in improving people's living conditions as the main reason for the LTTE's unhappiness with the current progress of the peace process. As an organisation seeking to play a political role, and one that will one day have to face elections to retain legitimacy, the LTTE has to ensure that it delivers material benefits to the people. To the extent that it fails to do so, its support base will shrink. This is no different from the government trying to provide a peace dividend to the people to ensure its own political stability.

Returning to the table

In his meeting with civil society leaders, Tamilchelvan referred to three types of broken promises. The first concerned the resettlement of displaced persons and the constraints that the army's presence in inhabited areas posed to such resettlement. The second was the lack of financial support for resettlement and reconstruction. The third was the undermining of the partnership between the government and LTTE due to the one-sided participation at the Washington aid conference.

Tamilchelvan reminded his audience that Tamil militancy grew in strength following repeated non-implementation of promises to the elected leaders of the Tamil people by successive governments in Colombo. These include the abortive Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957 and the District Development Council law of 1981, both of which held devolutionary potential. The LTTE emerged from a context in which falling victim to unfulfilled promises is a sign of failure. While politicians might be flexible about promises, guerrilla organisations are typically not.



A new library in Jaffna is not enough.

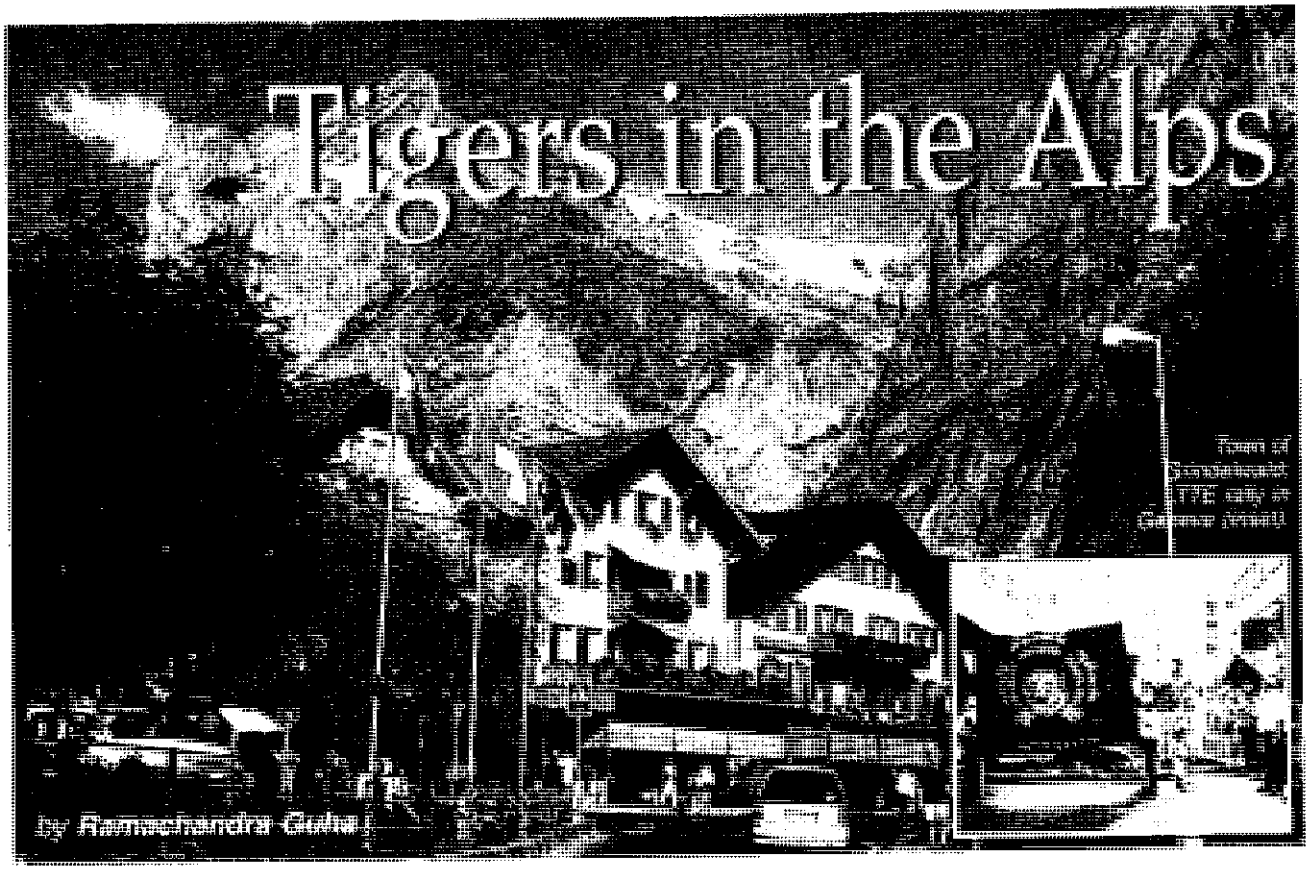
Getting the LTTE back to the negotiating table soon would help maintain the sustainability of the peace process in the long term. It would also serve the national interest to have both the government and LTTE present at the Tokyo donor conference scheduled to begin 9 June, though the LTTE has said that it will not be going to Japan. The government will need to pay special attention to the LTTE's concerns about the lack of progress in improving living conditions. This will require a more speedy disbursement of funds for resettlement and reconstruction. The government also needs to take action to reduce the overwhelming presence of the Sri Lankan army in the highly populated parts of Jaffna city and its environs.

At one of the earlier rounds of peace talks, the government promised to withdraw the army from one of the two hotels it currently occupies in Jaffna. There has been some movement on this matter, and now the army is making plans to shift from both hotels. But the area that the army has chosen to relocate to has given rise to further controversy. The demilitarisation of Jaffna, and indeed of the entire north and east, is a prerequisite for a return of normalcy to the country. It is a difficult challenge and requires a unity of purpose within the government and between Colombo and the LTTE. As commander-in-chief of the armed forces, President Chandrika Kumaratunga's cooperation is essential to this aspect of the peace process.

The most visible sign of change in Jaffna is the number of guesthouses and lodges that cater to outsiders

–Jehan Perera

Tigers in the Alps



by Ramachandra Guha

The revolutionary who succeeds underground is not the one who hides like a mouse under the floorboards, shunning the light of day and social involvement. The successful and resourceful underground worker takes a most active part in the everyday life of those around him, he shares their weaknesses and their passions, he is in the public eye, in the hurly-burly, with an occupation which everyone understands... The wisest way is also the simplest: to combine your secret and your overt activity easily and naturally.

–Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Lenin in Zürich*

On the outskirts of the ancient Swiss town of Bern lies an open space traditionally used as an *allmend*, or collective pasture. The southern part of the field has been converted into an exhibition hall, used off and on to display and sell agricultural machines. The open ground is still large enough to be known as the *grossé allmend*. However, no cows graze there anymore. Empty during the week, on Sundays the field is home to groups of little boys playing football, or frisbee, or flying kites, or simply walking with their fathers and their dogs.

Every year, in August, this Swiss field is colonised for a weekend by a crowd of Tamils. Some are resident in Bern, others come from Zürich and Luzern, still others from Netherlands and Germany and England. But they all came, originally, from the northern districts of Sri Lanka, and many still hope one day to return there. That the civil war in their island does not yet permit; hence this annual get-together in Bern, where four or five thousand Tamils gather to underline and affirm their spirit of community.

When I went to the Bern allmend this past August, the weather was wet, but the celebrations were unaffected. The ostensible focus of attention, all the while, was a series of sporting contests between teams of Tamils representing different parts of Europe. The games played included cricket, volleyball, football and a traditional sport called *killitata*, a hybrid that mixes running with wrestling. The football took pride of place, with six different cups at stake: separate championships for males under 10, under 13, under 15, under 18, and over 35, as well as one for girls.

The ambience was Tamil but the referees were Swiss and the style of the game German. The boys played the focused, physical football of the Bundesliga, short passes and bold body checks, rather than the long, hopeful balls up front that mark the game in South Asia. Their heading was first class and their spirit ferociously competitive. It had to be, with teams bearing names such as Super-Eagles, Germany, and Tamil Eelam, Poland. In the under-18 final, I watched Young Royal Sports Club, Zürich, play the Tamil Football Club of Denmark. The coach of the Young Royals kept up a continual stream of advice and (it has to be said) abuse: *"apdi ille"* ("not like that"), *"Ramesh ku kudu, paithiyo"* ("pass to Ramesh, you imbecile"), and such like. The object of his ire, a boy with streaked hair, was at length substituted. He

came out swearing – in Swiss German.

In the centre of the allmend flew the red-and-yellow flag of the putative homeland, Tamil Eelam. Under the flag, on a table shielded from the rain by a red canopy, rested the prizes of the competition: a row of large silver cups, all looking alike, with 'TAMIL EELAM CUP' inscribed at their base and a portrait of a man holding a flag on the side, his face pencilled inside a map of the island, the Tamil homeland's borders marked.

Towards the northern end of the allmend, the cricket tournament was being held. This was altogether more genteel, played with a soft tennis ball, by men almost all the wrong side of 35. There was one young boys club: Eela Stars CC, Bern, formed by 18-year-old Mahesh in memory of his dead father. But they lost early, to men who had learnt to play cricket under English-trained coaches back in Sri Lanka. The cricket final was played between two German teams. After the match, the winners and losers joined in an impromptu singsong featuring hits from movies made in Madras.

As foreign as the shouts across the allmend were the smells. The food was superb: those Tamil staples, rice and *sambaar* and *dosai* for lunch, as well as snacks such as *shundal* (spiced chick pea) and *bida* (betel nut leaf with grated coconuts and other condiments wrapped inside). Other shops were selling saris and salwar kameezes, bangles and other jewellery, videos and cassettes of film songs, and medallions of the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Velupillai Prabhakaran, cradling a leopard cub.

There was one shop selling books. The titles on display included a compendious edition of the *Kural*, the 1000-page text on life and good conduct by the Tamil sage, Thiruvalluvar. Tamil-French and Tamil-Deutsch dictionaries were also on offer, as were some computer manuals. But, right in front, on the desk that first caught the casual shopper's eye, were the recommended political texts. These were the Tamil translation of Lapierre and Collins' *Freedom at Midnight*, a biography of Ché Guevara and the newly printed memoir of Adele Balasingham, the Australian wife of the Tiger theoretician Anton Balasingham. There were also two books about Balasingham's boss, Prabhakaran. The cover of one book showed the Tiger supremo in a forest clearing, wearing fatigues, surrounded by a bunch of adoring boy cadres. The second book's cover had a large portrait of Prabhakaran in the foreground, with that other successful freedom fighter, Sheikh Mujib of Bangladesh, looking on indulgently from atop.

I do not read Tamil, and had to judge the contents of the books by the photographs on their jackets. I turned for help to the bookshop attendant, a sweet, smiling 20-year-old from Holland, named by his father after the great Indian cricketer of the 1970s, Sunil Gavaskar. I pointed to a book whose cover featured a man in khaki drill, wearing a khaki cap and dark glasses. "Who is this?" I asked Gavaskar Mahendran. "Nehru?" he replied, uncertainly. After I had left I realised who it actually was: Subhas Chandra Bose, the Bengali leader who had allied with the Axis powers during the second world war, and formed an 'Indian National Army' composed chiefly of prisoners of war.

A father who named his son after Gavaskar would be the kind of man who admired Jawaharlal Nehru. But, of course, the moderate Nehru would scarcely appeal to the Tigers. Bose, on the other hand, would: his story, made suitably heroic, sat well with stories of Guevara and Mujib and, of course, Prabhakaran. The bookshop was a manifest display of the real intentions of this sports festival, but there were other signs, too. One was the dress code of the organisers: black trousers, white shirt, and a black jacket with 'WTCC' on the back (standing for World Tamil Co-ordination Committee) and the logo of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in front. There were perhaps some two dozen such men, all dressed alike, spread out across the allmend, coordinating the various games and acting as ports of authority and call.

The black and white outfit somehow seemed appropriate, given the uncomplicated ideology of the Tamil Tigers and the unforgiving nature of their political practice. A slight variation on this dress code was permitted to Parthiban, the man assigned by the WTCC to escort and direct visitors such as myself. Parthiban was short, dapper, and – for a Sri Lankan Tamil – unusually fair and conspicuously clean-shaven. He also had a better-than-average facility with the international language of spin, English. He wore dark grey trousers on both days, with a light cream bush-shirt on the Saturday and a light green shirt on the Sunday – shirts that were almost, but not quite, white. He had his lines well prepared: he was a 'development consultant' working in Geneva, specialising on issues of 'sustainable development'. The aim of this festival he glossed as "telling our youth about their culture and traditions". As we passed the various games, he would repeat: "culture and tradition", "culture and tradition". Only once did the guard drop, when, in answer to a question as to why girls were playing football, he answered that the uplift of women in all respects, including the physical, was part of the "agenda of the revolution".

On instructions from above, Parthiban stuck close to me. Clearly it would not do to let an 'Indian journalist from Bangalore' go about on his own. Fortunately, though, early on Sunday he was taken away by his girlfriend to meet her parents, his prospective in-laws, and I never saw him again. Parthiban's exit allowed me to make the acquaintance of Astrid, a large-boned and genial Swiss woman who had married a Tamil and adopted both his culture and his football team.

Now 29, Astrid had met her husband, Jeyakumar, 10 years earlier while playing volleyball: he, a refugee, had been assigned by the Swiss authorities to a village near her own. She was doing a PhD in geography at the University of Zürich; her topic, the impact of Sinhala colonisation on the civil war. In her free time, Astrid

helped her husband run his soccer team. She spoke Tamil adequately, had learnt the complex script, and had visited the island six times – though not yet, she said sadly, the northern city of Jaffna, the heart of Tamil pride and rebelliousness. She seemed quite starry-eyed about the LTTE. "Every Tamil here supports the Tigers", she told me: "They have to, if they want to support the struggle back home. Only the Tigers run the schools, and take care of the orphans". I reminded her that the Tigers were still a banned organisation in many countries. "Not here in Switzerland", she replied, with uncharacteristic sharpness.

The Tamil boys on the field all called Astrid *akka*, or elder sister. Seeing this big, blonde lady with her arms around little black boys in football dress, my companion that day, the film-maker Sabine Geisiger, exclaimed: "She is the Mother Teresa of the Tamils!" Astrid's acceptance was aided by precedent: like Adele, the wife of Anton Balasingham, here was a white lady devoted to their language and their cause.

Astrid Jeyakumar is a Swiss woman who wants to become a Tamil. Then there was Tommy, the Tamil boy who would much rather be Swiss. A slim and athletic 17-year-old, with glowing skin and large earrings, Tommy was actually named Karthik Sambasivan. He looked askance at his native culture: the Tamils, he said, were disorganised, unpunctual, hierarchical and – in their attitude to women and children – authoritarian. His sister was not allowed to go out alone or date Swiss boys. He would go out with Swiss girls, but was still too scared to tell his parents. He had come to the festival hoping to run in the short sprints, but, to his disgust, the events had been cancelled. There was a consolation: his athletic skills had already put him on the fast track to a Swiss passport.

The motto of this annual festival on the Bern allmend might very well be: 'No more Tommys'. Its chief public purpose was to allow the exiles, spread in small numbers across Europe, to congregate as *Tamils*, to play their games, eat their food, listen to their music, meet old friends and make new ones, and make or break matrimonial alliances. But behind this social bonding was an aim rather more sinister – for to consolidate the Tamils as a community was also to remind them of the unfinished struggle back home, thus to forcefully direct their attention to the needs and claims of the LTTE. Each team had to pay an entrance fee; each shop had to pay a cash deposit; and other collections for the Tigers were undoubtedly being solicited on the side. The skill with which the whole show was organised left one in no doubt as to who was in command.

Exile

There are 45, 000 Tamils in Switzerland, a number larger than it might at first appear, for, there are less than 3.5 million Tamils back in Sri Lanka. And there are only about six million Swiss people. Thus, one in every 80 Sri Lankan Tamils lives in Switzerland. In parts of Zürich and Bern one in every 20 residents is Tamil. How did so many Tamils get so far? They came, in the first instance, fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka. In the 20 years that the war has been on, an estimated 70,000 people have lost their lives. Perhaps five times that number have fled, seeking refuge in India, Australia, Canada and the countries of western Europe.

From the early 1980s, as the civil war in Sri Lanka became more bloody, Tamils in the north began looking for ways of escape. Typically, each family wanted one of its younger male members to seek refuge abroad. This was a classic peasant strategy: the spreading of risk. Those who stayed back pooled their resources and bought a one-way ticket for their young man. In the early 1990s, the Oxford anthropologist, Christopher McDowell, interviewed Tamil refugees in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland. Among the testimonies he collected was this representative one from a refugee named Jeyakumara Sinnathamby:

One in every 80 Sri Lankan Tamils lives in Switzerland

I left Colombo in May 1984 on an Aeroflot flight to Abu Dhabi and then on to Moscow. From Moscow I went straight to East Berlin. I travelled alone because my friends had decided not to come at the last minute. My father paid 15,000 [Sri Lankan] rupees for the journey and I carried USD 300 in cash.

I arrived in East Berlin at 9 o'clock in the morning, and I purchased a 24-hour visa for USD 3 at the airport. Then I took a train to West Berlin: I had no problems because of the visa. At about midday I arrived in West Berlin where I was approached by a Pakistani man. I told him I wanted to travel to Switzerland and he said he would show me the way. The Pakistani bought me a train ticket to Neuss and gave me the photograph of another Pakistani who would meet me there.

Later in the afternoon I took the train to Neuss. For the whole journey I hid myself under a bench in the carriage. I had left my passport with the Pakistani man in Berlin. He said I could have it later. I met the other man in Neuss and he let me stay at his house for a few days. There had been other boys there a few days before. I didn't like the house. Others said that Tamil boys had gone to work in hotels as roomboys. Two days later the Pakistani put me on a train to Switzerland. He said it went all the way to Zürich, but I should get off at Bern.

Again I hid myself under a bench. There were four people in the carriage. I did not notice the border... then there were four more people in the carriage... they may have been guards. I ar-

rived late in Bern and spent the night in the station. The next day I went to the Aliens Police and asked for asylum. They asked me where my passport was... I told them it had been stolen.

An alternative route was to flee to India from the Jaffna peninsula, across the Gulf of Mannar. From Delhi one could take a flight to Belgrade, which like Moscow did not, in those Cold War days, require an Asian to have a visa. Sometimes *schleppers*, or agents, were paid money to ensure safe passage across the Iron Curtain to Italy or Germany and, finally, to Switzerland. As McDowell found, most refugees did not, to begin with, have firm political affiliations. It was just that the civil war had made life intolerable for the ordinary civilian, and the asylum seeker had been chosen by his family as being the most likely to make some kind of life overseas.

The Tamils came to Switzerland alone or in small groups. They were interrogated by the police, before being assigned to hostels with refugees from other countries. They received a living allowance of four francs a day. After a few months they were assigned to cantons willing to receive them, and also allowed to work. Slowly, the Tamils from the remoter valleys somehow found a way to the city, where jobs paid less poorly, where there were less clearly marked out by their colour, and where they might find some more of their fellows. Now, two decades after the first lot arrived, the bulk of the Tamils in Switzerland are to be found in the German-speaking cities of Zürich, Basle, Luzern and Bern.

The Tamils who made it to Switzerland in the early 1980s were mostly men. Later, they were joined by young girls coming to make an arranged marriage. The Swiss Tamils are, overwhelmingly, from the vellala or kariayar castes, that is, from farming or fishing backgrounds. Very few could speak a language other than their mother tongue. Those Tamils who spoke English generally found their way to the United Kingdom or Canada.

As it turned out, most of the Tamils in Switzerland ended up not, as Jeyakumara Sinnathamby had feared, as roomboys in hotels, but as something very adjacent: cooks and cleaners in restaurants. The *pizza-olo* of the Italian restaurant I patronised in Zürich was a Sri Lankan Tamil, as were several of the waiters. Indeed, almost all the Tamil men I met in Switzerland worked in the catering business. That was where, when they first came, they got work most easily; and that was where, for want of other options, they stayed. The authorities encouraged this, for native-born Swiss did not take readily to these dreary and comparatively low-paying occupations. The other trade where there were openings was construction, but the Tamils were deemed too slight to drive cranes or help build offices in the cold. To these jobs were directed refugees from Eastern Europe instead.

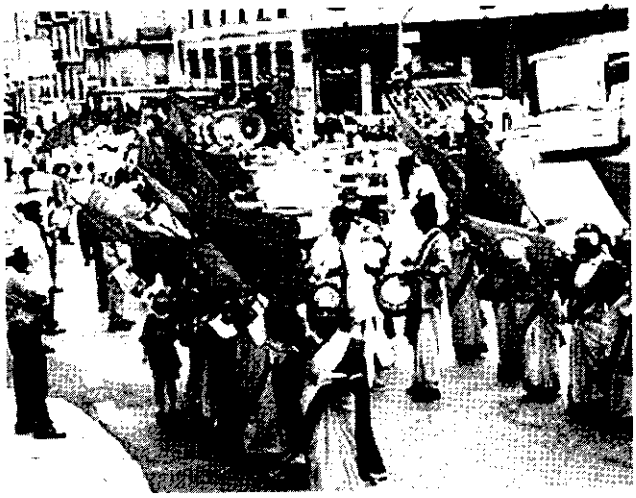
How do the Swiss view the Tamils? Emblematic here

Tamils march in Geneva.

are the shifting views of the popular tabloid, *Blick*. In the early 1980s, *Blick* vigorously denounced the incoming refugees as different and strange, and wanted them deported. But by the mid-1990s *Blick* and its readers had started seeing the Tamils almost as a 'model minority', as hardworking and docile, and doing essential jobs that no one else would, at any rate not for those wages. The ordinary Swiss liked to contrast the Tamils with Yugoslavs and Balkan peoples more generally. These other immigrants had also come in the 1980s, but were regarded as a perfect nuisance: as loud, aggressive, involved in drugs and excessively covetous of Swiss women.

Back in 1843, Jacob Burckhardt complained of his native Basel that it was in danger of silting up "without stimulating life-giving elements from outside. There are learned people here but they have turned to stone against everything foreign". Writing a century and a half later, another fine historian, Jonathan Steinberg, commented that "if Swiss democracy has some ugly features, it shows them to its foreigners". But the ordinary Swiss, I found, has really no interest in Tamil culture whatsoever. He did not know of, and would not care about, the richness of their classical literature or the subtle beauties of their classical music.

Still, of overt racism towards the Tamils there are few signs. In retrospect, the Tamils were certainly lucky that the Kosavars and the Yugoslavs came at the same time as they did. I asked a Zürich anthropologist what the future held. Would there develop an influential far-right party on the French or Austrian models? The anthropologist pointed out that there was already a party whose one-point programme was: 'out with the foreigners'. But, he added, their support base was trifling, and unlikely to grow. Was this because their tradition of humanitarian work made the Swiss more tolerant of difference, or because Switzerland had never been a colonising power? The anthropologist felt that more important by far was the fact that this was the most



Tamil women in a Swiss street rally.

prosperous country in Europe. The Swiss, he said, were simply too rich to be racist.

Street

In Zürich I stayed in the Industriequartier, a district located a mile down river from the main railway station. Its four-storeyed stone apartments were built in the 19th century, but the workers who once lived in them had long since departed. What remained was a large (and now empty) church named for Josef, and the original street names: Heinrichstrasse, Fabrikstrasse and Quellenstrasse. This was now perhaps the most racially mixed of Zürich's districts, with a fair representation of Italians, Turks, Yugoslavs, Bangladeshis and, not least, Tamils.

On my first night in the city I had dinner at the Santa Lucia restaurant, with its Tamil-speaking pizza-olo. I sat at a table outside and observed the street. A Tamil man with an umbrella, aged about 50, parked himself on a cylindrical pillar meant to mark off the road from the pedestrian area. He bobbed his umbrella up and down, and chatted up the passing Tamils: three boys carrying videos (of Bollywood movies, perhaps), a couple out on a date. Two men in their 20s came and joined him, sitting likewise on the parking pillars. A car stopped for 10 minutes, on the road, the driver leaning out to speak to his fellows. This was so Tamil (or South Asian) and so un-Swiss: the use of public space to 'take the air' (*hawa khana*, in Hindustani), to stand on the road or a street corner in anticipation of other members of the community – whether rich or poor, young or old, men, women, or children.

Another evening I was walking along Josef Park, in front of the old working-class residences. I came across a group of Tamil teenage boys, walking and playing with a football. They must have spoken Swiss German at school, but among themselves they conversed in Tamil: surely, I thought, a unique form of bilingualism. They seemed to know the locality intimately, and appeared very comfortable on the street, gossiping in their own tongue as they kicked the ball off the parapets and dust-bins. Their attention was momentarily diverted when four (white) Swiss girls came and sat on a bench in the plaza. The Tamils cast shy and sly glances in their direction, but made no move to talk or flirt. They could have been a group of loitering boys in any South Asian town, out on the road between six and eight in the evening, after school but before dinner, homework and bed. As in South Asia, this group was strictly male. For the girls had returned home directly from school. They had to help with the cooking and housework, and in any case it was not deemed safe or proper for them to wander about in the streets.

Exiles everywhere tend to stick together, at least in the first generation. But in this case, the natural desire to hang out with one's (likewise vulnerable) fellows is strengthened by conscious and directed social organisation. In the heart of this immigrant ghetto of Zürich is an office which runs no less than 73 Tamil schools in Switzerland. These schools hold classes twice a week: on Wednesday afternoons, when the regular Swiss schools close early, and on Saturdays. The children come in after they turn five, and sometimes stay until the age of 20. The kids start with Tamil songs and stories, before moving on to the alphabet and the construction of sentences. They use well designed and lavishly illustrated textbooks, printed in Bielefeld in Germany, but with their content supervised by a committee of Tamil professors from Jaffna, Colombo, Thanjavur and Madras.

The association that runs the schools calls itself the 'World Tamil Education Service'. Its office, on the corner of Josefstrasse and Langstrasse, is equipped with computers and a photocopier, and even an airy and well-lit conference room. One afternoon I met the two main office-bearers: Mahindran, a well-built man about five-feet nine-inches tall, and Sudhaharan, who was much shorter, balding and with glasses. Both wore moustaches, both said they were 33, and both had come in the late 1980s from Jaffna, abandoning their college degrees half-way. And both had worked as cooks in Zürich: Sudhaharan, who helped out part-time at the education service, still does.

In the early 1990s, a few Tamil schools were started in Switzerland on an individual and uncoordinated basis. In 1995, Mahindran took the initiative to hold a Tamil language exam in which 315 students took part. The next year he held a meeting of Tamil teachers from across the country, which decided to formalise the curriculum and seek proper textbooks. By 1998, there were 35 Tamil schools in Switzerland and about 1400 students. Now there are 73 schools with 4000 students enrolled in them. The teachers work mostly for free, but a few are paid from a grant given by the aid agency, Caritas.

I asked Mahindran and Sudhaharan whether their schools taught history and politics. No, they said, we want only to focus on language and culture. When

pressed, they admitted that the boys and girls did get a political education at home from their parents, who naturally had ideas of their own about the civil war. I then asked about the recent ceasefire on the island. Both of them, mild-mannered and gentle as they appeared to be, were firm and decisive in their political views. They were for the Tigers, completely. When I asked about Tamils who might have reasons for not supporting the Tigers, Sudhaharan answered: "In the early 1980s, there were other armed groups, but these were agents of the Sri Lankan or Indian governments. 15 years of struggle have shown that only the Tigers are trusted by the Tamil people. Of course, thieves and crooked businessmen do not like the LTTE. But all others do". Then he added, as an afterthought: "Of course, they [the Tigers] are strict".

I asked whether the Sri Lankan situation could be compared to that of Palestine. At one level the parallel held: both the Tamils and the Palestinians faced dispossession and a colonising army. But Sudhaharan, small and slight as he was, insisted that the Tamils were far superior. "Look at the Palestinians", he said, "they are fighting among themselves – one for Hamas, another for Arafat. And some of them are still throwing stones at the Israelis! They must build a united *military* force". The contrast could not be clearer: on one side the disunited Palestinians, on the other the Tigers, sole spokesmen for their people and ferocious fighters to boot.

'The Swiss are too rich to be racist'

At one point, nervous about the turn of our conversation, Mahindran and Sudhaharan clarified: "These are our personal views. We do not teach them in our schools – no politics there, only language and culture". Whether they seeped into the schools or not, their own views were pretty direct. Almost my last question related to the aim of the peace talks now being overseen by the Norwegians. I asked whether they would be satisfied with autonomy within a united Sri Lanka, or whether they would still insist on independence. The answer, from Mahindran, was immediate and resonant with feeling. "We have lost *everything* – homes, lands, forests and families. What for? In 1985, we might have accepted autonomy. But now, after all this struggle and sacrifice, what can we accept? Only Eelam".

Temple

An abiding memory of my time in Zürich is of church bells pealing. I lived across the street from a Protestant church, but elsewhere, too, conversations were interrupted by the sound of bells rung faithfully every quarter of an hour. Who was listening, or answering the call? Here, as elsewhere in western Europe, few people under 50 were practising Christians. The indication of this was not merely falling attendance in church. It lay also, for instance, in the divorce rate, which was more than 60 percent.

In this city of the great theologian Zwingli, the community that seemed to most seriously follow their faith was the Tamils. One day I called on a temple priest in the suburb of Adliswil. Dedicated to Shiva's second son, Subramaniam, the temple is on the banks of a gentle and green river, which was nice, and the priest was short and with a pronounced paunch, which was reassuring. When I had visited Sri Lanka earlier in the year, an experienced political journalist told me that malnutrition was rife in the north: "The only well fed people there", he said, "are LTTE cadres, traders, and Hindu priests".

Priests in Indian temples are also always overfed. But the story of Sharma *vadhyar* of Adliswil was anything but typical. Although from a family of priests, he had rejected the trade and worked in a firm in Colombo for 14 years. He was at the same time an activist with a group affiliated to the Fourth International. When the going got hot in Sri Lanka, fellow Trotskyists in Germany helped him seek asylum there. He found his way to Zürich, where the Tamils urged him to resume the family calling. He taught himself the scriptures, and started naming the odd baby. He graduated to marriages and deaths, and eventually was able to persuade the Swiss authorities to allot him space for a temple.

Fat, affable, wearing a *dhoti* but with his upper body bare, Sharma was a bit of an operator, but a charming one, and also highly successful. He wore large gold-and-diamond earrings, obviously a post-Trotskyist accretion. We spoke in his office, drinking orange juice in plastic cups, amidst a pile of Tamil books. Among them was a new edition of the *Ramayan* as retold by the legendary poet Kamban, which Sharma said had been gifted to him by the chief minister of Pondicherry, India.

"Communism is service. What we are doing here is also service". Saying this, Sharma took us to his temple. Here, dozens of young men were cutting vegetables and cleaning idols, in preparation for a prayer to be held later in the day, for which 400 people were expected. We could not stay, so Sharma asked that we come instead for the opening of a 10-day festival, to begin the next Friday.

When I got there the following week, the place had been transformed. The entrance now had a 20-foot-high tower made of cardboard affixed to it, mimicking the traditional *gopuram* of the south Indian temple. The cardboard was coloured and painted over with deities. On either side flew a flag: the red-and-white Swiss flag to the right, the yellow-and-blue Adliswil cantonal flag to the left. It was nine o'clock when I reached, but the ceremonies had begun. Inside, musicians specially flown in from Sri Lanka were playing their clarinets. Sharma was anointing the idols behind an orange curtain. The devotees patiently waited: women and kids sitting on the floor, the men standing to a side, separately.

After half an hour the curtain was lifted, to reveal both lord Subramaniam and his attendant. Sharma wore a richly embroidered gold dhoti and a red-and-gold sash on his head. Half-a-dozen assistants began chanting. A young pig-tailed priest with a fine tenor voice did a solo number, reading from a book in which Sanskrit had been rendered in the Tamil script. Altogether, the priestly functions seemed rather *ad hoc*, learnt from books and improvised rather than traditionally learnt. Yet there was no mistaking the devotion. One of the poems read out was a long invocation to the rivers of the Indian heartland, the waters that had given birth both to the language of Sanskrit and to classical Hindu civilisation. "Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Narmada!" chanted the tenor, "Godavari, Mahanadi, Tungabhadra!" The action was moving southwards, to rivers added on (I suspect) by a medieval Tamil saint. We finally reached as close to Eelam as Tambaraparani, a river that runs in the southern parts of Tamil Nadu.

Worshippers were streaming in all the time, making their way from the outlying cantons. Little boys in handsome kurta-pyjamas, girls in shimmering salwar kameezes – the preferred colours red-and-silver or bright green – women bedecked in jewellery, as if for their own weddings. They came in twos and threes, unobtrusively and spread out in time, then suddenly revealing themselves to be a consolidated and surprisingly large force. By 11 o'clock, there were at least 800 people present. It was at this hour, as Sharma had previously told us, that a Swiss Christian priest of the vicinity was expected to come and hoist the temple flag.

'The Palestinians are divided – the Tigers are the sole spokesmen for the Tamil people'

The churchman did not come ("caught in a traffic jam", was one rumour we heard) so, at 11.15, Sharma came out of the temple, accompanied by young men carrying the deity under an umbrella embroidered in scarlet. The priest hoisted the temple flag, between those of Adliswil and the Swiss Federation, broke a coconut, and formally announced the inauguration of the festival.

Memory

The Tiger presence at the temple was muted. There was no Eelam flag anywhere. I did see some teenage boys wearing black-and-white, but their fathers were dressed in gayer colours. Still, the Tigers must on the whole approve of a devotionalism that brings the Tamils together, that endorses their unity as well as their separateness from the Swiss mainstream.

In Adliswil, just 15 minutes walk from the temple, lives a man who is both a devout Hindu and a committed Tiger. His name is Mathialakan, and he is the prime mover behind the annual sports festival of the Tamil diaspora. The chief chef in a Swiss restaurant, Mathi has the sleek and trim body of an athlete. His eyes are soft, almost dreamy, his hair thick, his manner quiet but utterly self-assured. We spoke in his house, amidst a clutter of papers and files from the recently concluded Bern meeting. Mathi's English was as dodgy as my Tamil. So, for the most part, he spoke in Swiss German, his words translated by Yumi, a Swiss student of Japanese extraction who had come with me. Also in the room were his wife and their 16-month-old-son. On the wall hung photographs of his parents, a red LTTE poster with a growling yellow tiger on it, and a Tamil calendar dominated by a portrait of Prabhakaran.

Mathi had studied in Mahajana College near Jaffna, a place which was, as he put it, "famous in Sri Lanka for its football team". They had won the district championship eight years in a row. He himself played at that pivotal position, centre-forward. In 1987, he was doing his A-levels in Jaffna, and hoped to become an accountant. But, like so many others, his studies were interrupted by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). The oppressions of the IPKF, remembered Mathi, "had united all the previously quarrelling Tamil groups against them". A fellow student, Thileepan, went on a fast-unto-death in protest against the alliance of the Sri Lankan army and the IPKF. "Even Mahatma Gandhi drank water during his fasts", said Mathi, meaningfully, "but not Thileepan". After Thileepan died, the students exploded in support of the Tigers. With hundreds of others, Mathi was also put in jail. His mother would come to see him everyday, till, taking pity, an Indian Tamil soldier called Narayanaswami allowed him to escape. He made his way to Colombo and, in 1990, to Switzerland.

As an exile in Zürich, Mathi was struck by the divide between parents and children. The problem was that parents simply gave orders – eat this, dress like that, etc – without explaining what the culture was. So, thought Mathi, we need to more systematically teach our children about the homeland. "500 years ago, we Tamils had our own country, our own government, our own state. Colonisation by the Europeans and oppression by the Sinhalese destroyed it. Now we are struggling for the reclamation of our land. Even while we are here, we must prepare to go back to Eelam. Eventually that will be our home, not Switzerland. Here we can never escape being foreign".

In 1996, Mathi started an association called Tamilar Illam, or the Tamil House. He focused on sport, a medium that would best bring parents and kids together. He enforced a 'Tamil only' rule on the football field. In 1998, he held his first tournament, for the under-15s, with seven participating teams from five cantons. Slowly, the scope expanded to include other age groups – under 10, under 13 and under 18. There was no need, in his mind, for a 18 to 35 category, since those who fell within it were, like him, already Tamil in spirit and

sentiment. There was, however, an over-35 group for the parents, who would take their kids to the club and end up playing themselves.

The first transnational sports festival was held in 1999. It was a master-stroke: bonding the old with the young, pleasing those parents whose boys played, spurring the ambition to participate in the parents of those who did not. "How does this link to the struggle for Eelam?" I asked. "Our war is not only for the separation of territory", said Mathi. "It is for the maintenance of language, culture and religion – all together (*alles zusammen*). The festival brings parents and children together, renews cultural ties, and promotes a unity of outlook among exiles in different countries. I had my own dreams destroyed", he added, "my own life is effectively finished. But these boys can still, with our help, realise their dreams". I suppose he meant that he had now to live out his days as a chef in Adliswil, when he hoped to have been an accountant in Sri Lanka. This was said with such finality that it unnerved Yumi, with her own life ahead of her. "It is astonishing, the casual way in which he said 'my life is destroyed'", she told me later, "That was almost like kicking me off the sofa".

I asked Mathi who he had supported in the recently concluded soccer World Cup. "Brazil, naturally", he said. It appeared that he was a fan of the game of cricket, too. "I support the Indian cricket team", he told me: "even when they play Sri Lanka, and despite the doings of the Indian Peace Keeping Force". The memory of Thileepan's martydom could not completely efface the attachment to India, the mother lode of his language and religion. He hoped next year to take his son to the sacred shrine of Tirupathi in south India, to make the traditional offering of his first-born's lovely crop of black hair.

On that planned visit, Mathi would be accompanied by a bunch of boy footballers from Zürich. "Here we can only teach them so much about our culture", he said, "they have to go to Jaffna to experience it". Another (and larger) ambition was the creation of a full-fledged Tamil football team, entered under its own colours in the Swiss National League. Did not, I asked, this dream clash with the other dream of return? In his eyes this was not a contradiction. "All I hope", he said, "is that our boys should be proud of our culture and history. They can be Swiss by nationality, but they must still be Tamil in spirit". A Tamil team in the Swiss league would also be consistent with what was still a possible, if worst case, scenario. "If the war gets worse, and there are no Tamils left in Sri Lanka, they will at least be here, with their culture intact".

Mathi, like others of his fellows, refused to admit of any reason for a Tamil not to support the Tigers. "Without the Tamil Tigers there would be no Tamils", he remarked, implying that they would all have been killed by the Sri Lankan army. After I had finished interrogating him, Mathi said, "Can I now ask you a question? Why is *The Hindu* (the Madras newspaper he was told

I wrote for) so against the Tigers?" I answered, weakly, "I do not know – I only write on cricket, for the magazine section, not on politics". "Surely", he went on archly, "you read the rest of the paper? Why is *The Hindu* so hostile to the Tigers?"

I now decided that I must be at least half-way honest. "Perhaps because they have more sympathy with the Tamil moderates, such as the leaders of the TULF". "Then", continued Mathi, "let me ask you another question. What do *you* think of the Tigers?" "I share their dream of a just solution for the Tamils", I began. "I admire their courage. But why did they have to kill Tamils who might have differed from them? The assassination of Sinhala prime ministers and ministers – even that can be understood in the context of army atrocities. But why kill Amirthalingam and Tiruchelvam?"

Mathi turned to his wife, sitting discreetly behind him, and asked her to refresh his memory. She recalled for him who the two men were, and then he proceeded: "Amirthalingam – he was elected on a platform of Tamil Eelam in 1977. But he forgot about it – started looking out for his own interests instead. Tiruchelvam – he might have been of Tamil blood, but he lived in Colombo and could not speak Tamil. And he was working with the Sinhala and the Americans and against the Tamils". This was crude propaganda, but he seemed to believe it completely. I thought I had to protest, for Tiruchelvam was a scholar of learning and integrity. I had been to his house in Colombo, and had many friends who admired and even worshipped him. A brilliant legal scholar who had trained and also taught at Harvard, he was drafting a devolution package for the north when he was murdered by the Tigers. Ironically, in his last public lecture, Tiruchelvam had spoken out against what he called the "absurd contradiction of imposing a mono-ethnic state on a multi-ethnic polity". "No, no", I said now to Mathi, "he was working for autonomy. Maybe not independence, but surely that was not enough reason to kill him?" I tried to explain what 'autonomy' meant, but Mathi either did not understand, or chose not to.

Not in 20 years – since I lived with Marxists in Calcutta – could I remember having had political discussions of such intensity. Still, Mathi was not, in the formal sense, a 'party man'. His admiration for the Tigers was born out of his experiences as a student under the IPKF, and it deepened in exile, as alternatives to their

path were crushed or faded away. Even more intense was a talk I had with the leading Tiger ideologue of Switzerland, Anton Ponnarajah. He called himself a 'human rights activist', a now almost ubiquitous pose adopted by sympathisers of revolutionary groups across the globe.

I met Anton in the restaurant of the Luzern railway station, as he waited to catch a train to Geneva. The one hour he had allowed me was extended to two, and then to three. Anton was stocky, with puffy cheeks and the obligatory moustache of the Tamil male. His air was well oiled and combed backwards. Like Mathi and Mahindran, he was full of charm. He laughed and smiled easily, and refused to allow me to pay for the drinks. Of all the Tamils I met he was the most articulate and well-read. He had studied in a top Jesuit school in Jaffna where, I guess, he had learnt how to state and defend a case.

Anton left Sri Lanka in 1985. At the time he was in the middle of a degree course in mechanical engineering. But, he insisted, "by profession I am an actor". He had trained at a once vibrant theatre school run by AC Tarsesius in Jaffna. (The school was a casualty of the civil war, and Tarsesius himself was in exile in London.) After coming to Switzerland, he founded a mixed theatre group, acting with Arabs and Africans in plays with inter-cultural themes. Now he had shifted over to human rights work, but still managed to supervise a theatre school for the Tamils diaspora. He had designed a one-year course, with 500 hours of contact time, funded by the exiles, and with a dozen full-time students. This past year, his students had put on two plays for their commencement, one dealing with the Sri Lankan conflict, the other with the position of foreigners in Switzerland.

Twice a year, in April and August, Anton went to Geneva to meet delegates to the UN Commission on Human Rights. I asked him whether, in addition to the violations of the Sri Lankan army, he also mentioned violations by the Tigers. "No", he said, "because the Tigers are reacting to their actions". "What if reaction becomes over-reaction", I asked. "We are not promoting human rights abuse by the Tigers", answered Anton, "but you have to understand it as a response to army excesses. You can call it over-reaction, but others will view it differently".

Anton liked to tell Swiss friends who criticised their country, "For me your political system is heaven. I came from hell". In this land's past lay, perhaps, a lesson for his own. "Look at Swiss history", he told me, "these cantons hated each other, they massacred each other. But finally they have learnt to live with and respect one another". For all his partisanship, Anton seemed hopeful of a political solution. As we spoke, the warring parties were preparing to talk in Thailand. "Are the Sri Lankan politicians more sincere than in the past?" I asked. "No", said Anton, "but their military is now certain that they cannot win the war". He did not think the independence versus autonomy issue would pose a problem. "If the two parties are willing, a solution can be found: federal, confederal, two countries, or whatever".

This political realism towards the future was, however, markedly absent in Anton's understanding of the past. I asked whether he felt the Tigers should apologise for having killed Tamils such as Amirthalingam. "He gave a clean shit to the IPKF", Anton answered, immediately. He then compared the TULF leader to Vichy collaborators who were later hanged. "Whoever is a betrayer will be punished by the masses".

But what about Tiruchelvam? Why murder a fine and internationally respected scholar? "Because he was working against the interests of the Tamils", came the very quick reply. "Tiruchelvam said he was against the LTTE, but it is the Tigers who represent the whole community, the whole of the Tamil people. He talked against human rights violations of the Tigers, but never about the army". He reminded me again of what the French and the British had done to their 'betrayers' after the second world war: "If you are willing to be used by the enemy's propaganda machinery, you should be prepared for the consequences". Anton added, spitefully, "Tiruchelvam did not know Tamil, did not even know where Jaffna was". (At least one of these statements I knew to be a lie. When I visited Tiruchelvam's house in Colombo, his still intact study was lined with rows upon rows of Tamil books.) Later in the conversation, Anton told me of a speech at which Prabhakaran had apparently said: "If I betray the Tamil people, I too will be killed". This was a chilling justification of political murder, here being quoted with pride.

I insisted on seeking some admission of Tiger frailty. In parts of Mannar and in the eastern region around Batticaloa, the LTTE had mounted savage attacks on Tamil-speaking Muslims who had resisted being taxed. Independent reports suggested that whole villages had been ethnically cleansed. "What about the Tigers' treatment of the Muslims?" I asked. Pat came the answer, patiently prepared over years, and articulated many times before: "There was *never* any conflict in the past. It has been created by the government. As Lenin says, the oppressors always try to create clashes between sections of the oppressed. But as Tamils we know what it means to be subjugated by a majority. Give us the chance to decide our own future. Wait for the political solution. Then the Tiger leadership will never allow oppression of another minority".

The only time Anton stumbled, very slightly, was when I raised the question of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. He first blamed it on the IPKF (original action causing a justifiable over-reaction). In any case, if the Sri Lankan prime minister was now willing to talk to the Tigers after all the killings of Sinhala politicians, why could not the Indians do likewise? But this was different, I answered. One could not so easily justify the murder of a leading foreign politician in his own land.

This single act had wiped out all sympathy for the Tigers among the 60 million Tamils of India. Besides, Prabhakaran himself was an accused in the Rajiv Gandhi murder case, and the Indian government had demanded his extradition. Rajiv's widow, Sonia, was leader of the opposition in the Indian parliament, and likely a prime minister-in-waiting. Would not this be a problem for the peace talks? Would not those talks require, for their success, the benign approval of the regional big brother?

Anton sought refuge in his leader's choice of words. "In his press conference [of April 2002], Mr Prabhakaran referred to the killing of Rajiv as a 'tragic event'", he said. "Not, mind you, as a successful suicide operation". Then, like a good Leninist, he insisted that these questions were at bottom political, not personal or emotional. "Sonia Gandhi or even Mr Prabhakaran will not live forever. A way will be found to resolve this".

As Anton prepared to pick up his things to catch the train to Geneva, I asked him some questions in quick succession:

Q: Are you a Christian?
A: A Catholic by birth, but I do not follow any religious observances or go to church, although my wife does.
Q: Are you a Marxist? (this provoked by the several references to Lenin).
A: No, because what Marx and Lenin did or said were appropriate to their context. We have to design solutions relevant to our context.
Q: Are you a Tiger?
A: I am a Tamil, and all Tamils are Tigers.
Q: Really? (this said quizically).
A: Let me explain. I see myself first and last as a Tamil. I will always be a Tamil, even if I live 50 years in Switzerland. In my homeland the Tamil people are being oppressed, and only the Tigers are fighting this oppression. So I am a Tiger.

Faith

Anton Ponnarajah had abandoned his baptismal faith for another. Still in the church, and a priest no less, was Father Peppi, who had been sent by his bishop to minister to the 4000 Tamil Catholics in Switzerland. A round-faced and ever-smiling man, Father Peppi had studied in a seminary in Jaffna during the bloody days of the 1980s. The students, he recalled, had read their texts by candlelight, sometimes with the sound of shelling in the background. The father seemed to view the IPKF much like any Tiger did. He was himself picked up one morning by Indian soldiers – at 6.30 am, while he was praying, and released only late at night.

After his ordination, Father Peppi was asked to look after a refugee camp in Vavuniya. There were 30,000 inmates: Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Each family lived in a tiny room, 10 feet by 10 feet, and with no education or health facilities. He remembered a cholera

Cardboard cut-out Prabhakaran towers over Geneva marchers.

epidemic in which 30 babies died in a month. "Always panic, that time", as he put it. One of his fellow priests had estimated that there were 30,000 war widows in the north. But, Father Peppi added at once, "Other side also there are many widows in the south".

The father was proud of the efforts of his church towards reconciliation. His own patriarch, the bishop of Mannar, had collected money for the Sinhala poor. The bishop of Colombo had collected blood for Tamil victims of the war. The Catholics were a minority on both sides, but in the vanguard of the moves for peace.

Father Peppi's present job was to hold Tamil language services for the exiles. The first and third Sundays of the month he took mass in Zurich, the second Sunday in Luzern or Bern, the fourth Sunday in Geneva or Lausanne. The Swiss church had given him a flat – which is where we spoke – but their flock was completely segregated from his own. They met only once a year, on the second Sunday in November, observed as a 'foreigners day' in Zürich, when the Tamil Catholics, along with the Albanians, Serbians and others, were granted 10 minutes of a multi-lingual service that ran for a whole morning. Once this was over, the Tamils retreated to their ghetto.

In Switzerland, Father Peppi stayed away from the Tigers. He did not attend their functions, and they left him alone, assured that he had no political axe to grind. When I asked why they had such a following, he said it was because they were the only organisation now fighting for the Tamils. "They are the only redemption for their sufffering. My bishop recognised this, hence he urged the government to talk to them". But, I asked, were there problems back home with the Tigers? "Yes, for in their own areas they are like a government. They control everything. They want obedience to their rules. Their pass system proved difficult for us. Our people would sometimes complain about the taxes they levied". Are they taxing refugees, too, I asked. Father Peppi said he did not know.

How much money do the Tigers in fact get from the exiles? One published account said they collected 50 Swiss francs per month per family. This, accumulated over the community, would amount to five million francs annually. A university professor in Zürich knew

someone who paid, he said, as much as 200 francs a month. A Swiss journalist said that a great deal of money was also collected on events like Heroes Day, observed annually on 27 November, when thousands of Tamils would meet to hear patriotic speeches and to commemorate their dead. A male nurse in Basel told me simply that the "Tigers ask many, many money. They ask a lot if you have or if you do not have". He claimed to know a family who had made a one-time payment of 10,000 francs. Two or three years later, the Tigers came back to ask for more.

The nurse was a Muslim, originally from Mannar. Between 1989 and 1991, he was a medical student in Jaffna. It was hard for him to go home on vacations, travelling to and fro between areas controlled by the Tigers and the army. Then, suddenly, there was no home anymore. His father's thriving fish business was destroyed by the Tigers, as part of a wider attack on Muslims. The family fled to Colombo and the boy, on his parents' advice, escaped to Europe. Helped by an agent, he finally reached Switzerland, via Italy, Yugoslavia and Austria.

I spoke to this Tamil Muslim – let us call him Arif – in a Movenpick café outside the railway station. Here, in Basel, he could more easily become a nurse than a doctor. The authorities encouraged educated Tamils to move into this profession, since the Swiss could not decently look after their own elderly. Arif did a four-year course in nursing school, helped by loans from friends, Hindus as well as Muslims. "Among us there is no problem", he said. "The Tigers are the problem. They profit from a conflict. They incite Hindu-Muslim clashes in the Eastern Province, so that they can gain control". He now stayed clear of the Tigers, but said he knew other exiles who paid money regularly. This was to prevent harm coming to their families back home. "They pay as otherwise they are worried the Tigers will take away everything – land, jewellery, houses. No one talks about these things because they are afraid. I am also afraid".

I asked Arif whether he welcomed the ceasefire. "No, not really. I never believe these things. This is to allow Tigers to plan for the next stage of the war. Now they can move freely, bring in weapons and money into the north". He told me pointedly, "If they really wanted peace, why were they still collecting money? After the ceasefire, Swiss Tamils visited Jaffna and Mannar but came back to tell us: 'do not go home; the Tigers will take your money'". Arif said he did not believe that the Tigers were for the Tamils, since they had made so many of them suffer. Then he added, "The other side [the Sri Lankan Army] is also not good".

The café where we met was crowded. Arif looked worried whenever I spoke loudly, as I have a tendency to do. He himself spoke in a low voice, but with deliberation and an absolute clarity. Arif was reflective and philosophical, wise beyond his years, the wisdom borne out of his own, and his people's, experience. I should say the same for his almost exact contemporary, Mathi of Adliswil. Yet, how different were their perceptions of the Tigers. One hesitates to ascribe this difference simply to their respective religions. Leonard Woolf, who worked as a civil servant among the Jaffna Tamils in the first decade of the 20th century, wrote of "their strange mixture of tortuosity and directness, of cunning and stupidity, of cruelty and kindness". Thus the people, and thus also their leaders. The Tamil Tigers are both liberators and oppressors, heroic fighters for freedom as well as authoritarians brutally intolerant of dissent. How one judges them depends on which side you happen to see first, or see longest.

Eelam

Sometimes, walking the streets of Zürich in between appointments, I would compare the Tamil predicament to others I knew or had read about. The Tamils were certainly not like the Indian professionals in the United States, who come from elite backgrounds and mostly choose to turn their backs on the problems of their country. In some respects they were like the Jews of early 20th century Brooklyn: labouring away in low-paying jobs, but determined to educate their kids, to make them doctors and lawyers when they had themselves been cooks or bricklayers. At other times I thought the Tamils were akin to the Tibetans in India: likewise fleeing persecution, likewise committed to maintaining their language and culture in exile, as preparation for an eventual return. But there was one essential difference: here there was no Dalai Lama. Nor could the Tibetans claim a continuing opposition within their homeland. Their leader preached non-violence from an Indian hill town, whereas the Tiger chief was based in the jungles of Sri Lanka, directing a violent and (it seemed) not unsuccessful battle for survival.

Where would that struggle finally lead? I put the question to Martin Sturzinger, a journalist who is probably the foremost Swiss authority on the Tamils. Now 45, Sturzinger has been following the Sri Lankan conflict since 1983. He had made more than 20 trips to the island. He had never met Prabhakaran, but knew Anton Balasingham very well. Back in 1989, when the Tigers prepared to talk to President Premadasa, he had presented Balasingham with a book in English on the Swiss Constitution. "I do not know whether he read it", commented Sturzinger, "but he did not look too happy with the gift!" On another occasion, he told the Tiger ideologue, "You are socialists, so why do you not also take up the cause of the poor among the Sinhala and the Muslim?" Balasingham replied, "We are first nationalists, only then socialists". Sturzinger thought to himself: "Nationalists, then socialists, does that equal national-socialist?"

Martin Sturzinger described himself as "very sympathetic to the Tamil cause". He had seen that they had no equal status within Sri Lanka. But to the question, "Do all Tamils in fact support the Tigers?", he replied,

"There are now half-a-million Tamils in Colombo. Many of them are migrants from the Jaffna or Batticaloa areas. Would they be in Colombo if life was so good in territories controlled by the Tigers?" Here, in Switzerland, Sturzinger worked as an adviser on Tamil affairs to the Refugee Council. "Sometimes the Swiss people are so naïve", he remarked. A Swiss NGO, wishing to show its interest in 'refugee culture', invited a group of Tamils to put on a dance show. They came, and staged a drama with girls in fatigues, singing while brandishing sticks. The audience did not understand the language or the context, viewing it merely as a pleasing display of immigrant culture.

Sturzinger had spent the better part of a lifetime educating his countrymen about the plight of the foreigners in their midst. About his understanding or empathy there could be no question. Yet he said, "I have reservations about their leadership". In May 2002, Balasingham visited Switzerland to speak to the exiles about why the Tigers had decided to sue for peace. There was a large rally in Freiburg, organised by Anton Ponnarajah, and attended by more than 3000 Tamils. As in the Bern allmend, there were LTTE cadres placed strategically among the crowd, wearing black trousers and white shirts. "It was almost fascist", said Sturzinger.

If we settle for less than Eelam, remarked Balasingham back in 1989, our own people will kill us. But now it increasingly seems that autonomy on the Swiss model, rather than independence, is the most feasible option. Would the exiles accept this? Would their dreams of sovereignty and freedom be satisfied with a solution that had been on the table from before the Tigers were born? An answer was on offer in the place where Sturzinger and I met, the Thamillar Restaurant, off Aemtlerstrasse in central Zürich. Here, one wall had a large photograph of Prabhakaran, captioned: "Tamil Eelam National Leader". He was wearing a bush-shirt and was smiling. It seemed to be a studio photograph. As I stepped up to have a closer look, a waiter commented: "There are thousands of such photos in Sri Lanka".

More revealing still was what met the eye as one first entered the restaurant. This was a board along whose top ran the legend, "Eelam". Below was a map of the homeland, coloured green. The borders were marked by a row of blinking lights. The territory claimed extended to at least 150 miles south of the eastern port, Trincomalee. On the western seaboard, too, it extended well below the town of Puttalam, way beyond what any Sinhala would concede. The major settlements were well marked on the map: Killinochi, Mannar, Batticaloa, and Jallappanam (Jaffna). Just south of Trinco, a little red dot identified the proposed new 'capital'. Why, I wondered, had they chosen this place and not the old historic cultural centre, Jaffna? Was this to keep peace with the Muslims, or because of its proximity to the key port of Trinco? Or did it merely reflect the ambition of a new state to build a new capital?

While the territory of Eelam was painted over in green, the rest of the island was coloured a dull brown. On the southern part of Sri Lanka was painted the logo of the LTTE, a fierce yellow tiger against a deep red background. The tiger's eyes were a pair of orange lights. And what was the symbolism of *this*? The LTTE logo sat atop, or rather squashed, where Colombo would be on the map. The snarling tiger, with its eyes flashing, seemed to act simultaneously as the watchdog and guarantor of the territory placed above it.

What I had read about the Tigers before I came to Switzerland did not endear them to me. What some Tigers told me in Zürich and Luzern dismayed and even chilled me. And yet, with the exception of the oily spin doctor Parthiban, I hardly met an exile who did not charm me. Despite their profound ambivalence towards India and Indians, I was always treated with respect and courtesy. My sometimes impolite questions were always answered with an equal directness.

The Tigers are both liberators and oppressors, heroic freedom fighters, as well as authoritarians intolerant of dissent

An Indian brought up to admire Gandhi and Nehru cannot easily warm to the LTTE. My experiences in Switzerland did not quell my reservations; to the contrary, as when faced with the inflexible ideology of the cadres, it only confirmed them. But perhaps I might still be allowed to separate the person from his faith, thus to remember with affection the cook-cum-sports organiser Mathialakan, the actor-cum-activist Anton Ponnarajah, the school-and-curriculum builder Mahindran.

One memory, above all others, shall stay with me. On the second evening of the Bern festival I witnessed the final round of that famous Tamil game, 'musical chairs'. Its organiser was a little man named Manoharan, clad in black trousers, white shirt and Tiger jacket. With me was a Swiss television crew who wished to film the event. Manoharan ran to call us from the food stall, placing us strategically in the middle of the ring. We stayed there for 45 minutes, watching a field of 25 women dwindle to two. Also watching were hundreds of Tamils, standing four rows deep, with individual voices alerting wife, mother or daughter to a vacant chair when the music stopped. All the while Manoharan busily supervised the game, signalling to the music with a code of his own, chastising participants who tried to cheat by walking too slowly. He executed his responsibilities with an appealing mixture of charm and authority, and with an absolute and seemingly natural fairness. I cannot speak for his leader in the forest, or of how that man might come to run his Tamil state, but little Manoharan's conduct of his modest musical chairs did not seem inconsistent with the path of *dharma* or righteousness. △

Giggling over Ayodhya

A lawyer negotiates the many twists and turns in determining Ram's birthplace.

IN A significant development, the Jhumri Talaiya bccench of the Ram Rajya High Court rejecting the preliminary objections as to jurisdiction, requisitioned the papers and took the Babri Masjid disputed land title suit on board.

The hon'ble court declared that everyone except pseudo-secularists knew that *Ram rajya* extended to the four corners of the round world and the great beyond. Therefore, the high court had not only the power and jurisdiction but a duty to deal with any squabbles, not only among mortals but even among gods, who have been known to have been arrayed against each other in the past. It observed that interstate disputes between *prithvilok*, *patal-lok* and *yamlok* could also be dealt with by the court.

Deepening and extending the scope of the Lucknow bench order directing excavation at the disputed site and determination of the presence or absence of a temple, the court observed that Ram was very much in favour of modern technologies, as evidenced by his arrival in the vertical take-off *pushpak viman* at Ayodhya. Noting that since the matter before the court was not one of contempt, wherein truth was not a defence, no technology should be left unturned to aid and abet the court in its pursuit of truth in the pending case.

Praising Dr Abdul Kalam Azad for his role in the development of nuclear missiles, the court directed the Referral Institute of Nuclear Research and Warfare to make available the latest remote sensing ultrasonic devices attached to the nuclear warheads to ascertain whether indeed the echoes of the specific frequency waves characteristic of new-born babes could be detected at the site of the demolished Babri Masjid. It decided that while efforts were on to get to the root of the matter, one may as well dig in to the heart of the matter and see whether indeed a babe was born there in the epic age.

Appreciating the step-by-step approach of the court, on behalf of the centre the attorney general submitted that the provisions of the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1994, would come in the way of further progress in ascertaining the sex of the baby born at the disputed site.

The court observed that laws are made by parliament for the people, and in appropriate cases, it is the duty of the judiciary to see wherein national interest lies. Exercising the wide powers inhered by the constitution, the court deemed the legislation inapplicable to the present proceedings. Allaying fears of tampering by the executive and vested interests, the court directed the formation of an independent three-member panel of doctors from three premier institutions to conduct the sex-determination test and directed that the results thereof, with particular regard to details of the sex of the child, be put in a sealed cover and submitted to the custody of the court.

Tallying war

MUCH HAS been written about the war on Iraq, and nearly as much about that coverage. But there have been few (if any) attempts as yet to systematically analyse the coverage in the print media.

In the table, compiled by *Himal* intern Jui Shrestha, war coverage in five weekly publications – *The Economist*, *Newsweek* (Asia edition), *Outlook*, *Holiday* and *Al-Ahram* – is classifed into 62 categories. Surveying five weeks of coverage (19 March-28 April), the data offer insights into how different publications covered the war. A 'point' in a column represents one article of any kind (opinion, reportage, editorial, etc) on that subject.

As shown in the chart, London's *The Economist* wrote the most about reconstruction (10 articles), while *Newsweek* focused more on the make-up of Iraq's post-war leadership (10). The most popular issue with Delhi's *Outlook*, which was relatively critical of the US-UK war effort, was Pentagon media policy (8).

	POST-WAR IRAQ									POLITICAL ISSUES											ECONOMIC ISSUES					
	Future leadership of Iraq	UN role	Charges of war crimes	Role of Iraqi exiles	Museums/artefacts	Reconstruction	Opinions in the global South	Pentagon-State Dept rivalry	Role of MNCs	Iraqi leadership issues	Impact on US politics	Impact on Turkey	Impact on UK	Impact on France/EU	Global criticism of US	Role of India	Future US targets	Opinions in Bangladesh	Impact on West Asia	UN response to war	Weakening of UN	Effect on US economy	Effect on global stock mkts	Aid diversion to Iraq	Effect on Turkish economy	Effect on Asian economies	Effect on dollar tradir
The Economist (London)	5	3	2	1	–	10	–	–	–	4	2	1	1	1	1	–	1	–	–	–	–	1	1	1	1	–	–
Newsweek **(Asian edition)**	10	6	1	–	1	4	–	1	1	–	–	–	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–
Outlook (Delhi)	2	–	–	–	–	3	–	–	–	3	–	–	–	1	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	3	2
Holiday **(Dhaka)**[1]	3	3	–	–	–	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	13	–	4	2	3	–	–	1	–	–	–	3	–
Al-Ahram (Cairo)[2]	1	–	–	–	–	2	–	–	–	4	1	–	–	1	5	–	14	–	9	1	4	–	–	–	–	–	–

The senior counsel for the Vishwa Hindu Parishad pleaded that as per the latest amendments in the 'evidence act', electronic recordings and images could be used as evidence and the DNA of Ram from the serial *Ramayan* could be used to establish the identity of the baby. The counsel prayed for directions to Doordarshan to produce the original tapes duly attested to by Mr Ramanand Sagar.

Brushing aside doubts that a stalemate may be reached about the identity of the baby, the court observed that nothing is ever destroyed or created in the cosmos. Adjourning the matter for three weeks, the court held that at the appropriate stage, if necessary, the help of NASA, for whom Kalpana Chawla, a brave daughter of the nation laid down her life, could be requisitioned to take the matter further after the preliminary determination of the age and sex of the baby allegedly born at the disputed site.

The counsel for the Communist Party of India, Mr Tippal Kambal, submitted that akin to the use of natural science, Marxism as a social science should also be used to assist the court in arriving at the truth. Handing across the bar the ultra-topography maps made by the Leningrad-based Cuban company Castro Inc, Mr Kambal pointed out the fact that the disputed area fell squarely within the red highlighted working class area. The counsel argued that Mr Ram s/o Dasrath, non-resident of Ayodhya for 14 years, came from the monarchical class and even if a purported baby was found to be born at the disputed working class site, the said baby could not be him as there was an inherent contradiction between the proletariat and the monarchy, as irrefutably established by events in the neighbouring Himalayan Hindu kingdom. △

***Rakesh Shukla**, Delhi*

Neo-Malthusians

In 1877, amidst the worst famine of the 19th century, India's colonial masters hosted a self-congratulatory extravaganza in Delhi to mark the ascension of England's Queen Victoria as empress of India. A curious detail of the 'Delhi Durbar' was the incredible effort made by the state machinery to make sure the merry-making went off in style, with the state assisting in the transport of 84,000 official attendees. Meanwhile, centred primarily in the Deccan, the famine of 1877-78 claimed at least 5.5 million lives, though the actual number may have been twice as high; colonial administrators' lack of interest in compiling accurate statistics of those who perished makes it difficult to say. While people were dying, the colonial government stoically refused to provide relief, advancing the well-worn rhetoric that has resurfaced today in the slogan 'relief creates dependency', or that welfare is not the job of the state. This *laissez faire* attitude stemmed from a strong connection between Thomas Malthus and India. Malthus was chair of political economy at Haileybury College, England, where many colonial administrators were trained.

The humanitarian disaster of the late 1870s is unfortunately not a fading scar of colonial mismanagement that independent India can

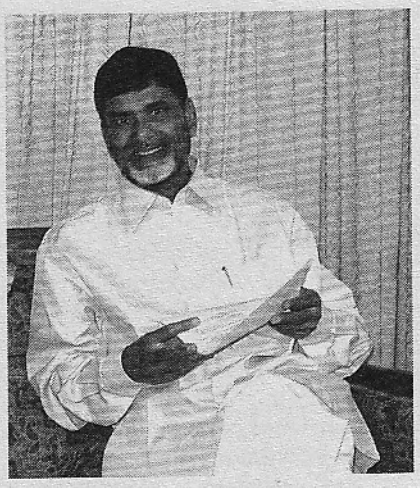
Dhaka's *Holiday* proved the most critical of the invasion among the periodicals surveyed, carrying 13 pieces on global criticism of the US and 10 pieces on the suffering of Iraqis. Finally, *Al-Ahram*, a Cairo-based weekly newspaper, was more concerned with impacts in West Asia, devoting significant attention to discussions of possible future US military targets (14), the desire of Iraqis to defend their country (11), and the loss of heritage caused by US-UK bombardment and invasion.

	MILITARY ISSUES											ARAB REACTIONS							MEDIA						HUMAN INTEREST								
	Defence contractors	Oil prices	US role in Egyptian policy	Effect on Egyptian economy	Iraqi defence	Fighting in Baghdad	US army composition	US/UK tactics	US/UK setbacks	Role of Kurds	Russian assistance to Iraq	Support for Iraq	Anger at own governments	Views of emigres	Sense of humiliation	Rising anti-Americanism	Post-war political fallout	Cost of war coverage	Iraq media policy	Pentagon media policy	Arab press	Performance of networks	Journalists in war/embeds	Iraqi desire to defend Iraq	Iraqi attitude toward US	Suffering of Iraqis	Loss of heritage	Relief efforts	Evacuations	Profile of soldiers	Responses to occupation	
[1]	1	–	–	–	3	2	1	3	5	–	–	2	1	1	1	3	1	1	–	1	–	–	–	2	3	3	–	–	–	–	6	
[2]	–	–	–	–	3	2	1	8	4	1	1	3	–	1	–	1	–	–	1	2	2	–	1	–	–	2	–	–	–	2	8	
[2]	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	6	1	–	1	–	–	–	2	–	–	–	8	4	–	1	1	1	4	–	–	–	–	4	
[2]	–	1	–	–	2	–	–	6	–	–	–	7	–	–	–	2	1	–	–	2	2	2	–	5	2	10	1	–	–	–	5	
[2]	–	1	2	7	–	1	–	2	9	–	–	6	3	–	–	2	1	–	–	4	9	–	–	11	4	9	10	1	2	–	4	

[1] INTERNET EDITION (WWW.WEEKLYHOLIDAY.NET)

[2] INTERNET EDITION (WEEKLY.AHRAM.ORG.EG). DATA IS INCOMPLETE FOR THE FIFTH WEEK BECAUSE OF A TECHNICAL PROBLEM WITH THE WEBSITE.

happily point to as a contrast to enlightened self-rule since 1947. Rather, dearth, drought and famine continue, as do the self-laudatory exercises of governing authorities amidst scenes of great tragedy. Today in Andhra Pradesh, a state cutting into the heart of the Deccan, a drought-related famine again stalks the land. This is not the day-to-day malnutrition that afflicts so many lives across South Asia, but an actual famine in which thousands of people are going without food. But, as has happened so many times before, the concerned authorities, in this case the technocratic functionaries of Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, are not very concerned about people starving, preferring instead to direct their attention and the state's budget to self-promotional exertions. Taking into account the starvation deaths in Mahbubnagar district, among others, a columnist in the *Deccan Herald* captured the insensitivity of the Naidu government by observing, "The Government is spending a few thousand crores to make the State a tourist destination in co-operation with various international airlines and the hospitality industry. Clearly, the priority of the Government is not the weak and hungry, as mandated by the Constitution, but the rich and powerful".



Naidu and Malthus: Brothers-in-arms.

Many development agencies and government administrators

Fallout

JHARKHAND, THE resource-rich eastern Indian state that came into being in 2001, is home to some of India's largest industrial sites, though its people are among the poorest in the country. In addition to boasting of several major Tata plants, Jharkhand has large deposits of bauxite, coal, copper, iron, manganese and mica, as well as India's three productive uranium sites, all near the city of Jadugoda. Uranium in its natural form is a mixture of elemental Uranium 235 and 238, the first of which is used in nuclear weapons. Uranium 238, which is leftover, or 'depleted', in 235-extraction processes, is used in anti-tank munitions of US and UK armed forces, and while not particularly radioactive is still very toxic.

The opening of the US-led war against Iraq on 20 March provided activists in Jharkhand with a unique opportunity to tie their under-publicised concerns about uranium mining in their state, which began in 1967, to the headline-making hostilities in West Asia. With the partnership of a Japanese anti-nuclear group based in Hiroshima, a local NGO named Kritika organised public meetings in Tata Nagar, Jadugoda, Turamdigh and Ranchi during the opening week of the war to discuss uranium mining and the use of uranium products in war. Kritika's intention was to draw attention to the humanitarian and ecological effects of uranium mining in Jharkhand, which is overseen by the Uranium Corporation of India, Ltd (UCIL), and also to highlight the effects of residual depleted uranium (DU) on Iraqis since the end of the first Gulf war in 1991.

During the 1991 Gulf war, US air force A-10 "tank-buster" planes unleashed 940,000 DU shells on Iraqi targets, leaving 270 tonnes of DU in Iraq and Kuwait at the war's end. Eight years later, during the Kosovo campaign, US airplanes dropped 31,000 DU munitions. A 2001 United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) study said that residual DU in the former Yugoslavia was an "insignificant" environmental risk, though the UNEP report was quiet about the health consequences of long-term DU exposure. In 1998, the government of Iraq demanded that the UK compensate it for costs associated with health damages suffered by Iraqi civilians as a result of DU contamination, which it said included foetal and bone deformities. Nevertheless, US and UK forces used DU shells in the recently-concluded war in Iraq, though some older DU munitions lines have been discontinued by private manufacturers amid concerns of litigation by US and UK servicemen citing DU exposure as a cause of illness.

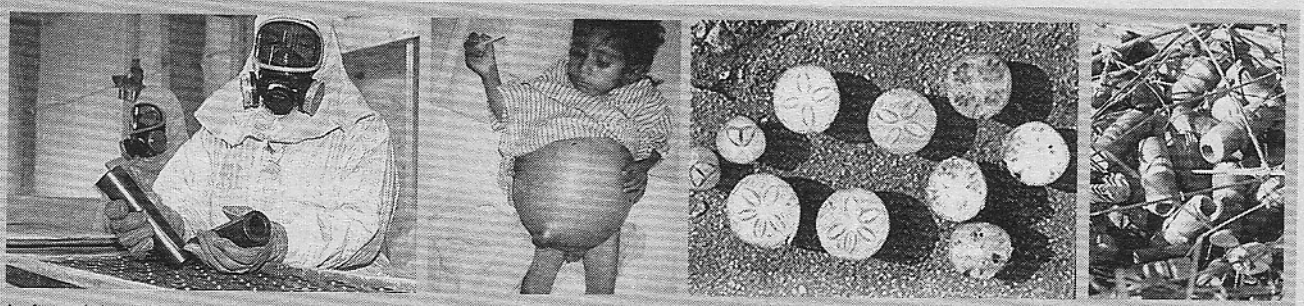
In 1999, before the creation of Jharkhand, a report by Bihar's legislative council said that people living within 15 kilometres of Jadugoda were disproportionately stricken by cancer, leukaemia in particular, as well as by deformities and impotency. It also cited the deaths of more than 100 mine workers from cancer during the previous decade, and the afflicting of 90 percent of mine camp residents with arthritis, as evidence of toxic exposure. Another group, the Jharkhand Organisation Against Radiation, says that 47 percent of adult women living near the uranium mines have suf-

have imbibed the neo-Malthusian doctrine of starvation and famine. While this ideology holds sway on a global scale, in particular concerning relations between the donors of the global North and their supplicants in the South, it is also the case inside modern day nation-states such as India. This doctrine is founded on the rather vulgar assertion that famines are a natural consequence of uncontrolled population growth and, sad as they may be, they are nature's way of keeping a check on unsupportable numbers. Hence it is an act of misplaced charity, not an obligation of state authorities, to provide relief. This doctrine, misanthropic in its twisted logic, helps to explain why the government of Andhra Pradesh has not rushed in relief for the starving people. It also suggests why the IT elite in Hyderabad receives truckloads of state patronage – after all, are not tech-magicians advanced, post-Malthusian exemplars?

Fortunately, the state does not exercise monopolistic privileges over the distribution of food; otherwise these doctrinal principles would be irreversible in practice. As it is, private citizens and civil society can mobilise some support for the starving. Since the fact of famine became undeniable last winter, efforts have been made to set up citizens' 'gruel kitchens' in the worst affected areas. While humanitarian relief can hardly be considered to be a political activity *per se*, politics has entered the fray, with Naidu being charged by critics of maladministration. In order to demonstrate the supposed insubstantiality of these charges, his government merely publicises its latest acts of technocratic wizardry, which in themselves are taken as evidence of sound administrative practice.

How famine is viewed by the elite, in particular by the ruling classes, is not merely a theoretical issue confined to debates among economists in Western universities and SUV-driving development workers. Food scarcity amidst overfull state granaries and a well-functioning transport system, in a certain sense, represents the empirical consequences of policies that are faulty in design and inhuman in practice. While we expect donors to avoid involving themselves in 'charity work' that falls outside their development matrices, it is a compulsion of the state to provide relief for its citizens at moments of great peril. When the state abandons its responsibility, it is laudable that such citizens' collectives are able to challenge the legacy of Malthus in the Subcontinent to save some lives. △

***Bela Malik**, Kathmandu*



Left to right: DU cores being handled in the US; Iraqi child suffering from suspected DU contamination; old and new kendu *fruit side-by-side; DU shells piled up in Sarajevo.*

fered disruptions of their menstrual cycles, and that 18 percent have either had miscarriages or given birth to stillborn babies. One ominous indication of the effects of uranium on humans comes from the fact that many *kendu* fruits grown in the vicinity of the mines no longer contain seeds. Defenders of UCIL say that most health problems arising in mine camps are related to alcoholism.

Another indication of the potency of exposure to DU comes from the substance's unique military-use properties. At 2.5 times the density of steel, and more than 1.5 times the density of lead, a five-kilogram shell tipped with DU is dense enough to penetrate heavy armour tanks. Once inside, the uranium disintegrates, and, because of the heat generated in the explosion, its particles start to burn. The effect of this on people inside a tank is "devastating" according to *The Guardian*. "Aside from the shards of metal flying around, there is a danger of being burned or suffocating as the oxygen inside the vehicle is used up".

Some of the Japanese participants at the Jharkhand meetings who travelled to Iraq before the war saw firsthand the effects of DU exposure. According to one delegate, Haruko Moritaki, Geiger counter readings along the border with Kuwait are 300-700 times above normal levels, underscoring the large presence of spent DU cartridges, which individually are not considered to be highly radioactive. The Japanese delegation's trip, which included visits to children's hospitals, found confirmation of the grave humanitarian situation in Iraq which has been well documented by many international agencies. The testimony of the Japanese delegates, in particular those from Hiroshima, added weight to Kritika's efforts to mobilise public awareness and resistance in Jharkhand against uranium mining and weapons production. Kritika, which does not accept large-money foreign donations, is now organising villagers in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa against proposed mine sites in their states. △

Free talk in Lanka

IN 2002, a year of considerable importance in the recent history of Sri Lanka, the government in Colombo matched progress on the peace front by setting out to improve regulations governing the country's media. Along with other measures, this included efforts to professionalise the press corps, promote women's advancement into media management positions and reduce legal restrictions on journalists' work.

Politics being what it is, however, by year's end the government had partially slipped into the established habit of using state media as a megaphone for its own views. Some journalists who are considered supporters of the main opposition People's Alliance (PA) received 'punishment transfers'. But while government media leaned toward Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's positions, private media proved to be lively and buoyantly contrarian. Numerous Sinhala tabloids – including *Lakmina, Lanka, Lakjana, Dinakara* and *Nijabima* – were founded to articulate the positions of the various Sinhala parties in opposition to

Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga.

Wickremesinghe's government.

Scheduled for public release on 3 May, *Media Freedom in Sri Lanka: Some Critical Issues*, a report by Sri Lanka's Free Media Movement and the human rights NGO INFORM, explores the condition of press freedom in the country today. The report provides an overview of the major issues of journalism in Sri Lanka since the signing of the government-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ceasefire agreement in February 2002.

One of the most important of these issues, and one that will have particular significance in a future dispensation of Colombo-LTTE partnership, is the circulation of news and views evenly among all citizens of the country. In September 2002, after a 15-year hiatus, the Sri Lankan government restarted a Tamil language television channel which can reach viewers in the north and east. Correspondingly, the LTTE has looked southward with a Sinhala language magazine, *Dedunu* (Rainbow), and opened up areas under its control to print media from the outside. Controversy, however, has not been totally avoided in media matters surrounding the ethnic conflict, as is demonstrated by the fallout from assistance provided to the LTTE in acquiring high-

Harsola's evicted

HARYANA, IN India, has been the site of some of the worst social atrocities in the recent and not so recent past. The persistence of highly oppressive patriarchal institutions, reflected in the shameful sex ratio of 861 women to 1000 men, is well documented. What is less well known is the firm hold of upper caste interests on institutions, and the violent subjugation of dalits, who comprise almost a fifth of the state's 21 million-strong population.

What further casts a shadow on the way democracy has evolved in Haryana is that dalits, though numerically significant, are neither politically assertive nor socially visible. So much so that according to the 2001 report of the National Commission of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) (yet to be officially tabled in parliament), no special courts have been established to deal with cases of dalit atrocities, as is mandatory for every state by the SCST Act. The extent of the state's

Murdered dalits, 2001.

neglect may be gauged by the fact that only INR 14,500 was spent on government legal aid work in 2001 on cases such as dalit oppression.

While particularly horrific events like the gruesome killings of dalits at Dulina, Jhajjar, in October 2002, help draw the attention of the outside world to the situation, there seems to be no consistent effort to monitor and check the growing violation of dalit human rights in the state. The recent killing of a dalit boy who had dared to marry a jat girl or the forced eviction of dalits (belonging to the chamar – leatherworker – caste) from their ancestral village Harsola in Kaithal district, for example, went largely ignored by the national media.

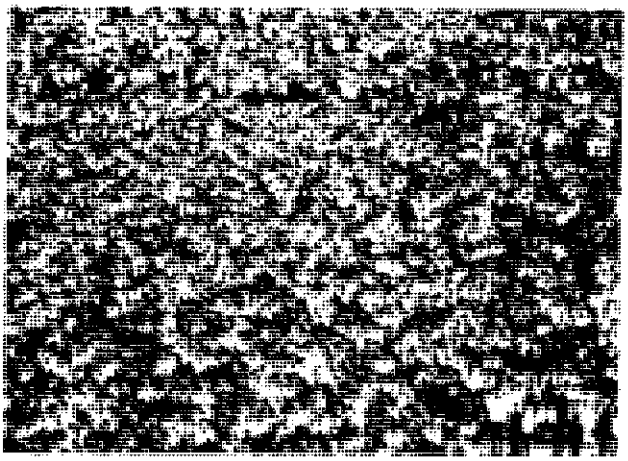
In March, more than 200 dalit families in Harsola, a small village in Kaithal district, were forced to leave their homes. Their problems began on 6 February. During the preparations for Ravidas Jayanti, a festival that honours the 15th century saint, Guru Ravidas, who was born into a family of cobblers, a minor scuffle broke out between dalit and inebriated jat youths. Insulted that dalits had dared to fight back, the jats, the main landowning group in the village, beat up a dalit boy the next day.

To forestall further confrontation, dalit elders contacted the village panchayat to defuse the situation but were met with refusal. Instead, the police intervened and called a meeting of both parties. At the meeting, as reported by regional newspapers (*Dainik Bhaskar, Amar Ujala*, 12 February), a planned attack was launched on the dalits in the presence of the police, in which

powered broadcasting and transmission equipment in December 2002.

Media Freedom notes that while there is currently no *de jure* censorship in Sri Lanka, many journalists practice self-censorship. "A political culture of violence and impunity has led to the creation of an environment in which expression of dissent in itself can constitute a life-threatening activity", the authors write. Further, a "repressive" Prevention of Terrorism Act is still in effect and continuing attacks on journalists have restricted the media's space. Also, in its own way, the media can contribute to ethnic-based hostilities by playing off suspicions of readers and distorting views expressed in other languages.

Events during the past 14 months have lent weight to concerns about the practice of free speech in Sri Lanka. Accusations have been made against the government, the opposition, the LTTE and allied groups of all three concerning the intimidation of journalists and acts of violence against media personnel. On 7 February 2003, for instance, police in Jaffna manhandled a group of Tamil journalists, injuring one. Political parties have also been troublesome at points; speaking at an opposition rally on 10 March, a Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party secretary warned that "biased" media institutions would be surrounded by thousands of JVP activists, a statement interpreted by some as an incitement to violence. And in April, Sinhala opposition newspapers reported that President Chandrika Kumaratunga, leader of the PA, would wrest control of state media from Wickremesinghe's government to ensure more coverage of opposition activities, underscoring the politicisation of the media. To receive a copy of *Media Freedom*, write to fmm@diamond.lanka.net. △



JVP rally, 2003.

scores of dalits were injured. Subsequently, all the dalits left their village and marched to the Divisional Commissioner's office in Kaithal to agitate for the restoration of their human rights. The action committee formed to spearhead the agitation made clear that they would remain in front of the office until the more than 80 people involved in the attack were arrested.

What will CM Chautala do?

The administration ultimately intervened, a few arrests were made and the dalits returned to the village when the local legislator promised to guarantee their safety from a jat backlash. In keeping with the promise, a temporary police post was set up in the village. The administration also promised the dalits that after a proper survey, they would be compensated for their injuries.

On 20 March, however, the uneasy calm in Harsola broke down when the accused, belonging to the upper caste jat community, were released on bail. That night the dalits came under attack once again. This time, fearing for their lives and realising that the police must be complicit in the attack, the dalits left the village without even contacting the police post.

Today, the 800-year-old dalit *basti* in Harsola looks like a haunted place. Empty houses and lanes tell of the sufferings of dalits, who are now scattered in different parts of Kaithal district. Having learned the extent of administrative and police callousness, they have decided never to return. Meanwhile, the charges against the guilty framed under the SCST Act have been skilfully withdrawn and instead, a fictitious case under the same act has been lodged against a local journalist who reported on the injustice.

A team of activists from Dalit Mukti Sangathan, Karnal, which met victims and visited the empty lanes of the dalit basti, expressed surprise that despite repeated reminders to the National SCST Commission and the state level commission, and a memorandum to the chief minister, no action has been taken. Whether Chief Minister Chautala, a jat, will do anything about this latest atrocity remains to be seen. For now, as far as the administration is concerned, the matter seems closed.

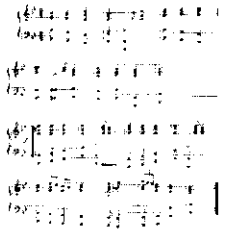
A telling element of this episode is that whereas the killings in Jhajjar caught the attention of the national media and polity, the forced 'expulsion' of more than 1500 dalits from their ancestral homes has till date remained confined to local editions of newspapers. Dalits are news in death, but while alive, they may only exist. △

Subhash Gatade, Delhi

Singing the nation

by **Nasreen Rehman**

Singing the concept of an *akhand* Bharat or of a Persianised *sultanat* or of a *shonar* Bangla when part of Bengal is in India is unreal



The old imperial tune: God Save the Queen.

Literature and music have long been a means of celebrating the cults of gods, kings and nations. In South Asia, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan* are early examples of this, from the Sanskrit tradition. There are of course, variations upon the general themes in different regional languages, and also local songs of praise and adulation for kings and deities. When the Turks, Persians and Afghans came to settle in India, they brought with them their own traditions of glorifying the king, such as, Firdausi's *Shahnama* (1010 CE). Additionally, they too, had carried with them traditions from Arabic of singing, *hamd* and *na't* and *tarana* in praise of their God, Prophet and saints, respectively.

Through the ages, there is ample textual, pictorial and iconographic evidence of thriving traditions of courtiers, painters, musicians and poets retained by rajas and *badshahs*. Their main purpose was to entertain their patrons, by eulogising them whilst heralding births, celebrating marriages and proclaiming victories. This often had little bearing on reality, as the artist would exaggerate the king's good looks, valour and generosity, no matter that the monarch was no looker, busy losing battles and taxing his subjects into penury; the painter would paint a picture of exaggerated grandeur and beauty and the poet would write in similar, inflated language.

Anyone who has attended an official function in India, Pakistan or Bangladesh will confirm the resilience of this tradition of sycophancy, as long speeches are delivered praising prime ministers and presidents, ministers, governors, petty functionaries and sundry dignitaries, while much of the state infrastructure crumbles, or extolling the virtues of artists, authors and celebrities or some literary work, painting or musical performance, regardless of the artistic or literary merit of the works in question.

The national anthems of India, Pakistan and, to a much lesser extent, that of Bangladesh are rooted in this tradition of eulogising and mythologising. However, they have to be viewed in the context of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, which saw the emergence of Indian nationalism and Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in British India, culminating in 1947, with independence and partition, resulting in the creation of Pakistan; and just 24 years later, another partition and the creation of Bangladesh.

South Asian nationalisms in the 20th century draw on the experiences of more than a century and a half of earlier models of nationalism. Early Indian nationalism had modelled itself on the European nationalisms of the 19th century. Beginning with the 1848 revolutions, the end of the 19th century saw the nation-state emerge in Europe. It was a time when much of the current map of Europe was conjured. Writing about this time, the left historian Eric Hobsbawm tells us,

> It is clear that plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups – not least in nationalism – were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity either by semi-fiction (Boadicea, Vecingetorix, Arminius the Cheruscan) or by forgery (Ossian, the Czech medieval manuscripts). It is also clear that entirely new symbols and devices come into existence... such as the national anthem... the national flag... or the personification of 'the nation' in symbol or image.

The idea that nations are imagined finds a place in Hobsbawm's *The Invention of Tradition*. Anybody who has seen the prescribed history text books in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh can see the manner in which nationhood, history and truth are constructed and contested: the national anthems are important manifestations of the construction of 'nationhood', simultaneously the perpetuators and reinforcements of feverish nationalism.

Prototype sentiment

The institutional uses of the fictions and myths of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and their anthems, have to be seen in two stages. First, the anti-colonial struggle and later the nation-centeredness of the postcolonial world in which hegemonic ideas of nationhood were packaged and offered as the authentic version of being. In the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, these concepts had a great impact at a time when there were already large populations living in cities where concepts of mass culture and the packaging of ideas had taken root. The association between productive relations and the technology of communication was an important factor in the propagation of these ideas – print languages created unified fields of communication. Newspapers, periodicals and novels all contributed to creating mass and nationalist trends.

When the Indian National Congress adopted *Vande Mataram* as its anthem in 1896, there were several models that were before it. Perhaps, the first song celebrating a nation-state was *Marseillaise* (1792). Composed by Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle, the French national anthem asks the sons of France to awake to the glory of the fatherland. The obvious gendered nature of the song notwithstanding, the general theme of the anthem is to fight for liberty, to use freedom as a sword and shield.

The British national anthem, *God save the Queen* (tune credited to Englishman Henry Carey, contentiously to Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Lully, and left 'anonymous' as preferred by Buckingham, adopted 1800), was also the national anthem of India for a time, as it was part of the British empire. Today, it sounds utterly ridiculous in a democratic country, for citizens to pray that God bestow riches on the monarch, while entrusting everything to him or her. However, there is a redeeming clause, at the end:

> May she defend our laws,
> And ever give us cause,
> To sing with heart and voice, God save the queen!

There could be a positive construction that singing the praise of the monarch is contingent upon her or him being subservient to the rule of law.

The other anthem that would have been accessible to the Indians because it was in English was *The Star Spangled Banner* (lyrics by Francis Scott Key 1814, adopted 1831), a paean to the American flag. In the current state of the world, where the United States seems poised to be the sole world power, it sends a chilling message. And so, as bombs dropped on Baghdad:

> And the rockets' red glare, the bomb bursting in air,
> Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there

And the sinister significance in the context of the Rumsfeld-Bush worldview, where the US is quite openly comfortable with bombing other nations of:

> Then conquer we must, for our cause it is just,
> And this be our motto: "In God is our trust"
> And the star-spangled banner forever shall wave
> O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

Both the United Kingdom and the United States of America are avowedly secular countries. However, in singing their nation, God is invoked time and again, for protection, justification and glorification of the country. But these were not the only models available to the Indians. *The Internationale*, written by Eugene Pottier at the fall of the Paris Commune, in 1871, translated into hundreds of languages, was the rallying cry for the oppressed and exploited of the world to rise and overthrow their masters. It has offered inspiration to social and political activists for over a century now. Sung at the First International in 1864, where Marx and Engels were prominent participants, it was sung by anti-fascist groups during the Spanish civil war; conducted by Arturo Toscanini at the La Scala at the end of the second world war to celebrate the fall of the fascists in Italy. In 1989, it was sung by Chinese students at Tienanmen Square before the massacre.

> Arise, ye prisoners of starvation,
> Arise, ye wretched of the earth!
> For justice thunders condemnation,
> A better world's in birth
> No more tradition's chain shall bind us,
> Arise, ye slaves, no more in thrall!
> The earth shall rise on new foundation,
> We have been none, we shall be all

Nehru making the independence address, 1947.

Calling upon the wretched of the earth to unite against oppression, this anthem subverts the idea of the nation-state; yet, it was adopted by the Soviet Union as its national anthem. It was also available to the Communist Party of India, in its English and Hindustani translations.

However, the first anthem that the Indian nationalists chose to sing in praise of their nation, came from the tradition of mythologising a fictive imagined nation personified as a goddess, was *Vande Mataram*, which appears in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 1882 novel, *Anand Math*. It was recited at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress. The fact that the novel and the context of the anthem were overtly anti-Muslim and treated them as a separate nation, and that the invocation of the deities, Durga, Kali and Lakshmi ran counter to the secular credentials of Congress obviously did not bother the leaders who selected it.

Thou art Durga
Lady and Queen,
With her hands that strike and her
Swords of sheen...

Vande Mataram or 'hail motherland' became the rallying call of freedom fighters through the freedom struggle. Many chose to either forget or overlook the fact that the first song celebrating the cult of the Indian nation was rooted in suspicion and hatred by one imagined Indian community of Hindus against another imagined community of Muslims that it viewed as outsiders. The writer Nirad C Choudhuri described the atmosphere of the times in which the song was written.

> The historical romances of Bankim Chatterjee and Ramesh Chandra Dutt glorified Hindu rebellion against Muslim rule and showed the Muslims in correspondingly poor light. Chatterjee was positively and fiercely anti-Muslim. We were eager readers of these romances and we readily absorbed their spirit.

Muslims and Hindus in the Congress, as well as the Muslim League, reacted sharply to the choice; within the Congress, in a cosmetic move, it was decided that only the first two stanzas of the poem would be sung (the stanza quoted above was excluded). Surprisingly, however, nobody inside the Congress or outside pointed out that Hindus and Muslims were not two separate nations. There was no significant debate on 'nationhood'; in the discussions, there seemed to be an acceptance that Hindus and Muslims were two distinct communities.

Nobody inside the Congress or outside pointed out that Hindus and Muslims were not two separate nations

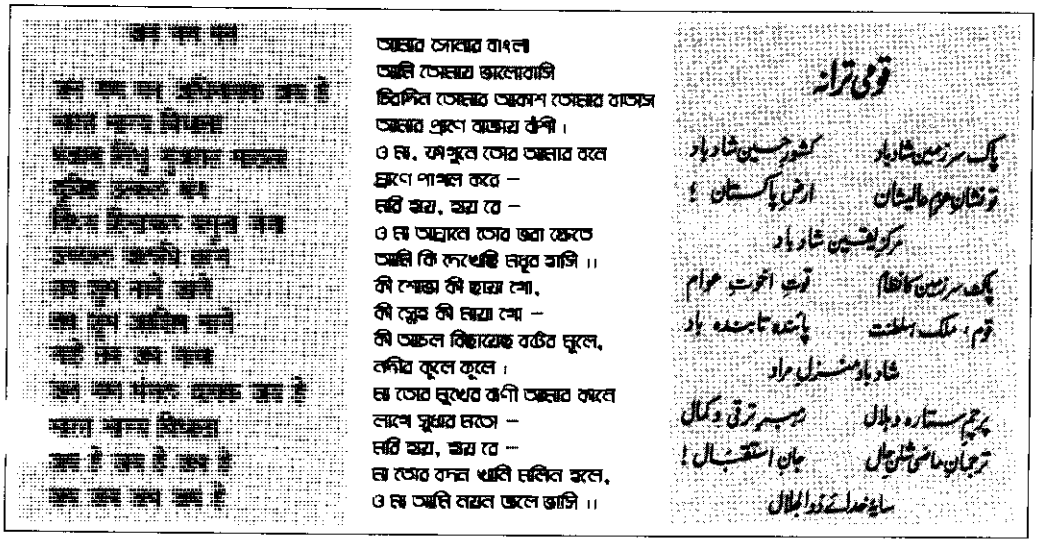
Top: Sheikh Mujib at March 1971 rally; Jinnah relaxing.

Anthem DNA

In 1911, *Jana Gana Mana* was used for the first time at the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress, where much of the activity was geared to preparations for the visit of the British monarch. Caressing the terrain of the 'nation's' geography, this ballad, which was adopted as the Indian anthem, marks its narrative with references to nine regions and two rivers – Punjab, Sindh, Gujarat, Maratha, Dravida, Utkal, Banga, Vindhya, Himachal, Yamuna, Ganga. It was written by Rabindranath Tagore, for the 1911 visit of King George V, who is described reverentially as *Bharat bhagya vidhata* or 'the lord of India's fate'. (A controversy brews over the composer of *Jana Gana Mana*, with most believing that Tagore was the composer while Captain Ram Singh, a Gurkha in the Indian National army and close associate of Subhas Bose, is also credited.)

After partition, there was some controversy about the choice of a national anthem for India. Finally, after a parliamentary debate, it was settled that *Jana Gana Mana* would be the national anthem and that *Vande Mataram* would have "equal status". On 25 August 1948, in a statement to the Constituent Assembly, Jawaharlal Nehru described his position on the national anthem:

> The question of having a national anthem tune, to be played by orchestras and bands, became an urgent one for us immediately after 15 August 1947. It was as important as that of having a national flag. The *Jana Gana Mana* tune, slightly varied had been adopted as a national anthem by the Indian National Army in South East Asia and had subsequently a degree of popularity in India also. I wrote to all the provincial governors and asked their views about adopting *Jana Gana Mana* or any other song as the national anthem. I asked them to consult their Premiers...



Jana Gana Mana was retained, ironically, even though half of Punjab and all of Sindh went to Pakistan, while currently, more than half of Bengal is the independent country of Bangladesh. In highly Sanskritised Bengali, the national anthem is in a language that is largely incomprehensible to the majority of the population of northern India and completely incomprehensible to the people of southern India. But it has the advantage of being very short and largely a litany of names of various regions. India is called Bharat in it – does this in anyway inform the Indian right wing's dreams of the mythical "akhand (undivided) Bharat"?

Another very popular anthem in India, which is almost as popular if not more than the national anthem is the tarana by Iqbal, *Sare jahan se accha Hindositan hamara, hum bulbulein hain iski, yeh gulsitan hamara*. Set to music by Pandit Ravi Shankar, it became the anthem for the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the mid-1940s. All the professionals associated with IPTA were progressive, radical and anti-communal. Ironically, Iqbal, who wrote in this poem, *"mazhab nahin sikhata apas mein bair rakhna"* (religion does not teach us to fight amongst ourselves) in 1930, dreamt of a separate homeland for Indian Muslims. Iqbal died in 1935, after conceiving the idea of Pakistan but before he could see its creation. No doubt, if he had been alive, he would have written the national anthem for Pakistan.

As it was, the choice of language and poet for 'singing Pakistan' was in itself an indication of how the country would develop. A majority of the population lived in East Pakistan with Bangla as its mother tongue; in the provinces of West Pakistan, Pashto, Balochi, Punjabi and Sindhi were first languages. Urdu had been prominent in the Punjab, and the British had used it for administrative purposes. It was also the tongue of the *mohajirs* from present day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Quite arbitrarily, Urdu was declared the national language of Pakistan and became the language of the national song. Tragically, a beautiful, rich and lyrical language came to be associated with a repressive state, out of touch with itself and its people.

At a time when Faiz Ahmed Faiz was already acclaimed as the greatest living Urdu poet, lyricist and litterateur Hafeez Jullandhri was given the task of writing the song. Not surprising, since Faiz, a revolutionary poet, had written a lament after independence, mourning the bitter dawn of bloodshed and partition. The new state of Pakistan saw itself free, not just from the fetters of imperial Britain, but free from the feared domination of 'Hindu India'. In defining the nation, Hafeez looked to the Persian tradition for inspiration. This, when the great masters of Urdu poetry, such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Miraji, had already altered the Urdu canon by departing from the traditional usage of classical Persian to explicitly local and indigenous imagery and language. There are no more than two indigenous words in the song, and one of them is *'ka'* – the preposition 'of'.

Hafeez could be congratulated for the phrase, *"Pak sarzameen ka nizaam, quaat-e-axuat-e-awam"*, which asserts that the primary concern in the pure land should be the strength and benefit of the populace. But he digs a deep hole with *"qaum, mulk,*

The anthem of the Hindu right wing: Vande Mataram

India's national anthem is largely incomprehensible to most people in northern India and completely incomprehensible to the people of southern India

The national anthems of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have no bearing on the reality and existence of the majority of their populations

Faiz Ahmed Faiz: zard patton ka ban jo mera des hai, dard ki anjuman jo mera des hai

sultanat, painda tabinda bad, shadbad manzil-e-murad". Which 'qaum' or nation is he referring to? In using the word 'sultanat', is he harkening back to the days of empires, falsely represented as Muslim empires in India? Quaat-e-axuat-e-awam – the order of this sacred land is the might of the brotherhood of the people – says the anthem of a country where, almost as if defying those words, Muslims have bled and killed each other since its creation.

While the Pakistani anthem ceded a lot of linguistic ground, Bangladesh seceded from (West) Pakistan largely on the grounds of language. In Pakistan, people still wonder why a Tagore song was chosen for Bangladesh, yet to come to terms with the fact that Bangladesh was about language and not about religion. Language was at the core of the resentment that East Pakistanis felt against West Pakistan. The partition of Pakistan into the independent state of Bangladesh gave a lie to the belief that South Asia had two nations: the Hindus and the Muslims. The Bangladeshis chose their anthem in the light of their struggle, therefore, Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu Bengali, was chosen, when in fact they could have chosen the more revolutionary Nazrul Islam. The Bangladeshis chose to highlight the Bengali aspect of their identity. Tagore is therefore the creator of two national anthems in the region. *Amar Shonar Bangla, ami tamaye bhalo bhashi* – was written in 1906, in the context of the partition of Bengal. Its words and tune, based on a Baul song by Gagan Horkora, in their simplicity are immediately accessible to any Bangla speaker. Invoking the mother goddess and mother earth, Tagore praises the rivers, the breeze and the seasons: it seems that his Bengal has eternal autumn and spring. There is, of course, no mention of the cyclones and storms that wreak havoc in the lives of millions annually. [See 'In search of shonar Bangla', page 33.]

False notes

The Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi national anthems are very much in the tradition of their Western counterparts, glorifying a make-believe land where the landmass becomes an end in itself – a way of identifying the individual citizen, who is bound and defined by unreal geography and who sings the praise of an unreal nation. Singing the concept of an akhand Bharat in the Indian anthem or of a Persianised sultanat in the Pakistani or of a shonar Bangla when part of Bengal is in India takes these three countries right into Saadat Hasan Manto's imagination.

In Manto's 1948 play, someone asks about the fictional Punjabi village, Toba Tek Singh. In reply, he is told, "If it was in India yesterday and is in Pakistan today, how do I know where it will be tomorrow?" If, many years later, the question had been about Dhaka, he could have been told that Dhaka had been in India, then it was in Pakistan and now it is in Bangladesh. Who knows where it will be years from now. There is a need to explode the myths of akhand Bharat, Pakistan, the pure land of the Muslim *ummah* or the exotic beautiful Bengal of sweet breezes.

The nation, hiding behind terms such as authenticity, tradition, folklore, community, obscuring its origins in what Benedict Anderson has called "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time", uses its national anthem to perpetrate its myth. The singing of national anthems at school assemblies and after the screening of films is no longer mandatory. However, who can overlook the hypocrisy inherent in a moment of glory at some international sporting event – the flag is hoisted, and people weep as the national anthem is played for the victorious country, and members of marginalised and victimised communities go forward to collect accolades for their nations?

Where there are common threads of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, filth and squalor, here is a suggestion for the peoples of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: *zard patton ka ban jo mera des hai, dard ki anjuman jo mera des hai* by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The majority of our populations live in appalling conditions of deprivation – somebody could add a few lines for the communal and ethnic strife that tears us apart. Perhaps, this will remind us more of our realities and might actually shame us into some action instead of standing and singing and celebrating non-existent nations. Like most other national anthems, the national anthems of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have no bearing on the reality and existence of the majority of their populations. The national anthems are as false as the nations they celebrate. △

The June issue of *Himal* will carry perspectives on the Nepal and Sri Lanka anthems.

In search of shonar Bangla

by ***Dina M Siddiqi***

In December 2000, a professor of political science at Dhaka University (DU) proclaimed at a public gathering that the Bangladeshi national anthem should be changed. The remark caused an instant furor nationwide. Mass condemnation and calls to censure Aftab Ahmed, the professor, came from students, leading cultural activists and other prominent members of civil society. He was roundly denounced for making a comment that was, among other things, "derogatory, objectionable, anti-Independence, anti-state and deeply hurtful to the sentiments of the people".

Three days later, an emergency meeting of the University Syndicate placed Ahmed on forced leave for three months. Angry students rampaged through the campus and set fire to his room in the political science department. The influential Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Jatiya Sammanya Committee (National Coordinating Committee to Resist Wartime Criminals and Collaborators) demanded that the university authorities expel Ahmed. Some student organisations demanded his expulsion because "he had lost every ground to be a teacher of Dhaka University, the birthplace of all progressive movements in the country". The following week, the Dhaka University Teachers' Association (DUTA) adopted a resolution to terminate immediately the membership of this 'errant' faculty member. The DUTA also called for Ahmed's expulsion from the DU faculty.

These events followed on the heels of another controversy over the national anthem. In November 2000, the Awami League government charged the editor, publisher and director of the Inquilab group of publications, along with a writer, with sedition under the draconian Special Powers Act. The Bengali daily *Inquilab*, a major vehicle of right-wing Islamist political parties, had earlier published a parody of the anthem, *Amar Shonar Bangla*. As it happened, the piece also used the anthem to mock the alleged corrupt practices of the Awami League regime and its leader, Sheikh Hasina. Among other things, the writer was critiquing the Awami Leagues's self-professed hegemony as keepers of the authentic nationalist spirit.

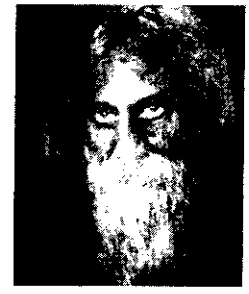
As with so many other issues in contemporary Bangladesh, debates on either side rapidly descended into partisan jingoism. This is not surprising, for as historian Willem van Schendel notes, "Hyperbole and accusations of betrayal of the national interest have formed the core of the political discourse of the country for so long that they seem almost natural". He goes on to say, however, that the question does not end there. To the external observer, the explosive sentiments and state responses triggered by tampering with the national anthem might seem extreme. Such an observation begs other questions: who can speak for the nation and under what circumstances? Exactly what was at stake, and for whom, in the defence or denouncement of the Bangladeshi national anthem? Why would a professor lose the 'right to teach' at Dhaka University for simply expressing his/her opinion on the subject? What kinds of vulnerabilities were revealed by the overwhelmingly emotional and legal responses that were elicited? In the rest of this essay, I attempt to outline some of the answers to these questions.

Tagore nationalism

The national anthem of Bangladesh is extracted from a longer version of *Amar Shonar Bangla* written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1906. Reproduced below is the official English translation of the anthem by the eminent academic Syed Ali Ahsan:

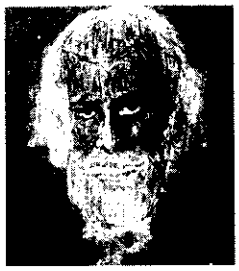
My Golden Bengal
My Bengal of gold, I love you
Forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune
as if it were a flute.
In Spring, Oh mother mine, the fragrance from
your mango-groves makes me wild with joy,
Ah, what a thrill!
In Autumn, Oh mother mine,
in the full-blossomed paddy fields,
I have seen spread all over sweet smiles!
Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what affection

The Bangladesh constitution of 1972 directs the first 10 lines of *Amar Shonar Bangla* to be sung as the national anthem



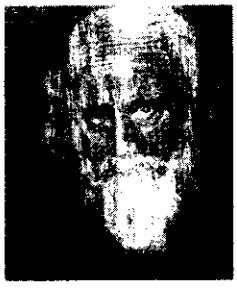
Tagore self-portraits

The *Amar Shonar Bangla* is a song that asserts the integrity of undivided Bengal



Controversies around the anthem mirror the many fissures and instabilities of national identity.

Performing *Rabindra shongeet* and reciting Tagore poetry became dangerous and subversive practices



And what tenderness!
What a quiet have you spread at the feet of banyan trees and along the banks of rivers!
Oh mother mine, words from your lips are like
Nectar to my ears!
Ah, what a thrill!
If sadness, Oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face
my eyes are filled with tears!

The *shonar* Bangla (golden Bengal) of Bangladesh's national anthem is a place of endless abundance and captivating natural beauty, an idyllic rural landscape where 'man' is in harmony with nature. In overtly masculinist language, the poet pictures Bengal as a fertile and nurturing mother to whom its (male) inhabitants cannot help but offer their devotion and protection. The tranquil imagery and placid strains of the musical score notwithstanding, heated discussions have raged intermittently over *Amar Shonar Bangla*'s suitability as Bangladesh's national anthem. Not unexpectedly, controversies around the anthem mirror the many fissures and instabilities of national identity.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote *Amar Shonar Bangla* as a protest against the partition of Bengal Province by the British administration in 1905. A romantic rallying cry for the integrity of undivided Bengal, the song remained in vogue throughout the first two decades of the 20th century. According to the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh's forthcoming *Banglapaedia*, *swadeshi* activists, revolutionaries and those who opposed the partition of Bengal used it to evoke "the spirit of patriotism among the Bangali masses". The entry attributes the song's diminishing popularity to the decline in regional nationalism in the 1920s, and traces its revival to the eve of Bangladesh's liberation war.

Whatever the reason, between the 1920s and the 1960s, Tagore's popularity declined somewhat in East Bengal/East Pakistan. But music increasingly occupied centre stage in the cultural practices of the autonomy movement in East Pakistan and cultural activists came to embrace the poet's work unequivocally. The centenary of Tagore's birth in 1961 provided an initial impetus for rallying around the poet as a symbol of secular Bengali cultural identity. In 1967, the Pakistani information minister galvanised the movement by banning the performance of *Rabindra shongeet*, the songs of Tagore, from state-run radio on the grounds that Tagore's ideas were not consistent with Pakistani national feeling. Days after the ban, a group of prominent Bengali intellectuals declared in an open statement that Tagore's songs and poems belonged to the soul of the Bengalis of Pakistan. Subsequently, performing Rabindra shongeet and reciting Tagore poetry became dangerous and subversive practices.

From 1969 onwards, the leading institute for the performing arts in East Pakistan, Chaayanaut, proceeded to transform *Amar Shonar Bangla* into a major emblem of the struggle for Bengali cultural autonomy. I was told that Chaayanaut had briefly considered a different piece, written by a Calcutta-based composer Dwijendranath Lal Roy; it was rejected because Roy's outlook was deemed to be too narrow, that is, too grounded in Calcutta. In contrast, the scope of Tagore's work and vision was held to be representative of all of Bengal.

Moreover, *Amar Shonar Bangla* had quintessentially 'Bengali' origins. The story goes that the original score was written by Gagan Horkora, a disciple of Lalon Shah who worked as town crier in Shilaidah, Kushtia (now in Bangladesh). Tagore, while he was based in Shilaidah supervising his family's *zamindari* estates, apparently took a liking to Horkora's composition and set it to music with his own lyrics in 1906. Tagore is credited, more generally, with recovering Baul music from obscurity and popularising it for the consumption of the Bengali middle classes.

For Bengali middle class intellectuals and activists, the emotive appeal and uses of Tagore's music increased in proportion to the increase in Pakistani repression. Indeed, *Amar Shonar Bangla* became an informal anthem long before any official declaration of independence. By March 1971, critical political meetings convened by students and workers, as well as by Awami League leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to discuss the possibility of declaring independence from Pakistan, opened with performances of *Amar Shonar Bangla*. Less than a month after the war started, the Bangladesh government in exile adopted the song as the national anthem. Clearly, Chaayanaut was tremendously successful in its mission. Meanwhile, music of other kinds continued to be a primary means of mobilising popular support and

sentiment for the independence movement that followed the brutal army occupation of East Pakistan on 25 March 1971. Almost overnight, songs depicting the heroic and bloody nature of the freedom movement flooded the airwaves of the underground Bangladeshi radio station, Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra.

The formal decision to adopt Rabindranath's composition as the national anthem in 1972 appears to have been uncontested. The song was a 'natural' choice, for the very emergence of Bangladesh seemed to redeem Tagore's vision of Bengali harmony and solidarity – just as it appeared to refute the 'communal' underpinnings of the 1905 partition of Bengal.

Amar Shonar Bangla also expressed what the historian Paul Greenough has called "the fervent attachment" of Bengalis – both in Bangladesh and the adjacent Indian state of West Bengal – to the distinctive landscape of the region. This landscape, as it happens, was distinctly rural and deltaic; by implication, it was in the villages that authentic Bengali culture was located. The song was a poetic celebration of the archetypal Bengali mentality.

That Tagore would become the major icon of cultural nationalism was by no means obvious or inevitable. As is well known, the cultural identity of Bengali speakers who are also Muslim has been contested at least ever since the 1871 census 'discovered' the size of the Muslim population of Bengal. The putative opposition between Muslim and Bengali has an equally long history. Exactly what constitutes the shared legacy of Hindu and Muslim speakers of Bangla continues to be a point of contention in Bangladesh. Bengali Muslim intellectuals have been grappling with the issue from the turn of the 20th century.

An archetypal lament of the secular Muslim intelligentsia has been the invisibility of Muslim Bengal (that is, Muslim peasant culture) in the works of the great literary figures of Bengal. Tagore's vast corpus was a case in point, for no Muslims of significance were to be found in his creations. Among Bengali Muslims, it was the writer and politician Abul Mansur Ahmed who most eloquently depicted the effects of this invisibility on the evolution of his political ideology. Ahmed recalls how in his school days the only significant Muslim characters he came across in the Bengali literary corpus were those portrayed in a negative light in the writings of Bankim Chandra and Ramesh Chandra Dutt. Over time, his benign disappointment at this cultural exclusion took a different direction so that he ended up calling for the production of a separate Bengali Muslim literature. As he saw it, the high culture of Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattapadhyay was *golami shahitto* or servile literature that did not reflect the life of the predominantly Muslim Bengali masses.

Tagore was not automatically rehabilitated by the creation of Pakistan and the problems that came with it. In 1948, noted Bengali playwright and communist activist Munir Chowdhury denounced Tagore as a reactionary figure. Yet, just three years later, he proclaimed that Tagore's legacy was for all of Bengal. Not incidentally, Munir Chowdhury was foremost among those who embraced Tagore as "the soul of the Bengalis of Pakistan". Evidently, the meaning of Tagore's place in defining Bengali cultural identity underwent a dramatic transformation during the Pakistani domination of Bengalis of East Pakistan. That this meaning was never stable is a critical aspect of understanding the parameters of the national anthem debate.

The shared legacy of Hindu and Muslim speakers of Bangla continues to be a point of contention

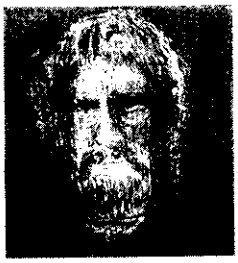
Tagore's place in defining Bengali cultural identity underwent a transformation during the Pakistani domination of Bengalis of East Pakistan

Dangerous speech

So why choose to interrogate this particular symbol of national unity, so many years after independence? And why is this considered to be so dangerous to the national interest? It is safe to say that the contents of the anthem – the first 10 lines of Tagore's longer composition – are not at issue. The romantic celebration of the villages of Bengal, their natural beauty and bounty, were inescapably 'Bengali', a part of the fervent attachment of (mostly) bourgeois nationalists to the rural landscape referred to earlier.

In 1972, *Amar Shonar Bangla* represented a collective symbol of national solidarity and promise; yet its fall from innocence was never far away. The fissures of nationalism – the pressures to produce a coherent history and timeline for the nation – soon began to emerge. The process of enclosing memory within fixed boundaries – the territorialisation of memory – proved to be impossible without confronting the ambiguities and slippages between the categories Bengali and Bangladeshi. If Bangladesh was a nation for Bengalis, then what was to be its relationship to the

If Bangladesh was a nation for Bengalis, then what was to be its relationship to the neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal?



The communal undertones of the Bangladeshi/ Bengali divide were never too far from the surface

neighbouring Indian state of West Bengal? If nationalism demands reaching into the past to produce a narrative that justifies the present, which past should it invoke? Most critically, what was the place of the two partitions of Bengal and of the two-nation theory (or religion) in this history?

To pose the question differently, just where was shonar Bangla located? It was not the united Bengal of which Tagore spoke; Bengal Presidency was much larger and included many non-Bengali speaking territories. Its boundaries had shifted in the past. The territory that became Bangladesh referred to a different (and, for many people, a dismembered) shonar Bangla, the borders of which were demarcated during the partition of British India in 1947. Without 1947, there would not have been a Bangladesh. Did such a conclusion redeem the two-nation theory? What then of the secularist claims on which Bangladesh was born? These are awkward questions that cannot be answered easily without dismantling the very framework of nationalist thought.

The nationalists of East Pakistan accommodated or skirted these questions by redefining what it meant to be a Bengali in or of East Pakistan. At the time of independence, then, locating shonar Bangla was an unproblematic proposition. Once national sovereignty had been attained, how to distinguish the citizens of Bangladesh from Bengalis in India emerged as an unavoidable concern. The Muslim/Bengali dichotomy was central to the debate.

Successive political regimes promoted the idea of a Bangladesh for Bengali Muslims. The two main political parties have appropriated the Bangladeshi/Bengali split ever since: the Awami League capitalised on its political genealogy, positioning itself as the legitimate voice of 'the spirit of 1971' and of Bengali secularism. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) championed Bangladeshi (Muslim) nationalism. Indian hegemony – real and imagined – stoked the fires of the Bengali/Bangladeshi debates.

The communal undertones of the Bangladeshi/Bengali divide were never too far from the surface. At the same time, the failure of the state to create a more just and equitable society led to a general disaffection with Bengali nationalism as it had been articulated earlier. From the mid-1970s onward, increasing militarisation and Islamisation also provided perfect fodder for the highly emotive debates that ensued.

It was during the military regime of President Ziaur Rahman that the first controversies over the national anthem emerged. The main architect of a Bangladeshi (Bengali and Muslim) identity and the founder of the BNP, Zia is said to have found *Amar Shonar Bangla* lacking because it made no direct reference to either the liberation war or to local Muslim culture. Apparently, Zia also felt that the pastoral tones of Tagore's song did not do justice to the Bangladeshi spirit – a martial song would reflect better the character of Bangladeshis. An allusion to colonial stereotypes of warlike Muslims and effeminate Hindus is unmistakable.

It is within the increasingly narrow and parochial discursive space of such debates that the national anthem controversy unfolded at the end of 2000. Ahmed is reported to have asked if a song written to protest the 1905 anti-partition movement could be appropriate as an anthem for independent Bangladesh. Furthermore, he apparently suggested that the anthem should be changed because it was written by an Indian Hindu poet. In other words, could an 'Indian' and a 'Hindu' who promoted the idea of an undivided Bengal speak for the Bangladeshi nation? At one level, it is simple to dismiss such claims. National identities in South Asia as we know them today do not have an especially long lineage; 'we' were all 'British Indians' when Tagore wrote *Amar Shonar Bangla*. Moreover, Tagore's attitude towards the swadeshi movement and Bengali nationalists shifted dramatically between 1906 and 1917. His 1917 novel, *Ghore Baire*, powerfully depicted the destructive effects of the movement and demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the communal issues attending nationalism. This consciousness was absent in his earlier work. Equally important, Muslims cannot have exclusive claims to speak for the territory that has come to be called Bangladesh – unless the terms Hindu/Indian/Bengali/secular are collapsed into one another.

As it happened, public support for calls to change the national anthem was muted at best. The BNP leadership, perhaps sensing the mood of the public, immediately distanced itself from Ahmed. An optimistic reading of the popular response would suggest that the communalisation of nationalism had not succeeded on this score at least.

Genealogical 'impurities'

For some nationalists, the main measure of the appropriateness of *Amar Shonar Bangla* as an icon of Bangladeshi nationalism is the original context of its composition, that is, the awkward relationship of the national narrative to the 1905 partition (which, as it happened, was repealed in 1911). By this logic, the song's genealogical 'impurity' – its original purpose in opposing the 1905 partition – provides an irrevocable condemnation. As it happens, the Bangladesh constitution of 1972 (Article 4.1) directs the first 10 lines of *Amar Shonar Bangla* to be sung as the national anthem. The anthem is not the whole original song composed by Rabindranath but an extract from it. The sentiments attached to the whole are not automatically transposed to the excised version.

The longer version appears to function as both paean and pledge of allegiance to an embattled motherland that is also the mother goddess. In line with other contemporary nationalist productions, it is explicitly 'Hindu' in tone and imagery. The last two lines of the final stanza, reproduced below, refer directly to the boycott of British goods during the swadeshi movement, which arose in the wake of large-scale anti-partition agitation.

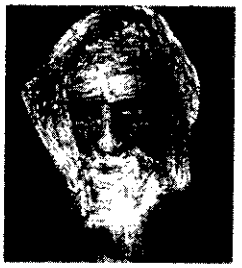
> Oh mother, I offer at your feet this my lowered head;
> give me, O mother the dust of your feet, to be the jewel upon my head.
> O mother, whatever wealth this poor man has, I place before your feet,
> Ah, I die,
> I shall no more buy in the houses of others, O mother, this so-called finery of yours,
> a noose around my neck.

Such nationalist overtones, overlaid with Hindu religious imagery, undoubtedly explain the song's popularity during the anti-partition agitation. (It does not, however, explain why some Muslims did not support the partition.) The Bangladeshi national anthem eliminates these 'awkward' passages. Indeed, it could be argued that the only Islamic influence on the text is that which is invisible; what makes this text 'appropriate' for Bangladesh is the erasure of those parts that are potentially offensive by their explicit Hindu tone. The remainder of the song is perfectly consistent with a strong nationalist movement – the glorification of the land and the sadness at domination by external forces are standard sentiments, and not especially controversial. The reference to the nation as mother is also stripped of its religious character. It is only when Tagore, India and Hindu are conflated that problems emerge. But this collapsing of categories is a post-independence phenomenon, albeit with roots in the past.

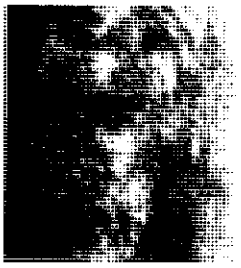
The virulence of right-wing nationalism notwithstanding, questions opened up by the national anthem debate expose basic ambiguities in national identity formation. Within the existing framework of nationalist thought, they raise profoundly uncomfortable questions about the genealogical purity of the nation and all that it stands for. To argue within the terms of this debate is to capitulate to its basic premise – that historically, essentialised religious and ethnic identities form the basis of all struggles. This is a deeply flawed argument, and one that is singularly counterproductive.

Writing this, one cannot help but be filled with a degree of anxiety about how such a reading might be misunderstood and misappropriated in Bangladesh. The issues are so fraught and the debates so polarised that it would be easy to be labelled anti-state or anti-secularist, depending on the ideological outlook of the reader. Neither is my intention. In the relentless debates over what constitutes national integrity, some very important questions are glossed over or suppressed. The issue of redistributive justice, for one, falls through the cracks. How to accommodate non-Bengali speakers and their social and economic marginalisation are other questions that are lost. It is time to move on to 'post-nationalist' histories that tackle equally awkward but much more urgent questions for the people of Bangladesh. △

Author's note: I would like to make clear that this essay is not based on a reading of the original text of Aftab Ahmed's speech, to which I did not have access at the time of writing. The analysis is based on numerous conversations, and on newspaper reports. My concern is not so much with what was actually said on the occasion but with how the reported remarks were received and appropriated politically.



Questions opened up by the national anthem debate expose basic ambiguities in national identity formation



AFTER THE disappointing showing by the Western press in its coverage of the war in Iraq (see Mediafile, April 2003), it should perhaps come as no surprise that its coverage of events in other parts similarly possesses an air of unreality. Take the *Wall Street Journal*, which has carried exactly two articles on a newly peaceful Nepal in the last two months. But lack of quantity is hardly made up for in Pulitzer-winning quality. Write Dana Dillion and Ha Nguyen in a 26 March *Journal* opinion piece:

WALL STREET JOURNAL.

> At first sight, it might not seem to matter very much who runs a mountainous, seldom-heard-of country tucked between India and China, far from the battle lines of the war on terrorism. But a victory by communists in Nepal would send a signal to other insurgents in Asia that violence pays and that the world has more important things to do than foil their advances. Worse still, once in power, the communists could make Nepal a safe haven for terrorists in the same way as the Taliban allowed al Qaeda to shelter in Afghanistan.

Chhetria Patrakar, who has spent a bit of time in a certain mountainous, seldom-heard-of country, is sorry to inform the *Journal* that the words 'Communist' and 'Maoist' are not interchangeable, there being about a dozen above-ground Communist parties in Nepal, including, at the moment, the Maoists. Moreover, the citizens of the country in question may be disinclined to serve as stage actor-foot soldiers in the ongoing 'war on terror' theatre. CP had thought that reports and op-eds are supposed to have some informed connection with the subject being covered. And might peace and stability in Nepal be first and foremost a concern for the people of Nepal, rather than for neo-con strategists of the American right?

■

THE GOVERNMENT of Pakistan, never shy of a challenge, has taken upon itself the unenviable task of 'cleansing' the Internet, that eclectic realm of news, gossip and fornication, at least insofar as the good citizens of the 'land of the pure' are concerned. Beginning in late March, Pakistani Telecommunications Co, under government order, began blocking user-access to well-trafficked domains of lasciviousness. On 6 April, it announced that it had blocked more than 1800 sites, though sceptics pointed out that porn-providers and viewers are a crafty bunch who will eternally stay a step ahead of even the most vigilant authorities. As stated by the Associated Press, the government's action may even lead to a curious form of citizens' initiative: "Some Internet users seemed undeterred by the blocked sites, and said they were ready for the challenge of finding new ones". Meanwhile, those of us in the neighbourhood inundated with pornographic spam (and, regardless of the recipient's sex, suggestions to enlarge the male member) would be mighty pleased if Pakistani Telecom would also get active in lending us some blocks.

■

DURING BRITAIN'S occupation of Iraq in the early part of the previous century, London used Indian civil servants to staff its imperial administration. With the Brits back in Baghdad (Basra, actually), Indian service in Iraqi civil administration may just witness a renaissance of sorts. In March, reports the *Dawn* of Karachi, the US military placed ads in Indian newspapers for recruiting Indians for clerical and semi-skilled positions in West Asia. Applicant guidelines: fluency in English, age less than 35 and non-Muslim. The last requirement, needless to say, raised more than a few eyebrows. "If US bases now cannot recruit Muslims for fear that they may be subversives, what will happen when Americans recruit for a 'colonial' administration in Iraq?" rightly pondered *The Statesman* of Calcutta.

■

reporters sans frontières

SOME NEWS about Maldivian news to report. On 4 March, Male cancelled 22 publication licenses and altered press laws to curtail "irregular publishing schedules". According to the government, the move was an attempt to "regularise production"; the new law authorises the revocation of a publication license if at least three issues of a publication are not brought out at regular intervals. The press freedom watchdog group Reporters sans Frontieres, however, termed the new measures less than innocuous, saying they "increased the government's ability to stifle criticism" and noted that "a tougher government line" towards the media is expected in the run-up to 2004 national elections. It is already a bit tough for non-atoll residents to read up on the latest in the beach-ringed islands, though daily mainstay *Haveeru* is happily still in production and online at www.haveeru.com.mv. We would all, of course, be well served by more news, not less, on SAARC's oceanmost member.

■

FOUR YEARS before journalists 'embedded' with American and British troops in Iraq, broadcast journalist Barkha Dutt got a close look at the fighting around Kargil by accompanying Indian soldiers to the frontline. The vexed question of embedded journalists – are they military mouth-

pieces or independent analysts, neutral bystanders or national witnesses? – is only now being approached by analysts of the Iraq war. Writing in *Himal*, July 2001, two years after coming back from Kashmir, Dutt reviewed her own performance in Kargil and weighed the compulsions acting on journalists travelling with soldiers in times of war. Her insights are especially relevant today:

> ...whether we like ourselves for it or not, our emotional perceptions of these conflicts are shaped by how our histories have been handed down to us. Whatever textbook journalism may preach, I think the time has come to accept that every story we do is shaped by our own set of perceptions, and thus prejudices as well. National identity is one of the many factors that add up to make the sum total of who we are and what we write or report. It sneaks up on us and weaves its way into our subconscious, often mangled and confused, but still there, determining what we see and how we see it. And, when I speak of national identity I do not mean chest-thumping, flag-waving nationalism. I mean years of accumulated baggage, what we read in school, the villains and heroes in our popular cinema – in fact the entire process of socialisation.

■

THE BUREAUCRATIC hostilities and judicial jousts surrounding Anand Patwardhan's anti-nuke documentary *War and Peace* appeared to arrive at a peaceful conclusion on 24 April, with the Bombay high court directing the film censor board to approve the film without cuts. The censor board had initially requested that five deletions be made in the film, which a subsequent review panel raised to 15. This was later revised down to two cuts and an addition, which the Bombay court rejected on the grounds that it would amount to a "stifling of free speech". Now, if only it were possible for a judicial ruling to expunge nuclear weapons from the arsenals of India and Pakistan...

■

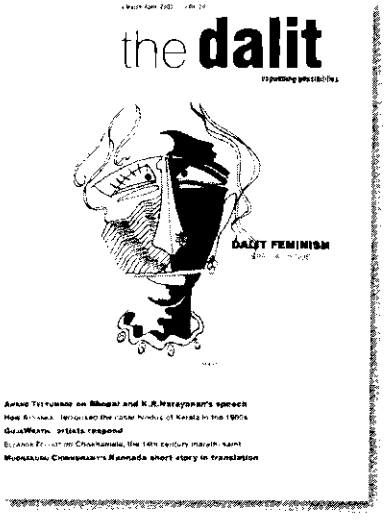
FOLLOWING IN his monarch's footsteps, former Nepal PM and Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) leader Surya Bahadur Thapa headed south in April for meetings with New Delhi's top politicos. Upon return at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu on 27 April, he told reporters that he had met Atal Behari Vajpayee, LK Advani, Yashwant Sinha, Sonia Gandhi and more than one former prime minister. According to the *Kathmandu Post*, 28 April, "Thapa ruled out any political significance of his visit". Oh? Thapa believes so, and the *Post* sees it fit to report thus without tongue in cheek, unless Chhetria Patrakar missed it.

■

ONE ANCILLARY benefit of the Western media's hyperactive response to the war in Iraq was the opportunity presented to outgoing, curious journalists to report on non-war topics in the regions they were posted in to gauge the war's fallout. A *New York Times* reporter, Erik Eckholm, in peacetime stationed in Beijing, landed on the other side of the Himalaya in Pakistan to wait out the war. Eckholm, an environmental reporter and author of a groundbreaking work on land erosion in Nepal, *Losing Ground* (1976), made use of his visit to expand on the one-dimensional view of Pakistan by many Western outlets as a hotbed of sectarian violence and gun-toting renegades. While other journos were searching for the latest Al Qaeda gossip, Eckholm filed on water (and its scarcity) as a source of current and future dispute in Pakistan. One article he filed was on the Sindh-Punjab water dispute related to the flow of the Indus, and the other was on the ecological and humanitarian consequences of the sea intrusion affecting 1.2 million acres of farmland in southern Pakistan. For directing attention to an underreported issue in a much-caricatured country, a thumbs-up to Eckholm.

■

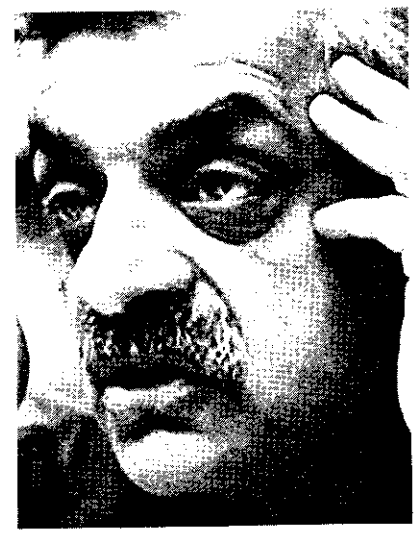
THE DALIT, as suggested by its name, is a bimonthly publication taking on a range of issues facing those on the receiving end of Hindu orthodoxy. The periodical focuses on culture, history and politics, but it had to deal with an unexpected issue a few months back – denial of office space by a landlord unhappy with 'untouchables' moving in. To its credit, the publication is now back on track, secure in an office in Madras, and scheduled to release a new issue on 10 May examining dalit culture. To subscribe to *the dalit*, contact its editor at chsreen@yahoo.com



—Chhetria Patrakar

"A war to promote terrorism"

Tariq Ali, born in Lahore, based in London, an internationally renowned writer, an editor of the *New Left Review* and author of the recent bestseller *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, has been a consistent critic of global imperialism since the 1960s. In conversation with David Barsamian at Porto Alegre, Brazil, he elaborated on the nature of contemporary imperialism, the complicity of the US media, the erosion of national sovereignty through the creation of dictatorial client regimes, and the nature of the Anglo-American imperial alliance and the war in Iraq.



David Barsamian: Imperialism is not a word that is often used in polite discourse in the United States.

Tariq Ali: It is a word they do not like, though it is a word they used a lot when the British empire was dominant. Liberal magazines were constantly attacking the British empire. On the eve of the second world war, a series of articles in *The New Republic* argued that there was very little to choose between the British empire and Hitler. They always had this hostility to the British empire because of the origins of the American state itself, and therefore they were very reluctant to accept the fact that they themselves had all the makings of an empire from very early on. They assumed that an empire consisted of colonies abroad which were ruled and staffed by people sent from the imperial country. And they said, "Well, we don't do it like that".

It is true that the United States did not do it like that. Look at its internal expansion. First, it conquered and destroyed the indigenous population. Then it fought a big civil war to unite its own country. Then it gobbled up bits of Mexico and incorporated them into the United States. It did something very similar to what czarist Russia did in the old days of the Russian empire.

Then they found a different way of moving forward. The American empire and American imperialism moved very quickly, through the Monroe Doctrine in the 19th century and the early 20th century, to take over Latin America. Look at the number of military interventions that were carried out first in the Central American republics, then throughout Latin America. Why were these carried out? Long before there was a revolution in Russia, these were carried out to defend American corporate interests. Hence, the term "banana republics" came into being. It was because American companies were going in there, backed by the Marines, securing these countries for the corporations, for American capitalism to grow and triumph.

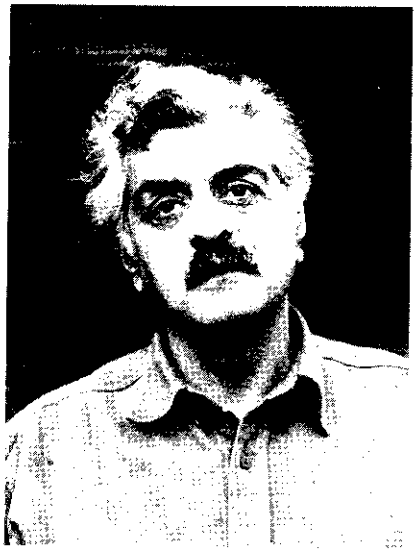
But for a long period the US kept to its own sphere. What caused it to move out was not so much the need for colonies, which it did not need in that sense, given the size and scale of the United States itself and the natural resources it possesses, plus the fact that it dominated South America. What forced it to move out was not even the first world war. What compelled it to move out was the Russian revolution. There is a very interesting parallel. At the same time as the Russian revolution was taking place, Woodrow Wilson decided that it was time for a major US intervention, because they were nervous that the threat to capitalist interests in Europe could actually threaten them in the long term. That is when they decided they had to go international.

D: To what extent is imperialism connected to or is an outcome of capitalism? You mentioned that Russia expanded. One could add that the Soviet Union had quasi-dependent states.

T: Soviet expansion after the second world war, far from being economically exploitative, was something they needed geographically and militarily, to create a network of states which were part of their sphere of

influence, part of their social and economic system, in order to hold the United States at bay. There was a deal agreed to with the Americans and the British at Yalta in 1945 for the creation of spheres of influence. By that agreement the world was divided up into strategic areas of operation – you can have Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia; Yugoslavia should be 50-50; Greece is ours, so if there is a revolutionary movement there, we will crush it, and you stay out of it. That is how the whole deal was done.

But leaving that aside, all the early empires were founded by the need for capital to expand. For a while this got disguised, because while the Soviet bloc existed, by and large people in the West saw it as essentially a war against an evil empire. Now the slate is clean once again. We have the world before us naked. We see exactly what is going on. The 20 September 2002 strategy doctrine put out by the Bush administration makes it crystal clear what this is all about.



Islamists were used in 1965 to kill reds. Go and wipe them out. They are atheists, they are communists. Kill, kill, kill, kill. That is how collaborators are created.

The difference between the American empire and the previous empires is that the United States usually prefers to work through local comprador, local rulers who are on their side. They do not like ruling directly, because they know it is an enormous expense. Why send your own people out to run a country when you can find locals to do it? That is how they have always operated. They occupied Japan after the second world war, they created a constitution, and MacArthur was like a viceroy. But they pulled out of that after a few years and let their local relays in Japan carry on, as they still do. The Japanese Liberal Democratic Party was created by the United States to do the job for them. Even in the latest case, Afghanistan, they did not want to have their own people there pending a general election. They put a puppet, a former employee of the CIA and the Unocal oil company, Hamid Karzai, in power in Kabul. And he does the work for them, even though they cannot leave him undefended, which they could in other cases.

The real intentions of US policy are not even concealed by most of the supporters of Bush writing in the American press. They are no longer even trying to conceal their real aims. They are saying, "we are the world's mightiest power, these are our economic interests, these are our strategic interests, these are our geopolitical interests, and we are going to defend them". This is imperialism, different from the past, in a new situation. And in Iraq they will assert new, raw imperial power in a way they have not done before.

D: Walter Rodney, the important political thinker and writer from Guyana, talked about what he called "the local lackeys" of imperialism, something you have just touched upon. Tell me more about this class of collaborators who serve the metropolitan centre.

T: This has been a systematic pattern throughout the 20th century. The period in the middle of the 20th century saw the rise of nationalism and liberation movements against the old empires. But already standing behind the old empires was the shadow of the United States of America. And as the old empires were going down, they were being replaced by the power of the United States of America.

In the middle of the last century there was the Korean war, a three-year war fought by the United States under the banner of the United Nations, in the course of which the industrially strong part of Korea, which was the north, was completely devastated. Not a single building was left standing. Its entire infrastructure was destroyed. And then they agreed to a ceasefire.

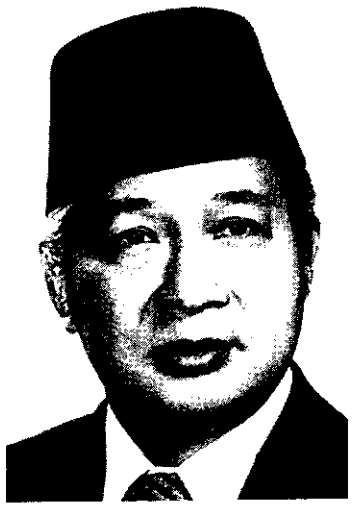
Then there was Vietnam. First, the French were defeated in Vietnam. The United States was not prepared to see that defeat and stepped in. And for the first time, American leaders thought of using nuclear weapons. John Foster Dulles, the secretary of state, suggested to Western allies and the French that perhaps, in order to stop these ants crawling up the hills around Dien Bien Phu, the big battle where the French were defeated, they should be destroyed.

Without understanding the national movements and the role they played, we cannot understand properly the role of collaborators. The aim of the American empire was, by hook or by crook, to get rid of these governments somehow; to maintain a nationalist pretense and to get in a different group of people who could pretend to be anti-colonial nationalists but actually serving the needs of the great metropolitan empire.

How did they do this? They failed in Vietnam. They succeeded in dividing Korea. But they could not rule South Korea democratically, because no lackeys could be found who could be elected. So they put the army in power. They did exactly the same in Pakistan. When a

general election was planned for April 1959, which would have returned a government that would have withdrawn from the security pacts into which Pakistan was tied, a coup d'etat was organised and the the military came to power in October 1958 to preempt a general election.

The country which worried them the most in the middle of the last century was Indonesia, because it had the world's largest communist party outside China and Russia, a party with a million members, and an additional two million people in front organisations. It had a big influence on the government and within the armed forces. So what do they do? They initiated one of the most dastardly actions since the second world war, a military coup, where they put Suharto in power. Suharto proceeded to kill a million people and wiped out the most powerful social movement in the country. The killings in the rural areas, where the communists had organised the peasants, were on a very high pitch. They killed a million people. And as *Time* magazine put it, quite bluntly, it was the best news the West had had from Asia in a long time. It was a big victory for them. In Suharto, they found a local collaborator, who stayed in power until the end of the 20th century. A dictator much more vicious than anything we have seen in Iraq came to power on a mountain of corpses. In 1975, he invaded East Timor, killed several hundred thousand people there, and wiped out all the secular, radical opposition in the country. And then people are surprised how come the Islamists are so powerful. Because Islamists were used in 1965 to kill reds. "Go and wipe them out. They are atheists, they are communists. Kill, kill, kill, kill". That is how collaborators are created.



In Suharto, the US found a local collaborator. A dictator much more vicious than anything we have seen in Iraq came to power on a mountain of corpses.

And then you have a new phase, which is the post-Cold War phase, where basically the triumph of the United States and world capitalism totally disarmed even semi-nationalist politicians who felt there was nothing else to do. Just work with them, serve them. It has been very difficult now for the last 20 years to get elected leaders who are prepared to fight for their own people and the rights of their own state. Interestingly enough, Latin America is a continent which has been in revolt now for some time. You have seen the election of Chavez. You have seen the failure to topple Fidel Castro after 40 years of blockade. You have seen the phenomenal victory of Lula in Brazil. You have seen the victory of Gutierrez in Ecuador. Evo Morales in Bolivia came very close to defeating the corporations' candidate. So we are seeing the beginnings of a new wave of, let us call it, subnationalism or protonationalism, which wants to resist and does not know how to resist. So maybe we are now reaching a period where this model could spread elsewhere. But by and large, in Asia and Africa they have, so far, pliable regimes.

I do not think this can last indefinitely. Curiously enough, the war in Iraq, the occupation of Iraq and the substitution of Saddam with a US puppet government so the oil can be shared out as war trophy, is bound to create a resistance sooner or later. It may take years but it will happen. In that sense, the American empire is no different from other empires. It is slowly sowing the seeds of the forces that will one day confront it.

But the confrontation, in the case of the United States, has also to come from within America itself. It is very interesting that Seattle was where the anti-globalisation movement was born. The first Anti-Imperialist League ever created was in Chicago in 1898 by Mark Twain and by other Americans, who identified imperialism as the major problem. Mark Twain was reacting to the American occupation of the Philippines, where they did a deal with the Spanish, as they did later with the French in Vietnam. Within a year, the league had a quarter of a million members in 30 different cities. And that was a time when there was no communism, no social enemies like that on a world scale, but imperialism still existed. And intelligent American citizens could see that it existed.

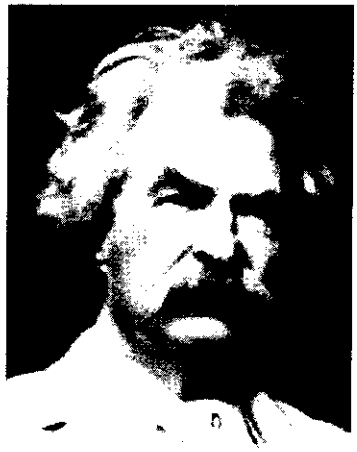
The time has come again for the heirs of Mark Twain and the other pioneers of that Anti-Imperialist League to get together and create such a body once again. This organisation can fight the empire morally from within its own heart.

D: Clearly, 19th century European imperialism was predicated on racism. What factor does racism play in imperialism now?

T: Racism was the basis of the old empires. There is a similarity between the old and new, but the racist motif has declined.They do not use it much now. In fact, they are trying to bend over backwards to avoid using it, because they know it is quite explosive. But you cannot deny the underlying feeling of white superiority in all this. When lots of civilians were killed in New York and some in Washington on 11 September,

the whole world was expected to weep for them in public. Why? Because they were citizens of the United States of America. When Afghan citizens are killed by indiscriminate bombings, by so-called accidental bombings, no one will ever build a monument for them. Why not? Because underlying all this is still the belief that the US is a superior nation a superior race and a superior people.

Look at the cavalier way in which casualties are discussed in the case of Iraq. There was a conference, organised by the State Department and its favourite Iraqis. An Iraqi friend who attended told me, they were discussing casualties: how many civilian deaths would be acceptable? According to him the figure the Iraqis and the Americans were talking about amongst themselves was 250,000. It should not go above that. A quarter of a million civilian deaths acceptable? When 3000 deaths are not acceptable in the United States of America, but a quarter of a million Iraqi lives are acceptable, what is that if not the most grotesque demonstration that the lives of these poor Arabs do not matter a damn. The form racism takes is different from the old days, but it is still there.



In 1996, when Madeleine Albright was the US ambassador to the United Nations, she was asked about the impact of sanctions on Iraq, and specifically, the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children. She was asked, "Do you think the price is worth it? And she answered, "We think the price is worth it".

That is one of the most shocking statements made by a senior American politician or leader since the second world war. If that statement had been made by Lyndon Johnson in 1968, or Nixon in 1970-71, that killing two million Vietnamese is worth it, there would have been absolute pandemonium. The fact that Madeleine Albright said this on CBS and was not reprimanded for it by her president is just deeply shocking.

The first Anti-Imperialist League ever created was in Chicago in 1898, by Mark Twain and other Americans, who identified imperialism as the major problem

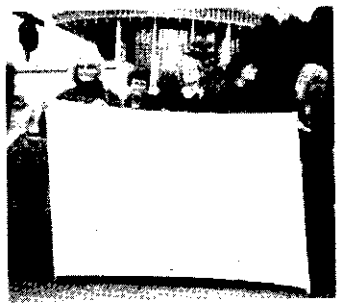
This is where we see this empire at its worst. Remember the worst atrocities of the British empire in India, for instance the Jallianwala Bagh episode in 1919, where they killed several hundred people. Several hundred people and what outcry there was in the world. When Belgium's King Leopold started killing Congolese people, a massive outcry ensued. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a book called *Atrocities in the Congo*, which sold 200,000 copies in two months. There were massive worldwide campaigns against these atrocities. Now it is almost as if the world has gone to sleep, that they are so comfortable and secure in Europe and North America that killing people and the deaths of ordinary civilians do not matter a damn. They are all deemed to serve some cause, and I put it to you that the cause they serve is the cause of the American empire.

D: What is the role of the media in shaping and forming public opinion. For example, the media constantly repeat that Saddam Hussein represents a grave threat to the United States. And also, contrast the media in Britain with the United States.

T: Yes, there is a difference. In the United States, television coverage of the rest of the world is hardly ever there. And it is almost as if the only way they can teach people geography is by going and bombing countries. Oh, you don't know where Afghanistan is? It's here. Look, we're bombing it. You don't know where Iraq is? It's here. We're going to bomb it, then you will know where it is. So you have a population which is not informed or educated by the media except when it is time for war, and when they suddenly find a country, pick it out and attack it. It is a process which can only be described as propaganda of the most disgusting sort. You do not allow people to think for themselves. You frighten them.

This notion of Saddam Hussein being a threat to the United States makes everyone in Europe laugh, including European politicians. Recently, I was at a public debate in Berlin.I was debating Professor Ruth Wedgewood, an advisor to Donald Rumsfeld. To my amazement she suddenly turned to the Germans and said, "I know the reason you are opposed to this war. It's because you're scared of Saddam". Afterwards, people came and told me, "We were really taken aback by that. What does she mean?" I said, "This is what they say in the United States all the time. They frighten the people that Saddam represents a real threat. And I am staggered that they have begun to believe their own rhetoric". And one of the members of the audience said to me, "For us this was not so much a political experience as an anthropological experience". There you see the big difference.

The media in the United States has degenerated. And that even applies to large numbers of television networks in Europe. The funny thing is that these so-called journalists travel all over the world, and sometimes they miss out on the most important struggles taking place because their eyes are just concentrated on what they need to report in their papers. The American



media's coverage of the Israeli occupation of Palestine is so one-sided, it is almost as if the Palestinians were occupying Jewish lands and the Israelis were resisting a big force of Palestinians.

The reporting in the American media is part and parcel of what is happening. And it is essentially the need to use the media to create an institutional depoliticisation. Do not write anything which might make people think, because if you do it, they might think things we do not want them to think, and then where would we be? This is what neoliberal economics, globalisation has done to the functioning of democracy. It is beginning to damage it very seriously.

In Europe, the situation is slightly different. You still have newspapers which will publish critical articles. It gets bad when a country is actually involved in a war. But on Iraq, for instance, and Palestine you have had coverage in the British, French and Italian newspapers of which you will find no equivalent in the United States, with the partial, occasional exception of the *LA Times*, which sometimes publishes very critical stuff. The European press allows far more space and far more news reportage of events which are taking place more objectively than anything in the United States itself.

D: What about such US magazines as The Nation, In These Times, The Progressive, ***or Z, and all these new websites, such as indymedia.org, commondreams.org, or zmag.org? They are providing alternative information.***

T: This has been one of the most important developments in challenging the weight of the media, the alternative information networks, which have sprung up everywhere following Seattle. It means that a small group of politically aware citizens anywhere in the world can access this material. But the mistake we should not make is to imagine that this can somehow compete with the powers that be. That is a serious mistake. And sometimes we get carried away and excited. But always be aware that cyberspace and the web can be very deceptive. Because it is on the web does not mean that everyone gets it. And where we have not been able to compete with them at all is in the television coverage. In Genoa, the Italian police went into the Alternative Information Centre and smashed it to bits. They were scared because activists had television cameras and were filming what was going on when Carlo Giuliani, one of the protestors, was killed. But it is still very important, because it breaks the complete monopoly these people have.

In some countries, there are progressive daily newspapers that have managed to keep going. It is quite remarkable. In Norway, for example, there is *Klassekampfen* (class struggle). In Italy, there is *Il Manifesto*. It is interesting, when you talk to the *Manifesto* editors, they say, "During times of crisis, our circulation just shoots up. That is when people need alternatives". The combination of all this and websites can work, but it is only a drop in the ocean.

> They are so comfortable and secure in Europe and North America that killing people and the deaths of ordinary civilians does not matter a damn

D: Why is Tony Blair such an enthusiastic partner of George Bush in his war on terrorism?

T: The problem with Tony Blair is that he actually believes in it. He is a deeply conservative man. I have absolutely no doubt about it. He would have been a good leader of the British Conservative Party. He is probably too right wing for some conservatives, but he would have been perfectly at home there. Underlying Blair, which very few people talk about, there is a streak of Christian fundamentalism in him which goes very deep. And there is around him a Christian mafia, which is quite authoritarian in its social attitudes and beliefs.

In terms of foreign policy, I think Blair decided very early on after he came to office that he was going to continue the deals Thatcher had done with Reagan. What these deals have done, basically, especially after the Malvinas/Falklands conflict, is that they have docked the British Ministry of Defence totally into the Pentagon, to the extent that when the latter upgrades, the former, which does not need to do it, has to because it is part of the same system.

And now, the British political class, labour and conservative, is totally committed to this alliance. It reminds you of what Charles De Gaulle used to say when he kept Britain out of the common market, when he kept on vetoing British entry into the common market. He used to say that Britain will always be an American Trojan horse in the European Union. How right he was. Blair likes to go and tell the Europeans, I am close to Bush. I can influence him. And he tells Bush, it is important I am in the European Union because I can make sure that your views there are properly defended. That is the role this guy plays.

Underlying Blair's servility to the United States is how he sees the country. Britain is a medium-sized, northern European country. It no longer has an empire. The country has quite an exploitative deregulated system which attracts foreign capital because wages and taxes are low. This is what Thatcher achieved. Blair believes this has to be maintained, because he does not have any other vision. And one of the ways it can be maintained is by totally hanging alongside the United States, sharing part of the proceeds and being seen by Washington as a loyal ally. Satraps used to do it in the days of the Roman empire, more loyal to the empire than many people inside the empire itself, who could see the realities of what they were doing. And that is what Blair has consciously decided he wants to be, a loyal satrap of the American empire.

> Oh, you don't know where Afghanistan is? It's here. Look, we're bombing it.

I mentioned his faith in Christianity and the US. In addition, he is also a very greedy man. He is obsessed with money. He is always telling people at private dinner parties how being prime minister of Britain has meant that he is not earning as much money ashe should be. When politicians combine piety and greed and then are prepared to justify wars, you get a very internally mixed-up politician.

D: Noam Chomsky, among others, has suggested that the United States, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been fervently looking for an oppositional force to replace it. They tried Noriega in Panama, Qaddafi in Libya, and the Cali and Medellin drug cartels. Now they have zoomed in on Islam, a certain variant of it, fundamentalist and militant, as the new archenemy.

T: They have indeed. The one thing on which they have got support from a large numbers of other countries is that Islamic fundamentalist terrorism is a bad thing and this is an enemy which has to be wiped out and destroyed. But where do you go from there? Because unless you understand what causes young people to decide to sacrifice their own lives, how do you stop that process? So in order to justify infinite war, they have invented this enemy, which they created themselves at the height of the Cold War to service their needs in Indonesia, Afghanistan and in the Arab world. They supported the people they now call their main enemies in order to destroy radical nationalist regimes which threatened their interests. Now these people have broken loose because the Americans dumped them. That is essentially what is going on.

It is crazy to make Islam into a monolith. It is just as divided as any other part of the world. How is it a big enemy? The maximum number of people Al Qaeda has, is 3000, maybe 4000. They are ensconsed in different parts of the world, including Europe and the USA. So how come they cannot be destroyed? The problem is not Al Qaeda. The problem is the conditions which create this mood which drives young people to despair. You cannot get away from that. It will not stop unless the central problems in West Asia, Palestine, Israel, and what is being done to Iraq, are solved.

That is one reason why the war in Iraq, far from being a war against terrorism, should be called a war to promote terrorism, because people will feel their governments have let this happen. There is nothing they can do. What are we going to do? How are we going to respond when Baghdad, the historic city of Islamic civilisation, the city of the caliphs and *1001 Nights*, is once again occupied by crusaders. That is what they will see. It is seen in the Arab world as a crusade for oil. And the reason they have made Islam the big enemy now is because oil is underneath Islamic lands, which is an accident of geography and history. The richest deposits of oil lie underneath Muslim lands. There is oil in Brunei, a Muslim country in Southeast Asia, Iraq has the second largest deposits of oil, Iran has oil, the Arabian peninsula has oil. If there was no oil underneath the Islamic world, it was somewhere else – let us suppose all the oil or the bulk of the oil was in Africa – that would be the enemy. The rhetoric would be different. They would be saying, "They are not proper Christians, they have never learned proper Christianity", or whatever else suits them. The reason Islam is the enemy is tied very closely to oil and the needs of the West in controlling this region and making sure it never goes out of that control as long as the globe exists. That is the plan. △

(The unabridged transcript of this conversation is available at www.himalmag.com)

Special editions and rubber barons

How the Malayalam press reported the war in Iraq

by **Mohammed Yasir**

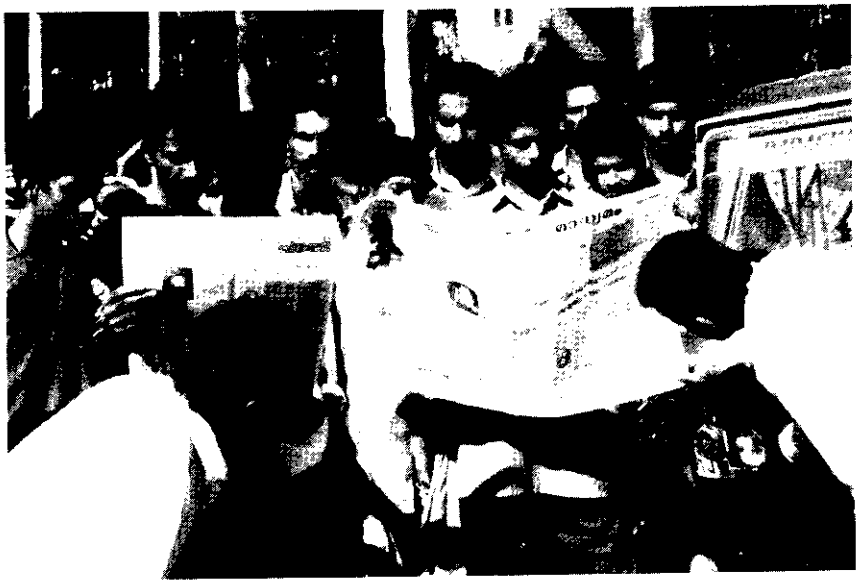
The state of Kerala, a lightning streak on the map between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, is home to 32 million people, most of whom speak Malayalam. The Malayalam press has a rich heritage dating back to the colonial era, boasting such prominent figures as the late journalist 'Swadeshabhimani' Ramakrishna Pillai, who the British exiled from Kerala because of his much-publicised opposition to colonial rule. Another old-time Malayali press icon is Muhammad Abdurahman Sahib, the late publisher of Kozhikode's *Al Ameen*, who according to local lore was offered valuable jewellery by one his anonymous admirers on the street to restart the paper after it closed. (Sahib declined.)

One of the most vibrant regional language presses in India, the Malayalam press is heavily influenced by European thought and exerts an influence beyond the confines of Kerala. The older generation colours its conversations with quotes from Marx, Fannon and Sartre; for young people, Derrida, Chomsky and Ché Guevera hold sway. The Malayali may have to depend on imports from neighbouring states for staples such as rice and vegetables, but not in the case of periodicals – Malayalam newspapers are available in many news-stands across India, and some even publish editions outside the state.

In part because of a Malayali disapora dotting the Indian Ocean rim and populating many major Western cities, it has a worldview that mixes local tradition with a strong sense of global events. With a sea-faring connection to West Asia going back centuries, it is hardly surprising that Malayalis and the Malayalam press took a strong interest in the war in Iraq.

Generally speaking, Malayalam newspapers adopted an anti-invasion stance during the United States-led war. But there were variations in war coverage, owing partly to the orientation of newspapers and their controlling interests. The mainstream Malayalam daily papers *Mathrubhoomi*, *Malayala Manorama* and *Madhyamam* covered the war independently, though each tailored coverage to the perceptions of their audiences. Taken as a whole, the Malayalam press' coverage of war was on par with that provided by the English-language papers in Kerala, and in some cases better.

SINI GEORGE



Catching up on the day's news with Madhyamam.

The standard-bearer

In the familial universe of Malayalam journalism, *Mathrubhoomi* (Motherland) is the grandparent who avoids extreme stances, forever trying to please all who matter. A Gandhian, KP Kesava Menon, founded the paper during the independence struggle, after the success of which *Mathrubhoomi* fell into the hands of business interests who subverted many of its earlier ideals, at times even turning it into a soft communal tool. Thanks to the efforts of liberal staff members, the paper retains a secular tone, and today *Mathrubhoomi* is the standard-bearer of the 'middle elite'.

During the 'war month', measured here as 19 March-19 April, the paper, as expected, provided extensive coverage of the hostilities, even producing extra sheets devoted wholly to the happenings in Iraq. *Mathrubhoomi* published eight standard-sized anti-war editorials during the month, at times with a doomsday tone; usually these focussed on war-related problems faced by Indians, in particular Gulf Malayalis. Of the 55 op-ed pieces

published by the paper during this period, 37 were war-related, mostly in the oil politics vein, though the paper's managing editor, MP Virendra Kumar, was acerbic in his lambasting of American motives. A consistent theme of *Mathrubhoomi*'s coverage involved the concern that the war would spur terrorist responses, in particular those of the Islamist variety. The paper's coverage, as a whole, was not particularly unique or incisive.

During the war month, *Mathrubhoomi*, which has a claimed circulation of 700,000, carried an average of four and a half pages of daily war coverage. In most instances, the anchor stories were war-related, though the paper, which had sent a reporter to cover the cricket World Cup in Africa, did not send a correspondent to Iraq, instead relying on news and features from wire agencies. Judging that the popular Malayali sentiment was against the war, the paper translated the columns of the well-known war correspondent and Pentagon critic Robert Fisk. At the war's conclusion, after the fall of Baghdad, *Mathrubhoomi* changed its tack slightly, moving from its earlier usage of 'war' (*yuddham*) to describe the conflict to a more qualified 'attack' (*akramanam*).

Soft-pulp Malayalam

Malayala Manorama, often referred to as just *Manorama*, is a market-focussed newspaper now in its 115th year of publication. It epitomises the tension between runaway commerce and principled stands. Often, the paper shocks its readers by following a quaint editorial policy. For instance, it is still remembered that on 7 December 1992, a day after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the paper's editorial was concerned with a fall in the price of rubber. Most people attribute that particular editorial and the paper's more general journalistic style to its owners, who also run the Madras Rubber Factory (MRF), a leading tyre manufacturer. The more conspiracy-minded of *Manorama*'s critics claim that the paper is on the payroll of the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency (the supposed evidence being the presence of the paper's managing director, Mammen Mathew, as the lone Indian representative at a Tel Aviv media conference). The biggest contribution made by *Manorama* to Malayalam journalism is the professionalism it has introduced to the industry. For many Malayalis, 'newspaper' is still synonymous with *Malayala Manorama*.

Manorama covered the war against Iraq in truly market-obsessed fashion – in fact, hours before the US and Britain even fired their first missiles into Iraq, the paper published an edition announcing that the war had begun. During the war month, *Manorama* published two daily editions, the second being a war supplement under the paper's standard masthead. Including reports and photo features, there were four pages of war coverage on average. The paper's 22 war-related editorials during this period were not completely anti-war, but were instead attempts at striking a balance between the pro- and anti-war positions. Photographs played a major role in *Manorama*'s coverage, very effectively helping to convey the pathos of the Iraqi situation. The paper gave much space to rumours surrounding Saddam Hussein and mysterious stories about the Republican Guard. The paper's reports, at one level, were a Malayalified version of 'embedded' journalism, though the paper did not send a correspondent to West Asia, a break with its usual practice of often sending a *Manorama* reporter as Kerala's sole media representative to outside venues. In total, the paper's war coverage may be characterised as soft-pulp excitement.

> The Malayalam press coverage was at par with Kerala's English papers – and sometimes surpassed it

The anti-warrior

Madhyamam is a struggling competitor of *Mathrubhoomi* and *Manorama*. Run by a Muslim reformist organisation, the paper, despite its limited resources, sent a correspondent, MCA Nazir, to Iraq. The paper was careful to avoid prejudiced reportage from American and British wire services, and focused in great measure on the condition of the besieged Iraqis. As an editorial policy, *Madhyamam* refrained from using the term 'coalition forces', instead employing 'American-British forces'. The paper did not, however, increase its page length to accommodate war news.

During the war month, *Madhyamam* carried 16 anti-war editorials under such titles as "Boycott US, UK Products", "Not War, but Barbarism" and "The UN is Dead". The day after Baghdad fell, the title of the paper's editorial was "Not Victors, but Exploiters". Between 19 March and 19 April, the 12-page paper gave an average of five-and-half pages to war coverage, and its Sunday supplement was full of horror stories from the conflict. *Madhyamam* published 64 op-ed pieces during this period, many of them translations of hard-hitting pieces from internationally known writers. Taking the Malayalam press as a whole, *Madhyamam* clearly stood at the forefront of the peace movement in Kerala, calling on its readers to protest in the streets against the invasion. Before the war even started, *Madhyamam* was carrying translated columns of Robert Fisk and Noam Chomsky on the dangers of American global ambitions. Fisk, and later the Australia-based freelance writer John Pilger, received prominent placement in the paper during the war, and continued to do so even at the end of April. *Madhyamam* made ample use of the resources at its disposal to offer a distinctive viewpoint on the war. △

The capacity for conquest

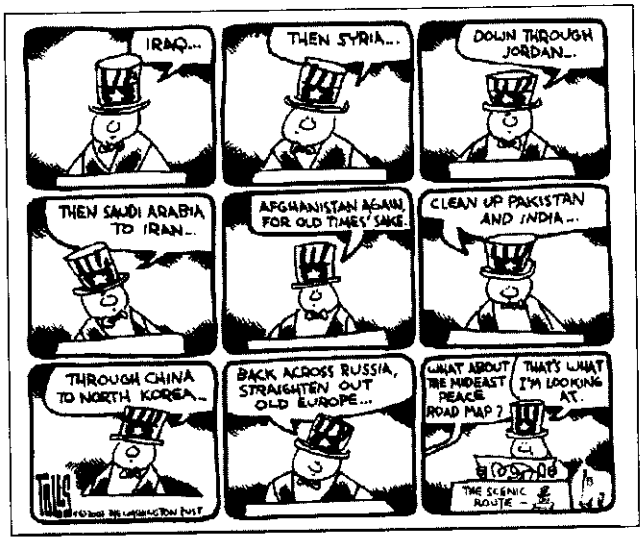
The strategic impact of US victory in Iraq on South Asia

by ***Varun Sahni***

On 20 April this year, as the United States military forces in Iraq changed gears from "war fighting" to "state building", two cartoons appeared in *The Washington Post*. The first has George W Bush asserting, "Syria isn't 'next on the list'. We don't even have 'a list'... It's more of a wheel". The adjoining caricature shows Bush next to a "wheel of fortune"; the arrow is pointing at Iraq, but Syria, Iran and North Korea are also on the wheel, wondering when it will turn against them.

The second cartoon in the *Post* was even more explicit. An official spokesman in an Uncle Sam hat stands at a lectern saying, "Iraq, then Syria, down through Jordan, then Saudi Arabia to Iran, Afghanistan again, for old times' sake, clean up Pakistan and India, through China to North Korea, back across Russia, straighten out Old Europe....". At this point someone in the audience asks, "What about the Mideast Peace Road Map?" Answers the official spokesman, "That's what I'm looking at". He holds in his hands a map of "the scenic route".

So is this what world politics has boiled down to in 2003? Are these cartoons accurate in their portrayal of the spirit and aspirations of Washington DC? What does it mean to live in an international system in which military capabilities are acutely concentrated in the hands of a single state? Are the rest of us truly at the mercy of the whims and fancies of the Americans? And what is the strategic significance of this state of affairs for South Asia and for its cardinal security dilemma, the India-Pakistan conflict? These questions, uppermost in many minds after the victory of the US (and UK) in Iraq, warrant an analysis of American power and policy, particularly as it relates to South Asia.



US on top

It is important to understand, right at the outset, the overwhelming superiority of American capabilities today. Both logically and causally, everything else flows out of this military dominance, which is both absolute and relative. In absolute terms, the US today has military capabilities that can reach any point on the planet accurately, lethally and in real time, thereby crippling the adversary while its own forces are sheltered to the maximum extent possible from the inherent dangers of war. The Iraq war demonstrated this absolute capability of the US beyond a shadow of doubt.

But even more awesome than the absolute capabilities of the US is the fact that no other power on Earth today can remotely match them. Depending on how you count and what you look out for, the US today spends more on its military than the next 10 powers combined. Historian Paul Kennedy in a recent article goes even further in asserting that the Pentagon budget is "equal now to the combined defense spending of the next 14 or 15 powers". This overwhelming military preponderance is overkill dominance, if there ever was.

But, in fact, this quantitative perspective understates US military dominance, for two reasons. First, many of the powers trailing behind the US on the military spending list are its own allies. Second, unlike most of the other powers on the list, a large chunk of the Pentagon's budget goes into military research and development, or in other words, technology. Thus, the military dominance of the US is not just based on higher military spending, but on a *qualitative* gap, a technological chasm that no other power can at present conceivably span.

However, it would be a mistake to attribute US military dominance to technology alone. Going hand in hand with its lead in technology are its vastly superior systems of military organisation and strategic planning. As the Iraq war demonstrates, strategic control of the war by the theatre commander did not stand in the way

of tactical innovativeness on the battlefield itself.

The clearest example of this would be the surprisingly rapid fall of Baghdad. In the history of war, there have been only two ways to "take cities" that are in hostile hands: through siege (surrounding a city until it surrenders through starvation, exhaustion and attrition) or by urban warfare (fighting it out street by street, zone by zone). Instead, the American forces devised the novel tactic of "reconnaissance in force" that involved a small but highly mobile mechanised force penetrating deep into the city, occupying critical road junctions, and then staying put to fight a static infantry battle until reinforcements arrived.

The American tactics in Baghdad can be contrasted with the fiasco of Mogadishu a decade earlier when, in much less intimidating circumstances, the US suffered one of its most humiliating military defeats. Nothing demonstrates better the capacity of the US military to learn from the lessons of war and to improve its performance in 'the next round'.

Thus, the first imperial war of 'Pax Americana' clearly demonstrates the US lead in all things military – money, technology, planning and training – and begets the question: is there any way in which American power can be moderated or balanced? In the long term, of course another great power will rise to challenge and balance American power. This is the lesson of history and the logic of politics, as international studies scholar Christopher Layne has shown so convincingly. In 1660, France under Louis XIV was unchallenged; by 1713, England, Habsburg Austria and Russia were contesting French power. In 1860, the high noon of the Victorian period, Pax Britannica looked secure forever. By 1910, it was clear that Germany, Japan and the US had emerged as contenders to British power. Who can doubt that 25 years from now, another great power, most probably China, will be giving the US a serious run for its money?

DC pays any attention to South Asia only because of the dangerous instabilities that persist in the India-Pakistan nuclear scene

The problem for the rest of the world is that 25 years is a long way off. What happens in the interim? Do we just grin (or grimace) and bear it? Put in these terms, it is clear that today there is only one body that could moderate the exercise of American muscularity, and that is the Atlantic alliance itself. As the member of a security community, the US has an enormous interest in keeping the alliance of liberal market democracies alive.

This is what makes Jacques Chirac's miscalculation such a terribly damaging one, not just for France but indeed for all of us. Instead of grandstanding in the UN Security Council and taking on the Americans so publicly, French diplomacy ought to have been working within the confines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to convince the United States that the multilateral route to disarming Iraq was the only one worth taking. That was a role that France, with ambitions of greatness, could have played to perfection. At this moment of world history, to have expected multipolarity to alchemically emerge from an overt confrontation with the US was at best wishful thinking, at worst, a blunder of historic proportions.

Realpolitik school

In the top military school in America, where I am on a short visiting stint, basic American strategy and interests are debated and analysed and future American generals and admirals are trained to see the larger picture. If there is one place where one would expect to find an exuberant triumphalism about the scale of the US victory in Iraq, this is it.

Incredible though it may seem, I can honestly say that I have detected none of that. Instead, what one senses are a quiet satisfaction and a steely resolve. On 11 September, America was attacked. Now, the US will attack whomsoever it feels is threatening its security. It all seems to be as simple as that. The point, then, is that the US not only has the capabilities but also the conviction and commitment to use the overwhelming force that it commands to protect its security.

But is the American definition of security threats not unduly expansive? Even many of those who sympathised with and supported the US after 11 September felt that Iraq did not pose a security threat to the American homeland. That, in effect, was at least one of the criticisms of American policy leading up to the Iraq intervention.

The US, obviously, viewed the situation differently. Its consideration was not just the possibility of Iraq passing on weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups, which the US government made so much of in the days before the war. The very fact that the US faced a terrorist threat in the first place was placed at the door of Saddam Hussein. The argument went something like this: terrorists (Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda) targeted America due to the presence of US forces near the holy sites of Islam in Saudi Arabia. US forces were deployed in Saudi Arabia due to the threat that Saddam Hussein posed to Iraq's neighbours. Thus, regime change in Iraq was in the vital security interest of the US. As can be seen, one of the first decisions the Bush administration took after the Iraq war was to deploy American forces from Saudi Arabia to Qatar.

The intention here is not to revisit the question of whether US intervention in Iraq that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was justified or not. Replaying both sides of that argument would serve little purpose, given that both positions are well known and firmly held. The idea here is to discern the pattern of US

intervention in recent years to ascertain under what circumstances the US feels free to militarily intervene in other states. That is obviously a matter of significant import for South Asia.

Thus, if Iraq suggests that the US is predisposed to intervene militarily in other states, North Korea presents a completely different reading of its propensity toward intervention. In the latter case, the US has made it clear that what it is most concerned about is not Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions *per se*, but rather its nuclear commerce. It is North Korea's threat that it would sell nuclear and missile technology that most worries Washington DC.

Given China's security guarantee to North Korea, and given the latter's conventional capability to obliterate the city of Seoul, a US military intervention in North Korea is highly unlikely. But the litmus test for Washington DC appears to be the extent to which its own security is threatened, not its broader interests. Protection of its immediate security, rather than the promotion of its long-term interests, will determine the likelihood and timing of US military intervention. Thus, along with power and purpose, both of which Washington has in abundance, we need to add a third factor, protection (critics of the US would be tempted to use the word "paranoia" instead), as a test of when the US will intervene and when it will not.

It does not appear that the military capabilities that the US currently commands, and its commitment to use that capability when it feels it needs to, will make 'Pax Americana' a period of crusades and conquests. The US still seems to view the world in classic *realpolitik*, or even *machtpolitik* (power politics), terms. If there is a desire to crusade and conquer, it comes not from Washington but from London. In recent years, it is the British who would appear to be articulating and promoting a *moralpolitik* understanding of what they undoubtedly regard as "Anglo-American" dominance. Robert Cooper, a key foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, has even suggested the need for "a new kind of imperialism" that actively intervenes in cases of state failure and humanitarian crises. But as long as the realists rule the roost in Washington DC, crusades and wars of conquests are unlikely. Wars of prevention and retribution should remain the name of the game.

Dialogue of the deaf

Given this scenario where the US will pursue war only in response to security threats of an immediate nature, what does all of the above mean for South Asia? Immediately after 11 September, South Asia became for a brief moment the cockpit of world politics. The "global" war on terror was located in South Asia because of the widespread and deep-rooted perception in the US that it is primarily from there that the terrorist threat emanated. The Iraq intervention has changed all that. South Asia has been safely returned to the periphery of world politics.

The only reason that Washington DC pays any attention to South Asia is because of the dangerous instabilities that persist in the India-Pakistan nuclear scene (it can hardly be dignified with the term "equilibrium"). As the crisis of May-June 2002 clearly revealed, in the India-Pakistan context the gap between asymmetric warfare and a nuclear exchange remains uncomfortably small.

The reason for this is obvious enough: in order to counter Pakistan's asymmetric warfare ("cross-border terrorism"), the temptation for India to initiate a sub-conventional war (small special forces operations against terrorist targets) remains strong. The problem is that sub-conventional war, which the Indian policy community has labelled as "limited war under nuclear conditions" (*not* to be confused with "limited nuclear war"), has the distinct potential of escalating into a full-fledged conventional war. If that were to happen, Pakistan's avowed (albeit unwritten) doctrine of first use/early use could lead to nuclear weapon use by Pakistan, followed by a nuclear second strike by India.

In doctrinal terms, it would appear that the basic problem is that the need for credibility imposes very different requirements on Pakistani and Indian nuclear doctrines. With their nuclear first use/early use doctrine to compensate for Indian conventional superiority, Pakistani planners have to grapple with the issue of nuclear thresholds, ie the point beyond which Pakistan would have no option but to *use* its nuclear weapons. For India, in sharp contrast, the entire issue of credibility revolves around the question of avoiding nuclear war, ie waging limited conventional war under nuclear conditions.

As Pakistani statements from General Musharraf downward would indicate, a number of different thresholds are being signalled by Pakistan – geographic, military, political and even economic. How political or economic instability in Pakistan would translate into nuclear weapon use against India is far from clear. In effect, Pakistan seems to be laying down not one but multiple tripwires for India, some of which are all but invisible to New Delhi.

Pakistan's Kashmir policy makes it a revisionist state in the bilateral and regional context. Nuclear weapons, which by their very nature buttress the status quo, thus pose a huge dilemma for Pakistan. As the weaker state, nuclear weapons are good news for Pakistan, since they guarantee its security in perpetuity. On the flip side, however, nuclear weapons spell *finis* for Pakistan's Kashmir policy. This explains why Pakistan, to get around the status quo, is now deliberately shortening its nuclear fuse vis-à-vis India by enunciating a host of nuclear thresholds. Given its lack of conventional superiority, nuclear first use in the case of Pakistan is also likely to involve early use, which is precisely the signal that Pakistan wishes to get out to its adversary.

India's nuclear doctrine, in contrast to Pakistan's, is based on a completely different understanding of the

role of nuclear weapons. If India "went nuclear" because of the belief that only nuclear weapons can deter nuclear weapons, then it would appear that Indian policy makers now also subscribe to the converse proposition: when both sides have them, nuclear weapons deter only nuclear weapons. The intent, clearly, is to establish a deterrence relationship with Pakistan that leaves some space open for limited conventional war.

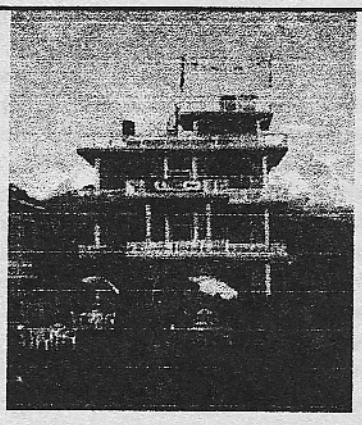
Communication with the adversary is the *sine qua non* of limited war inasmuch as it signals that no core interest is at stake in the engagement. Kashmir, however, is a core interest for both states. For this reason, the hope of some that the Kargil conflict of 1999 would become the Cuban Missile Crisis of South Asia and make both nuclear sides stand down has been stillborn.

The crisis of summer 2002 would indicate that both India and Pakistan are on a steep learning curve when it comes to building a robust deterrence relationship, which must necessarily be based on the notion of partnership with the adversary to prevent and manage conflict. This would suggest that as long as Pakistani policy is predicated on nuclear compellence (leveraging its nuclear capability to "internationalise" Kashmir in order to force a settlement upon India), a stable deterrence relationship is unlikely to emerge between the two states.

Given the nature of the security dilemma in South Asia, the fear that the summer of 2003 would be an action replay of 2002 – snows melt, terrorism increases, India warns, Pakistan responds, standoff ensues, the world wonders – is therefore totally realistic. The problem with an annual India-Pakistan standoff is that, in the absence of a stable deterrence relationship, there is absolutely no guarantee that the situation will not suddenly escalate out of control.

However, as long as the India-Pakistan standoff does not threaten the security of the US itself, any possibility that Washington DC would forcibly intervene in the region can be totally discounted. Neither Pakistan nor India, in that sense, is Iraq. Washington DC, as a matter of fact, wants good relations with both states, and both of them in turn are craving good relations with the US.

The fact that there will be no significant strategic impact of 'Pax Americana' on South Asia is good news. It would of course be even better if India and Pakistan could end their dialogue of the deaf and begin a genuine dialogue. The recent conversation between the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers may yet signal a new beginning.



The endless road to democracy

A prognosis of civil-military cooperation

by **Shafqat Munir**

Pakistan's decades-long, on-again, off-again relationship with democracy has been marred by both internal and external factors. Over the past three decades, Pakistan has held six general and a similar number of local body elections. It is difficult to complain about the number of elections, though the duration between these polls has varied widely. Whenever the people of Pakistan have been allowed to exercise their franchise, the levels of participation in the political process, even at the village level, have been fairly good. In the last three decades, while people have voted for their representatives and governments, they just have not been given a chance to vote *out* their representatives and governments. Either the military has stepped in or presidents have dissolved assemblies to settle disputes with prime ministers.

Civilian presidents dissolved assemblies and dismissed the governments of Benazir Bhutto twice and of Nawaz Sharif once. But while these prime ministers were not allowed to complete their terms, presidential action did not disrupt the democratic process, as new assemblies were constituted throughout the 1988-1999 period through elections. However, the dismissal of the governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (5 July 1977) and Nawaz Sharif (12 October 1999) came at the hands of generals who introduced their own visions of civil-military democracy. If General Zia-ul Haq brought in a conservative agenda, General Pervez Musharraf took over with a comparatively liberal one. But both introduced democracies of their choice and defined governance on their own terms. And both fabricated would-be ruling parties overnight to advance their respective agendas.

Usurpers: Musharraf and Zia.

During his 11-year rule, Zia literally tried to change the basic democratic fabric of Pakistani society through so-called Islamisation, which US policymakers condoned and sanctioned so that they could leverage religious sentiment against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. This is the era that brought to Pakistan the culture of the Taliban, Kalashnikovs, drugs and other extremist trends linked to the US-Osama bin Laden *jihad* against Soviet troops. The Zia era successfully fragmented Pakistani society along ethnic, caste, creed and religious lines, and witnessed the creation of a separate electorate system to justify the general's grip on power through elected local bodies. Then came the highly controversial Hudood laws, which, in the name of Islamisation, undermined the position of women and contributed to the marginalisation of minority communities and citizens in general, making them more vulnerable to social and state violence while concomitantly depriving them of their fundamental rights and democratic traditions.

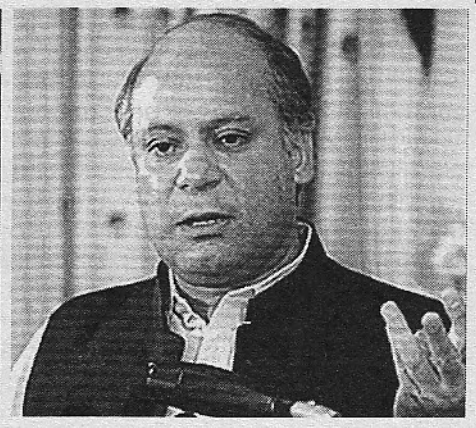
The military dictatorship of General Zia is solely responsible for Pakistan's spiralling crises, which combined have blocked progress towards democracy and stymied the pursuit of tolerance, peace, social justice, economic growth and institution building. Moreover, it was Zia's rule that created militant *jihadi*s, the so-called warrior element, among the people of Pakistan.

Mushy order

In contrast to his predecessors, Musharraf has been hesitant to drape his government in the garb of martial law. He is on record as saying that he is not an incarnation of either Field Marshal Ayub Khan or Zia, but is a different breed. Indeed, Musharraf claims to be a Pakistani visionary in the mould of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Muhammad Mahathir of Malaysia.

While both Zia and Musharraf introduced their own slates of democratic reforms, Musharraf is something of a humane dictator rather than a military one. He has allowed the protection of certain liberties. He has introduced a devolution plan aimed at distributing power to local bodies, thus facilitating transition to democracy at the village level. In contrast to Zia, Musharraf fulfilled his promise of conducting elections within the period mandated by the supreme court, albeit amid public accusations of electoral rigging to ensure the victory of his client party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), at the centre and in the provinces of





The deposed: Father and daughter Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif.

Balochistan and Punjab. Politics being what it is, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party was relegated to the opposition benches in Sindh despite emerging from the elections as the single largest party. In North Western Frontier Province, a pro-Taliban religious alliance wound up in control.

Nonetheless, before restoring even selective parliamentary politics, Musharraf introduced the Legal Framework Order (LFO), which according to his government's theoreticians, automatically became part of the constitution without parliamentary endorsement. Besides introducing electoral reforms such as lowering the suffrage age from 21 to 18, establishing seat quotas of 33 percent for women and minorities and other similar progressive provisions, the LFO gave sweeping powers to the president over the administrative functions of government. It is because of this imbalanced power formula that Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali is on record as saying that President Musharraf is his boss. Coming from a prime minister, such an admission runs counter to the spirit of Pakistan's constitution, rules of procedure and tenets of democracy. The opposition is pursuing this, querying how a grade-22 officer (chief of army staff) outranks an elected prime minister.

The LFO controversy has marred the newly elected national assembly, which has convened six times in short-lived sessions since its inception after the October 2002 general elections. In the sixth session that ended on 30 April, the national assembly counted 15 working days during which it transacted nominal business in the form of a bill broadening the powers of the government to sack government employees. Out of these 15 working days, the national assembly actually met for only seven, during which the opposition continuously voiced its protests against the LFO and the presence of a uniformed president in the assembly hall. After almost six months, the tug of war between the opposition and the Jamali-led, Musharraf-controlled government has failed to result in the repeal of certain clauses of the LFO that empower the president over the prime minister and the parliament and allow him to simultaneously hold a military rank.

Nevertheless, only recently Prime Minister Jamali showed some flexibility and started talks with the opposition. A day before the talks were set to start, however, Musharraf met senior journalists, telling them that he would not give up his uniform, thus implying that he will continue to hold the reins of power. He categorically stated that he wants to see the reforms introduced by his government continued, implying a continued central political role for himself. Musharraf went so far as to make the interesting argument that his uniformed political service is required, as it allows him to speak for both the military and political leaderships. The opposition did not buy this argument, but the situation ignited a debate on whether democracy can prevail long without the support of the military and if the military's role should be constitutionally enshrined, as the Westminster model may not suit Pakistan.

On the LFO, the opposition-government joint committee has identified seven controversial clauses that need to be sorted out before 15 May so that the parliament is in working order before the start of the seventh session. In the opposition's formulation, the most important of these issues is the constitutional status of the LFO, which it says cannot be unilaterally added to the constitution by the government. The second concerns the holding of dual military and civilian leadership posts, and the third calls for the National Security Council to be dismantled. The fourth objection is that presidential power to dissolve parliament under Article 58(2)-B of the constitution is unacceptable in its present form, which is related to the following point, that of all other powers of the president that give him supremacy over parliament. A demand of Pakistan's legal fraternity for a three-year extension of the retirement age of judges is the sixth point, followed by the final, the incorporation of several important laws under the sixth schedule of the constitution, laws under which may only be repealed or amended with the prior consent of the president. The committee is scheduled to negotiate on these points during a series of meetings between 5 and 15 May.

It is useful to consider these seven points in the context of Musharraf's candid discussion with senior journalists, where he articulated his defence of the LFO. The question also arises as to how the committee can resolve this conflict when Musharraf has declared himself indispensable on all political fronts, including the economic and diplomatic. Given such a situation, and despite the scheduling of formal talks, it cannot be ruled out that the opposition will soften its stance, in particular in light of a possible improvement in India-Pakistan relations, which might entail diplomatic and commercial re-engagement. If this were to happen it would have far-reaching effects on the domestic politics of both India and Pakistan.

It is likely that the LFO committee will accept some expanded presidential powers, such as those under Article 58(2)-B and presidential discretion in the sacking of prime ministers. Similarly, the government for the time being could scrap the controversial National Security Council and give up ground on the extension of judges' retirement ages. On the issue of Musharraf holding two offices simultaneously, a compromise could be arrived at by giving a date for him to step down from his military position if he agrees to stand for re-election as a president in sherwani instead of in uniform.

Prospects

If the government amicably resolves the LFO controversy, it could then focus its attention on political stability to reap the fruits of economic growth and a favourable diplomatic climate. But for the LFO impasse and political upheavals, Prime Minister Jamali's government has inherited a fairly comfortable economic situation and the rewards of a calculated foreign policy of putting Pakistan at the centre of international attention.

On the domestic front, the economy is predicted to grow 4.5 percent in fiscal year 2003 and by as much as five percent in 2004 owing to stable macroeconomic conditions, a narrowed fiscal deficit of 5.1 percent, a 15 percent increase in revenues and stabilisation of the inflation rate at 3.5 percent. According to a recent Asian Development Bank report, Pakistan's balance of payments has improved significantly due to a sharp increase in foreign remittances and larger inflows of foreign loans and grants. The balance of payments currently shows a large surplus of USD 2.7 billion in the current account. External debt and liabilities have also declined, with Pakistan retiring expensive short-term loans/debt from USD 37.1 billion to USD 36.5 billion. GDP growth stood at 3.6 percent in fiscal 2002, up from 2.5 percent in 2001. There are indications that due to these improvements, GDP growth may exceed the 2003 target rate of 4.5 percent. Additionally, heavy rains in late winter have improved the prospects of agriculture, which is the backbone of Pakistan's economy. But while these positive economic trends suggest an improved future for Pakistan, rising poverty has had massive counter-effects, weakening social sector services, among other impacts. Just as importantly, employment opportunities and livelihood options for many people, particularly the marginalised, are not improving.

Pakistan's economic growth outlook is clouded when there is political instability, tension at the borders and global economic uncertainty. Though there are some signs of flexibility on the domestic, regional and international fronts, Pakistan has to move in a skilful manner. While politics falls beyond the military's mandate, the generals nonetheless have concrete political power stemming from their control over administrative, intelligence and economic networks, making them difficult to ignore. Politicians should consider devising a model of democracy tailored to Pakistan instead of expecting the Westminster system to suddenly work.

Likewise, the military leadership should recognise that when generals topple elected civilian governments, sometimes in concert with US strategic calculations, displaced civilian leaders pull on the military's power. In this game, which has been repeated several times, the military manufactures mandates for a newly created group of pro-establishment leaders who lack support on the ground. Those who join these military-crafted governments to legitimise the rule of generals receive a clean chit, often in spite of implication in criminality, while opposition figures are branded corrupt and often driven into exile or imprisoned. Political stability cannot be ensured unless real political parties and their leaders, in accordance with popular support from the people of Pakistan, are allowed to function freely, and the political and military leaderships respect one another's positions.

On the border conflict, the recent peace initiative from Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the matching response from Islamabad come as good omens. The Americans, having completed their task in Iraq, now appear interested in helping to resolve other regional conflicts such as the tension between India and Pakistan. In the US-dominated global order, it appears that there is no purpose to such tension, and hopefully stability in India-Pakistan relations will soon emerge.

The third stability factor, the reversal of international uncertainties, has improved with Islamabad's adroit handling of the Iraq crisis. It neither sided openly with the US nor with Saddam Hussein. However, Pakistan has been supportive of the Iraqi people, and it is garnering economic support and enhanced status as an ally in the war against terrorism and as a country that repudiates state-sponsored terrorism.

Of the three stability factors, the latter two appear to be improving, though the country's domestic political situation still requires progress. This depends purely on the attitudes and understanding of the two forces in the country, the political and military leaderships. △

Microbes unite!

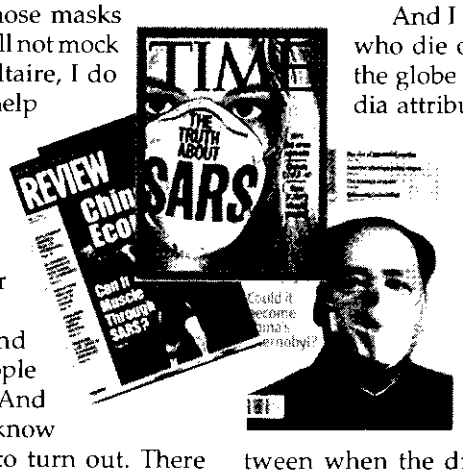
THE DEPRESSION hits me on a warm and humid Bangkok evening. I am just through with dinner in the city's crowded Sukhumvit business district, my head full of the war on Iraq, and I spot these people – people with masks on their faces.

A couple of weeks ago anybody with a cloth covering his or her face in this city would have been branded a *jihadi*, a possible Arab/Muslim/dark-skinned/dark-intentioned 'terrorist'. The city had been on alert well before the war on Iraq started to prevent 'Arab looking' people from doing bad things – for eg, looking Arab. Just around the time of the Anglo-American attack on Iraq, if an 'Arab' had been seen behind a mask in Bangkok the entire city would have been evacuated.

Apparently, not anymore. Respectable people wear masks now in Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. In fact, they say wearing a mask is mandatory to save yourself from SARS – the flu-like virus that has much of Southeast Asia in deep panic. Tourists are cancelling their trips in droves, schools are closing down, economies plunging, governments in crisis and the Chinese – oh those 'super-contaminating Chinese' – are being spurned everywhere.

Suddenly, an irrational panic grips me: there is no escape. If the Apostles of Armageddon running the White House do not get you, some mysterious, malevolent microbes will. For a fleeting moment, a deep frozen moment, I lose hope. We are finished. They will get us one way or the other. This is what the new/old colonial world order is going to be all about – complete helplessness for us common citizens. Caught between SARS and their wars the only safe place is soon going to be – you guessed right – on planet Mars.

Yes, the people I saw wearing those masks have a right to protect themselves. I will not mock them in any way. To paraphrase Voltaire, I do not believe these masks medically help them in any way but I will defend to the death their right to wear them. And then there are so many of them out there who deserve to have a mask fixed on their faces anyway (so we will not have to 'read their bloody lips').



Yes, there are these microbes and many of them are dangerous. Yes, people have died and still continue to do so. And it is indeed true, we really do not know which way this pandemic is going to turn out. There are constant references to the great influenza outbreak after the first world war, which killed an estimated 20 to 40 million people. Is SARS going to be that big? I am no kin to any Indian sage and I cannot predict such things. But I am betting that neither the 'medical experts' nor the 'media' can give us a real idea of what is going to happen. At this stage, given the sparse information on hand about SARS, it is all idle speculation – an activity that some people usually make lots of money out of.

Even assuming the deeply depressing thought that much of humanity is going to be wiped out by SARS over the next year (that is what the media is making it sound like), let us take a step back from this approaching abyss, take a deep breath (go ahead, do it while it is still safe) and reflect on a few questions about other aspects of this pandemonium of a pandemic.

First the context: why are we so full of fear only of these microbes and not of those dozen other ways in which people die completely avoidable deaths?

To anyone who is not already aware of these facts let me spell them out:

- 250,000 to 500,000 people die every year around the world due to ordinary influenza, the common 'garden variety' flu. In the United States alone, with a vaccine and medical care available, flu kills 36,000 people every year.
- Anywhere between one to 2.7 million people die every year due to malaria, a vast majority in Africa, many of whom are children.
- Tuberculosis kills two million people every year, 98 percent of whom live in developing countries.
- HIV/AIDS claimed 3 million lives in 2002, including those of an estimated 610,000 children.
- Traffic accidents kill 300,000 people every year in Asia alone.
- The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq killed at least 10-15,000 Iraqi soldiers and over 2300 Iraqi civilians in its first two weeks and perhaps several hundred British and American troops.

And I am not even counting those millions who die of poverty and malnutrition around the globe annually. Every year the Indian media attributes hundreds of deaths to the 'cold wave', 'the heat wave', 'too much rain' and 'too little rain'. The fact is these deaths have nothing to do with the weather – people die every hour, wantonly, in perfectly good weather. We all know why. I say this: if we choose to cover our faces, let it be in anger and in shame – not just due to some microbes.

Here are the numbers of SARS cases worldwide and deaths between when the disease is supposed to have broken out in southern China around 1 November 2002 and end-April. In the six months since the outbreak, a total of 4439 cases of SARS and 'suspected' SARS have been recorded in 26 countries and 263 people have died. The mortality rate due to SARS is estimated to be between 3 and 4 percent – just above that of normal influenza –

but even this is not confirmed because the total number of real SARS cases is not yet known. Nor is its exact method of transmission clearly understood – which is why wearing masks may not be a useful precaution at all.

The medical establishment: the SARS alarm bells started ringing only when the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued a global alert in mid-March. A war of words broke out soon between the WHO and the Chinese health authorities – the latter being accused of 'hiding information' about SARS in its first few months. The Chinese said something back, which nobody understood (they are never going to be a 'superpower' this way).

One of the big critiques of bodies such as the WHO from health activists has been of the way the global health body has adopted a purely 'vertical' approach to global health problems at the cost of a sustained, holistic and long-term approach. So whenever there is an outbreak, or more usually an outcry, about a particular disease, the WHO and other global health officials organise a 'posse', mobilise some resources and ride into the wilderness ready to 'lasso' the villain. Once the 'critter' is temporarily caught or suppressed the issue is mostly forgotten.

There is no attempt to even address the underlying causes of new viruses and diseases emerging for example, due to super-intensive techniques of animal husbandry, recycling of animal offal in animal feed, the use of a variety of artificial hormones and growth-enhancers and, of course, effects from biological warfare experiments. Nor is there any attempt to mitigate the conditions, such as overcrowding, poverty and lack of housing infrastructure, under which infectious diseases such as SARS spread so rapidly. The WHO has failed to push policies that tackle other basic social and economic determinants of public health – such as conflict, environmental pollution and privatisation of health care.

The media: has anybody really asked how much of the SARS scare is due to the media's penchant for simplistic, alarmist reporting? One of the first 'big' SARS cases to make headlines was that of Johnny Cheng, a Chinese-American businessman who died at a hospital in Hanoi, Vietnam, after flying in from Hong Kong. In late March, Hanoi was one of the 'epicentres' of the SARS pandemic, going by media reports. No more. The country seems to have slipped down the hit list of 'no go' places with just 63 reported SARS cases and five deaths.

How did this 'super-contagious', 'killer' disease get contained in a crowded country like Vietnam with a very average public health system? Nobody in the media is following the Vietnam story anymore because that is not on the map of the globe-trotting elites. But Hong Kong, Singapore and Toronto are on that map, hence the panic about viruses travelling on the business class seat next to them. (If nothing else, maybe there is a great 'success story' out there in Vietnam, with details of how a poor, third world country has successfully contained this deadly new infectious disease.)

And what happened to the media follow-up to the various other health scares we have had in the past decade all around the globe? Bubonic plague in India, Ebola in Africa, the Mad Cow Disease in the UK (I won't take a dig at Tony B on this one)? And why was there virtually no coverage in the 'international media' of the influenza outbreak in Madagascar in mid-2002, where more than 27,000 cases were reported within three months and 800 deaths occurred despite rapid intervention?

There is an apocryphal story going around about how much of a 'media thing' the SARS scare probably is. The question asked is why this new form of flu is being called the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome? 'Severe' and 'acute' – two synonymous terms together – why? Apparently the term 'severe' was added (only in early March) to avoid an awkward acronym resulting from what was originally dubbed the Acute Respiratory Syndrome? What's the secret here: cover your face and save your ---?

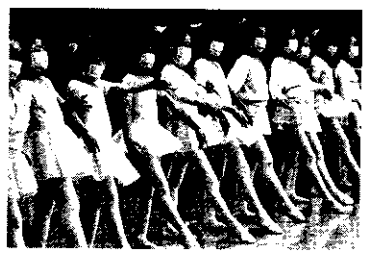
How much of the SARS scare is due to the media's penchant for simplistic, alarmist reporting?

That story is probably just a bad joke, but let me tell you, I think so is the way the entire SARS scare is being reported and played out. I am not saying that the deaths due to SARS are not a real, serious tragedy or that it could not turn into a dangerous pandemic. Far from it. There is no moral mathematics involved here, please. Every human life is precious – Iraqi or American, Chinese or Singaporean. A very unique, irreplaceable universe of its own disappears forever with each physical death. All I am pleading for is some more perspective. Why are those dying of malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and poverty in most developing countries every day not making the headlines? Is it not because those who die unseen, unheard, untreated are not in the same league as the Gold Card-holding frequent flyers of our world? Is it not because there is such a 'low probability' of a TB-infected African child coughing in the same air-conditioned corridors that our elites frequent?

A couple of years ago a senior editor of one of India's major newspapers, when asked by a women's rights activist to publish a story about high rates of malnutrition among girl children, is reported to have refused and said, "The readers of our newspaper do not suffer from malnutrition". Sure, Mr Let Them Eat Cake, but are you and your readers not the cause of malnutrition in India? (Ahem, what I wanted to say was, "Will someone pass me that cutting edge of the French Revolution!") When one hears stories such as these, a ques-

tion arises in the mind. This is just a nasty, nasty question that I just cannot get out of my head. Could it be that those who die unseen, unheard, untreated are themselves microbes in the worldview of our masters? Has the microbe become a metaphor for the unwashed, unwanted millions who do not fit into the corporate globalisation of our empire-builders?

Good riddance, they suppose, to those teeming, troublesome microbes – of so little value to the empire. Microbes, who cannot afford to buy and have nothing to sell.



And from this high point of moral clarity it is just a little leap away to identifying those other microbes that need to be dealt with. The bearded, turbaned, different, dissident, multi-tongued microbes. To be screened and searched at every airline check-point, discouraged, disinfected, disposed off like a dirty secret. Microbes, whose very existence is a form of biological warfare to some.

No, I really do want to bring this subject up, however depressing the subject is to me and to many of you reading this. It is important to see what our dear world is headed towards. A world in which there are perishable, pestilent microbes and there are those human beings moulded in the image of God.

Okay, okay, not all of us are microbes of course. Many of us are a slightly higher caste – tolerated, employed, paid, domesticated sheep and cattle. And there is also that special category – well-fed, trained dogs. God bless the creatures; I really have nothing against their species. (In fact, some of them are my best friends.) But I cannot help objecting to the worst of canine qualities that many of these four-legged ones in our midst display.

Whining and dining with the masters, biting and barking at the poor. I know all this is getting a bit too depressing and I do not like it one bit. I have been reading too much Orwell these days, and that too, on the front pages of daily newspapers. So how does one get out of this 'animal farm' we all seem to be trapped in? I say let us go back to our roots and our traditions – the great traditions of the ancient microbes.

Think of it, microbes, the first form of life on planet earth. Microbes – mating, multiplying, mutating into higher, more virulent forms of cognitive, combative life. Weathering all storms, resisting all predators and surviving every sterile environment. Microbes evolving, exploring, exploding till every form of life finds its place under the sun.

I have got it figured now. What this globe really needs now is a Movement Of All Microbes and the Mother of All Movements. A million MOAMs to match the challenges ahead.

(By Satya Sagar; originally under the title "SARS, War and the Farce", Zmag, *April 2003)*

Phoney knights in showy armour

Successful people
Have separate shoes
Some for celebrations
Others for grief
—Govinda Mathur, *Bache huye shabda*

PRESIDENT HAMID Karzai has more faith in his American guards than in his own people. General Musharraf refuses to speak to an "uncivilised" parliament but courts even lowly Pentagon officials enthusiastically. King Gyanendra has chosen, since 4 October 2002, to walk the treacherous bylanes of state power all alone but he can do nothing about what the US government considers international terrorists. President Chandrika Kumaratunga has very little confidence in the peacemaking abilities of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe but cannot deny him his moment in the sun due to the pressure of the Washington Consensus. For Begum Khalida Zia of Bangladesh, the motives of anyone opposed to her quixotic politics are suspect, but even she trembles at the Western charge that her country is harbouring Al Qaeda fugitives.

In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati and Mulayam Singh will lob cheap innuendo at each other but will not do anything to oppose American presence in the region. The Lalooland of Bihar does not even make a claim to political civility – its *de facto* chief minister graces a political rally to celebrate the power of the stick, presumably because it is useful in electoral politics. But in his rally, Laloo at least showed the courage to stand against American imperialism, even though his actions have very little significance.

Things are not much better in Maharashtra or Gujarat where since saffronites are in control of public life, everyone is disturbingly quiet about the crusade against Muslims in West Asia. A little to the southeast, there is no love lost between the competing claimants of Annadurai's political legacy in Madras. Chandrababu Naidu's courtesy towards the leadership of the Congress is largely a reflection of the political reality in his state. His Telugu Desam cannot run the Andhra administration by antagonising Sonia Gandhi's sympathisers in the Hyderabad secretariat – the keeper of Telugu pride needs them only to check the powerful challenge of the Bharatiya Janata Party. But all of them are keeping mum about the new hegemon in the region – the United States of America.

Even though democracy survives in some form or the other in more parts of South Asia now than ever before, popular governments have failed to transform the ruling classes of this region. Not unlike their feudal predecessors, the elite of even democratic regimes from Kashmir to Colombo continues to conduct itself with the arrogance of "since I am the boss around here, I know best what is best for you all". Despite democracy and the freedom of press, dissent can still put you at peril – even a historian of Romila Thapar's standing has to learn to live with state-inspired public ridicule. So the masses have learnt to accept the hard reality of American arrogance simply because the elite has ignominiously acquiesced.

American eminence

A division in the ranks of the ruling elite has often led to cataclysmic events. The creation of Pakistan was largely a result of mutual suspicion between the Muslim and Hindu intelligentsia of the Indian National Congress, epitomised by a clash of the personalities of two barristers – Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The birth of Bangladesh became a foregone conclusion the moment the feudocratic military establishment of Islamabad refused to deal with Bengali winners of electoral politics from East Pakistan on equal terms. Among other factors, the demagoguery of Sinhala politicos ensured the rise of Tamil insurgency in Jaffna. The effects of these conflicts continue to afflict all South Asians to this day.

> For the elite the best guarantee against a challenge is an American insurance policy

In a socially integrated region such South Asia, it is perhaps natural that intrastate conflicts have interstate ramifications, but when divided rulers exploit solidarity, the unity of the people often proves to be a curse. Islamabad cannot keep itself aloof from what is happening inside Kashmir or Kandahar even if it wants to. Indira Gandhi had to invade East Pakistan to liberate Bangladesh. But her son's compulsions in Jaffna were different – Rajiv Gandhi had to dispatch peacekeeping forces to Sri Lanka to prevent the creation of an independent Tamil state.

Whether it is the fate of Lhotshampas languishing in the refugee camps of eastern Nepal or the lot of the Biharis of Bangladesh braving the crossing of India to make it to Pakistan, the destinies of all South Asians are inextricably intertwined. Unfortunately, the ruling elite of Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad, Kathmandu, New Delhi and Thimpu does not appreciate this, mainly because it lives in the gated ghettos of capital cities. And it has increasingly begun to think that the best guarantee against any challenge from the people is an American insurance policy, bought by unquestioningly supporting the Bush-Blair duo, even in its own neighbourhood.

Politicians take all the blame – much of it well deserved, no doubt – but other constituents of the ruling elite cannot be exonerated of wilful failure on all fronts. It is said that the market integrates, literature opens the mind, the media liberates and the intelligentsia encourages tolerance. Perhaps. But these 'agents of change' are doing anything but. They behave more Bushy than Tony. Then why bemoan the fact that it takes a bludgeoning from the global bully to make AB Vajpayee and MZ Jamali talk to each other? Is it not a fact that were it not for American pressure, the Tamil Tigers would have withdrawn from the negotiating table long ago, and the Maoists of Nepal would still be ransacking and ravaging the countryside at will?

Let us face it: the South Asian elite is too disconnected from the masses to understand their trials and tribulations. Lacking indigenous tools of comprehension, it needs American prisms to make sense of its own surroundings. And then, inevitably, Pentagon 'persuasion' to act on contradictions within its own societies.

Blustering bourgeoisie

Farid Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*, is a typical American republican who places personal liberty high in the order of priority, way above the need of democratic politics. Zakaria hails from India, has a Muslim name, and has no compunction in manufacturing intellectual apologies for the aggressive neoliberalism of his adopted country. American conservatives could not have wished for a better poster-boy for their post-11 September game plan in West Asia.

Garner and Chalabi team up in Baghdad.

MURRAY WEBB

On one of his tours of duty to New Delhi, recalls Zakaria, "A friend of my father's took me aside and he said, 'I want you to know how proud we all are of you.' That's the great thing about India. Success in America isn't considered selling out. They all think you have made it!" Zakaria perhaps tried to hide his shame behind a sign of exclamation. But there is no revelation in what his father's friend said – most members of the South Asian elite are so ashamed of being born in this region that all their energy is wasted in escaping from here rather than working to bring about meaningful change.

With such hollow men and empty women in positions of leadership, no South Asian country can hope to offer even a symbolic resistance if the two 'butchers' of Baghdad were to decide tomorrow that 'regime change' in this region is a necessary condition for the betterment of this region.

In the face of dire warning from invaders, Iraqis, to their credit, are still refusing to accept Ahmad Chalabi, a front man for Jay Garner. But if Farid Zakaria were to follow the warships of victorious Marines into Bombay, he would find friends of his father's falling over each other to garland him at the Gateway of India. They would not be doing anything new though. South Asians have greeted all outside victors with much gusto through the chequered history of this region. The British ruled with the support of native rulers, 'native informers' and native clerks. The freedom movement was a challenge to the continuation of their domination, but the partition of British India affected people's perspectives. The class-war in the Subcontinent lost before it could begin in right earnest – infantile patriotism ousted it from centre stage.

For the feudal-military elite of Pakistan, hawking the fear of India is the easiest way of maintaining its hold on power. Courting America is a logical corollary. It is not very different in India where 'security risk' has been elevated to such levels that to question it is tantamount to sacrilege. Ironically, the more India and Pakistan spend on 'defence', the shriller the call for even more resources for weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps because the elite of both countries knows that their progeny will not face the consequences of their monumental follies. Children of Pakistani and Indian bourgeoisie will be waving the star-spangled banner, just as their forefathers did the union jack.

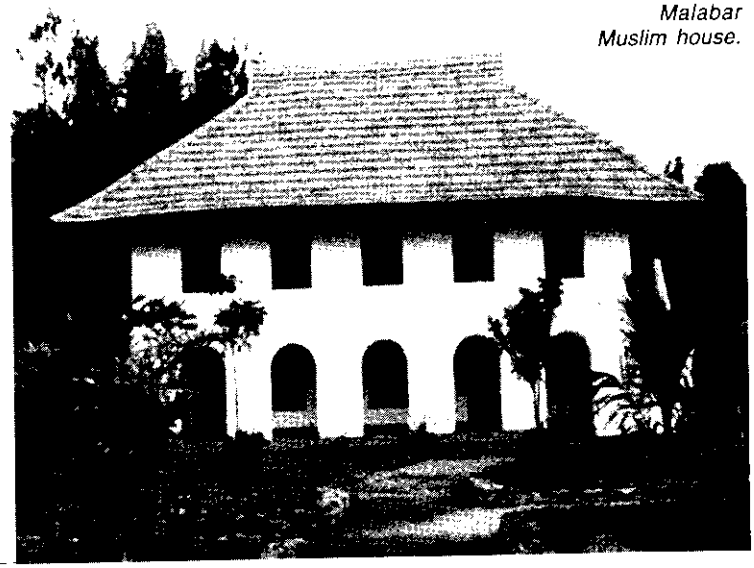
Quite clearly, the Nehruvian design of producing indigenous ruling elite by cloning Oxford, Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has failed to deliver the desired results. All that those institutions have done is to produce either intellectual coolies for Western capitalism or to widen the gap between the 'best' and the rest. The chasm between brown sahibs and ethnic box*wallas* on the one hand and agricultural labour and the coolies on the other has widened rather than decreased. Feudal lords at least had a vested interest in retaining their ties to the land; the professional elite would rather forget that bond.

The stress on 'quality of leadership' has failed to produce another Mahatma, one more Qaid, or another *ekushe* uprising. Meanwhile, Christina Rocca scolds Vajpayee, Musharraf, Wickremesinghe and Khalida Zia like so many little children. Islamabad and New Delhi may resume their relationship without the Marines barging in, but the Marines may yet come if the South Asian elite refuses to be assimilated in the society that has put it in a position of power.

The leaders might do well to remember that the people have very little to lose. Nobody fought for Saddam Hussein even though the Iraqis lost their country to the hated Anglo-Americans; it can only be worse if a similar misfortune were to befall South Asia. △

–CK Lal

A stroll in the (reassembled) countryside

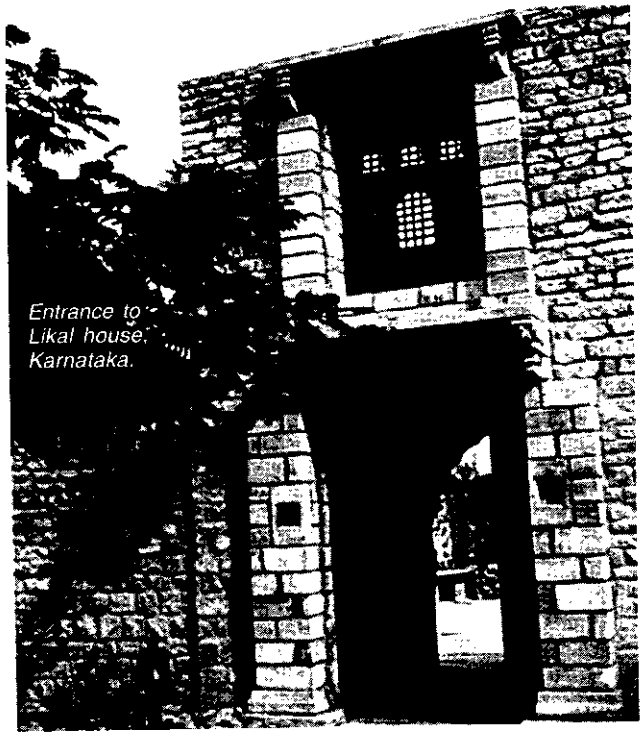


Malabar Muslim house.

The Dakshinachitra housing museum south of Madras takes one through decades of village life in the Indian south.

by ***Syed Ali Mujtaba***

India lives in its villages, so people say, though the headfirst rush towards urban centres of recent decades has been uprooting the rural landscape. An ongoing migration to cities continues to cut many people off from village life, negatively affecting local cultures of crafts, festivals, music and folklore. In reaction to this phenomenon of market-guided mobility, boutique villages have sprung up in many of India's cities. But a more unique effort at encouraging an appreciation of the rural has borne fruit just 21 kilometres from Madras, on the road to the ancient port-town of Mahabalipuram. The Dakshinachitra museum has charged itself with the duty of celebrating south India's diverse village housing styles.



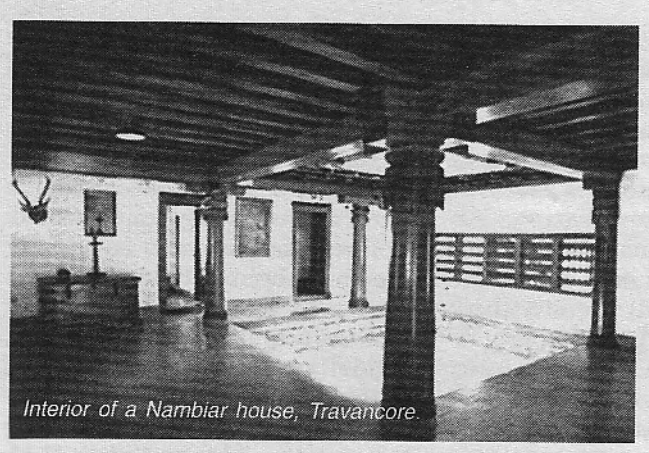
Entrance to Likal house, Karnataka.

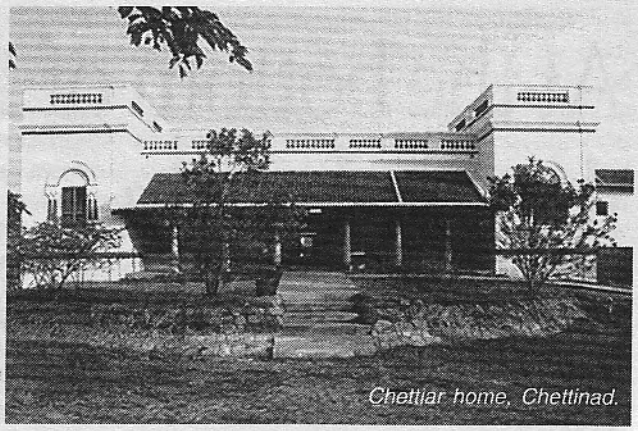
In most cases, the museum 'exhibits', which may date as far back as the 17th century, have been dissembled from their original locations and reassembled inside the museum's grounds. The museum's curators have collected a representative array of houses from across the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu to showcase the varying houses that for centuries characterised south Indian villages, many of which are now being subsumed beneath a bland modernity.

On visiting Dakshinachitra, one is struck by the range of artefacts on display, each encapsulating an aspect of traditional life. Amidst the transplanted homes of artisans, farmers and merchants, one can stop for a chat with the village craftsmen employed at the museum, or spend an afternoon trying to match steps to the tunes of folk musicians. The craftsmen are a foil for the unique structures in which they work by offering lessons in many forgotten village trades, making the museum a living dynamic unit.

On my visit to Dakshinachitra on a crisp, sunny afternoon, I first passed through the small crafts bazaar. The century-old teak woodwork and floors of the house came to the museum, beam by beam, slat by slat. The house once accommodated four generations of a Tamil chettiar (merchant family), with each room around the centre courtyard the property of a son, patriarchal lineage determining housing arrangements. The house demonstrates dual histories, of a family and a building style, each complementing the other in their common presentation at Dakshinachitra.

Behind the chettiar house, a row of smaller dwellings fills out the Tamil Nadu section. The specimens include a silk weaver's house from Kanchipuram, an entire Brahmin *agraharam*, or enclave, an agriculturist's


Interior of a Nambiar house, Travancore.


Chettiar home, Chettinad.

house from Thanjavur, and an early 20th century potter's residence from Tiruvellore. In the Kanchipuram house, predictably, weavers work at traditional looms to produce 'Kanjivaram' saris, while in the neighbouring buildings craftsmen offer visitors lessons in traditional practices. Artisans teach the craft of basket weaving, the art of glassware and pottery. A shrine to Ayyanar, a guardian deity of villages, an exhibition hall for textiles from various time periods and a shed housing a temple chariot complete the Tamil Nadu offering.

In the Kerala section, the second to be assembled by the museum, the central attraction is an all-wooden Syrian Christian house from Podapally, Kottayam, built in the 1850s. The layout of the house is typical, with a granary attached to the entrance hall, unlike in most Hindu households. Christian icons in the granary suggest that it may have served a dual purpose as a place of worship. At Dakshinachitra, another Syrian Christian home, this one dating from 1910, has been attached to the larger structure. The second house includes a living room, a separate dining room and kitchen, evidence of British influence on construction styles. The distinctive materials that went into the two buildings are jack fruit and plata wood.

Next to the Syrian Christian homes is a Nair family homestead. The Nairs are a matrilineal Hindu caste,


Syrian Christian home, Kuttanad.

and in this example of a middle-class agriculturalist dwelling, the kitchen is separate from the main house. A carved wooden ceiling indicates craftsmanship of the highest quality. Another Hindu home, a Menon house from Calicut, is constructed of laterite and timber, and is representative of many 19th century middle-class houses in central and northern Kerala.

The Tamil Nadu and Kerala sections opened in 1996, after which it took more than four years for the sections on Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh to come up. Today, these remain small, each represented by only one cluster of homes. The Karnataka section contains a Likal (weaver) home, and the Telugu Ikat weaving community is represented in the Andhra section. The construction of both houses is similar, primarily relying on roughly finished large rocks. In the Karnataka home, a large workroom extends off the entrance, with tools spread around the floor and benches. In the Andhra house, the living and working spaces are similar in size and across one another off the entrance. The residential quarters can be approached from a separate entrance, and include a terrace overlooking a courtyard.

Dakshinachitra exposes the visitor to the scale of India's diversity – not just at the national or regional levels, but also within villages. Houses of craftsmen, agriculturists and merchants may share space along a rural road, but they differ from one another in design and functionality. Housing evolved such as to match perfectly the occupation of the residents. At first the differences appear small or inconsequential, but when viewed within the context of everyday activity, with artisans or merchants at work inside them, one can see how small variations reflect the various needs of occupants.

A final consideration on housing styles concerns the relationship between houses and their physical environments. In Kerala, canoes are often kept inside residences dotting the state's backwaters, while the construction of Tamil houses reflects the climatic conditions of altitude, proximity to open water and ecology. In the 10 acres of Dakshinachitra, the museum captures the spirit of a much larger territory, demonstrating the balance of society and nature. △

At the bottom of the food chain

The planned slumming of metropolitan India.

"What are we waiting for? A bloody revolution?" Gita Dewan Verma demands with a mixture of old-fashioned anger, frustration and impatience in the concluding lines of *Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and Their Saviours*. The book is a passionate critique of the haphazard and insensitive urban development initiatives that have converted more than half of modern India's city spaces into slums that no society with even a modicum of sensitivity ought to consign its citizens to. And her suggested method for resolving this appalling chaos is typically simple and old-fashioned too:

> I do not have yet another 'original' theory for a new, improved model for urban development arising out of my limited understanding just to pander to my own desire to be original. I only suggest that since the path we have taken in the last few years does not seem to be going anywhere we want to, we should just get into reverse gear and reach a better point to trace a new path...

Accordingly, she reserves her most bitter criticism for what she terms Contemporary Urban Development (CUD). Verma's formulation is simple: over the years, a number of master plans, programmes and policies, including the Draft National Slum Policy of the late 1990s, have been put together at the instance of various arms of government, often with the help of planning professionals and non-governmental organisations (that might or might not know anything about city planning). Many of these plans have provisions built into them that, if implemented, might actually make a difference for the better. Then why is it that nothing is ever done until some kind of crisis situation is reached, and even then, instead of going back to follow the provisions offered by existing policy documents, the first – and often only – thing that Those in Charge (another of Verma's terms) do is to call for a fresh set of studies or policies?

Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and Their Saviours

by Gita Dewan Verma
Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2002
INR 200, pp xxiv + 183
ISBN 0 14 302875 8

reviewed by
Harini Narayanan

Verma believes this is because such activities sound busy and exciting, they might just make the headlines and perhaps even convince a middle-class public with a short memory that a radical solution to urban slummification (to borrow a term favoured by the author) is in sight, something that would be impossible to convey by simply referring to decades-old policy documents that everyone has been convinced were failures. As Verma explains, the failures have occurred because policies have never been properly implemented, not because they have failed after they have been fully implemented, but who is to point out this fine difference? "Pilot projects, model projects, best practices, policy announcements, new policy announcements, etc... being continually published, discussed, debated, celebrated, replicated and extrapolated... create the illusion of constant activity with little regard to impact". Adding later: "It [does] seem like national policy-making [has] been reduced to just a routine exercise in word-processing, photocopying, spiral-binding, distributing and discussing at 'consultations' – fashionable but illusory fabrication that [makes] tailors look busy but [leaves] the Emperor naked".

Intensely personal

Through her career as a mainstream urban planner and later, as an independent planning researcher, Verma has made it her business to point the above facts out to those concerned at every stage – to be what she calls a 'whistle-blower' – but as she says, no one has ever paid much attention: not the government, not the international agencies that hand out awards to the sexiest policy fabrications without checking to see if they are working, and certainly not the media. It must have been this intense moral claustrophobia, this feeling of constantly pounding at doors and windows that will not open to let her ideas in, that propelled her to pour her anger out in the form of a book.

This energy makes the work intensely personal, even self-conscious. The book is dedicated to "the little people", "the big people', "the other people" and "the whistle-blowers". Each chapter begins with a little parable in which the "Lord of CUD" typically rejects the "default Old-fashioned Urban Develop-

ment Option" offered by his computer in favour of the CUD option – a stylish policy approach that has no bearing on reality. Every chapter ends with an impassioned piece of rhetoric. The point, though, is that by and large, the style works for Verma – perhaps because it is both sincere and backed by some very exhaustive discussions of case studies drawn from different parts of India, though the most detailed examples relate to Delhi and Indore. Also, at every stage, Verma attempts to link the micro-level tales of uprooted or boxed-in slum-dwellers or hawkers with the larger urban development problematic and the comprehensive moral bankruptcy of a state and a society that refuse to tackle the big question with honesty and perspective.

For instance, even as she recounts the tragic stories of specific slum-dwellers who are made to pay by the state for the privilege of being put through compulsory 'resettling' or 'upgrading' procedures that are exercises in treachery that often do not even offer temporary security of tenure, Verma steps back to point out that such exercises are destined to intensify slummification. "That development processes have come to ignore so many so consistently has serious implications for planned development, which is meant to leave equitable room for all. Anything else directly or indirectly only abets slumming".

In fact, it is the lack of equity in the distribution of urban land that leads most directly to the emergence of slums, and not in-migration or urban poverty, the author points out. As Verma and others have noted, the very first Master Plan for Delhi (1962) acknowledged that housing that incorporated very small plot sizes was extremely likely to deteriorate into slums. Even so, over time, plot sizes in slum resettlement colonies in Delhi have gone down from 40 sq metres to 12.5 sq metres. An estimated 3-3.5 million slum-dwellers (the estimates have been made by government departments) – who make up one-fourth or more of the city's population – live in five percent or less of the city's land. In other cities, where 'encroachable' land is even scarcer, slum densities are even higher. Such densities and house sizes are simply not conducive to living spaces that look like anything other than slums. No wonder the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) continue to include slum resettlement colonies that they have themselves created in their list of official 'slums'.

Meanwhile, as the space available for the poor in our cities is systematically reduced and erased, other forms of land use are as systematically – and often illegally – privileged. As more and more 'farmhouses', cyber parks, gigantic upper-end shopping malls and office blocks for the 'new economy' are granted sprawling, prime real estate at 'token' prices, the poor who populate the lower-end service and industrial sectors of the city, the modest neighbourhood retailers who serve the majority of citizens and the "small factories needing propinquity to ancillary establishments" will necessarily all be accommodated in overcrowded and 'inappropriate' locations. "The end result", Verma points out, "will be and is the slumming of our cities. Seen thus, the root cause of urban slumming seems to lie not in urban poverty but in urban wealth".

> "The root cause of urban slumming seems to lie not in urban poverty but in urban wealth"

As an example of one single large-scale 'slummification' exercise that contravenes all existing master plan and slum policy provisions, not to mention all codes of civic decency, Verma details the massive Narela resettlement project on the outskirts of Delhi. 60,000 slum-dwellers were evicted from various parts of Delhi (even from sites designated for residential use under the master plan) in the middle of the monsoon in mid-2000 and summarily deposited at Narela, a site far away from their jobs and erstwhile homes, a location that had been planned since the 1962 master plan to be "a self-contained sub-city but was yet to be developed as such". The evictees were offered no alternative sites, no consideration on the basis of distance from their current homes or jobs, no public transport or other services, no jobs except those in "non-conforming industries yet to come up in the industrial area yet to be developed" – and of course, no explanation for why they had to move at that particular moment, often from locations where they had been living from well before the first plans were even formulated.

Subsequently, an explanation for this relocation was offered, rather obliquely, in a report prepared by the government for the Istanbul+5 United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) Conference 2001, where it was claimed that Delhi slum-dwellers were relocated to Narela "from the most untenable and disaster prone sites" in the city. This claim, as Verma points out, cannot be entirely true, since the area cleared of slums has since been found suitable for government housing, office complexes and parks and green belts.

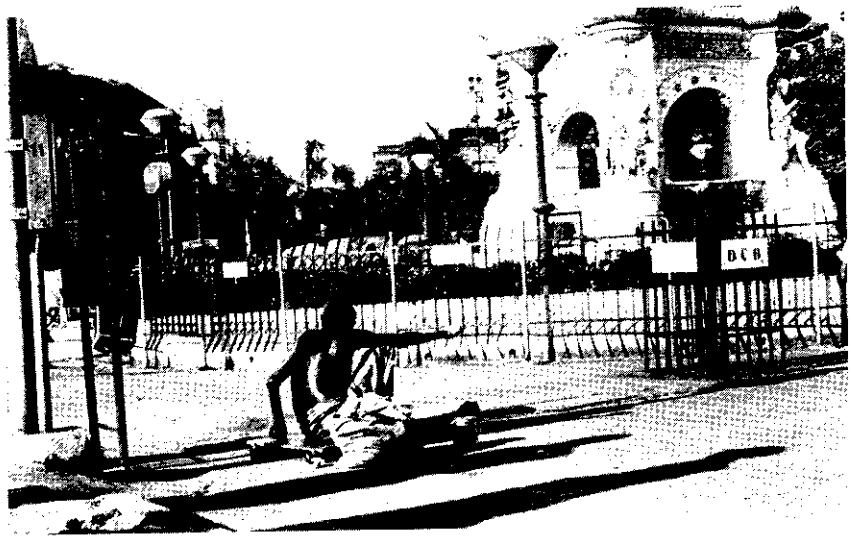
In an essay published in *DELHI Urban Space and Human Destinies* (2000) on the settling of Welcome colony, a slum resettlement colony in East Delhi, the anthropologist Emma Tarlo also talks of the many parks, public spaces and pavilions that have come up in the spaces that have been vacated by uprooted slums. By locating on a map several of the over-80 different locations spread all over the city that yielded their populations to Welcome, Tarlo demonstrates how, far from being "peripheral to the development of the city as a whole", the development of Welcome colony is actually "inextricably bound with the morphology of the city as a

whole". However, neither Tarlo nor Verma provide a comprehensive map of all the uses to which land emptied of slum-dwellers has been put. Had they done so, one could have asked a powerful question: in an ideal situation, the presence of a large number of parks and other 'lungs' for the city is obviously desirable, but how valid is the satisfying of the secondary and tertiary needs of a privileged few when the cost involves the destruction of the very basics of existence for everybody else?

This is certainly not a question that troubles local administrators overmuch. In fact, my own study of annual reports and other documents generated by the DDA has shown that discussion is hardly ever directed at the demolition and resettlement of *jhuggis* (huts) on the one hand, and the use to which the violently cleared land has been put on the other. Apparently by chance, sections that list demolition activities are often followed in these documents by sections that detail the acreage given over to the development of parks, lawns and woods during the year in question. The number of acres set aside each year for these felicitous developments, created to keep in "tune with [the DDA's] vision of developing a healthy city", are uncannily similar to the number of acres listed as having been cleared through demolition, but an overt link is almost never made. In the DDA annual report for 2000-2001, for example, the only instance in which one is actually told of the use to which a particular piece of land is going to be put after it has been 'freed of encroachments' appears, of course without irony, in a section titled 'Rehabilitation of Jhuggi Dwellers of Motia Khan'. Here, we are told that "about 2,246 jhuggi dwellers" are to be uprooted from Motia Khan to make way for a hotel and that "it has been proposed" that these evictees be resettled in Sector 4, Rohini. The freeing up of land for the starred hotel is clearly an achievement of which the city development agency is particularly proud.

Hunger over housing

Perhaps there is, after all, a certain cold-blooded method to the madness of apparently arbitrary and repeated eviction, followed by low-grade resettlement (often with no meaningful assurance of tenure) and later, eviction again. Apart from ensuring that space occupied by the poor is always available at practically a moment's notice when some 'public' need is felt, this process of keeping the city's poor forever unsettled also helps to build an enduring picture of them as shiftless, unproductive, shadowy beings who are forever living off the largesse of the city administrators who need to spend precious public money to evict them. The journalist Kalpana Sharma, writing in *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (2000), discusses the manner in which this fundamental uncertainty and assumed illegality of residence that slum-dwellers in Indian cities have to live with, even in old and apparently well-settled slums like Dharavi in Bombay, cloaks their entire beings – their very existence – with a mask of illegality as far as the city's better-off residents are concerned.



In fact, the Supreme Court of India has repeatedly responded to public-interest litigation that demands the removal of slums, hawkers, garbage and so on by reinforcing this negative image of urban slum-dwellers. In a landmark judgement on garbage management in Indian cities quoted by Verma, for instance, the court observed that "rewarding an encroacher on public land with [a] free alternate site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket". This image of slum-dwellers makes it easy to evict them summarily, and even the most meagre provision of resettlement can then be projected as public and administrative largesse.

Predictably, Verma reserves some of her fiercest ire for justices who have repeatedly functioned as *de facto* urban development experts, especially in Delhi, where localised urban-use squabbles repeatedly fetch up at the country's premier court of law. She is also critical of well-meaning NGOs that often plunge into the business of making policy suggestions on this and other subjects without the necessary background training or knowledge, and of government agencies that solicit such efforts. "NGOs must be involved", she concedes,

> but cannot be allowed to call all the shots. Their strength is their grassroots ethos, which makes them great for monitoring and implementation (including project formulation). To let them take over policy and planning levels – to the exclusion of profes-

sionals – is justifiable only after stopping expenditure on professional education. At the rate we are going, we will welcome even open-heart surgeries by NGOs simply because they care!

As an example, she discusses the drafting of national schemes for the homeless in early 2001 by a group of NGOs that based their list of priorities on the findings of research conducted in Delhi. Housing was apparently not included as the subject of a scheme because the homeless people surveyed did not list it as a priority. This sounds an alarm bell for Verma, who concludes that a false result must have been arrived at because of flaws in the research design. This might well be so – the complete research questionnaire is not available to this reviewer at this point, so a more informed comment cannot, in all fairness, be made. However, it was important for Verma to add that such a result is not unusual in surveys of those at the very bottom of the urban human food chain, as it were.

Pushing the line of questioning would have probably yielded the answer that employment, and with that, the sating of hunger, are prioritised over housing of any kind. Anthropologist Joop W De Wit's research (and Verma's own) has shown that slum-dwellers faced with resettlement protest the move most bitterly because they will be far removed from their existing jobs – too far removed to commute back on expensive or non-existent public-transport routes – and because they see no prospects for new jobs in the wildernesses to which they are typically banished. This is why many of them are prepared to sell off their new homes and return to live near their old neighbourhoods in housing quality that is worse than before – perhaps even on the pavements.

But the point is not about whether slum-dwellers prioritise housing or jobs. The fact that they prioritise jobs cannot be taken by the state (or by NGOs) as a reason to sideline the housing issue. To return once again to the much-maligned master plans that Verma repeatedly reminds the reader of: most such existing plans actually do envisage the concomitant, all-round development of decent housing stock, employment centres and infrastructural facilities in all the areas that all the residents of a city are expected to live in, whether they be in 'original' or 'resettled' areas. All that needs to be done, as Verma might say, is for the bloody plans to be *implemented* faithfully.

In conclusion, one must stress that a book such as this one is not easily found in the Indian context. Given that the growth of slums and their interface with urban India is one of the most pressing urban issues of the day, this is strange, to say the least. But further, a combination of background experience, meticulous research and passion, such as can be found in *Slumming India*, is even more rare and, therefore, even more special. △

Call for submissions

Film South Asia '03

25-28 September 2003, Kathmandu

Regulations/Criteria
Films made after 1 January 2001 are eligible for entry in the competitive category. Entries have to be on South Asian subjects, broadly understood. They can cover any subject in the range available to filmmakers, from people, culture, lifestyle and adventure to development, environment, politics, education, history and so on. The filmmakers need not be South Asian.

Length
The duration of the film is not a bar. Preference will he given to full-length documentaries.

Competitive and non-competitive categories
Documentary films completed after 1 January 2001, if selected, will be admitted to the competitive category (although entrants may specify if they do not want to compete). Films made before the cut-off date will join the non-competitive category.

Entry conditions
Entry is free of cost. Entries without the duly filled-in entry forms will not be considered. All entries must be accompanied by labeled still photographs from the films for use in the festival catalogue and promotion.

Submission deadline for entry
All entries must reach the Festival Secretariat in Kathmandu by 30 June 2003.

Sending procedures
Entries for selection will be accepted only in VHS video format (PAL/SECAM/NTSC) and have to be sent by courier to the FSA Secretariat in Kathmandu Valley. The entry package should be labeled "Only for cultural purpose, no commercial value."

Selection of films
A preview committee for the FSA '03 will meet in the summer in Kathmandu to select the films. Selection will be complete by 30 July 2003, immediately after which directors/producers of the selected entries will be notified and asked to send either film prints or professional video format copies for screening at the festival. Altogether about 30 films will be selected for screening. Suhmission deadline of final print / tape of selected entries Selected entrants will be notified by 31 July 2003. The film prints or professional video format for screening should reach the Festival Secretariat by 15 August 2003.

Jury and awards
Monetary prizes, along with citations, will he awarded for overall excellence to the directors of the three best films chosen by a three-member jury.

For more information on FSA '03, please visit the Himal Association website, www.himalassociation.org

For more information please contact: Manesh Shrestha, Festival Director. PO Box 166, Lalitpur. Kathmandu. Nepal. Tel: 977-1-5542544. Fax: 977-1-5541196. Email: fsa@himalassociation.org. smanesh@wlink.com.np. Internet: www.himalassociation.org/fsa/

Warm up to history with an exercise by ABHAY DONGRE that both informs and quizzes.

G. ALOYSIUS guides us through the world of Iyothee Thass, pioneering turn of the century dalit-buddhist intellectual-activist.

A profile of Gurram Jashua, Telugu poet, who between 1920 and 1970 produced 30 works. By JANGAM CHINNAIAH.

GAIL OMVEDT on navayana buddhism and why Ambedkar did not believe religion would vanish with the progression of modernity.

An extract from ARAVINDA MALAGATTI's modern Kannada classic Government Brahmana.

RAMANARAYAN S. RAWAT reconstructs an undocumented piece of partition history: how in 1946-48 the SCF aggressively campaigned against the Congress, allying sometimes with the Muslim League.
Main Section

R. AZHAGARASAN examines bow K.R. Narayanan in his presidential speeches silenced his voice to give voice to our silences.

March-April 2003

the dalit

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India's nationalist elites are beneficiaries of a systematic racist ideology, argues JOE HILL, invoking Memmi and Berreman.

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Third Report: 1997-2002
Committee of Concerned Citizens
Anupama Printers, Hyderabad, 2002
pp xxii+434, no recommended price

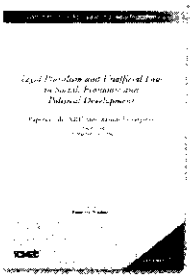
Founded in 1997 in response to the People's War and state violence, the Committee of Concerned Citizens has investigated abuses in Andhra Pradesh and facilitated discussions between the Maoists and the government. This volume, which includes correspondence and reports between 1997 and 2002, documents abuses committed by, and the negotiating positions of, the concerned parties. Convened by SR Sankaran, a retired Indian Administrative Service officer, the 14-person committee of senior journalists, academics and lawyers has had high-level access to leaders of both sides, making this report a fairly comprehensive overview of the ongoing search for reconciliation in Andhra Pradesh.

Where There Is No Psychiatrist: A mental health manual
By Vikram Patel
Gaskell, Glasgow, 2003
pp xxii+266, no recommended price
ISBN 1 90242 75 7

In the absence of professional psychiatric services, families and otherwise trained medical personnel often provide informal mental health counselling. Written in a textbook format with numerous illustrations, this manual includes guidelines for diagnosing common mental illnesses such as depression and retardation, explanations of non-institutional treatment options, and recommendations for patients and family members of persons suffering from a mental illness. Geared for the non-specialist, the book is intended for distribution among English-readers who lack access to institutional psychiatric services, principally those in villages and under-serviced areas. The book includes usage recommendations, dosage prescriptions for many common mental health medicines, and contains charts for tracking a patient's condition.

Tibet, Tibet: A personal history of a lost land
By Patrick French
HarperCollins India, New Delhi, 2003
pp 333, INR 395
ISBN 81 7223 508 9

Setting out on "a quest for the true, as opposed to the mythical, Tibet", British South Asianist Patrick French mixes personal reflections from his 20-year association with Tibetan causes, historical vignettes of Tibet and neighbouring regions, and research conducted inside Tibet. The author of two earlier books on topics drawn from Indian history, French writes that Tibet is not "the hermetic, forbidden land of European repute", but instead a dynamic land of travellers, historically engaged with areas as far-flung as Benaras, Samarkand and Chengdu. Often ruminating, the book contains curious asides on matters as variant as the "Clintonian" outlook of many Tibetan monks on sex. French attempts to weave a narrative of modern Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora, with frequent reference to international politics and history.



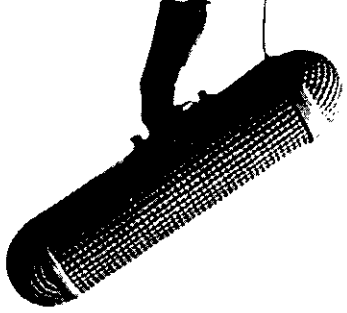
Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law in Social, Economic and Political Development
edited by Rajendra Pradhan
International Centre for the Study of Nature, Environment and Culture (ICNEC), Kathmandu, 2003
pp 457, 495, 417, no recommended price
ISBN 99933 53 21 8

The papers in these three volumes include analyses of community-based property rights in India, legal pluralism and community forestry in Nepal, and aboriginal environmental management in Tamil Nadu's Kolli Hills, among other topics. With contributions from many of South Asia's leading researchers, published here with lengthy reference notes, the ICNEC papers offer specialised insight into a range of Asian social, economic and political issues, often in reference to environmental concerns.

Afghanistan: From terror to freedom
by Apratim Mukarji
Sterling, New Delhi, 2003
pp 321, INR 500
ISBN 81 207 2542 5

Surveying the recent history of Afghanistan as well as the country's relationship with India and Pakistan, Delhi-based journalist Apratim Mukarji, currently with the Indian Council of Social Science Research, assesses the outcomes of the US-led war in Afghanistan.

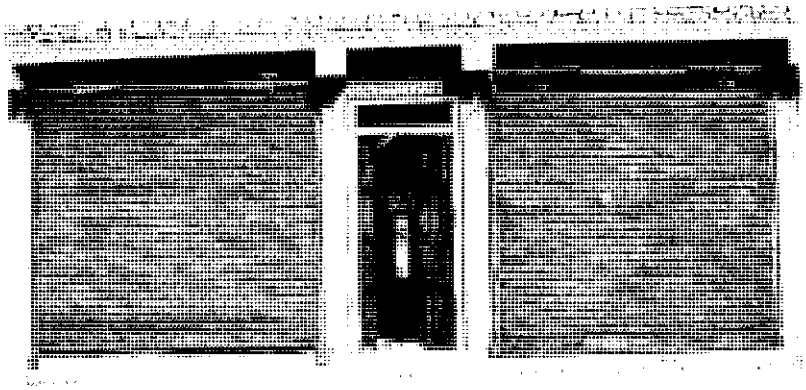
Note to publishers: new titles can be sent to GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal. Books are mentioned in this section before they are sent for detailed review.



Noise and sound

If a sensitive long-distance microphone were to be dangled in geostationary orbit somewhere over Chattisgarh at the centre of the Subcon on a workday morning, it would pick up one noise from Asansol to Multan, from Shigatse to Matara. And that is the grating sound of metal on metal, of steel shutters being pulled up in a clanging, raspy, bone-shattering noise that sends the heart racing and leaves the brain terror-stricken.

It is a terrible experience that is repeated tens of millions of times at shopfronts and housefronts, in markets and residential neighbourhoods, all over. Only South Asian onomatopoeia can approximate the downing (or upping) of a shutter; it is a frightful *ghatghat-ghat-dhaddhad-dhad-dhyang*! An uncultured reverberation that is as remote from modern day sophistication as it is removed from any arena of South Asia's past.



It is yet to be recognised — the mental trauma suffered by the hundreds of millions of South Asia's teeming billion every morning and evening as shutters clang open and bang shut in a continuous line right along the Grand Trunk Road to Peshawar, up its innumerable offshoots and feeder roads and their innumerable offshoots and feeder gullies. How many of us turn into serial killers and/or corrupt contractors as a result of the upping and downing of shutters day in and day out?

The chaste, cultured wooden shutter with louvers or glass panes is a thing of the past in our middle-class neighbourhoods. Your average metal shutter is a binding together of strips of steel that ride metal guides on the two sides. When open, it is rolled up at the top, bundled over a spring mechanism. The contraption is designed to make noise and ensure security, and it does both with efficiency.

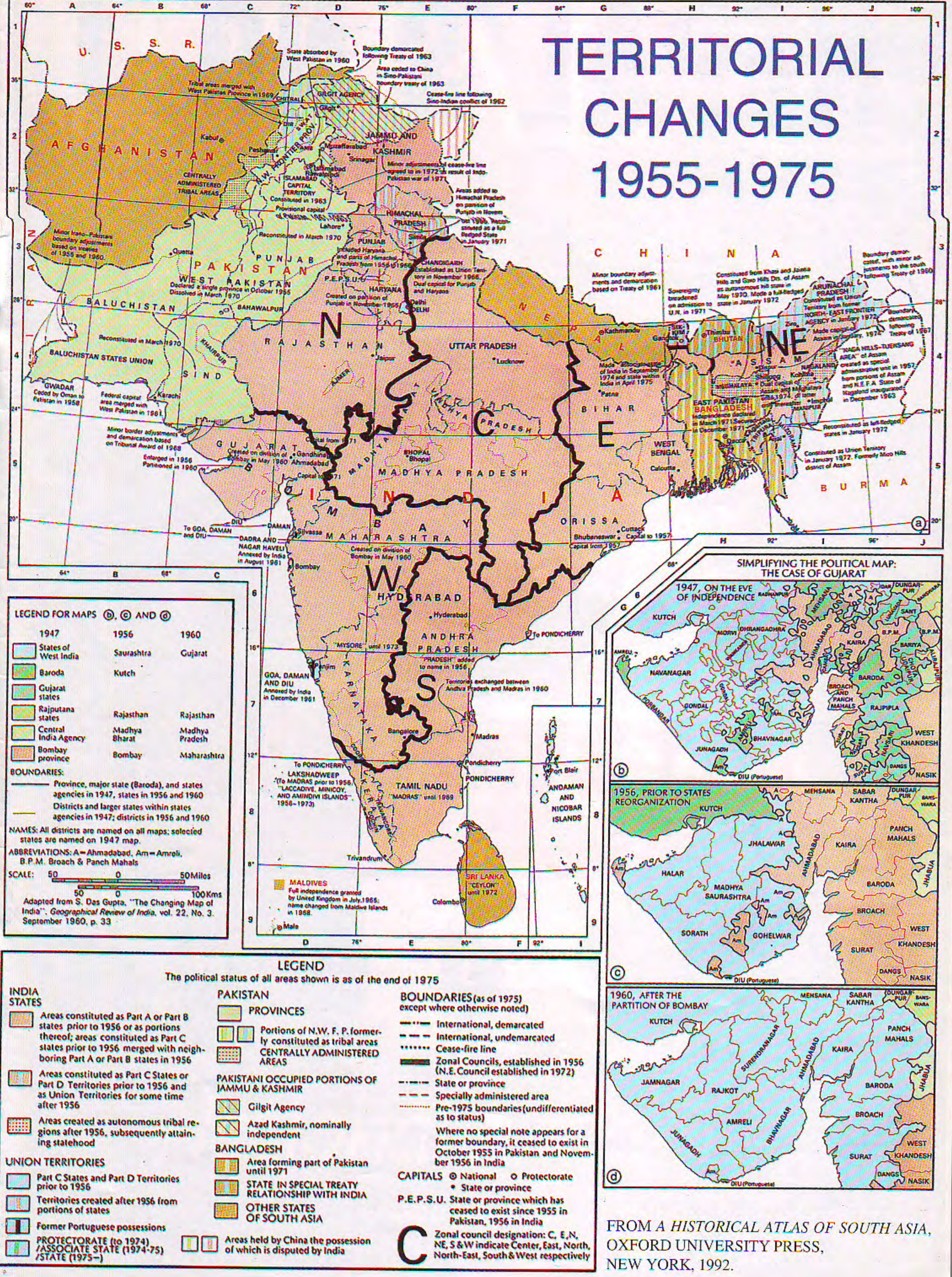
What it lacks in aesthetics, the metal shutter provides in near-total protection. But then a bazaar lined with metal shutters is more like an industrial zone, completely bereft of the human touch, as forbidding as a fortress. The life goes out of a marketplace when all is shuttered up – even the scavenging strays look like woebegone ghosts.

There are, of course, other modern day noises that we suffer from, that surely inflict massive psychological damage on the populace in cities, towns and villages. The amplified muezzin's call shatters the dawn, after an all-night bout with the scratchy surround-sound of the *jagaran* brigade. The high-decibel rendition of the *qawalli* on the loudspeaker does injustice to the wild energy evident in its unaided singing. The nuanced timbre of the *tabla* has lost out to the whine of the electric guitar and other manufactured sound.

The trucks that blast their highway pneumatic horns in crowded city streets are another way in which modern day noise has banished old world sound. The screech of the circular saw at the wood workshop replaces the soft rasp of the hand-held plane. The whine of the lathe drowns the tappings of the blacksmith's hammer. And the sweet cacophony of the DC-3 Dakota's piston engines has been supplanted by the whining of turbofans. The blast of the musket was first replaced by the report of the .303, and now we have 'graduated' to the rat-tat-tat of magazine-fed SLRs (self-loading rifles).

We are being overtaken by noise, but somehow we have to find a way to recover sound. Let the beat not overwhelm the melody. Let us at least oil the shutters...

Kanak Dixit



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