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BIKAS PANJUR

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Editor

Kanak Mani Dixit

Associate Editor

Thomas J Mathew

Assistant Editor

Shruti Debi

Contributing Editors

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

Editorial Assistant

Andrew HM Nash

Design Team

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

Marketing

advertising@himalmedia.com

Subscription/Overseas Sales

Anil Karki
 subscription@himalmedia.com

Nepal/Northeast India Sales

Sudan Bista
 sales@himalmedia.com

Marketing Office, Karachi

Ajmal Kamal
 City Press
 316 Madina City Mall
 Abdullah Haroon Road
 Saddar, Karachi 74400
 Ph. +92-21-5650623/5213916
 email: cp@citypress.cc

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 a South Asian magazine.

Contributors to this issue

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

CK Lal is a Kathmandu engineer and *Nepali Times* columnist.

Chitrangada Choudhury is a student at the Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester.

Daniel Coppard and Ben Rogaly spent two years (1999-2000) examining the issues raised in their article. Coppard is at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, and Rogaly is at the University of Sussex.

David Ludden is professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. This article was originally delivered as the presidential address to the Association of Asian studies.

Deepak Thapa is editor, Himal Books, and director of the Social Science Baha in Patan.

Dévider Sharma, formerly with *The Indian Express*, is a Delhi-based food and trade analyst.

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

Kabir Mansingh Heimsath is an independent scholar and photographer based in Lhasa.

Kamal Dixit is the librarian and chairman of Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, Patan.

Manjushree Thapa is a Kathmandu-based writer affiliated with the civil society NGO Martin Chautari. She is the author of *The Tutor of History and Mustang Bhot in Fragments*.

Rakesh Chhetri is a Bhutanese political analyst and editor of www.bhutannewsonline.com

Subhash Gatade, a social activist and journalist based in Delhi, also edits the Hindi journal *Kriti Sanskriti Sandhan*.

Sunilini Kumar is a doctoral student in the political science department of the University of Delhi.

Sanjana Hattotuwa is a research associate with the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), Colombo. His views do not necessarily reflect those of the CPA.

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Why the women die

T MATHEW'S article (*Himal*, April 2003) was a rare journalistic display of public health principles: of looking at the total picture, of prioritising, of looking not just at proximate causes, of placing it in a political-economic perspective. The article was also written with punch, indeed pungency.

I do however wish the author had focused on some epidemiological issues that are mentioned, but with data: the fact that twice as many females who are not pregnant die of anaemia as those who are, the fact that communicable disease takes a four times greater toll on women in the reproductive age group than causes related to reproduction, that tuberculosis kills more women than causes related to reproduction.

In the section on violence against women, it would be important to bring in the issue of inequalities. One critical reason for the increase in violence against women – indeed, all weaker sections, as we euphemistically call them – is increasing inequalities. There is quite a bit of epidemiological evidence on this. It is important to recognise this so that the issue is not treated simply as a personal issue, but linked to larger processes.

By and large I am in agreement with the writer's views on the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. But given the Bushmen we have, it becomes important to defend what little was gained there.

Mohan Rao, Delhi

Radical chic theorems

AN ISSUE as desperately serious as women's death in childbirth (*Himal*, April 2003) deserves an approach unencumbered by the baggage of trendy ideologies. T Mathew rightly points out the scandal of the self-perpetuating and ineffectual cycle of international conferences, producing reports that no one reads and setting goals that remain unrealised – an industry in its own right, grinding along, while out in the hills, far from the air-conditioned conference halls, the women continue to die. Supported by international funding, the same cosy group of experts assemble and reassemble, no doubt enjoying their frequent pleasant reunions. This situation deserves the scorn that T Mathew has heaped on it. But we are talking about life and death and pain, a subject vitiated by Mathew's basically spurious treatment.

The writing is as clogged with portentous and pseudo-scientific terminology as any official report that now moulders in a dusty drawer

To illustrate the subject, Mathew relates the story of "Sheela", who died just after her fourth childbirth. He identifies a situation that had "an immediate bearing on Sheela's demise". A toilet project was initiated in her district, as a result of which "toilets began to acquire a certain appeal as a status symbol". The village people "succumbed to the pressures of sanitary consumerism, as relieving oneself in the open became a sign of social inferiority". But the toilets required the fetching of water, and the cost of installation strained family budgets, thus reducing the money available for food. Disaster followed with the swift inevitability of Greek tragedy. Sheela's family built a toilet; pregnant Sheela had to haul water for the toilet, and payment for the toilet meant less food for Sheela; reduced nutrition and the extra job of hauling water took its toll, and Mathew declares, "the toilet evidently contributed to her undoing". Sheela died in childbirth; the sanitation project an "indirect cause" of her obstetric complication.

Excuse me? Perhaps T Mathew has never had an experience similar to one I had, when I entered a Nepali village during an outbreak of typhoid caused by flies feeding on exposed human waste and then settling on food. When I left that village, they were still cremating the dead.

Alas, T Mathew, it seems that there are many more factors involved in the question of mother (and child) mortality than your philosophy has dreamed of. The diseases fostered by "traditional" (a code term for whatever is deemed culturally correct) toilet practices and the resultant human waste that contaminates Nepal's fields and streams extend beyond typhoid to cholera, hepatitis, gastroenteritis, dysentery, and others. But Mathew does not consider the effect of these devastating diseases upon infant mortality and their concomitant effect on women. Who would be so bold as to deny the direct relationship between high infant mortality and the frequency of women's pregnancies and thus, maternal mortality, as well as Nepal's galloping birth rate?

(Why did Mathew not give as his example, instead of this circuitous and dubious story, a truly and immediately verifiable cause of maternal mortality, such as the practice in rural Nepal of cutting the umbilical cord with a piece of non-sterile broken glass, which often results in the mother's death by tetanus?)

Not only is the story of "Sheela" a specious explanation of what causes the death of women but, on reading further, we learn that Sheela herself is a fictitious character, her story "a composite" – which strictly speaking is a violation of journalistic ethics. Yet Sheela's story is merely a device for Mathew's attack on his primary target: birth control, which he prefers to call "population control". According to Mathew, such organisations as the Population Council, the United Na-

tions Population Fund and the International Planned Parenthood are less anxious about promoting safe motherhood than they are about advancing "pet theorems about the ostensible link between high population growth and underdevelopment". Their promotion of birth control programmes is based on "the eccentric theory of avoided pregnancy", as if "avoided" (ie planned and timed) pregnancy has no relation at all to women's health. And Mathew imputes an insidious goal to these agencies' emphasis on birth control: preoccupation with "the potential implications of relative demographics on the balance of power between various categories of people". (The Population Council, he notes, is a chief advocate of Norplant, "a contraceptive that frees women from male decision-making but promptly places them under the control of physicians for both implant and removal" – an allegation resting on the absurd assumption that physicians and health-care workers give women orders as to when to become pregnant, and the equally absurd assumption that women obey them.)

Mathew's objection to birth control is based on a radical-chic analysis: he argues that "population control ideology" derives from first world paranoia about group encirclement and extinction, arising from differential fertility as between the global North and South...." Thus, birth control is a devious scheme by which the richer nations are attempting to reduce the influence of the poorer ones.

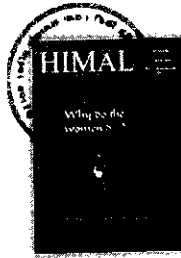
The faux example of Sheela, who died in childbirth because her family acquired a toilet, pales beside this outrageous position. Although T Mathew is male, his wilful insensitivity derives not from his gender but rather from his controlling ideology ("references to women's empowerment seem to be no more than gender-sensitive curlicues that decorate late capitalist development literature".)

T Mathew may take heed of this: we no longer regard control over our women's bodies and over the frequency and spacing of our pregnancies as merely a kindness, and certainly not as a "late capitalist gender-sensitive curlicue", but as our basic human right. To be sure, "safe motherhood" is based on many components – nutrition, hygiene, and competent midwifery or obstetric assistance – but to deny that the frequency and spacing of our pregnancies is a primary factor in our health and our very lives defies rational comprehension.

Finally, T Mathew has mastered the jargon of the international agencies: his writing is as clogged with portentous and pseudo-scientific terminology as any official report that now moulders in a dusty drawer. The best part of his article was its title on the cover: "Why do the women die?" The plain, simple English of that question stirred me deeply; it deserves a serious

examination. I hope it will get one in a future issue of this important magazine.

Marcia R Lieberman, Providence, USA



Holistic health

THE ISSUE of uterine prolapse, while discussed with sensitivity (*Himal*, April 2003), failed to raise some important points. The prevalence of uterine prolapse in Nepal varies, with women in the tarai and midhills principally affected. When I conducted a health camp in Mustang, a mountainous area, local medical personnel told me that in the previous three years there had been only one prolapse case, the explanation perhaps being the relatively high status of women in the area. After delivery, a woman rests for at least one month, and her health is further protected by a diet rich in protein, carbohydrates and vitamins. In contrast, in hilly areas such as Achham and Doti, women often do not regularly consume milk, meat and green vegetables.

Another aspect of women's health concerns physical infrastructure, including that which is not directly related to health. Improving roads improves access to health services, just as improving the water supply helps to make people healthier. So for the authors to write that the issue of prolapse "has been ignored even by professional women's activists" is not entirely true. People working for better a health system, including the enabling infrastructure, or conducting research in remote areas, are also helping to address maternal morbidity issues.

I also do not agree with the statement that "activists that showed concern over the condition have almost completely given up the cause", as it lacks broader perspective. People advocating family planning services indirectly address problems of pregnancy, and consequently uterus prolapse. Others working on equality and sexuality issues too are helping the situation. The authors, I am sure, must be aware of women whose husbands demand intercourse 15 days after childbirth on the notion that it is an uxorial duty. Activists who address situations like these are helping to address prolapse.

Further, admonishing activists for raising property rights issues is incorrect. The low turnout at health camps in western Nepal, including ones in which GIZ and the American Himalayan Foundation agreed to finance treatment, has been mainly attributed to the low priority that women's health receives in the family. Husbands were often unwilling to accompany their wives or allow them time off from household duties, and sometimes the prolapsed uterus has already be-

Health writers need to broaden their investigations to take into account the inherent complexities of human health

come a source of stigma preventing other family members from providing support. A woman's ability to stand independently and demand health services stems from numerous sources, both financial and social, and attempts to enhance these are necessary for the improvement of healthcare.

When considering health issues, it is necessary to take into consideration the entire situation of a patient. As is so often pointed out with reference to development efforts, writers should also avoid taking 'vertical' approaches, and instead broaden their investigations to take into account the inherent complexities of human health.

Dr Aruna Upreti, Kathmandu



Off the mark

THE INQUIRY into the possible impact of the US victory over Iraq on South Asia (*Himal*, May 2003) is imperative. But some questions are unanswered or poorly answered in Varun Sahni's attempt at this.

To say that 25 years is good time for another power to possibly emerge and challenge the United States is one thing. To support this by relying on earlier instances of challenges to *status quo* powers may also be the same thing (see references to the waning of British, French and German might). But, to say that the way France has been posturing over the Iraq episode is "a blunder of historic proportions" is wholly bereft of convincing analysis. How can one assume that certain actions are likely to challenge the status of the US while the actions of states such as France are blunders? The objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union, as laid down in the Maastricht Treaty, are only being taken forward every time a France or a Luxembourg acts in the way it does. The challenge to the US may just come about as a result of the posturing of the very countries that make up the EU. Surely, Sahni could have been more forthcoming on the kinds of posturing that can/could challenge US positions, if it was that predictable, and explain how/why France committed a "blunder", if it did indeed commit one.

The focus on American superiority – in absolute terms, relative terms, qualitative terms, and 'organisational/strategic planning' terms – is not something which is totally new to the post-11 September world. 11 September itself was the new element. Having given the background to the US attack on Iraq, this recourse to the status of US military capability is out of place. The US has been (since the end of the second world war) spending a fortune in these areas. How does the military superiority (and that too consistent superiority) have any bearing on the claims laid by Sahni that South Asia will not become another Iraq? An analysis that contrasts the fact that the "militarily superior" US

is behaving with Iraq, Syria, North Korea in a way different from the "militarily superior" US of earlier times, is something that Sahni could have explored.

He says, "The fact that there will be no significant strategic impact of 'Pax Americana' on South Asia is good news". To posit a statement of this strength and conviction is hardly cautious. It assumes a certain consistency in the politics of this region, which is far from what obtains. The US certainly is aware of this fluidity. It would not, certainly after 11 September, wait for the India-Pakistan standoff to reach threatening levels, to act. It might very well be the case that 11 September has changed the way the US is looking at India-Pakistan and that both countries have understood this. Hence, the new set of initiatives on both sides.

Thomas Joe K, Delhi



Too close for comfort

IT IS always flattering when one's work is reused by another. However, I am a little surprised that the article, 'Singing the Nation' by Nasreen Rehman (*Himal*, May 2003) does not acknowledge my earlier piece on exactly the same subject, namely, national anthems, and just coincidentally also entitled 'Singing a Nation into Being'.

My article appeared in the annual issue of the journal *Seminar* (No 497, January 2001) and is widely available on the internet. A version of the essay was also republished, with additions and revisions, in a special international issue of *Biblio* guest-edited by me under the title 'The A-Z of Nationalism'. Therefore, it is a trifle hard for me to believe that the writer has not come across my earlier thesis, especially as she diligently follows up on many of the arguments and examples cited by me (many minor betraying details such as the references to *Toba Tek Singh*, the mention of the phrase *bharat bhagya vidhata* and the discussion of the territorial provenance of the Indian and Pakistani national anthems, etc, reveal this strategy clearly).

Now, I am not claiming that Rehman's 'perspective' is a case of simple plagiarism. She has been much more sophisticated, taking an existing idea, juggling its contours around, pursuing references, extending the initial ground and giving the whole a much more populist twist. All this is consistent with regular academic and journalistic practice, and I have absolutely no quarrel with it, but such practice also demands, does it not, that we acknowledge our sources?

We live in a time when grab-and-take policies have been endorsed by some of the world's most powerful and respected democracies. That an article purportedly written to resist just such (neo-)colonial and gung-ho nationalist practice and rhetoric then adopts

exactly such methods itself, is therefore peculiarly ironic. Surely we within the SAARC nations could offer in our small way, a rather different and more cooperative model for the exchange of ideas – one that would be courteous and honest and unafraid of losing out just because we generously acknowledge each other's work and worth. *Himal* is a respected magazine with a great deal of outreach in the region and I truly hope it will have the open-mindedness to publish this letter, for speech that is truly free and fearless is surely the first imperative of nations, whether or not we believe the claims made by their national anthems!

Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Delhi

the author responds

I AM afraid that I had never heard of Rukmini Bhaya Nair before, nor have I read anything by her. I acknowledged all my sources in my article. I would like to make one important correction: *Toba Tek Singh* is a short story by Saadat Hasan Manto; it is not a play. This was perhaps an editorial oversight. Manto happens to be a personal favourite, and I happen to think that the story *Toba Tek Singh* is the most perfect statement on the partitions of South Asia or on shifting and changing boundaries through history.

Nasreen Rehman, London

note from the editors

HIMAL'S EDITORS were familiar with Rukmini Bhaya Nair's 'Singing the Nation into Being' well before the publication of Nasreen Rehman's 'Singing the Nation' and did not consider the latter to either replicate or extend the arguments of the former. Hence, the article was published without any major changes in the original text. We have, since receiving Nair's comments, undertaken a detailed comparison of the two texts, and it only reconfirms our original view that the two articles do not resemble each other. Analyses of the Pakistani and Indian anthems are bound to revolve around the same set of obvious specifics. The territorial focus of *Jana Gana Mana* and *Pak Sarzameen* is one such obvious instance, where it is more than plausible that many different individuals will independently arrive at the same conclusion. To cite just one example, the presence of Sindh in the Indian anthem is such a glaring anomaly that it has been routinely commented on for many decades. Discussions of the Indian anthem commonly dwell on the circumstances of its composition and hence, the reference to possible connotation of *bharat bhagya vidhata*. There are in fact numerous discussions on the internet, pre-dating 2001, which discuss the specific issues common to both Nair's article in *Seminar* and Rehman's article in *Himal*. But that does not make either of these two articles just unacknowledged restatements of what has appeared earlier. And even where common details are concerned, the two articles differ

occasionally on points of fact. Thus Nair attributes the composition of the musical score for *Jana Gana Mana* to Ravi Shankar, whereas Rehman mentions Captain Ram Singh.

More fundamentally, the difference between the two articles lies in the very different perspectives from which the anthems are viewed. Thus for Nair,

"To extend this comparison to the national anthem would be to assert that it functions as a kind of maternal lullaby..."

"National anthems are psychological dynamos".

"...even the most sceptical would soon be convinced that the potent mix... in an anthem regularly contributes to a massive rush of adrenalin, no matter how phlegmatic or cynical its audience".

"Reactions to the sound of an anthem are as spontaneous as they would be to maternal speech. They compel us to listen and to love without question".

"...national anthems are Freudian lullabies for populations that can be as large as a billion..."

(Rukmini Bhaya Nair, *Seminar*, January 2001)

Rehman, on the other hand, questions the presumed sanctity of the national anthems of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan:

"In highly Sanskritised Bengali, the national anthem is in a language that is largely incomprehensible to the majority of the population..."

"Quite arbitrarily, Urdu...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".

(Nasreen Rehman, *Himal*, May 2003)

All sources were credited by Nasreen Rehman in full in the original text. The citation of AG Noorani (*Frontline*, Vol 16: No 01, 1999), the widely known secondary source of the Nirad C Chaudhuri quote, was inadvertently omitted.

The title given by Rehman was retained despite a superficial resemblance to the title of Nair's article in *Seminar* since they mean two very different things, each consistent with the thrust of respective arguments. 'Singing a nation' implies a ritual act that does not bring the nation into being. 'Singing a Nation into Being' on the other hand clearly suggests that the act of singing is also simultaneously an act of realising the nation. The distinction is subtle but the difference is substantial.

SRI LANKA

TO TOKYO

THE LIBERATION Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) participation in the Tokyo donor conference, scheduled for 9-10 June, remains in doubt as of the end of May. Unless it compromises, the LTTE has set a virtually impossible challenge for the government with its condition that Colombo should take concrete steps to establish an interim administration for the north-east prior to the Tokyo meet. Unless the LTTE recaptures the flexibility it showed at the outset of the peace process, when it accepted a federal solution and partnership with the government in newly established institutions, Colombo will be hard pressed to meet its terms.

The government cannot go beyond the limits set by the constitution. Either the LTTE accepts a government statement accepting in principle the concept of an interim administration, or it accepts an interim set-up within the framework of the constitution. As neither of these seems likely, the prospects for advancing the peace process in Tokyo seem slim.

But that the conference will be held appears not to be in doubt, given Washington DC's announcement that its deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, will be attending. The statement on Armitage's participation made the point that the Tokyo conference will be an important forum for the international community to demonstrate its support for the peace process. The US preponderance in the post-Iraq war period is too great for even an unorthodox organisation such as the LTTE to ignore when powerful countries such as Russia and France appear to have caved in.

For the past three years, since the commencement of Norwegian facilitation in the peace process, the US has been showing a strong interest in peace in Sri Lanka. The unprecedented amounts of World Bank and International Monetary Fund loans to Sri Lanka this year are a consequence of this interest. If Norway's facilitation has been indispensable in maintaining communication links between the government and

the LTTE in the present time of crisis, US interest has provided Sri Lanka's peace process with a global dimension.

Sri Lankans may not be fully aware of where their country is being positioned in global affairs with this interest of the global power. But that this interest exists means that the space for either the government or the LTTE to do

as it wants has shrunk. It is ironic that the LTTE's struggle for self-determination may have taken the country to a point where the global pressures on it to conform have become too powerful for viable long-term resistance.

Lessons

The LTTE's continuing refusal to re-enter the peace process by not accepting the Japanese invitation to Tokyo may mean it will be seen as a potential peace process spoiler. As such, it would be natural to welcome the decision of the Japanese government to go ahead with the conference, and for the US to send a high-level delegation to it, whether or not the LTTE is there. It would also be natural to feel a sense of satisfaction at the prospect of the LTTE getting itself marginalised through its own stubbornness. However, at this juncture, it would be judicious to bear in mind a key lesson from the past that makes any rejoicing over the LTTE being left out both premature and unwise.

History shows the impossibility of solving the ethnic conflict without the LTTE's cooperation. Both the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987 and the peace talks of 1994-95 failed when the LTTE pulled out of them. The LTTE's decision to end those peace processes came as great disappointments to most people. Neither the Tamil nor the Sinhala people wanted the fighting to resume. But when it did, the prevailing belief became that the LTTE could be marginalised by military and political means. There was also hope that a viable solution could be found without it.

But on both occasions it took years of



In comes Uncle Sam.

Ironically, the LTTE's struggle has brought in global pressures that will be too powerful to resist

war for it to become clear that the LTTE had to be a part of the solution, and not kept out of it. In particular, the period of the last government, led by Chandrika Kumaratunga – when the effort to subdue the LTTE militarily and marginalise it politically reached its zenith – proved that there could be no solution to the ethnic conflict without the cooperation of the LTTE. The failure of President Kumaratunga and the People's Alliance (PA) government must stand as a lesson to those who are directing the peace process today: they need to make a very strong effort to bring the LTTE back in the peace process.

If the LTTE persists in its refusal to take part in the Tokyo conference it might be tempting to see the June meeting as paving the way for its political marginalisation. There is no question that an LTTE refusal to participate in the Tokyo conference would be an affront to Japan and Norway, which have both tried hard to bring the LTTE in as a participant. Norway even sent its foreign minister to the Wannu to meet with the LTTE's leadership. In its latest effort the Japanese government has once again urged, or virtually appealed, to the LTTE to take part in the conference. But if the past is a guide, the (anticipated) political sidelining of the LTTE that could occur through international displeasure will not help the peace process.

The government
must make its
peace with the
president

Presidential role

In assessing the present situation it must be noted that the LTTE's demand for an interim administration is not unreasonable in and of itself. The concept of an interim administration was first floated by Kumaratunga, who once admitted that she offered the LTTE a 10-year term of interim administration on conditions that were never formally announced. The principle of an interim administration once again found expression in the draft constitution of 2000 put before parliament by the PA government that was headed by the president. Finally, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe himself upheld the cause of an interim administration headed by the LTTE during the election campaign of December 2001.

Given this, the problem with the LTTE's demand for an interim administration is not with the concept itself, but with its timing. Making this demand just three weeks prior to the Tokyo conference, and expecting the government to deliver in concrete terms, is

unrealistic. Establishing an interim administration would require a constitutional amendment that the government is incapable of bringing forth at this time as it lacks the requisite two-thirds majority in parliament. In order to achieve such a majority, the government needs the support of the opposition.

The LTTE must share the blame for the government's unwillingness to bring the president and opposition into the peace process. It has continually described the president in critical, if not hostile, terms, as has she them. The LTTE has not invited the opposition to join the government in the peace talks, which perhaps it should do. It will take a significant change in this mindset for the government to bring the opposition on board.

But what is quite perplexing is the government's inability to give President Kumaratunga her due place as the elected head of state on occasions of great national importance. For instance, media reports indicate that the postponement of the Thai prime minister's visit to Sri Lanka for the commemoration of an historical Buddhist event had less to do with the inclement weather than with the absence of proper protocol involving the president. If this is true, it is a matter of great shame and disgrace that even religious and cultural matters are not spared the pettiness of politics.

At least for the sake of national unity, the government should reconcile with the president. President Kumaratunga deserves to jointly lead the government delegation to Tokyo. Such an action could set the stage for a presidential nominee, if not an opposition representative, to attend future peace talks with the LTTE. This would make it easier for the opposition to give parliamentary support to decisions taken at the peace talks. In the meantime, for the sake of sustaining the peace process and obtaining maximum economic benefits for the people, the LTTE should take its place alongside the government delegation as a joint partner at the Tokyo conference.

– Jehan Perera

SRI LANKA

TEA AND OTHER THINGS

JUDGE CG Weeramantry, former vice president of the International Court of Justice and the president of the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms, told the Hague Appeal for Peace in New York on 14 February 2003 that "the Security Council has never authorised force based on a potential, non-imminent threat of violence. All past authorisations have been in response to actual invasions, large scale violence of humanitarian emergency". Judge Weeramantry also maintained that without moral, legal and factual evidence for a war against Iraq, the Anglo-American alliance had painted itself into a corner by dragging the troops to the borders of Iraq.

His comments found resonance in the country of his birth. Throughout March, there were pickets and protest rallies in Colombo. Workers, human rights groups, people from all communities and of diverse political hue marched under banners such as "Do not spill blood for oil". Chanting slogans – join the world mass opposition to the war; condemn the war threat against Iraq, Bush wants a puppet ruler in Iraq; no bombs to Iraq but food for children – the protests reflected the perception of the war on Iraq by the masses in Sri Lanka. Demonstrators were often addressed by speakers who usually simply called for more protests to pressure the government and the president to oppose the war.

A curious blend of domestic war fatigue, fears of a fledgling peace process going astray and anti-America feeling promoted by chauvinistic forces who wished to use the war on Iraq for partisan political gains animated much of the anti-war protests in Sri Lanka. In particular, it was the current peace process that played on minds – after over two decades of a devastating war, which has led to the economic and social ruination of the country, people in Sri Lanka look upon war as an evil that they are loath to revisit or see inflicted upon another country. However, while the war was

distant and abstract, its ramifications were concrete and real.

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment set up a special command centre at its head office soon after war broke out to enable people to know about family members employed in West Asia. In addition, a special fund of SLR 500 million was set up to help workers in case of need. On 20 April 2003, the bureau confirmed that no Sri Lankan worker employed in West Asia had been affected by the Iraq war.

In contrast to the people on the street, the government sought assistance from the United States to solve problems in exporting tea to countries in West Asia. The war had brought tea exports to Iraq, the fourth largest buyer of Sri Lanka's tea, to a standstill. Tea prices at the Colombo tea auction had significantly declined; Sri Lanka's 'low-grown' teas, favoured by the West Asian market, dropped between 10 and 15 percent in price and large stocks remained unsold.

Sri Lanka's economic recovery, which the government believes will be the harbinger of a sustainable peace, was put in question on account of the war. Japan's peace envoy to Sri Lanka, Yasushi Akashi, on a visit to Sri Lanka in February 2003, said he hoped "outside events" would not divert attention from Sri Lanka's Norwegian-backed peace process. Akashi also noted that the major aid pledging conference scheduled to be held in June 2003 could coincide with a post-war situation in Iraq. Akashi's concerns matched those of the government, that international attention on the war in Iraq would divert monetary pledges for the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in Sri Lanka, especially in the north and east.

Money talks

President Chandrika Bandarnaike Kumaratunga, in an online interview with *The Washington Times* in early March 2003, said that there should not be any war with Iraq, especially without the sanction of the United Nations. She went on to say that 75,000 Sri Lankan expatriate workers in West Asia would be affected by a war in Iraq and that it would have an impact on global economic growth and stability as well.

Echoing the sentiments of the president, the foreign affairs ministry issued a press release on 20 March 2003. In it, the govern-

Because of the US involvement in the peace process, much of the anti-war protest died down with the de-escalation of the ground offensive in Iraq



All bagged up and nowhere to go.

Iraq is a distant country for those in the north and east whose livelihoods have been wrenched away from them

ment expressed unequivocal support for the UN system: "Sri Lanka ... continues to firmly believe that issues affecting international peace and security should be as far as possible identified, considered and resolved through the UN, the primary global institution through which the will of the international community can be legitimately expressed. Therefore, it is essential that the role of the UN and its credibility and authority be restored and respected". There was no overt condemnation of America's actions, nor a questioning of the war and its *raison d'être*. It did, however, link the Iraqi war with the other problems in West Asia, and in particular urged "substantial progress towards an enduring and just peace" between the Israelis and Palestinians.

Other voices were not so sterile. Tissa Vitharana, spokesperson for the opposition People's Alliance said on 10 March 2003, 10 days before the war began, that "Bush and Blair have become war criminals by their action of going to war without United Nations approval... The Government should not help US forces in any way".

Because of the involvement of the United States in the peace process, much of the anti-war protest died down with the de-escalation of the ground offensive in Iraq. A murmur of dissent still exists, but it is unlikely that anti-Americanism will hold sway in the annals of the government. The visible involvement of senior figures in the Bush administration in the peace process in Sri Lanka, the good relations that exist between the two countries, the economic benefits can all, as Richard L Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State, said in his

opening remarks at the April Washington meeting with donors and the government of Sri Lanka, result in "...an infusion of international support [which will] add an unstoppable force to this momentum of peace".

Sri Lanka will probably pay lip service to a policy of non-alignment, but with the paradigms of cold war alliances now moot, it is increasingly evident that Sri Lanka will continue to develop a cosy relationship with the United States on a whole spectrum of issues.

The next three years in Sri Lanka will probably not constitute a post-conflict situation in terms of formal political and constitutional structures confirming this, but rather a post ceasefire period. In this period, the prevailing emphasis on rehabilitation by the negotiating parties and donors alike will continue. It will be accompanied by incremental progress in the determination of a final political and constitutional settlement, as well as in the establishment of robust safeguards for democratic governance and human rights. Consequently, there is a danger that this pre-eminent emphasis on realising a 'peace through development' rationale in practice now will fatally compromise the former and stymie the latter.

Furthermore, continued social and political upheaval in West Asia will invariably impact the fragile peace process in Sri Lanka. With the pockets in the south as underdeveloped as vast tracts of land in the north and east, communities on both sides jostle for attention in developmental efforts. With the economy showing slow signs of recovery, its fate will depend to a large extent on the mood swings of the global markets. Tourism, a major industry in Sri Lanka, will also suffer on account of protracted conflict in West Asia. Another downswing in tourist arrivals could mean disaster for an industry that is painfully recovering from years of neglect.

Public support of the peace process hinges upon the realisation of an elusive peace dividend, the delivery of which in turn depends largely on economic growth. Iraq is a distant country for those in the north and east whose livelihoods have been wrenched away from them. And yet, developments in West Asia, and America's voice in world affairs may very well shape the contours of their future in Sri Lanka. ▽

— Sanjana Hattotuwa

NEPAL

KING AND PARTIES

NEPAL'S POLITICAL parties have over the years dug themselves into a pit of non-credibility.

Their detachment from the national interest and petty behaviour hurts the country as it tries to tackle the Maoist insurgency. The parties are on a confrontation course with the king, who seems to want to remain in the centre of things. On 30 May, King Gyanendra's appointed prime minister, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, resigned after the parties launched a street agitation. The king then asked the parties to choose their own prime minister and cabinet, possibly in the hope that they would never be able to agree among themselves.

The talk in Kathmandu's diplomatic and donor circles that wield inordinate influence over the country's national affairs is dominated by exasperation with the political parties, who 'just do not seem to get it'. The conventional wisdom is that the king is trying to set the country on the right track, and the parties are playing spoilsport despite 12 years of bungling while at the helm.

What is forgotten in these top-circle conversations is that the prelude to the dozen years of undoubtedly messy multiparty democracy was three decades of autocratic rule by the palace. Memories of the Panchayat system, in place for 30 years until political parties won democracy in 1990, should be enough to discourage all desire to return to a palace-administered polity.

12 years of democratic governance ended in October 2002 when King Gyanendra abruptly dismissed the Sher Bahadur Deuba government. In this, the first substantial stretch of democratic rule in Nepal (BP Koirala's elected government was dismissed in December 1960 after a year and seven months in power), individual politicians and the parties, though inexperienced in parliamentary practice

and grappling with their incompetence and the spoils of office, managed still to take the country ahead.

The success of elected village and district councils in decentralised decision-making for development could be emulated elsewhere in South Asia. Media was deregulated, and private and community FM stations transformed the way in which Nepalis keep themselves informed. The Nepali people have found a voice and confidence in 12 years, in village meetings as much as in national media, which is the bedrock of long-term democracy. Panchayat-period propaganda that the country would collapse without the king's 'unifying' role in politics has been proven wrong.

An almost continuous political instability certainly played a part in the striking setbacks that plagued society and the economy in the last dozen years. Intra-party bickering, the lack of internal party democracy, the easy slide into corruption, the politicisation of the bureaucracy and the police force, the inability of the parties to arrive at consensus in times of national crisis or to face the challenge of the Maoists – all were serious failures.

Even so, and in spite of all of these failures, the last dozen years were a telescoped period of learning in which Nepal's political parties attempted to learn the lessons that in other societies were learnt over several decades. Concurrent with these political experiences, the ability of media and the rest of civil society to watch over the public sphere grew. And with experience on their hands, the parties also showed signs that they were learning from

What is forgotten is that the prelude to the dozen years of undoubtedly messy multiparty democracy was three decades of autocratic rule by the palace



King Gyanendra reflects

MIN SAURABHARVA



BP Koirala, Nepal's first democratic leader.

their mistakes, and were settling down for the long haul.

But this was precisely when the Maoist insurgency moved into full swing, bringing in its wake numerous challenges that an immature democratic polity was inept at handling. As the state responded to the insurgency, the power of the army grew, and it increasingly seems less amenable to civilian direction. The palace, which had for some years taken a backseat in the country's developments, came back as a driving force towards the end of 2002.

When he dismissed the Deuba government, King Gyanendra could have installed an entirely technocratic government or an all-party government representing in proportion all the parties in parliament. Instead, and mistakenly, he did neither. A cabinet was cobbled together so lacking in popular authority that the country and its people have been left in limbo. In reaction, the political parties, which had quietly acceded to the dismissal of the Deuba government, an action not strictly permitted by the letter of the constitution of 1990 (it is up to the prime minister to recommend any action to the crown), decided that there was ill intent in the palace's manoeuvrings.

The Maoists want a republic, but a combination of social, national and international factors have sapped their momentum

King Gyanendra has frequently and publicly reiterated his commitment to multiparty democracy and a constitutional monarchy, and there is every reason to believe that he is personally sincere in these statements. But that does not mean that the palace, which constitutes the monarch as well as the interests and forces of conservatism, is not averse to expanding the space it has been relegated to since the people's movement of 1990.

In the game of perceptions, whatever his intentions and plans of bringing peace to the land before handing back power to the political parties, the king today is not viewed as playing the role of a facilitator. Rather, he is seen as a political player, and the institution, as a result, has been dragged through the complications of hands-on politics. It is possible that King Gyanendra has decided even to risk this perception in an attempt to wrestle the Maoists to the ground by taking them head on in a battle

of wits. And indeed, if successful, settling the Maoist problem would bring the monarchy some public sympathy and support it has sorely needed since the massacre of June 2001.

The way forth

At the time of writing, a new leadership was on the cards. The king has the chance of going back to being a true constitutional monarch and rise above the fray of day-to-day politics. The new government will have its work cut out: conclude the peace talks with the Maoists, get them to disarm, announce local and general elections.

King Gyanendra must have realised that he needs the buffer of elected politicians to be a good, facilitating king and not be tainted by the dirt of the political marketplace.

The monarchy, beyond its proper role as a neutral site for mediation and conciliation when required, could involve itself in Nepal's social, economic and cultural spheres to the benefit of a modernising society.

The Maoists want a republic, but a combination of societal, national and international factors have sapped their momentum. The only system Nepalis know will work in the long term, for it is the only one that can develop the resilience and flexibility to respond to the needs of society and economy on an ongoing basis, is a government run by elected peoples' representatives, regulated by an active civil society.

— Kanak Mani Dixit

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Nameless Asia and territorial angst

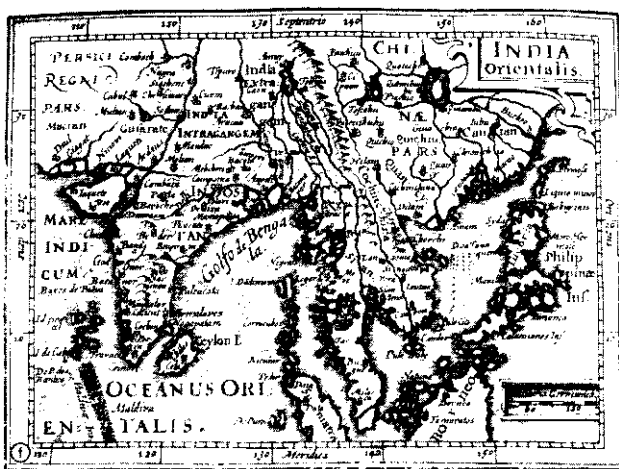
by David Ludden

Maps are a peculiar kind of visual text. Their mundane practicality makes them appear to be mere instruments of utility, which tell us where we are going, and puts everything into its proper place. But their utility comes packaged with invisible ingredients, which make their instrumentality not only culturally complex but also historically disturbing.

The most powerful of all the invisible things in maps are the feelings that suffuse them, ie, feelings of territorial attachments. The most apparent of these cartographic passions are national ones, but in every city and town, street kids, real estate agents and insurance companies also have strong feelings about their local maps. Zoning boards, planners and electoral constituencies invest maps with local politics. Landowners love their property lines. Universities and colleges depict their campus identity with maps, and the logo of the Association for Asian Studies is a map of Asia, which depicts a particular territory of Asian studies scholarship.

As invisible as the sentiments lurking in maps are the social relations of mapping, which produce maps and authorise their interpretation, and whose most influential architects work in national institutions, including schools, colleges and universities. The ubiquity of state-authorized mapping is now so complete that most governments do not regulate most map-making, yet almost everyone draws official lines on maps by habit anyway. This habit represents the mapping-hegemony of the national state, a force so invisible, pervasive and widely accepted that most people never think about it, which indicates the global expanse of the national state's territorial authority.

The internal and external boundaries of national states are now so familiar, because they are so often seen, that they appear as virtually natural features of the globe. This virtual reality came into being in the 19th century, as industrial technologies for surveying the earth and producing statistics, and for mass-printing, mass-reading, and mass-education, began to make viewing standardised maps a common experience. Making maps, reading maps, talking about maps and thinking with maps-in-the-mind became increasingly common with each passing decade. By 1950, people around the



ALL MAPS: A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1992.

India, as seen in 1616 by Dutchman Petrus Bertius.

world had substantial map-knowledge in common. Today, it may well be imagined that most people in the world – including illiterate people – share common map-knowledge, because they routinely experience various versions of exactly the same maps.

During the global expansion of modern mapping, national states incorporated all geography. Old territorial attachments remained – and new ones emerged – but the maps-in-everyone's-mind increasingly had to make sense inside the maps of national states. National state boundaries only covered the globe after 1950, however, and only since then, all the histories of all the peoples in the world, for all times, have come to appear inside national maps, in a cookie-cutter world of national geography.

National maps represent the most comprehensive organisation of spatial experience ever in human history. Scholars work inside that experience, and spaces that elude national maps have mostly disappeared from intellectual life. That disappearance is invisible in maps, and also in the histories that maps contain. Nevertheless, the historical novelty of national maps indicates a discrepancy between the spatial forms of human experience in the past and present. As we study history, we must put the past in its proper place. However, we habitually erase that historical dissonance, by deploying

what could be called territorial anachronism, to locate all the human past inside the spatial confines of our national present.

Geographies of imperial intelligence

Each national state maps the world for itself, and invisible elements in national maps of the world indicate hidden geographical histories of knowledge that animate the world of national states. The United States, for example, drew its own map of Asia. Many old and current maps depict Asia as including most of Russia and as touching the Mediterranean, but the US government mapped Asia to divide the Middle East from Central and South Asia. Scholars, educators, publishers, schools, tourist agencies, news agencies and countless others followed suit. Intellectual attachments to the official map of Asian studies developed accordingly.

Invisibly, however, America's Asia mostly means China and Japan, as indicated by the fact that three-quarters of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) membership study China or Japan. This reflects a special American territorial attachment to East Asia, which dates back to when Admiral Perry 'opened' Japan. By 1950, a century of mobility across the Pacific, to and from America, had formed a distinctly American geography of knowledge about Asia. In Europe, by contrast, centuries of mobility across the Indian Ocean formed geographies of knowledge about Asia, and European Asian studies still pays proportionately more attention to South Asia than its American counterparts.

But European and American attachments to Asia developed in basically the same way, as knowledge about Asia developed inside expansive national geographies of intellectual interest. European and American national interests moved into Asia, as material for Asian studies moved out of Asia, into Europe and America, including all the loot in the British Museum and all the PL480 books in American libraries. Asia thus became a mobile subject of knowledge, whose elements moved among producers, learners, locations and users, on several continents.

Asian studies arrived in Europe as disparate bits of Asian space came together under European imperial intelligence; and Asian studies evolved in America, in dialogue with Europe, during the age of national independence in Asia and American global ascendancy, spawning distinctly American dialogues with Asia's national intelligentsia, steeped in a cold war discourse of modernity, tradition and development.

America's Asia remains a mobile subject of knowl-

edge today. Originally, the mobile interests of missionaries and the military informed the composition of American Asian studies, and politicians, foundations and educational institutions still finance Asian studies to inform mobile American interests of all kinds. Over the years, shifting targets of national opportunity in Asia have shaped American maps of knowledge about Asia, for example, by matching the quality of academic collaborations with the character of bilateral relations between each Asian country and the US. Asian issues spark interest in American Asian studies roughly in proportion to their interest for American national culture. Each new Asian hot spot in the US news attracts scholars, politicians, publishers and educators; and targets for American bombers, investors and foreign policy always make good targets for academic investments.

Not only in America, of course, but also in all other nation settings, geographies of knowledge and of national attachments have numerous

complex and variously visible entanglements, which can be seen quite clearly when we think about how America's intellectual map of Asia changed, after 1980, when the US revived The Great Game with a war against the Soviets in Afghanistan; when American children of South Asian immigrants, mostly from India, began to enter American colleges; and when South Asian professionals, again mostly from India, came more often to work and study in the US. In the two decades after 1980, policies of structural adjustment and liberalisation also induced globalisation that extended the reach of American consumers, politicians and corporations much further into South Asia than ever before. South Asian migra-

tion to the US steadily increased, and in 2001, India surpassed China as the top national exporter of students to America. On 6 October 2001, when the US began bombing Afghanistan, more of South Asia became newsworthy than ever before.

Asian spaces that now preoccupy American news extend far beyond the boundaries of academic Asian studies. They connect the far west and far northwest of Eurasia to South, Central, East and Southeast Asia. This is more than border crossing. It conjures an Asia With No Name that includes Chechnya, Turkestan, Kazakhstan, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, and touches Sudan as well.

In this Nameless Asia, places now preoccupy Americans that once preoccupied Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. American news about this new Asia



'America's Asia': AAS logo (inset).



invites more specific comparison with 19th century texts about America's wild west and about British imperial frontiers, because America's new Asian frontiers appear in the popular media as a fearsome terrain, filled with volatile, dangerous, irrationally religious people, who threaten civilisation, and who move surreptitiously across harsh terrain, where the US military must establish law and order. In addition, when we plot the news sites in this nameless Asia, we see an ensemble of dots like that on flight maps of airlines that shuttle workers constantly from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan to and from jobs in the Persian gulf and Southeast Asia. This spatial pattern in turn recalls old routes between the Silk Road and Indian Ocean that took shape in the 14th century. These spatial coincidences indicate that very old geographical histories of mobility animate the nameless Asia to which America now seems irrevocably attached.

Territorial anachronism

To recover old geographical histories of mobility, we need to understand why they are so invisible. Taking a long-term view, it is evident that territorial authorities have buried knowledge about mobility in many cultures, over many centuries. Territorial maps-in-the-mind give social space cultural form for ruling elites who typically map their spatial powers with symbols to contain human attachments to space – even as human societies also live in mobile spaces that eluded such territorial maps. Authors of territorialism have long described their own sublime domain as the enclosure of civility, outside of which fearsome people and demons lurk in the dreaded forest, wild steppe, fierce desert, mysterious mountains and endless untamed darkness of the sea.

As a result, most historical texts articulate territorialism, in one way or another, and overall, the record of territorial order has banished disorderly mobile spaces to the outlands. This banishment includes the mobility of territorialism itself, which has repeatedly transformed territorial maps and meanings. In these shifting historical sands, each territorial authority insists on controlling geography in its own space and time, and strives to bury old geographies in the graveyard of archaic cultural forms. Territorial anachronism thus gains a new life in each epoch, and the most practically useful past always appears inside maps of the present.

Modernity banished mobility from human space in its own distinctive style. Scientific cartography and historical geography scrambled up all the historical evidence of human mobility over the ages, by putting it all into its proper place, inside national maps, acting in the manner of primitive archaeologists who rip artefacts

out of context to display in museums. In addition, of course, most historians study only their own national territory. National maps tell scholars where to work and put history into its proper place, where mobility appears to be merely an aspect of a geographically enclosed national past. Territorial anachronism thus consigns all the evidence of human mobility to dusty dark corners of archives that document the hegemonic space of national territorialism.

In this context, scholars now consider mobility as border crossing, as though borders came first, and mobility, second. The truth is more the other way round. To begin to recover the mobility of Asia, we can try to imagine maps that render visible all the old boundaries, which indicate the mobility of territorialism, among other transactions between territorialism and mobility. To better understand geographical history, we can try to imagine three-dimensional maps, with temporal depth, which keep archaic geographies visible, rather than burying them under the opaque flat surface of each successive present-age of boundary making, including our own.

Each territorial authority insists on controlling geography in its own space and time, and strives to bury old geographies in the graveyard of archaic cultural forms

The book of modernity

America's nameless new Asia inhabits sprawling spaces in and around the old domains of the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires, where societies have always been extensively mobile, and where mobility has typified social life as much as sedentary, settled life, and in many places and times, much more. Many territorial authorities drew their boundaries here, as urbane literati composed texts to articulate territorial order embodied

in mosques, shrines, temples, forts, palaces and stupas. But the people who wrote the old texts and built the old monuments of territorialism also moved around, over land and sea, in huge spatial zones of interaction. Everyday maps-in-their-minds resembled route maps and travel guides. Pre-modern capitals were multiple and mobile, and their territorial authorities moved anxiously across unstable terrain, from one settled site to another, to cultivate gardens of civilised order in archipelagos of sedentary security, surrounded by open expanses of land and sea.

Over the ages, mobility and territorialism opposed one another, in theory and practice, but they also needed one another and had to live together, however roughly, because mobile societies intersected settled environs and escaped control by sedentary authority; and mobile folk had little choice and many incentives to transact routinely with sedentary folk. In everyday social practice, intersections of territorialism and mobility often meant conflict; because people who controlled resources in their own territory invested assets to generate dividends in their own territory; while mobile folk moved assets

from one place to another, to invest locally and to carry the proceeds away, back into the realm of mobility.

Over the centuries, countless transactions between mobility and territorialism increased social wealth and also pitted mobile and territorial people against one another. Good examples are of course the fraught relations between nomads and farmers, between shifting and permanent cultivators, and between itinerant merchants and sedentary artisans. A more complex but historically salient example today is the kind of conflict that underlies imperialism and globalisation, that is, between mobile territorial folk, who bring many separate territories under an expansive, encompassing territorial authority, and sedentary territorial folk, who covet assets that move across wide spaces, but also fight to secure their own territory, so that they can put assets from their wider world to work on their own ground.

From ancient times, human mobility remapped Asia repeatedly, and after 1100 AD, the force of mobility steadily increased, which expanded the scale of territorial conflict, provoked more mobility, and made the fixing of territorial boundaries increasingly imperative, universal and imaginary. Territorial boundaries in 18th century South Asia formed a frantic kaleidoscope, as perhaps half the total population comprised mobile artisans and workers; peasants colonising new land; itinerant merchants and nomads; pilgrims; shifting cultivators; hunters; migratory service workers and literati; herders; transporters; people fleeing war, drought and flood; soldiers; and camp followers supplying troops on the move. All this mobility entailed widespread conflict and sparked a huge expansion of commercial activity, commodity production and global economic interconnections.

In this early modern context of massive mobility, in the late 18th century, sedentary territorialism began its long march to modern dominance; and in southern Asia, it marched with and against the armies of British imperialism. The civilising mission of modern territorialism came with a massive use of military force to demolish countless fighting forces that roamed the countryside, fought for their own turf, defined ethnic mini-polities, controlled most of the land and were still moving into their own frontiers. In the 19th century, modern industrial armies, moving over vast distances, created static states of political order, contained in modern maps – and, of course, this did not only happen under the British, or only in Asia: the same modern process of imperial conquest produced the national boundaries of the United States.

By 1900, sedentary territorialism was an established cultural norm in most of the world. Mobility was suspect, even deviant; out of the ordinary. Nomads, itinerants and other vagrant, unsettled sorts came under strict scrutiny and regulation. In British India, the most recalcitrant misfits became “criminal castes and tribes”. State officials counted legal migrants who left and arrived in state territory; and counted people born in one

territory who lived in another. Thus enumerated, migrants became people out of place in the national census of modern society. At the same time, ethnography and administration erased the traces of mobility from the constitution of sedentary village societies that became the basic building blocks for modern Asian territory.

In the book of modernity, mobile folk became aliens, as empires became archaic. In social theory, social science and political practice, mobility fell outside the normal – that is, typical, ordinary and normative – society. Modernity cast a harsh eye on migrants in all its mapped constituencies, from the local micro-domain of the village, to the macro-domain of national state. Territorialism became a cultural passion, and being a native insider became the only firm basis for social status in each mapped territory. A mobile past became a cultural liability and faded further from memory with each generation. Constructing “the native” inside native territory and inside native social, cultural and political order became an academic passion. Civilisation and culture thus became strictly territorialised in national societies that valorised the native and marginalised all the mobile identities that look foreign.

In the 20th century, the stigma of alien mobility darkened in Europe, Asia and America alike. In South Asia, where countless generations had moved and resettled over centuries, across unbounded geographies of mobility, millions of natives became foreigners in national territories carved out of British India, where the joy of independence mingled with the pain of alienation, marginality, victimisation, expulsion, exodus, dislocation and assimilation.

Affluent intersections

The citizen, alien, migrant and refugee thus arrived together as definitive social identities in national territory. And since 1950, migrants and refugees have increased in number much faster than citizens. Human mobility has continued to increase in a world of faster transportation, growing population, higher-tech communication and increasing inequality.

In this new, national world of mobility, state boundaries do not contain mobility, but rather constitute instruments of power over mobility. Old tensions and conflicts between mobility and territorialism now appear in new forms, as people in national territories strive, simultaneously, to enforce the closure of national territories, to control people and assets inside national boundaries, to exclude and subdue aliens, to move in and out of national territories, to move assets across boundaries, to move and settle in richer territories, to change and mix territorial identities and to improvise new forms of mobile territorialism, such as diasporas, metropolitan regions, multinational business and global America.

To begin to imagine more realistic maps of the present than national state maps provide, we might



simply abandon the idea that territorialism could ever contain mobility, and thus that territorial order could ever subdue disorderly mobility. National societies depend on mobility, which territorialism cannot control, and mobility is always invisibly at work changing the composition of territories in ways that territorialism does not comprehend.

Thus it makes sense to rethink maps-in-the-mind of Asian studies by focusing attention on geographical intersections of mobility and territorialism, rather than merely studying territories of national order. Urbanisation is an obvious intersection. Cities are symbols and centres of wealth and power inside national territory because they are focal points for mobility inside and across national boundaries. Mobility in, through and around cities pre-occupies social life now more than ever, as social mobility leads people to move from poorer to richer places, on routes that lead from village, to towns and to cities. Such human mobility intersects territorialism in the demographic process of urbanisation, which cuts across borders and transforms territories, intra-nationally and inter-nationally, at the same time.

Mobile assets also travel widely and also tend to accumulate in richer places, where privileged locations in networks of mobility allow people to invest wherever they see promise, and to bring their dividends back home. Such circuits of mobility among sites of capital accumulation also intersect territorialism both intra-nationally and inter-nationally, and their cumulative geographical effect has been to increase territorial

inequality. Over the last century, poor people in poor places have formed an ever-larger percent of world population, and also of migrants, refugees and displaced persons. Only 10 percent of the world's people now live in the world's 12 richest countries, with over USD 20,000 per capita GDP – the most populous being the US (45 percent) and Japan (21 percent) – while 80 percent of the world's people live in 54 countries with under USD 1000 per capita GDP, mostly in Asia. Similar trends in inequality separate rich from poor places inside most countries.

In this world of mobility and inequality, people are now moving in ever larger numbers from poorer to richer places – most of all, to urban areas, but also to richer countries – and at the same time, rich people in richer places are using their increasingly disproportionate command of the world's wealth to acquire ever more of the world's assets, not only with money, but also with force.

Aliens and anxiety

All these trends are now transforming the nameless Asia to which America is so visibly attached today, which sprawls across the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, and where conflict at the intersections of mobility and territorialism increased noticeably after 1980, as people moved more quickly into global networks, and to America; as wealth and inequality both increased; as well-to-do urbanites, including scholars, fostered global enterprise and thrived in its corridors; and as the US began its campaign to control the corridors of mobility running through Afghanistan.

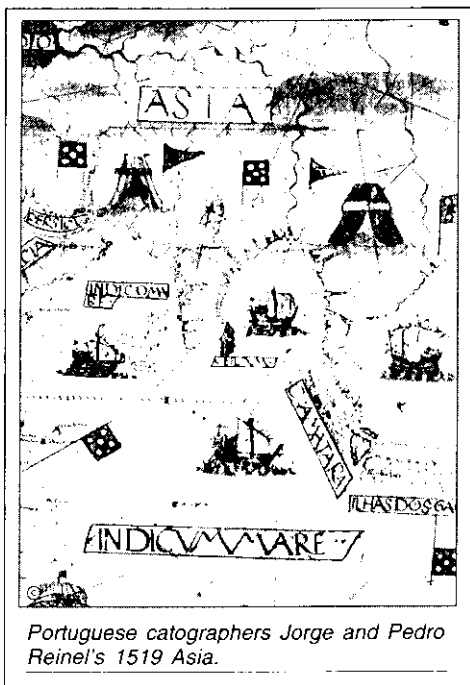
Most major conflicts inside this nameless Asia are struggles for territorial authority, but they also inhabit geographies of mobility where national maps represent

an illusion that nations live inside national borders. National states do retain territorial authority, but national maps do not describe geographies even of national societies, economies, cultures and politics. National maps are normative instruments of social power in struggles over territory characterised increasingly by organised violence.

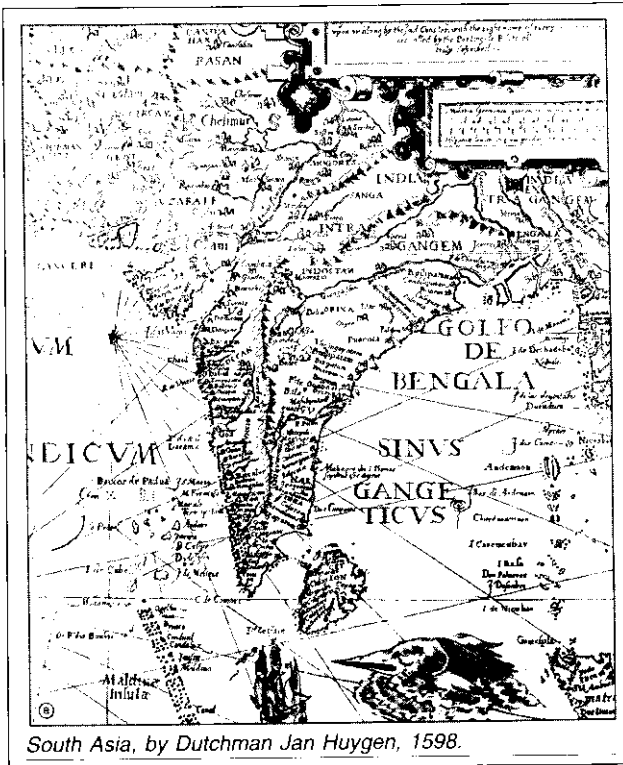
Most boundaries in our nameless Asia remain open to walk across. Armed guards and high walls stand out on the land, as security force protects public and private property against land grabbing and other forced appropriation. Porous boundaries between public and private property that appear as corruption indicate markets moving inside public institutions. Lawyers and judges spend much of their time on property disputes, which periodically

spill onto the streets, where boundaries between public politics and private profits remain fuzzy. Countless conflicts erupt today at intersections of mobility and territorialism, over conflicting insider and outsider claims over territorial resources, in rural localities and urban neighbourhoods. International conflicts are of the same kind.

Since 1980, one prominent cultural feature of territorial conflict is the public media promotion of national fear that aliens are threatening national territory. Territorial anxiety and campaigns against alien peoples that now typify globalisation generally, amidst the public promotion of national fear, aggression and self-righteousness. For example, Americans praised the dismantling of the national territory that Ronald Regan called "the evil empire", and valorised the dismantling of national barriers to American enterprise in poor countries around the world. At the same time, the US barri-



Portuguese cartographers Jorge and Pedro Reinel's 1519 Asia.



South Asia, by Dutchman Jan Huygen, 1598.

caded its own national borders. Then, on 11 September 2001, shocking attacks on monumental symbols of American national power triggered national panic in America, leading the US government to launch a war in Asia that the president had promised would not be stopped by any border of national sovereignty. Inside the US, meanwhile, homeland security forces have clamped down specifically on alien Muslims. The US has compiled a long list of suspect Muslim countries, whose immigrants, students, governments and societies receive special security attention. US embassies now manage aggressive vigilance over the internal affairs of most Muslim countries, and Americans now have three million Pakistani individuals under strict surveillance inside Pakistan.

At the same time as Americans have globalised their national fear of aliens and aggression against enemies of their national interests, territorial anxiety has also generated violence against minorities identified with the alien menace inside many poor countries on the receiving end of US expansionism. Amidst struggles over national sovereignty in India, ambitious Hindu politicians have targeted Muslims, but also Christians, and in the 1990s, as Indian territorial anxiety increased, so did votes for the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which formed a coalition national government in 1998. In March 2002, after three years of state campaigns to make India Hindu, rampaging gangs massacred Muslims across the Indian state of Gujarat, at the same that the US military killed the Taliban, along with at least two Afghan civilians for each person who died in the World Trade Centre. Then, as the Gujarat

killings continued, the Indian government threatened war with Pakistan over Kashmir, which it claims to be under attack by the same Muslim terrorists who many Americans believe threaten America.

Gujarat's historic mobility deepens the meaning of recent events. Since ancient times, Gujarat has been a land of the Indian Ocean as much as of India. Historic sea routes to Kashmir and Samarkand came ashore in Gujarat, where people set sail for Cairo, Cape Town, London, Singapore and Hong Kong. Mahatma Gandhi was born in Gujarat, where a composite Jain, Hindu and Muslim culture spawned a tradition of non-violence that began its Indian political career in South Africa. Gujaratis have always been prominent among affluent Indians overseas, as they are today in America.

In prosperous Gujarat, the most urbanised, industrial state in democratic India, where entrepreneurs embrace free markets and epitomise an American ideal of global progress, a BJP state government banished Indian pluralism from politics and connived in the massacre of Gujarati Muslims, to conquer Gujarat territory for their Hindu nation. Gujarat state elections then bolstered the BJP victory, to the joy of rich Gujarati businessmen in Bombay who celebrated the return of law and order with an event called "Gujarat Unlimited", where one participant called the Gujarat killings, which killed more people than died in the World Trade Centre, "a storm in a teacup". Meanwhile, many affluent Indians overseas, who prosper in the halls of globalisation and also feel the sting of alien minority status in America, finance efforts to conquer India for a Hindu nation supervised by the BJP, accepted by the US government, and bolstered by many contemporary producers of knowledge about India.

Defining the territorial nation

Campaigners to make India Hindu are now spending huge sums to make knowledge about India entirely Hindu in America as well as in India. In the last century, analogous cultural activism – with one foot in America, and one in Asia – has shaped national territories in many countries, as nationalists have struggled for power amidst global American efforts to paint the world in the American colours. This particular intellectual intersection of mobility and territorialism formed a real-world context for research and education about Asia in America, throughout the 20th century; its deep influence on American knowledge about Asia is entirely invisible in our national geography of Asian studies.

Gujarat is only one Asian place where people with very mobile territorial attachments are struggling over territorial authority, in government, on city streets and in towns and villages; using laws, guns, media, bombs, votes and schools; and producing knowledge about Asia. Hindu India is only one ethnically majoritarian intellectual form of national identity thriving amidst the territorial anxieties of globalisation, and basing it-



self on the idea that each national state is a unique domain of a singular, unitary and definitively national culture. People in many countries rally around this idea, and victories in one bolster efforts in others. The knowledge they all produce seeks to regulate, subdue, erase, expel, terrorise and even kill the living legacy of human mobility that antedates national boundaries and still moves across them to form culturally mixed societies. To cite just one example, Indian state schoolbooks now depict the Aryan Hindu as being indigenously Indian and all Muslims as descending from alien invaders. At the same time, the Indian media describe Pakistan and Bangladesh as Muslim terrorist camps and the Indian government wants to force two million Muslim Bengalis out of India, into Bangladesh.

How we study such conjunctures of knowledge and politics is significant. Intellectual and educational activity anywhere that drives human mobility and all its attendant cultural mixing and spatial ambiguity into the shadows of knowledge marks minorities everywhere as targets for organised violence.

Remapping mobile space

All this indicates that scholars in Asian studies enjoy a compelling opportunity to explore geographical histories of knowledge about Asia and of social life in Asia, and to re-map Asia as a shifting, mobile spatial idea, poorly understood either inside fixed boundaries or in a world imagined without borders. In this endeavour, national maps by themselves no longer represent a rational division of academic labour, and more complex geographies better serve to orient research and education on the many-layered, mobile historical spaces that shape national environments.

National identity and international collaboration still constitute the ground on which we must work to address problems in the present with knowledge that connects the past and future. History will not be ending any time soon, and the national state should retain its territorial authority for a long time to come.

Historical research produces knowledge about the past to inform the future we are making today, and many historians are now working hard to bring mobility out of the shadows. In 1989, the eminent Mughal historian, M Athar Ali, opened his presidential address to the Indian Historical Congress by saying, "we should not try to read back our present national sentiments into those of the people of a millennium earlier", and he then went on to survey histories that ran from the Oxus to the Narmada rivers, from the 11th to 18th centuries. Much important work has appeared since then. Its cumulative message is that human histories live inside geographies of mobility that we grossly and now dangerously distort by merely drawing routes of trade, migration and cultural flows among territories defined by national maps.

Human mobility creates affect-laden social spaces that constantly move and change shape. The natives of

these mobile social spaces include all kinds of people: poor nomads and rich capitalists; idealist poets, missionaries, scholars and artists, as well as pragmatic merchants, workers and peasants; and, yes, they also include rampaging imperialists.

Social spaces formed by human mobility foster cultural identities both inside and among territories. Though we often denote cultural mobility with the term diaspora, mobile societies have not merely come from one place to arrive in others; they have also generated dissonant, non-territorial social spaces, which elude maps altogether and always implicitly challenge territorial authority. At the same time, however, mobile folk have also settled happily in sedentary territories, to become territorial fanatics themselves.

From this perspective, we can see that the mobility which typifies globalisation operates in many spatial and temporal registers, and forms many, disparate geographies, which coexist, conflict and complicate one another, and have done so for a long time. National states live inside spaces of mobility, and we would thus do well to abandon the idea that national boundaries represent the fundamental geographical fact of modernity.

Geographies of mobility call out for more attention from scholars who want to make the future more secure for minorities and migrants. Rather than viewing ethnic identity through maps-in-the-mind that identify people with one place or another, and rather than mapping 'belonging' either here or there, or both, it is more realistic to imagine that all societies are composed of spatially expansive geographies of human mobility, where attachments to territory always change with the times, as they are indeed changing today.

The mobility of Asia also calls out for attention from scholars who want to understand mobile territories like 'Hindu India' and 'Global America', both of which indicate that culture and power produce territorialism in travelling spaces that national maps render invisible. People who shape territorial authority and national passions today travel wide networks that did not disappear when national maps made the word 'imperialism' sound archaic. War and pogrom transact freely across boundaries that separate nations, properties and neighbourhoods, which seem ever more permeable and also more useful as weapons for the people who seek to control territory with organised violence.

At the end of the day, history indicates that all the boundaries will change, and they are in fact changing today, in front of our eyes. We cannot know how transactions between mobility and territorialism will draw the maps of the future, but scholars can improve knowledge of the present and options for the future by training their eyes critically and realistically on the very old and very undead geographical histories of mobility that haunt the world of national states and also of Asian studies. △

Unification bridge

WHEN HE was in his early teens, Mohamed Amir used to go swimming with his friends from Fares island and get into fights with rival groups from the neighbouring Maathodaa island. "The two islands are just a stone's throw away from each other. We used to swim in the shallow lagoon and throw corals at Maathodaa boys who would bully us", Amir, now in his mid-30s, reminisces.

Today a teacher in Male, the Maldivian capital home to 70,000-plus people, Amir, who has earned the nickname 'Fares Amir' because of his home island, says that much has changed in the social relations between Fares and Maathodaa islands.

The rivalry between the two neighbouring islands in the Gaafu Dhaalu atoll – the largest natural atoll in the equator-straddling Maldivian archipelago – goes back 30 years, a consequence of neigh-

bourly feuds inherited and continued down the years. However, the gulf between the two islands was bridged, literally and figuratively, when the government recently reclaimed the shallow lagoon separating the two, making it one whole island now known as 'Fares-Maathodaa'.

Since then, tensions between inhabitants of the two islands have eased, with residents saying they now want integration in all senses. Benefits of cooperation are already evident; a single powerhouse, built on the reclaimed coral sand 'bridge', now provides electricity to both sides. A health centre has also been set up while a school, an ice production plant for fishermen, a court and an administrative office for Fares-Maathodaa are in the works.

Residents are also hoping that economic benefits will flow from the unification. The larger an island is, the more likely it is to receive assistance from the national government. "Developing 200-odd islands is like

developing 200 separate countries. A small island state like Maldives cannot possibly undertake such an arduous task with the limited resources we have", a senior official from the planning ministry explains. While only about 200 of the archipelago's 1190 islands are inhabited by humans, more than 80 have been developed for high-end international tourists.

The planning ministry has embarked on an ambitious nationwide development programme called 'Effas Kurun', which literally means shifting people from disadvantaged islands to those with greater space and economic prospects. Fares and Maathodaa are expected to benefit from this venture because the joining of the two islands has made the improvement of facilities and commercial opportunities possible.

"We are seeing a time of great development for us. It might not have been possible before as economic constraints prevented us from

Hijacked justice

ON 23 June, in a courtroom in Calcutta, the hijacking trial of Burmese dissident Soe Myint is scheduled to begin. The case revolves around the events of 11 November 1990, the day Myint, then aged 22, along with fellow dissident Kyaw Oo, hijacked a 220-passenger Rangoon-bound Thai airways flight from Bangkok with a laughing Buddha statue wrapped in tissue paper that they claimed was a bomb, and redirected the plane to Calcutta. Their aim, Myint says, was to draw attention to the suppression of democracy in Burma.

Upon arrival in West Bengal, despite being booked for the hijacking, the two received something of a hero's welcome. On 12 November, crowds assembled outside the jail in which they were being held, and Myint and Oo were allowed to hold two press conferences during their detention, at which they made upbeat statements. The longtime West Bengal chief minister,

Jyoti Basu, assured them that they would receive refugee status, and 30 members of the Indian parliament lobbied Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar to grant them such. Three months after their arrest the two were released, and in 1993 Myint received official refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

At the time, New Delhi was strongly opposed to the Burmese military junta, which had come to power in 1988 and rechristened the country 'Myanmar' the following year. The cases against Myint and Oo remained pending throughout the 1990s, though no action was taken on them and they were allowed to live freely, and in 1995 the public prosecutor recommended that the state of West Bengal drop the charges. Oo was allowed to migrate to Europe to pursue studies, while Myint remained in India to take up fulltime

dissident work as a journalist, along the way befriending Samata Party leader and current Indian defence minister, George Fernandes. Myint, now 35, stayed in Fernandes' official

Delhi residence for several years before renting his own apartment in west Delhi, and in 1998 he founded Mizzima, an Internet news service on Burma (accessible at www.mizzima.com) that regularly criticises the government of General Than Shwe.

Thus, the situation stood until the night of 10 April 2002, when Myint, to his great surprise, was rearrested in Delhi by West Bengal police and taken into custody on a warrant citing the hijacking charge. It is not entirely clear why, after 12 years, the police suddenly took a renewed interest in his case. Myint's defenders, however, point to the visit of India's foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, to Rangoon the same week as Myint's re-arrest



Soe Myint

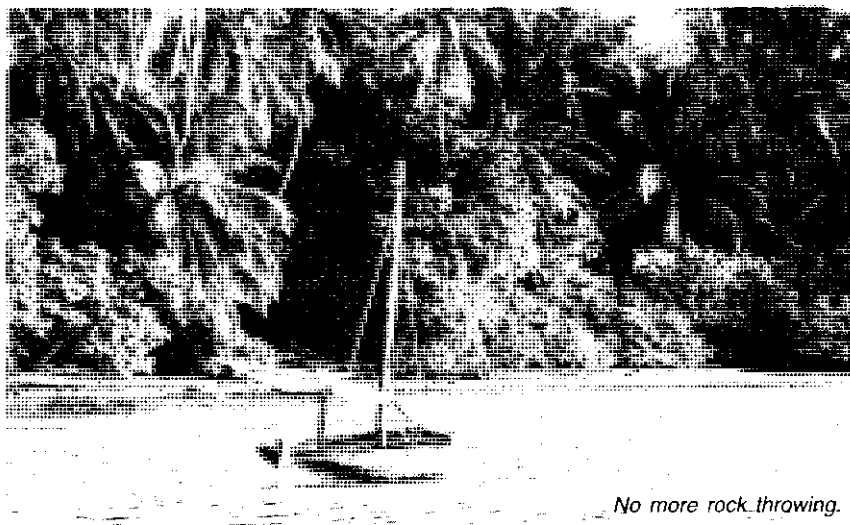
developing basic infrastructure in both islands", the Fares Island chief Mohamed Latheef says.

While rivalries "run deep", he is optimistic that residents will see a time of social harmony in the near future. "Give us about two years and I am sure everything is going to be just fine. It will give us time to develop and consolidate friendships between Fares and Maathodaa residents".

Fares has a population of 802 while Maathodaa's is slightly larger, at 853.

Many islands in the Maldives are disadvantaged because of the scattered nature of the populace. The country's 320,000 people, predominantly Sunni Muslim, live on a string of islands dotted across 90,000 square kilometres of the northern Indian Ocean.

While Fares and Maathodaa are seeing economic, social, educational and medical benefits resulting from the joining of the two islands, the most outstanding example of de-



No more rock throwing.

veloping friendships among the rival islands is that fishermen from both islands now work in their erstwhile rivals' *dhoonies*, traditional fishing vessels, and young children from both islands study in a common nursery school. A new school with classes up to grade 10 is also in the pipeline, according to Latheef.

The Maathodaa Island chief Ibrahim Latheef is cheered by the recent developments as well. "Now we can open big stores catering to a larger number of consumers", he says. Like many other residents, he too would now like to lay to rest the long-running rivalry and give development a chance.

Mohamed Yooshau, Male

by way of explanation. India has dropped its principled opposition to the Burmese dictatorship in favour of pragmatic engagement with the Rangoon regime, and some suspect that the Burmese generals, for whom Myint is a thorn in their relations with New Delhi, requested that Singh arrange for his arrest. Myint says that Fernandes pressed Singh on this point, and that the latter denied any involvement in the case.

His experience in custody leads Myint to believe that the arrest was politically motivated. Between his jailing, on 10 April, and his release a week later, two unidentified interrogators questioned him on his political and journalistic work, not, as the charges would suggest, on his involvement in the 1990 hijacking. Despite requests from Myint's lawyer, Nandita Haksar, the identities of the two interrogators have not been revealed. In January 2003, a Calcutta court formally charge-sheeted him, though the opening of the trial, originally scheduled for

April, was postponed until late June to allow the public prosecutor to make arrangements for 29 witnesses. Myint's activist wife, Thin Thin Aung, says that the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led West Bengal government is willing to drop the case, but that New Delhi is intimidating Calcutta into carrying out the trial. If convicted of hijacking, Myint faces life imprisonment.

The Myint case has become a minor cause célèbre, with activists and journalists in India and overseas agitating for his release, and four attorneys representing him in court pro-bono. An Internet petition calling for the charges to be dropped has collected nearly 1000 signatures, Reporters sans Frontieres has called on the Indian government to explain the arrest, and at least six Scandinavian Burmese watchdog groups have demanded his immediate release. Numerous publications in India and Southeast Asia, including *Frontline* and the *Bangkok Post*, have reported on the case, guaranteeing that if it does go to trial,

Myint will become a celebrity defendant in the process. Which makes the re-arrest all the more puzzling, because if Myint is convicted after a dozen years of agitating against the Rangoon regime, the impression, either correct or incorrect, will be that he has been jailed for his work as a journalist and that the Indian government caved into Burmese demands to silence a critic.

Myint himself notes that he could easily slip out of India to avoid trial, but says that he will stay and fight his case. "Being in a neighbouring country of Burma like India, I could do many activities", he says. "It is also important to mobilise the support and solidarity of the people of India and lobby the government of India to support the democracy movement in Burma. More importantly, India still has a vibrant democracy which continues to allow Burmese democracy activists to launch various campaigns for democracy in Burma".

On the picket line

IT IS Islamabad's best-known secret. The picket lines at fast food multinationals KFC and Pizza Hut were well into their second month this spring, and there had not been a word about it in the local press. Stories filed by reporters on the city's longest-running non-violent protest had a habit of mysteriously disappearing – the godfathers protecting American franchises must have some clout. The only related news that was permitted (or planted) was a crime report, naming individuals against whom cases had been registered for demonstrating at a supermarket, though the story failed to mention what the demonstration was about. Clout and crude scare tactics, one supposes, are the hallmarks of godfathers everywhere.

There is some evidence, however, of who these protectors might be. The evidence is statistical, based on arrow number plates that flock to KFC Rawalpindi, and

green number plates that swarm Pizza Hut Islamabad. But as it is circumstantial evidence, we will refrain from presenting it. It goes against our campaign principle of strict adherence to the law.

Adhering to the law in Islamabad is by no means simple these days. For the local lawmakers keep changing it all the time. It was our third night at KFC and the city administration – DC, AC, city magistrate, DSP, SHO and busloads of police – was out in force to protect the goateed images of Colonel Sanders. We had barely started distributing our boycott leaflets when we were told that it was a violation of Section 144. We stopped leafleting and unfurled our banners. The city magistracy then proclaimed that, as of right then, this too was a violation of the same law. Somebody produced a megaphone; Section 144 was extended then to ban the use of it. Desperately trying to stay on the



right side of the rapidly changing laws, we put away the megaphone and blew whistles instead. The game of wits between Islamabad's lawmakers and its law-abiding citizens continued till late that night. Finally forced to remain

silent and stand five metres apart, we lit candles – dim beacons pointing the path of freedom from American brand-name slavery. The city authorities could have snuffed this challenge too, but it was late and other, more lucrative pursuits beckoned them elsewhere.

Baffling arrogant lawmakers may be a piece of cake. Convincing the public that boycotting American corporate brand names is an effective strategy to contain American unilateralism is another matter. A typical conversation between a picketer and a would-be customer runs as follows:

Picketer: Don't send royalties to

condemn the Pokhran II nuclear tests of May 1998. And India, while not completely reversing itself, has toned down its traditional support for the Palestinian cause.

According to Nehru biographer BN Pandey, India's first prime minister "had no feeling of animosity towards Israel and would have hated to see the Jewish state wiped out of existence or even crippled by the Arab nationalists. The reason for his refusal to have diplomatic relations with Israel was tactical; it was his fear that India might lose the friendship of the Arab world", important partners in the non-aligned stance. After Nehru's death in 1964, and before Rao's arrival as prime minister in 1991, Congress governments resisted making public overtures to Israel for fear that they would alienate Muslim voters in India and jeopardise India's access to West Asian oil.

The strengthening of Indian-Israeli ties during the past decade demonstrates as much about chang-

few months after suffering an embarrassing defeat in the Sino-Indian border war, New Delhi invited senior Israeli military leaders, including the chiefs of army staff and military intelligence, for consultations. Israeli labour minister Yigal Alon visited India in 1965, as did foreign ministers Moshe Dayan in 1977 and Shimon Peres in 1993.

A year before the Peres visit, Indian-Israeli diplomacy reached a milestone with the establishment of full diplomatic relations, an outcome of Narasimha Rao's non-ideological, post-cold war foreign policy. This decade of engagement focussed primarily on military contacts, with Israel emerging as India's second largest military supplier, following only Russia. Today, Israel provides India with military assistance in its combat aircraft, weapons, tank, missile and naval programmes, and is slated to train 3000 Indian jawans in anti-insurgency tactics. Israel supports New Delhi's stand on Kashmir and refused to

Courting Tel Aviv

ARIEL SHARON, the embattled, pugnacious prime minister of Israel, is reportedly weighing a state visit to India, perhaps as early as June. If the visit happens, it would be the first by an Israeli head of government to New Delhi (Israeli head of state Ezer Weizman made a ceremonial visit in January 1997), and would cement the 180-degree turn in relations between India and Israel since they gained statehood within months of each other in 1947-48.

Despite the emigration to Israel of thousands of Indian Jews, Indian-Israeli diplomacy during the cold war remained a cold affair, at least publicly. New Delhi refused to engage in full diplomatic relations with Israel, though it did allow Tel Aviv to establish a trade office in Bombay in 1950, which became a consulate three years later. Over time, cooperation grew slowly between the two states, primarily in security affairs. In January 1963, a

America; boycott American brand names; boycott KFC; boycott Pizza Hut.

Customer: But Pakistanis own this restaurant and it provides livelihoods to many Pakistanis.

Picketer: We are not for closing these restaurants. All we are requesting is that instead of promoting American brand names and sending royalties to the USA, they do business under a local name, establishing a brand name of their own.

Customer: But then they will have no customers.

Picketer: Not if people like you boycott American brand names and support local outlets.

Customer: But you cannot change American policy by boycotting one American restaurant.

Picketer: If corporate America feels the pinch, it will make the American administration change its policy.

Customer: Actually it is my kids who want to eat in here.

Picketer: Maybe you need to ex-

plain all this to your kids, if you do not want them growing up as mental slaves to American brand names.

Customer: But America produces many useful things.

Picketer: Yes, and there are many good Americans too. This campaign is not against all things American. This is just an effective way to tell corporate America that attempts at world domination through force can be counterproductive to their interests.

This conversation can be longer or shorter and not always successful. But the campaign has been effective – effective enough to have the city administration descend on us once again, this time at Pizza Hut. On 6 May the city AC and magistrate, using provocation, abuse and harassment, took the identity cards of those on the picket line by force and threatened immediate arrests if the picket continued. Not willing to risk arrests of girl students and se-

American Jewish lobby for India. In February, the singularly influential American-Israeli Political Action Committee, whose website boasts a quote from the *New York Times* calling it “the most important organization affecting America’s relationship with Israel”, argued in its *Near East Report* that “faced with similar threats from Islamic radicals and weapons of mass destruction, burgeoning economic, political and military ties between Israel and India are proving beneficial to both countries”.

On 22 May, the US approved Israel’s sale of an advanced airborne early warning system to India, valued at USD 1 billion, and the same day in Islamabad former Inter-Services Intelligence chief Hamid Gul told reporters that a Sharon visit to India “is a threat to our security”. Closer Indian-Israeli cooperation is turning heads in Islamabad. “Do growing India-Israel relations have an impact on Pakistan and its security?” queried one Pakistani news-

nior citizens, we retreated to fight another day.

Already this demand-side campaign is gaining momentum. Starting with the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, many institutions have declared themselves cola-free. Booklets explaining the boycott, available in both English and Urdu, are proving popular. More citizens continue to join the picket ranks: it is a cause of our times, and the finest of the city are coming forward to take it up. Islamabad is beginning to demonstrate that with patience, commitment and creativity ordinary folk can effectively resist unilateral aggression and contribute to world peace. And our resistance is succeeding – if the response of the local hirelings is anything to go by. ▽

Jamil Omar, Islamabad



ing global politics as it does about India’s evolving internal dynamics. The perceived importance of the Arab world has declined, while India’s Muslim population has been the target of campaigns of vilification and violence, particularly since the rise of the Hindu-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Support for Israel has arisen in ideologically diffuse sections of the Indian political spectrum, ranging from the Congress under Rao to the current BJP and even the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a leader of which, former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, visited Israel in 2000.

Islamabad is reportedly nervous about growing Indian-Israeli military ties, in particular that they may serve as a channel for advanced US military technology to reach the South Asian theatre. Such concerns about an Indian-Israeli-US military axis, which have been voiced in India by political columnist Praful Bidwai, among others, appear buttressed by growing support in the



paper in May. “The answer cannot be but a categorical yes”. Faced with the prospect of advanced military technology reaching India, some Pakistani commentators have called for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel, though this would be wildly unpopular with Pakistani public opinion. ▽

Swansong of unity

Sinhala nationalism in *Namo Namu Matha*

by *Sanjana Hattotuwa*

State symbols often celebrate and commemorate a history of cruelty, injustice, and exclusion

Anthems have truly only one purpose – to instil patriotism and nationalism in citizens at a time of need. This time of need can range anywhere from a cricket match to a rallying cry to support troops fighting for the territorial integrity of a country (which in Sri Lanka has rarely coincided with the former). In Sri Lanka, the flip side of a national lethargy where for instance, deadlines are passé and only upheld by social pariahs who value time, is the militant fervour with which symbols of Sinhala hegemony are protected. The flag, the national anthem, the constitution wherein the status of Buddhism is enshrined – all three are inextricably entwined in a complex dynamic that has influenced polity and society since independence in 1948. This has led to tragicomic situations, where even the seemingly benign news of an official re-recording of the national anthem can result in presidential decrees and political acrimony.

Breaking away from colonial rule in the late 1940s, the people of Sri Lanka were kindled with patriotic fervour. Of course, one of the first steps of any new nation-state in the postcolonial world was to find a lyric expression of its status of independence. After a competition, Ananda Samarakoon's composition *Namo Namu Matha* was chosen as the national anthem on 22 November 1951. The first public rendering of the national anthem was made on Independence Day, 4 February 1952, by a group of 500 students from Museus College, Colombo, and was broadcast over the radio. History does not record how many people listened.

A national anthem is predicated on the existence of one pivotal element, the nation. A nation is commonly considered to be a group of people bound together by language, culture, or some other common heritage and is usually recognised as a political entity. Ordinarily the word nation is used synonymously with country or state;

however, it does imply more than just a territory delineated by boundaries. A nation could also signify a group consciousness of a shared history, race, language or system of values. Sri Lanka thinks not – its history has been coloured by the systematic and calculated repression of the aspirations of minority communities and groups, something that rabid chauvinists neglect to remember.

State symbols often celebrate and commemorate a history of cruelty, injustice, and exclusion. Strangely missing from the history of the national anthem in Sri Lanka is any recognition of a shared destiny. Although a national anthem should ideally stand for national unity, in Sri Lanka, it embodies the perverse tragedies of the past – every time it is sung it is an inadvertent recognition of the politics that have plagued the country for over half a century. This profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering and discrimination is couched in lyrics which stand aloof from the need to find unity in diversity – a key element of a pluralistic society that Sri Lanka has not been able to establish. More than amnesia in verse, *Namo Namu Matha* is a harmonious perpetuation of partisan politics that has left the country grappling with the after-effects of a protracted civil war.

Also hiding in the seemingly innocuous national ardour of the anthem is the pernicious evil of majoritarianism – a singular plague which in the guise of democracy has ravaged this nation's polity and society after independence in 1948. It is in Sinhala, the language of the majority. It sings hosannas about the bounty of Sri Lanka, its beauty, its rich harvests and a host of other peripheral and idealised qualities, but not about its peoples.

Sri Lanka Matha,
Apa Sri Lanka
Namo Namu Namu Namu Matha.
Sundara siri bharini,

Surandi athi sobhamana Lanka
Dhanya dhanaya neka mal pala
thuru piri jaya bhoomiya ramya
Apa hata sapa siri setha sadhana,
Jee vanaye Matha!

And so on... In the second stanza,
the prayer to the mother nation is
(in translation):

In wisdom and strength renewed,
Ill-will, hatred, strife all ended,
In love enfolded, a mighty nation,
Marching onward, all as children
of one mother,
Leads us, Mother, to fullest free-
dom.

There is not a single reference to the multiple ethnicities in the island. No hint of the complex socio-political matrix that has coloured communal relations, the richness of religions or the multiplicity languages, a shared past. Listening to the 'national' anthem, you could be forgiven if you believed that Sri Lanka was a mono-ethnic, Sinhala Buddhist nation-state.

What nation?

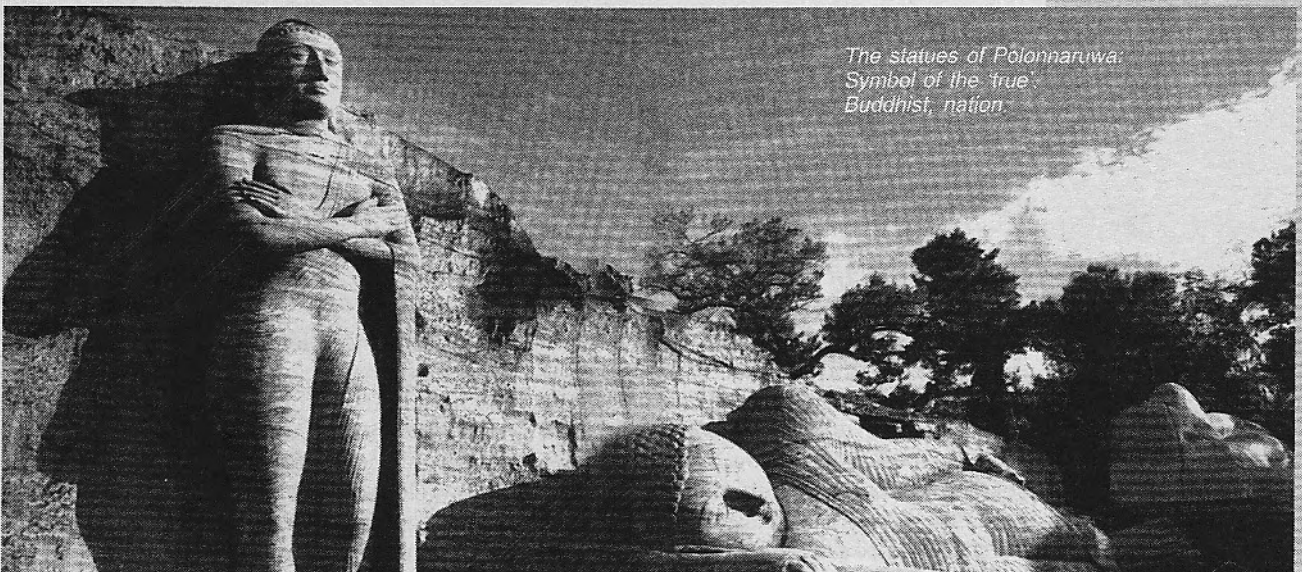
However, one must also place the anthem in the context of post-independence politics in Sri Lanka. As they did throughout their empire, the British ruled Ceylon by creating an English-speaking elite from amongst the Sinhala and the Tamils. Their favouritism engendered an opposition which took racial and religious overtones. The majority of those who had been left out

of the elite spoke Sinhala and were Buddhists, and they began to promote a racist notion of Sinhala superiority as an 'Aryan race'. After independence it was this Sinhala-speaking group that gained control of the new state, and began to exclude Tamils from higher education, jobs and land mainly by making Sinhala the only official language. Not surprisingly, Tamils resented this discrimination. As the anthropologist Stanley Tambiah has argued, the island's violence is a late-20th century response to colonial and postcolonial policies that relied on a hardened and artificial notion of ethnic boundaries.

In the 30 years from the mid-1940s, successive governments took measures to reduce the number of Tamils in the professions and the public sector. These measures interacted in diverse and complex ways with a potent Sinhala Buddhist exclusivism, which gradually became the animating ideology of the Sri Lankan state. Particularly among the arrivist, lower caste Sinhala, the spread of anti-Tamil chauvinism was soon perceived as a promising means of increasing economic opportunity. As time passed, the electoral promise of pandering to this chauvinism tempted even the most cosmopolitan of Sinhala politicians.

It must be remembered that Sinhala Buddhists strongly believe that they have a duty to protect and uphold their faith in Sri Lanka. From the political leaders who, in the name of preserving the supremacy of Buddhism in Sri Lanka have deferred to the Sangha (the Buddhist clergy, that seemingly benevolent institution so much a part of poli-

In Sri Lanka,
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the past –
every time it is
sung it is an
inadvertent
recognition of
the politics
that have
plagued the
country for
over half a
century



*The statues of Polonnaruwa:
Symbol of the 'true'
Buddhist nation.*

The farce continues. News of a re-recording of the national anthem in 2002 raised the heckles of the *ancienne regime* – how on earth could Sri Lanka even contemplate it without expecting a political imbroglio?

tics in Sri Lanka) and much as they have manipulated it, to the attitude of the Buddhist clergy, the primacy given to Buddhism has proved inimical to the interests of Tamils in Sri Lanka. This Sinhala-Buddhist mentality, which has informed and shaped post-independence politics in Sri Lanka, has engendered intolerance in polity and society and carries a large burden of responsibility for the ethno-political conflict.

Sri Lanka's national anthem is a lens for this history of complex socio-political interactions. In 2003, the farce continues. News of a formal re-recording of the national anthem in December 2002 raised the heckles of the *ancienne regime* – after all, how on earth could Sri Lanka even contemplate a re-recording without expecting a political imbroglio? The minister in charge pleaded ignorance, the president warned the prime minister against hasty decisions, the singers said they had faithfully kept to the original tune and lyrics and the general public was wondering what on earth the fuss was about.

The United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan in 1999, reporting on complex humanitarian emergencies, cited a study by the United Nations University that found a positive relationship between war and inequality among domestic social groups. More than simple poverty, it is this inequality, which the weak state is unable or unwilling to manage, that breeds conflict. Although not all poor states with high levels of inequality have experienced civil war, in those that have, such as Sri Lanka, inequality corresponding to ethnicity proves an es-

pecially potent destabilising force.

This observation holds valuable lessons for Sri Lanka, for it is a country of multiple identities and multiple ethnicities. This ethnic diversity is something to be celebrated, not shunned or repressed. State institutions should reflect it and encourage it along with the need to cohabit peacefully and to appreciate the concerns and aspirations of each community.

Sri Lanka has much to lose if the present peace process breaks down. An indifference to historical antecedents, the international context and the legitimate aspirations of all communities could irrevocably plunge Sri Lanka into a vortex of bitterness, mistrust, mutual acrimony and violence. A negotiated agreement or a peace process that addresses the symptoms of violent conflict must include provisions for future processes towards institution-building and societal transformation if they are to be sustainable. A true expression of the *volksgeist* of a nation not only depends on a celebration of its linguistic diversity, but also an acknowledgement of its multiethnic fabric.

A commitment by both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to the creation of a federal Sri Lanka was welcomed amidst great fanfare late last year. A culture of rights, respect and the honourable accommodation of differences is crucial to the federal idea and to its realisation. It has to be a new social contract, a covenant – the Latin word from which the term federalism is coined – if it is to have lasting legitimacy. A truly national anthem of Sri Lanka must recognise this fundamental reality. ▽

The king's song

The military tune that became the anthem

by Kamal Dixit

Nepal did not have a national anthem as such till about 100 years ago. The Rana government of the day, it seems, made do with whatever melody came in handy for official events and celebrations. Local folk tunes, popular melodies and sometimes even a likeness of *God Save the Queen* would be played by the military band

as the occasion demanded.

Sometime during his reign (1895 to 1901) as hereditary prime minister and de facto ruler, Bir Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana was advised that a *salaami dhun* ('salutation melody') each should be composed for the king and the prime minister. The military band was handed the task of compos-

ing a suitable tune, and it did so under the supervision of the bandmaster at the time, Director of Music, Nepal, Dr AM Pathan. The *Shree Teenko Salaami*, meant for the Rana prime minister, and the *Shree Paanchko Salaami* were pressed into service in 1899. (The three – ‘teen’ – ‘shrees’ referred to the Rana prime ministers, while the five – ‘paanch’ – ‘shrees’ refer to the Shah kings of Nepal. ‘Shree panch’ may be translated as ‘his majesty’.)

This is how *Purana Samjhana* by Ram Mani Acharya Dikshit, advisor to Chandra Shumshere, reports the provenance of the tune of *Shreeman Gambhir*, the national anthem of Nepal. But it is a disputed legacy. The other claimant to the *dhun* is Bakhatbir Budhapirathi, who was a member of the band that Pathan headed. Officially, however, the tune remains ownerless, with the matter not decided either way.

Chandra Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana succeeded Bir Shumshere. His long reign (1901-1929) is often considered the peak period of achievement for the Rana autocracy, which held power from 1846-1950, a period when the Shah kings (*maharajadhiraj*) were only titular heads. As the graduate among the Ranas, having studied in Calcutta and travelled to England, Chandra Shumshere understood the modern-day needs of pomp and ceremony. On ascending to office, ‘Maharaja’ Chandra Shumshere ordered his advisor to insert words into the two tunes.

Ram Mani, as the superintendent of the Gorkha Bhasha Prakashini Samiti (the Nepali Language Publications Committee), a government-appointed watchdog body, was a natural choice for the responsibility. He turned to his assistant, the prominent poet Pandit Chakrapani Chalise, who fit lyrics into both salaami dhuns.

With the overthrow of the Ranas in 1950, the melody glorifying the prime minister went the way of the autocracy; King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev returned from a brief exile in Delhi to retake power in agreement with democratic forces led by Bishweswor Prasad Koirala’s Nepali Congress. Expectedly, the *Shree Paanchko Salaami* came to be used routinely for state ceremonies.

Over the years, the song underwent some change as the definition of what Nepal was, and who all should be included in its signature musical identity, expanded. The original wording was:

Shreeman Gambhira Gorkhali
prachanda pratapi bhupati
Shree-paanch sarkar
maharajadhirajako sada rahos
unnati
Rakhun chirayu eeshale praja
phailiyos pakaraun jaya premale
Hami Gorkhali bhai sarale

Bairi saru haraun, shanta hun
sabai brighna byatha
Gaun sara duniyale saharsha
nathako sukriti katha
Rakhaun kaman, bhari biratale
Nepalimathi sadhai nathako
Shri hos thulo hami Gorkhali ko

The first alteration to the song was the dropping of ‘Gorkhali’, which was supplanted by ‘Nepali’ in 1951. Gorkhali was by then seen as a limiting denomination referring only to the principality from where the ancestors of the Shah kings fanned out in conquest in the mid-18th century. Also, the term was by now closely associated with the Gurkha regiments of foreign (British and Indian) armies. Meanwhile, the name ‘Nepal’, which was inherited from the ancient Kathmandu valley, had come to denote the country as its borders stand today.

The 1962 constitution, handed down by King Mahendra after wresting power from the elected government of BP Koirala in 1960, officially declared the *Shree Paanchko Salaami* as the national anthem. That is when it became the *rastriya gaan*, the national song. In it, the second stanza was excluded. Also dropped was the male-only reference implied by “bhai” (brother), apparently to make the anthem more gender-sensitive.

Actually, the wording of the king’s anthem had nothing remarkable in it, and compared to the prime minister’s, which was certainly more melodious than the marching tune of the monarch, it was quite bland. And Chakrapani Chalise also added sweeter lyrics, including pleasant Sanskrit phraseology that worked for the music, such as the phrase, “...himashila mandita suhindu sashrita...” But being the king’s anthem, it was *Shreeman Gambhira* whose star rose with that of the Shahs.

The second stanza in *Shreeman Gambhira* had some ‘meat’ in it, with messages and benedictions such as “...let the enemies vanish, let all obstacles and pestilence be



Chandra Shumshere
Jung Bahadur Rana

BALKRISHNA SAMRA

calmed..." The words also exhort the Nepali people to be brave and loyal. But as we have it today, the national anthem simply extols the majesty of the king. It wishes him a long life, all success and the spread of his subject population – something that has come to pass with population explosion and the migration of Nepalis to faraway lands in search of survival. *Shreeman Gambhira* has the people praying for the monarch's continuous triumph and wellbeing.



King Tribhuvan

Debating the anthem

Time and again, voices have been raised for changing the national anthem. There is particular dissatisfaction that it is exclusively a paean to the incumbent on the throne. In fact, a number of patriotic songs have been nominated as its replacement, songs whose music is inspired by folk traditions rather than the imagination of a Pathan military bandmaster. Also, the fact of retroactive fitting of words into an existing tune is clear in the awkward rendering of the song, required to be sung with a stop-go gusto that is not there in the average Nepali language poetry that has been put to song.

Interestingly, this awkwardness was only augmented when the ending phrase "*hami Nepali daju bhai saraley*" ('all us Nepali brothers') had to be replaced by merely "*saraley*" ('by all'). This meant lengthening the one word and breaking it into seven syllables to force it into the tune at hand. This is why the end of the Nepali national anthem has always been a difficult campaign of open mouths and throats trying to get around a particularly difficult bend at the finish.

For these reasons, many songs have been proposed as alternatives. Among the numbers vying for the top spot is one penned by the firebrand 1940s poet and political activist Gopal Prasad Rimal and put to music by singer-composer Ambar Gurung. The song glorifies the Nepali flag: "*Rato ra chandra soorya, jangi nishan hamro...*" ('In red, with the sun and the moon emblazoned, our martial standard...') A more recent aspirant has been a long-forgotten song by one of the first successful poets of Nepali and a prolific writer, Shambhu Prasad Dhungel. Dhungel was given the title of 'Aashu Kavi' by Chandra Shumshere, who was impressed by the poet's natural ability to simply churn out verse. The song, long forgotten, was resurrected by the singer and musician Deep Shrestha recently. It refers to

the Nepali's need for respect, which has a certain resonance today when the country is dealing with a serious problem of image: "*Har bakhat harek kura ma, mana hos Nepalako, jaha jaha jaun hami, shaana hos Nepalako*". ('All the time, and in every sphere, let Nepal be honoured; wherever we go, may we find Nepal perceived in glory'.)

Some would say that the anthems that have been proposed and which seem to be popular have their own problems. The first is the image of Nepal that they project – of a conquering nation, replete with references to the *khukuri*, the besting of 'enemy' empires, and the territory that Nepal was forced to cede to the British after the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816. Similarly, the references are also to Nepal as a country of the midhills, with little reference to the country and population as it has evolved, including the 'trans-Himalayan' fold and the Madhes plains region that now houses more than 50 percent of Nepali citizens.

Perhaps an ideal national anthem could still be written for Nepal, and it could be done through a national competition of the kind that the Sri Lankans had in 1951 and the Thais are experimenting with now. And perhaps the ideal national anthem would be one that extols and glorifies exclusively the diversity that makes up the nation-state of Nepal – certainly the geographic and climatic differences between tarai, hill, mountain and trans-Himalaya, but even more importantly the diversity in the population. A lyric incorporating such a subject, and put to 'good' edifying music, would perhaps be able to add just a bit to the sense of unity of purpose that seems to be missing in the present-day political landscape.

But there is always the counterpoint that suggests let sleeping ratriya gaans lie. A country's glory and its image can hardly ever be measured through its national anthem, and there is an innumerable number of national anthems that perhaps do not reflect the aspirations and feelings of the people.

All said and done, for the moment, Nepalis may be glad that at the very least they have a national anthem today to sing, howsoever out of tune and awkwardly, at celebrations national or local. And for this, we have to thank a Rana prime minister, a Pathan bandmaster and a Kathmandu pandit, all long deceased. ▽

Perhaps the ideal national anthem would be one that extols and glorifies exclusively the diversity – geographic and human – that makes up the nation-state of Nepal

The wars 'we' wage

State-sponsored orientalism in the western press, and the abandonment of journalistic duty in the war in Iraq

by *Chitragada Choudhury*

The blindness of contempt is more hopeless than the blindness of ignorance; for contempt kills the light which ignorance merely leaves unignited.

– Rabindranath Tagore, *East and West*, 1922

Norms and values, as well as information, are transmitted to audiences in overt and covert ways via the news media. In the event of a conflict, the news media, with its growing ability to define 'reality', is all too often expected to take on the task of creating public consensus, of contributing its patriotic bit. This means abandoning a questioning stance and highlighting certain issues at the expense of more uncomfortable ones that go against the dominant script. In order to project unity, rhetoric about national and cultural identity gets revived, even invented, in order to stimulate feelings of homogeneity within groups, and to identify the enemies as 'they'. While this phenomenon holds true in much of the western ('international') media's coverage of global events, it was particularly evident in the weeks leading up to the war in Iraq, with the underlying elite consensus structuring facets of the news, choosing subjects and framing issues in a manner that consequently limited what the public read/saw in the name of news.

The mainstream (and overwhelmingly corporate) media in America under-reported the massive and unprecedented anti-war protests seen all across the world, including in the US. Once the war broke out, this popular opposition went even more under-reported in the Anglo-American media. Biased towards elite actors – the 'newsmakers', as the media constantly reminds us – this omission was justified in terms of the lack of formal political opposition, with US Democrats and British Conservatives backing their respective governments in the war on Iraq.

The conduct of the media during the course of the military conflict also reveals such biases. Throughout the campaign, the media regularly reminded their audiences that non-embedded journalists reporting from within Iraq had "their movements monitored by the Iraqi regime", suggesting that such journalists' accounts were somehow tainted as a consequence. Yet there was little parallel discussion of the outcome of accounts by embedded journalists made to sign contracts to follow the coalition's direction and orders: the one-sidedness

of reporting from the perspective of the troops, the culture of silence that working and living with their 'protectors' engendered, or even the outright falsity of their early news reports – Iraqis firing Scud missiles or the 'fall' of Basra and Umm Qasr, for instance – that arose out of a singular reliance on US and UK military sources.

About 600 journalists, mostly Anglo-American, acquiesced to the contract described by the US Department of Defense as "mutually beneficial to both the Government and news media organizations", and requiring journalists to abandon their duty of holding power accountable for its actions and effectively to function as a propaganda arm of the aggressors.

A parallel policy by the Pentagon created inequality of access to events in Iraq for journalists who resisted the embed programme (and by extension to military dictates about what should be reported), leading the European Broadcasting Union's head of news to comment: "They have created a caste system with embedded journalists – usually from countries in the so-called coalition who can associate with the troops – and the truly unilateral broadcaster who is prevented from coming anywhere near the news". Indian journalists who had to report from countries neighbouring Iraq also drew attention to this discriminatory policy, the implications of which are disturbing: a shrinking of space for independent perspectives with even countries like India with independent, developed media systems depending on secondary sources – primarily Anglo-American news organisations and agencies – to interpret for their audiences events through defining stages of the conflict.

In bed with the Pentagon

That embedded journalists, including those of the BBC, often resorted to the term 'we' while referring to US and UK military efforts reveals the defining orientation of such reporters towards the coalition's interests and objectives. London *Times* reporter Chris Ayres' account of his embedded experience, which among other things necessitated trying hard "*not to think* about the Iraqis being blown apart" (emphasis added) by American missiles, exposes the severe limits of the neutrality and fairness of such reportage. "I noticed that some of the US press corps had brought along their own American



flags (complete with poles) to stick in the Iraqi mud", Ayres notes when commenting on the relative lack of enthusiasm for invasion displayed by the Marines in contrast with the excitement of many war correspondents. "So much for objectivity", he laments. Ayres' portrayal of Iraqi soldiers, rather underdeveloped and one-dimensional, provides a sharp contrast to his empathetic portrayal of American troops as complex human beings, progressively altered by the experience of military combat. (Emphasis added):

At al-Diwaniyah, the Iraqis seemed to be everywhere: in front of us, behind us and to both sides. Every night they attempted crude attacks. Day by day, I saw the Americans become more brutalised. As the fatalities mounted the Marines began to resent the rules of engagement that prevented them firing at civilians. Many of these civilians, after all, turned into warriors at night. It was sad to see the Marines – many of them intelligent and sensitive men behind the defensive bravado – lose their innocence. They had become killers, and talented ones at that.

Being embedded with the troops created a commonality of interest; Ayres' resultant dilemma however could only be resolved in one way:

For journalists, wearing the chemical suits, patterned like standard Marine desert fatigues, posed an ethical problem. We looked like Marines. To the Iraqis, we were Marines. It seemed like yet another blow to our objectivity. I came to the conclusion, however, that I would rather lose what little chance of objectivity I had left than die from an Iraqi blister agent attack. That must have suited the Marines just fine. ... My objectivity was shot to bits. All I wanted was for the Americans to win quickly: for my own safety, rather than any political reasons.

When after 10 days he wished to quit, the reaction from the American military planners was hostile. A senior military public affairs officer called him a "piss-poor journalist" for writing pieces on Iraqi attacks on supply lines and stalled progress in the military campaign. "I'm glad you're leaving, because otherwise I would be kicking your ass out of here", the officer said.

Post-war accounts from embedded journalists like Chris Ayres, or CENTCOM-based journalist Mike Wolff, about reporting under the 'benign' gaze of the American military provide a telling comment on the grotesque realities of war while raising troubling questions about the ethics, effects and indeed, sheer physical dangers of such crisis journalism. After the cessation of the main military campaign, the BBC admitted that it did not adequately convey to its audience that accounts of embedded reporters provided only one snapshot in the larger picture of war. The fact remains that through most of the conflict, the standpoint of the military, with little critical journalistic comment, was elevated over all other perspectives on the war. According to Ajai Shukla of New Delhi television (NDTV):

The biggest challenge for a journalist reporting the present Iraq conflict lies in bypassing the sophisticated American media management campaign that has been put in place to mould public opinion in favour of this war. Journalists must now consciously divert their attention away from the easily available stories of soldiers and military success and focus instead on the more difficult stories of human beings caught up in the war.

Chemical Ali of the sandpit

In the months since the collapse of the regime in Baghdad, the Anglo-American news discourse continues to be symbolic of an unspoken agreement between the media and the government. At times this symbiosis takes on an overtly crude form. The president of the news division of the American network CBS describes his network's provision of bulletins for the 'Towards Freedom' propaganda channel broadcasting into Iraq from an American military plane as an "appropriately patriotic gesture". Tony Blair's spin doctors present

such action as legitimate propaganda exercises. On the popular news show 'Good Morning America', produced by ABC television, anchor Diana Sawyer expresses urgency about American blankets reaching Iraq in time so that the Iraqis can "see examples of American generosity". On the British television channel ITV, a correspondent reporting from Iraq, while standing amidst a landscape visibly decimated by the bombing, glibly discusses how America can "reap the benefits of this war". In the media, captured ex-Iraqi officials are referred to by names such as "Chemical Ali" or "Dr Germ". "Widely known as..." say these news reports, even though such epithets are more often than not circulated by the western governments to convey a sense of bestiality of demonised enemies to their publics.

Coverage of the Iraqi people, or of other putative 'terror' states, is no better. While the pulling down of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad was declared as "momentous" by the BBC, anti-US demonstrations in Iraq since then, attracting significantly larger numbers of people, have been treated casually at best. ("Is Iraq in danger of becoming an Islamic state which will turn against the West?" asked a news anchor on the BBC.) Syria is a victim of similar reductive, monolithic portrayal: in an interview to the BBC, a US official crudely described Syria's co-operation with the US in the recent arrest of Iraq's former intelligence chief as "the only good thing that has come out of that country in a long time", a sentiment whose underlying assumptions also gain frequent expression today with reference to Iran and North Korea. Whole nations and their peoples are thus defined purely in terms of whether they are 'for' or 'against' the West, while identities, histories or national trajectories of their own are eliminated from the script.

Prior to the Iraq campaign, the Anglo-American media chose to parrot establishment views about the threat Saddam Hussein posed to the 'civilised world', a threat presented as so imminent that the UN could not be given the six months which Hans Blix saw as necessary to complete inspections in Iraq. The urgency displayed by America prior to the war contrasts sharply with the current calls for patience as Tommy Franks declares that it may take up to a year to trace Iraq's alleged 'weapons of mass destruction'. The speciousness of the coalition argument, with implications of life and death for untold numbers of Iraqis, has hardly been challenged by the mainstream media. As the goalposts get shifted, the media has now taken up the trope of 'rescue', ie regime change, mirroring the self-congratulatory stance of the American and British governments that view themselves as liberators of an oppressed people lacking agency.

An examination of how the western media frames the issue of weapons as signifiers of the orientalist binaries of 'good'/'evil' is crucial, not in the least be-

cause this war was, according to Washington DC and London, "a necessary pre-emptive strike to divest the Iraqi regime of its weapons of mass destruction, which pose a grave threat to the civilized world". The effects of the weapons used by the former have rarely merited the description of 'destruction', let alone 'mass destruction' in the western media. Such skewed reportage effectively creates the sense among western public opinion that 'our' weapons are good/precise/smart/legitimate; 'their' weapons are evil/indiscriminate/illegal. Yet, in Vietnam between 1961 and 1975 the American military dropped millions of litres of chemical weapons, carrying out what the world's leading environmental scientists have termed as "the largest chemical warfare campaign in history". Lethal chemicals such as Agent Orange, used by the Pentagon, with full awareness of their fatal effects, linger on in the country's environment, where they have thus far been transmitted to three generations of Vietnamese. Over 500,000 civilians have died and an estimated 650,000 people suffer from life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and birth defects.

In Afghanistan, by some estimates the most landmined country in the world, the number of civilians killed as a result of America's continuing 'war on terrorism' is well over 3000, a number which continues to rise with the on-

going military activities of the 11,000 US troops stationed there. American and British governments described the dropping of 1500 cluster bombs on Iraq in the current "war for civilisation" as "a legitimate military strategy", despite the fact that their use violates the basic moral principle of maintaining a distinction between belligerents and innocent civilians. According to Human Rights Watch, the estimated 24 million bomb-lets dropped by the US and UK in the first Gulf war have killed or injured over 4000 Iraqi civilians since 1991.

Use of depleted uranium (DU) continues to be justified by the American and British military establishments with the claim that harmful effects of DU exposure have yet to be conclusively proved, despite significant evidence to the contrary (*Himal*, May 2003). However, accounts of American and British veterans of the first Gulf war, one in four of whom are today injured, tell another story than that proffered by their former commanders – of DU exposure leading to numerous health problems, from chronic fatigue syndrome to leukaemia. The effect then, on a defenceless population on the ground – whose voices are rarely carried in the media – where such weapons are dropped can only be disastrous. This obscuring, under emphasis, even outright denial by governments of what 'we' do – "murder from a safe distance", pointed out a recent anti-war statement signed by over 900 US war veterans – goes unquestioned in the western media conditioned by the wor-

Identities, histories or national trajectories of whole nations are eliminated from the script

thy/unworthy victim dichotomy.

More damagingly, the media have failed to question their governments over the (il)legitimacy of fundamental issues in the current conflict: Paul Wolfowitz's contention that the war on Iraq and the subsequent 'reconstruction' can be funded by Iraqi oil receipts; an American ex-general heading the Iraqi administration; the secret dealings of the Bush administration from as early as September last year to 'reconstruct' Iraq; day-to-day aspects of Iraqi life from oil to agriculture to education being sold off to politically connected American companies in blatant disregard of the United Nations – all have more or less gone unchallenged in the media. The extent that concerns have been raised concerns an inequitable distribution of the spoils. As a journalist from ABC said, "That big American companies would win major contracts to rebuild Iraq is not so surprising. But even such loyal US allies as Great Britain have been shut out of the bidding".

The promises being made by Bush and Blair to the Iraqi people are exactly the ones that were given to the Afghans in the wake of their country's 'liberation' from the Taliban in November 2001, when declarations of the Anglo-American political elite claiming 'we will not turn our backs on the people of Afghanistan again' were eagerly lapped up by the media. Given such circumstances, comment and analysis of the present state of Afghanistan would have provided valuable comparative context and depth to the reports of the conflict in Iraq and the arguments for it. However, for an event-obsessed media, Afghanistan currently holds little value. Too taken up with reporting the assurances being doled out to the Iraqis and the coalition rhetoric for a 'free and democratic' Iraq, the American and British media, have deemed it unnecessary to hold Bush and Blair accountable for their promises to export freedom, democracy and the benevolence of the free market to Afghanistan. 18 months after its 'liberation', the sombre reality is that Afghan civilians continue to be killed by American 'smart' bombs in the endless pursuit of 'terror', the country remains fractured and under the repressive influence of warlords with President Hamid Karzai's writ effectively limited to Kabul, while trade in opium, according to the World Bank, is currently contributing more money to the Afghan economy than the much touted foreign aid, most of which in any event is being channelled into donor-administered projects with little Afghan input.

As was famously posited by Edward Said, the power of the self-serving discourse of orientalism effectively binds the field of meanings within which the media choose to operate. The narrowness of the coverage is reflective of a subterranean belief among journalists that Iraqis need to be led by the hand by the West, the repository of higher wisdom of what is fit for their country (and indeed the wider world). Journalism that thinks outside the frame to question, rather than uncritically report, notions of western superiority and benevolence

(most notably that of veteran journalist Robert Fisk, who covered the war for London's *Independent*, as well as *The Guardian's* coverage of the war) has been disproportionately low in the overall flow of images and accounts in the western media.

To be fair, the media are hardly unique in displaying such a neo-colonial mindset. Niall Ferguson, British historian and a firm advocate of the project of empire, writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in late April, explicitly endorsed the view of *Wall Street Journal* editorial features editor Max Boot that "the United States should provide places like Afghanistan and other troubled countries with [quoting Boot] 'the sort of enlightened foreign administration once provided by self-confident Englishmen in jodhpurs and pith helmets'". Ferguson laments, however, that America's "young elites have no desire whatsoever to spend their lives running a screwed-up, sun-scorched sandpit like Iraq". If a noted academic like Ferguson would so offensively describe a land that is home to a millennia-old culture, is it surprising that journalists display prejudice and ignorance?

Dissent in a globalised world

While anti-war demonstrations seemed to unite the world in recent months, Jonathan Raban, writing in *The Guardian*, argues that there is a crucial difference between protests in cities like Rome, Athens, New York or London and those unfolding on the streets of Cairo, Islamabad or Amman. While the former are clearly motivated by outrage over the belligerent policies of Bush and Blair, he writes, they do not feel the latter's "sense of intense personal injury and affront, a violation of the self".

Yet, globalisation of the media landscape, with advances in communications technology, in particular satellite TV and the Internet, as well as the existence of significant diasporic communities, especially within western societies, is making it difficult to carry on talking in first-world dualisms about oriental and occidental cultures as wholly separate, autonomous or independent.

The existence of diasporas is perhaps the most significant: the creation of trans-national communities – and from the point of view of the media, trans-national audiences – through the large-scale movement of peoples from nearly every part of the globe across territorial borders during the past half century is an entirely novel development in human history. The intimate sense of humiliation and dishonour that Raban refers to was evident in the opinions expressed during the conflict on a morning call-in radio show on the BBC Asian Network. The station was launched nationally last October for the five million-strong British (South) Asian community, as part of the public broadcaster's effort to rid itself of a predominantly white image and better reflect the diverse ethnic makeup of contemporary British society.

With the outbreak of war, several callers on the show took issue with Bush's simplistic binaries, expressing opposition to an "illegal and unjust" war, deep suspicion of the motives behind it ("it is all about Iraqi oil" was a constant refrain), fear that the conflict, far from making the world more amenable to 'freedom', was deepening existing divides and resentment, and even hope that the Iraqis might successfully resist "the western invasion" of their country. Inevitably the global also informs the local: the divisive politics of the Subcontinent spilled into discussions, with calls on the one hand for America to similarly redress the human rights violations against Muslims by the Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat, and on the other for India to follow America's example and strike Pakistan. As Arundhati Roy has observed, the most troubling aspect of this "racist war" is that "it engenders racism in everybody – perpetrators, victims, spectators. It sets out the parameters of the debate, it lays a grid out for a particular way of thinking".

The call-in show audience also repeatedly challenged the line adopted by most sections of the British media that the outbreak of war had made debates about its legitimacy redundant. It is interesting to note that while 70 percent of the US public supported the Bush government's military action in Iraq, only 30 percent of African-Americans backed it. The editor of a black newspaper in San Francisco explained this deep split as a sense among the community that you cannot export something you do not have at home, thus suggesting that at a deeper level the black community's opposition to the war was reflective of a sense of alienation from the mainstream. While polls in Britain monitoring public opinion during the war did not offer a parallel break-up, voices heard on the Asian Network depict a similar picture of disconnectedness between the British political elite and the British Asian community. As Simon Cottle points out,

The term 'minority' after all is not simply a numerical designation but refers to imbalances of economic, political and social power – inequalities often forged in relation to a colonial past, diaspora histories, and contemporary patterns of disadvantage, discrimination and unfair access to the means of cultural representation.

A related theme in caller opinions was the lack of identification with the language of war used by the American and British governments, its duplicity internalised by the mainstream media. While the media focussed on the immediate conflict, providing little context or history, listeners questioned the hypocrisy of a western foreign policy which had sold military hardware, including the means to create chemical and bio-

logical weapons, to Saddam Hussein's regime in the past, withheld substantial amounts of humanitarian aid to the Iraqis through sanctions over the last decade and was now bombing the country to 'liberate' it. They also expressed opposition to the media's callous disregard for Iraqi lives implicit in references to the killing and maiming of defenceless civilians as "collateral damage", "a public relations disaster" for the American and British governments, or even more dismissively as "a war with miraculously few casualties"; the glossing over of the humanitarian effects of the coalition's use of cruise missiles, laser-guided 2000-pound bombs, depleted uranium and cluster bombs all designed to "shock and awe" the Iraqis, their use justified by constant references to Iraq's yet-to-be-found weapons of 'mass destruction'. Amidst approval of the Asian Network for providing a platform to articulate their

views marginalised in the mainstream debate, callers also expressed a growing reliance on Al-Jazeera television, which in their view better addressed their needs and concerns, given the establishment bias of the Anglo-American media. Defending the Arab network's coverage of the war, a caller asked, "What right does America have to oppose Al-Jazeera carrying pictures of American POWs when the superpower's detention of the so-called 'illegal

combatants' in Guantanamo Bay also defies international law?"

The western media frames the issue of weapons as signifiers of the orientalist binaries of 'good'/'evil'

Networked societies

The globalisation of television news and its accompanying international public sphere is still dominated by Anglo-American ideologies conveyed in the texts of internationally distributed Anglophone media (Reuters, CNN, BBC, Fox/Sky News etc). Their colossal power and global reach succeeds to a large extent in edging out smaller rivals from the market and limiting possible alternative views and representations that the audience can access. However, the 'first draft of history' is no longer being solely written by white male journalists.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of the campaign in Afghanistan and the Arab media's coverage of the current conflict mean that several contesting representations exist in the public domain, making for a more critical audience. This is in sharp contrast to the media environment during the first Gulf war when the overwhelming communications superiority of western powers ensured that their image of 'reality' got played out all over the world. (It also meant that America could get away with dubious acts, like the bombing of an Iraqi army in retreat, since the mainstream media chose not to cover it.) It then becomes interesting to consider what effects the presence of a plural (as opposed to exclusively western) news environment might be having on the manner in which the military conducts itself, and how threat-

ened it might feel by emerging news media such as Al-Jazeera which gives Arabs an opportunity to represent themselves and contest the negative stereotypes that abound in the western media. That Al-Jazeera's bureaus were at the receiving end of American firepower, first in Kabul and then in Baghdad; that protests against America's attack on the Palestine Hotel inhabited by journalists who had by then moved out of the embedded programme, were flippantly dismissed by the Pentagon spokesperson – "Baghdad is not a safe place. We do not recommend anyone to be there" – and justified by Colin Powell in the most bizarre (or perhaps chilling?) terms – "The amount of force was proportionate to the threat against United States forces" – shows up the arrogant face of American power, its minatory notions about how a media displaying any independence should be 'managed'.

At the height of the conflict, when NDTV's news content was off air as it switched to broadcasting itself instead of on Star News, messages on its website by Indian viewers from the US and Britain to West Asia spoke of their longing for an Indian channel to provide them with a reliable account of the conflict and cover angles of the news which were not being adequately addressed. Supra- and sub-national journalism by the likes of Asian Network, Al-Jazeera and NDTV is thus creating political communities within (and across) national bound-

aries. The presence of diasporas and cable and satellite technology means that these emerging channels are producing 'micro-spheres' in an extra-societal global public space creating counter-flows to mainstream news coverage not just internationally but, perhaps more crucially, domestically, creating a multi-layered information order.

Will such channels help to further discursive scope assimilating all sides in an argument towards a richer, plural, more humane debate? Or will they lead to the 'ghettoisation' of peripheral views while the centre continues more or less unchanged, stubbornly resistant towards, even contemptuous of, views that oppose those of its own? Either way, these emerging developments in the global media landscape must carry great ramifications. Clearly, simplistic construction of collective national identities by the mainstream Anglo-American media purporting to speak on behalf of 'we' is posing problems within their multicultural societies. As far as the latter go, the point of view of the 'other' no longer exists out there; it now has to be contended with, at home as it were, blurring, on the one hand, the lines between 'us' and 'them', but also exposing the fallacies of simplistic assumptions of a common global village in the 21st century. Divisions in the 'network society' not only run deep, they are sustained in the prime by the media.

Call for entries

Film South Asia '03

Kathmandu, 25-28 September, 2003

Submission deadline: 30 June, 2003

Film South Asia, only festival of non-fiction films on South Asian subjects, calls for entries for the fourth edition of the festival being held in Kathmandu from 25 to 28 September 2003.

Film South Asia, organised by Himal Association in Kathmandu, has established itself as the premier event to showcase the latest in South Asian non-fiction filmmaking. It is also a platform for filmmakers from all over the region to gather and appreciate each others' works and share ideas.

jan **vrijman** fund
international documentary
film festival amsterdam

HIMAL

Regulations

Films made after 1 January, 2001 are eligible for entry in the competitive category. Entries have to be on South Asian subjects, broadly understood. The filmmakers need not be South Asian. Entry is free of cost. All entries must reach the Festival Secretariat in Kathmandu by 30 June, 2003.

Monetary prizes, along with citations, will be awarded for overall excellence to the directors of the three best films chosen by a three-member jury. Past juries have been headed by renowned filmmakers Shyam Benegal from India and Goutam Ghose from Calcutta among others.

For additional information and entry form for Film South Asia visit the Himal Association website www.himalassociation.org

For more information 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,

Film South Asia '03 is supported by Jan Virjman Fund, Netherlands and Himal South Asian magazine.

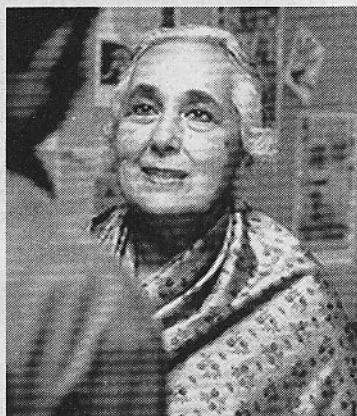
Hating Romila Thapar

Why the Hindutva brigade has set its sights on India's most distinguished historian

by **Subhash Gatade**

...an historian who is indefatigable in the pursuit of knowledge and prolific in its publication, and who is above all a devoted partisan of the truth. ... The early history of the country has been illuminated by Professor Thapar, whom I now present, more than by almost any other scholar. An historian of that period who seriously wishes to refute accepted fictions and dispel the general darkness will need several high qualities...

- Citation presented by Oxford University to Romila Thapar while conferring on her an honorary Doctorate of Letters, 2002.



Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South, and that she would spend 10 months at the John W Kluge Centre in Washington DC pursuing "historical consciousness in early India".

While 72-year-old Thapar's appointment was greeted with applause by serious students of history, little did anyone realise that acolytes of the *Hindutva* brand of politics, primarily those in the Indian diaspora, would unleash a vitriolic campaign against her built on name-calling and the disparaging of her professional qualifications. Claiming that "her appointment is a

The distinguished scholar Eric Hobsbawm, author of a four-part history of the 19th and 20th centuries, recently gave a talk at Columbia University in New York City. In a speech on politics, memory and historical revisionism, he said, "The curious fact is that as we move into the 21st century, historians have become central to politics. We historians are the monopoly suppliers of the past. The only way to modify the past that does not sooner or later go through historians is by destroying the past". "Mythology", Hobsbawm added, "is taking over from knowledge". He then mentioned the case of Italy, where, he said, a government commission has been ordered to revise history textbooks in an effort to discredit the Italian republic's anti-fascist, communist roots.

On the other side of the world, in India, simultaneous with Hobsbawm's speech, history was also being 'rewritten' in a disturbing manner with the unleashing of a vicious campaign against one of the Subcontinent's most distinguished historians, Romila Thapar. Emeritus professor of ancient Indian history at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, author of many seminal works on the history of ancient India, recipient of honorary degrees from many leading world universities, Thapar was recently honoured by the US Library of Congress in a manner befitting her scholarly standing. The library announced that it was appointing Professor Thapar as the first holder of the Kluge

great travesty", an online petition calling for its cancellation has, as of the last week in May, collected over 2000 signatures. Thapar, according to the petition, "is an avowed antagonist of India's Hindu civilization. As a well-known Marxist, she represents a completely Euro-centric world view". Protesting that she cannot "be the correct choice to represent India's ancient history and civilization", it states that she "completely disavows that India ever had a history". The petitioners also aver that by "discrediting Hindu civilization" Romila Thapar and others are engaged in a "war of cultural genocide".

The petition, accessible at www.petitiononline.com/108india/petition.html, includes space for signatories to comment on their opposition to Thapar's appointment. Entries range from the unintentionally ironic ("Thapar is a pseudointellectual [sic]" - Ravi Kandula, #1106) to the overtly communal ("Do you know the similarities [sic] between muslims and commies? They are both anti-national (they don't believe in nations). They believe in killing all non-believers" - V Jayaram, #2072) to expressions of injured Indian honour ("Romila is a hindu-hating marxist who would stoop to anything to denigrate her own country. I hope that New Delhi revokes her citizenship, seizes her assets and declares her and her family persona non grata" - Gautam P Ganesh, #1578) to a sense of American patriotism rooted in anti-communism ("As a proud Indian-

American, I feel the US has an obligation not to appoint Communists or Extremists/Leftists to important positions in the Library of Congress" – Raj Mohanka, #490) and even to an ostensible commitment to prevent an unqualified person from receiving an appointment ("How can someone with no knowledge of history and shoddy research be nominated to this post!!!! I protest strongly as a US citizen and active voter!" – Chetan Gandhi, #762). While most signatories chose to leave the comment space blank, the presence of a large number of hostile expressions from Indian-Americans drawing on right-wing strands of both Indian and American nationalisms helps to locate the campaign's geographic and ideological coordinates. As stated by SRIDHAR, #750, "Romila Thapar is a Indian Traitor", a succinct statement clear enough in its meaning, notwithstanding the misused article.

History as politics

While the Internet is full of such character assassination, which in its vulgar ignorance need not be taken seriously, it does represent a particular mindset that begs questions about the radicalising of the Indian Hindu diaspora. Questions may also be raised about the increasing 'democratising' of a discipline that requires sophisticated tools of research, where evidence, method and theory need to be rigorously used by those trained to 'write history'.

For all the popular naysaying, Romila Thapar's credentials in the profession are secure. She has, in the words of a reviewer writing in *The Hindu* in April 2003, "adapted herself decade after decade to changing trends and tendencies, and [has] continued nevertheless to produce work of a consistent quality". Ranging from her contribution to the *Penguin History of India*, which has been continuously in print since 1966, to her latest work, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (Penguin India, 2003), she is the author of numerous academic tomes, including *Ancient Indian Social History* (Orient Longman, 1979), *Interpreting Early India* (Oxford University Press, 1994), *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (Oxford University Press, 2003). That, of course, does not include the hundreds of articles and academic papers in which she has pioneered both the study of early Indian texts and the integration of archaeology with written sources.

Thapar's academic work is controversial with the Hindutva lobby because it is grounded in professional methods of historical investigation, rather than in the pet historical theories of Hindu extremists relying on extrapolation from Sanskrit texts. The disagreement may appear academic in nature but the controversy around her appointment speaks to a larger cultural

project being advanced under the guise of anti-communism. While it is true that Thapar makes use of some Marxist categories of historiography, unremarkable in itself given the strong Marxist tradition in professional Indian history writing, her opponents' objections are essentially political rather than academic. Thapar's documentation of early Indian life is at odds with the Hindutva preference, grounded in a regressive Hindu orthodoxy, of seeing India as a purely Hindu civilisation, the political implications of which for contemporary India being obvious.

A letter of protest against the baseless petition sent to the Library of Congress puts the facts straight. "Since the 1960s", it states, "Professor Thapar has written powerfully against the colonial stereotypes that India had no past, no sense of time, and no historical consciousness. The petitioners attribute to her precisely those ideas that she has spent a lifetime battling against". The letter also comments on the reasons why so many petitioners experience discomfort with the way Professor Thapar and many other professional scholars view Indian history. According to the correspondents:

'Do you know the similarities between Muslims and Commies? They are both anti-national... They believe in killing all non-believers'

Professor Thapar's conception of Indian past is different from that of the petitioners. Professor Thapar has looked at a variety of cultural traditions in the making of ancient India. To the petitioners Indian past is monolithic, unified and unmistakably only Hindu. Those who disagree with this notion are accused of committing cultural genocide.

The fact is that Romila Thapar has been pointing out for more than three decades that the historical theories expounded by the Hindutva club are a jump backwards to the assumptions of 19th century colonial history. (See Thapar's *Communalism and the Writing of Ancient Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, 1969.) In February 2003, in delivering the Athar Ali Memorial Lecture at Aligarh Muslim University, she elaborated on this theme again:

The colonial interpretation was carefully developed through the nineteenth century. By 1823, the *History of British India* written by James Mill was available and widely read. This was the hegemonic text in which Mill periodised Indian history into three periods – Hindu civilisation, Muslim civilisation and the British period. These were accepted largely without question and we have lived with this periodisation for almost two hundred years. ... Mill argued that the Hindu civilisation was stagnant and backward, the Muslim only marginally better and the British colonial power was an agency of progress be-

cause it could legislate change for improvement in India. In the Hindutva version this periodisation remains, only the colours have changed: the Hindu period is the golden age, the Muslim period the black, dark age of tyranny and oppression, and the colonial period is a grey age almost of marginal importance compared to the earlier two.

Hindutva McCarthyism

In a December 2001 article in *Mainstream* under the title 'Communalising Education', JNU historians Mridula Mukherjee and Aditya Mukherjee discuss the politics of history as seen in the ironies inherent in the ongoing history textbook controversy. "Paradoxically, the present regime is imitating Pakistan[,] which made a similar move in the 1970s of keeping history out of a particular level and then prescribing a distorted, one sided version at the senior level", they write. "Regimes uncomfortable with history or with an agenda which is narrow, sectarian and undemocratic often seek to suppress or distort history".

This is not for the first time that Thapar has come under attack by the Hindutva brigade, nor is she the only scholar to suffer its abuses. With the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) assumption of power at the centre in 1998 and its ongoing attempts to remake the educational curriculum in its own chauvinistic image gaining momentum, intellectuals and academic positions at odds with the Sangh Parivar's view of history have come under attack under various pretexts. The BJP has pursued a concerted effort to malign and delegitimise scholars and intellectuals at odds with its view of India's past. After the stalling of the Indian Council of Historical Research-sponsored 'Towards Freedom' project edited by professors Sumit Sarkar of University of Delhi (DU) and KN Panikkar of JNU, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) went all-out to weed out the influence of, in the words of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief KS Sudarshan, "anti-Hindu Euro-Indians" from the curriculum. In 2001, when the moves by NCERT were underway to delete passages from school textbooks that allegedly 'hurt' the sentiments of this religious sect or the other, a delegation of Arya Samajis met Murli Manohar Joshi, the human resource development minister, and demanded that Thapar, along with historians RS Sharma of DU and Arjun Dev of NCERT, be arrested. Not to be outdone, Joshi has also reiterated time and again his pet thesis that 'academic terrorists' are more dangerous than armed ones.

While the vilification campaign against Romila Thapar will have no impact on her Library of Congress appointment, it is evidence that the Hindutva campaign

to falsify history has reached new heights. The letter of protest sent by scholars and intellectuals supporting Thapar rightly concludes:

This is a not just a shocking intolerance of perceptual differences. It is a politics that seeks to silence critique, and battles for a notion of the past that is homogeneously Hindu. It is part of a wider attack that we are witnessing in India today against intellectual and artistic freedom, and against cultural plurality. In a political milieu where dissent is being regularly repressed through intimidation, this petition against Professor Thapar and the hate mails that accompany it, become particular cause of concern.

In a 13 May Rediff.com column on the Thapar controversy, the Indian political commentator Praful Bidwai argues that "The campaign represents the rebirth of McCarthyism..." Bidwai's reference to McCarthyism

is fitting – the Wisconsin conservative denigrated his political and ideological opponents by drawing on a deep-seated religious suspicion of left-wing ideologies, and advanced a powerful, dangerous cocktail of American nationalism grounded in so-called Christian values and unquestioning support for the nation and its political institutions.

The matrix of political conditions in 1950s America and present-day India (and the outlook of many in the

Indian diaspora) is similar. Hindu nationalists, both in India and abroad, are sensitive to India's position in the world and see themselves as fierce defenders of the Indian nation against 'dangerous' elements, typically constructed as Muslim and also at times as communist/Marxist. McCarthyism and the anti-Thapar campaign are both built on a populist politics of denunciation, of collecting a supposedly monolithic people against a hostile force. In 1954, in a move strikingly similar to the history book shenanigans in India today, the US Congress inserted two words into the 'Pledge of Allegiance' recited every morning by American schoolchildren – "...one nation, *under God*, with liberty and justice for all", so that the pledge would differ from similar statements of loyalty in the Soviet Union that express no divine connection. The insertion in the US pledge is mild in comparison to the broader ideological project of Hindutva, but it rests on a similar assumption, that religion can be used to buttress state-inspired formation of identity. Unlike many of McCarthy's targets, Thapar will not fall victim to the ongoing assault. Tragically, though, the ambitious designs of the Hindutva brigade are already being realised in part throughout India. ▽

'In the Hindutva version, the Hindu period is golden, the Muslim period black, the colonial period grey and of marginal importance'

WHO IS the most talked about South Asian? Short of eavesdropping on every SAARC territory teashop, it is difficult to say, though with the help of Google we can at least get a glimpse of whose name pops up most online. Among national leaders, barring a few exceptions, it appears that losing power or never exercising it is a sure path to Internet glory. Thus the number of hits for Nepal's dismissed prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (11,200) towers above the combined total of the current head of government, Lokendra Bahadur Chand (3270)¹, and Maoist Supremo Comrade Prachanda (1000). Aung San Suu Kyi, with 55,400 hits to her credit, bests Burma's military strongman, Than Shwe (18,500), and the Dalai Lama (258,000), South Asia's most popular Internet personality, commands a strong lead over China's new president, Hu Jintao (48,100). With 73,700 hits, the otherwise never-seen Taliban leader Mullah Omar just barely surpasses Hamid Karzai (71,100), perhaps an omen that Mr Karzai is fated to lose power once his name makes its way onto a few more pages.

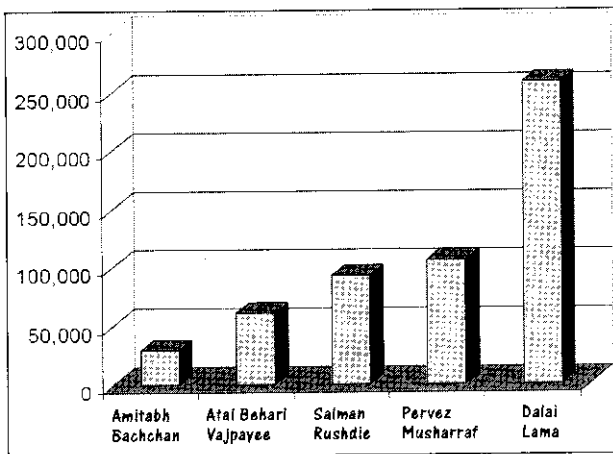
A handful of national leaders actually enjoy Internet glory simultaneous with their stay in power. Pervez Musharraf, the most frequently appearing South Asian head of government, state and/or military on the Internet, is in Dalai Lama country with 106,000 hits, far ahead of his predecessors Benazir Bhutto (39,500) and Nawaz Sharif (44,400). (Pakistani PM Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali is still in web neophyte territory with 4700 hits.) Given India's scale and tech might, one might expect Atal Behari Vajpayee (61,600) to boast a bigger number, but at least he is ahead of pop icons Amitabh Bachchan (29,600), Aishwarya Rai (46,900) and Sachin Tendulkar (56,400), although India's most popular Internet figure appears to be Salman Rushdie (93,200). Globally, George W Bush (2,400,000) seems unbeatable, though even without Pentagon help, Britney Spears (2,010,000) may be able to stage a virtual coup. But whatever, and granted the sociological weaknesses of using a Google hit-rate as a poll on popularity, in South Asia

it is Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, who is the most popular.

■ **REMEMBER AFGHANISTAN?** It is that mountainous place stuck somewhere between the obsessively patrolled India-Pakistan border, the oil fields of West Asia and all those similar-sounding 'stans' of Central Asia. It is also the place that stood centre-stage in the press for a few fleeting moments in the fall of 2001. You will excuse Chhetria Patrakar for the memory-jog, but judging from the coverage, Afghanistan essentially ceased to exist after the stars and stripes went up in a Kabul compound and Hamid Karzai settled into his rocky interim government.

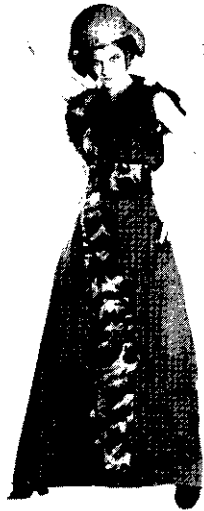
It is perhaps to be expected that the media will follow the trajectory of bombing raids, but why is it that the interest is so difficult to sustain once spent daisy-cutters begin collecting dust? If only because such stories are so rare, a 25 May report in London's *Observer* on conditions in 2003's Afghanistan caught Chhetria Patrakar's eye. Titled, 'On the roads of ruin', Peter Osborne's 3300-word article paints a bleak picture of Afghanistan today with its persisting lawlessness and violence, the ongoing and under-reported 'anti-terror' military operations carried out by 11,000 US troops stationed there, the crippling fiscal shortfalls for basic services and questionable funding priorities, including the construction of a new US embassy at a whopping USD 300 million (wonder if that is being passed off as aid to Afghanistan, CP would not be surprised). The situation is grim, and so all the more reason for rigorous journalism to head back to Afghanistan. Perhaps some of the hundreds of reporters twiddling their thumbs in Doha and Baghdad could think of popping over to Islamabad and hiring a taxi for Peshawar, over the Khyber Pass, to Jalalabad and Kabul.

■ **RIVAL OF** the Mughals, guerrilla warfare tactician, Maratha nationalist, icon of the Shiv Sena... and now sword-wielding Delhi statue. Yes, Shivaji has proven to be a versatile figure, especially in his present-day political incarnation as representative of powerful Maharashtra's *Hindutva*-minded political class. On 28 April, in a ceremony attended by top politicians, the Indian parliament unveiled a massive statue of the 17th century figure on horseback, pointy sabre gripped in his bronze clutch. The symbolic significance of elevating Shiva, now often invoked in sectarian expressions whatever his own role in history, to prominent display on the lawn of secular democracy was lost on *The Asian Age*. The paper's caption of the event stuck to "Great Maratha" and



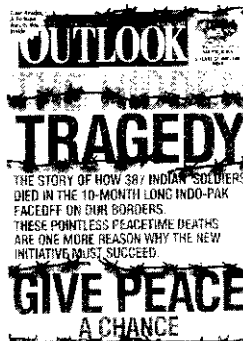
¹Chand resigned on 30 May; his Google hit total subsequently dropped to 3240.

then was satisfied with listing the attending dignitaries. Unfortunately, Shivaji's historical personality today is entwined with a personality who was not there at the unveiling that day, and that is the Shiv Sena supreme commander, Balasaheb Thackeray.



Syndicate in Lahore, are each displayed in front of an upside-down American flag, and include a model in sleeveless combat gear gripping a pistol against her left thigh and another covered by bloody handprints staring stoically past a noose hanging by her side. Provocative and sensual, the images' blend of female beauty and human misery has to qualify the section as a unique anti-war outburst.

OUTLOOK, WHICH addresses itself to a corresponding, if larger, audience in India to that of *Newsline* in Pakistan, had a 19 May cover story on Indian troop casualties stemming from the 10-month Gujarat-to-Kashmir border stand-off following the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament. Authored by Murali Krishnan and Chander Suta Dogra, the article counts 387 deaths and 1051 serious injuries sustained by Indian troops – subdivided into those caused by mines, enemy action, environmental/psychological strain and accidents – not including the 285 jawan deaths and 788 serious injuries during the period stemming from “terrorist attacks”. The authors’ point, that sustained military mobilisation exacts an enormous psychological and physical strain on soldiers, is well taken and timely. But one would have hoped that a similar tally had been made of civilian and Pakistani troop losses. Prolonged eyeball-to-eyeball standoffs are good for no one, including those on the other side of the fence, and



Outlook's earnest cover strap of “give peace a chance” would have been well-served by a peek across Wagah/Atari.

THE SOUTH Asia Tribune, an Internet newspaper run by US-based journalist-dissident Shaheen Sehbai, provides consistently critical coverage of events in our region, and particularly of those in Pakistan. But perhaps the *Tribune* has been too critical for Islamabad's liking. According to an “urgent” late-May email sent out by the paper, readers in Pakistan have reported that they are unable to load the website on their computers – suggesting that the Pakistani government may have pressured Internet providers to block the site. 12 hours later there was another email. Yes, the matter had been resolved; yes, www.satribune.com was under an “illegal and uncalled for blockade by the Pakistani Government”; but no, it had not given up. It provided recipients with six new links to the site, and promised more if any of these were blocked. One such link: www.sendfakemail.com/anonbrowser/http://www.satribune.com/index.htm



FOLLOWING GEORGE W Bush's Iraq victory lap aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, which he arrived on with the help of a naval jet's acrobatics, South Asian leaders are taking note and following suit. Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes, like the American president well aware of the political dividends of military posturing, decided to spend a night onboard the submarine *INS Sindhuvir* on 24 May. An aircraft carrier is easy enough to land on, but how did Fernandes make his way many leagues beneath the sea to the *Sindhuvir*? This computer generate image, on *The Telegraph* website on 21 May, posits one possibility.

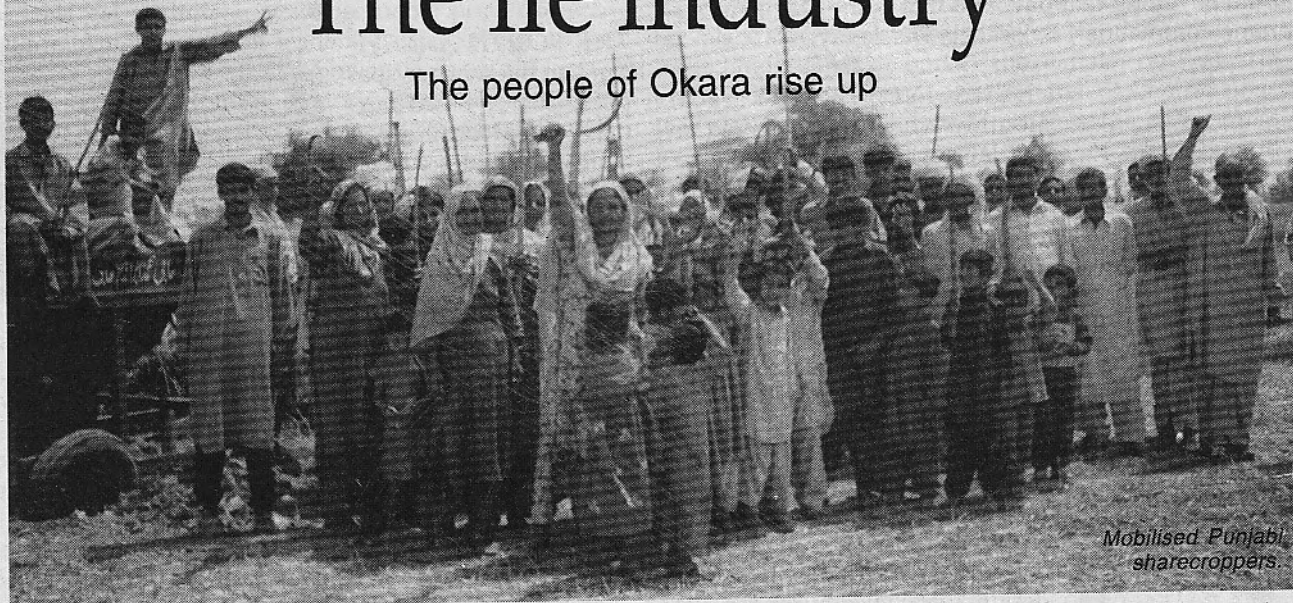
WE ARE not behind the world when it comes to putting pictures of government heads up in government offices, airport foyers, and so on. Normally a picture will do, that of King Birendra or Atalji or Musharraf or Begum Zia. Sri Lankans, though, have a problem. In the peculiar presidential-prime ministerial system put in place by Chandrika Bandarnaike Kumaratunga, the country now has to suffer two portraits. And then, when it is a highway pit stop run by the Ministry of Tourism, you have the privilege of exchanging meaningful glances with not only President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickreme-singhe, but the Minister of Tourism Gamini Lokuge as well.



— *Chhetria Patrakar*

The lie industry

The people of Okara rise up



Mobilised Punjabi sharecroppers.

by Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

The website of the United States Central Command recently reported that Pakistan suffered a USD 10 billion loss (almost one-third of total external debt) because of its support for the US wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Within hours of the posting, the information was removed from the website and was played down by the mainstream media in Pakistan. That such information should be suppressed as quickly as possible is hardly surprising. After all the Pakistani military establishment and its puppet political elite have made their living since 11 September on a healthy dose of blatant lies, drawing their cue from the most sophisticated fabricator of all.

The fact is that Pakistan's economy went into virtual freefall because of the US 'war on terror', and no amount of reference to the sparkling macroeconomic figures that the International Monetary Fund quotes *ad nauseum* can hide this fact. Nevertheless, General Musharraf, finance minister Shaukat Aziz and the rest of the gang that runs the country have tried very hard to propagate a lie about progress and stability. Of course, this is possible because the disenfranchised majority of Pakistanis are taking the fall, and their political voice is muted. Meanwhile those trying hard to stay in the good books of the global financial elite are all too happy to pretend that everything is better than ever.

The lie industry is now very well established. It has a long tradition backed up by a handy infrastructure that exists solely to serve the interests of the elite. The weapons of mass destruction fraud that dominated media networks before the war on Iraq has been completely exposed, but the lie industry has already re-

gated this fraud to the category of relic news items. And now the United Nations has acquiesced quite easily to the US and UK Iraq reconstruction drama. Meanwhile in Pakistan, Musharraf's complete unwillingness to retreat from his position on the Legal Framework Order is also based on a compilation of lies that makes everyone else but the army responsible for the crisis that Pakistan faces.

Okara frontline

But the most significant lies, the ones that are based on the carefully constructed social fabric that is the Pakistani state ideology, the ones that expose the sordid brutality of our state, and the ones that have broken the backs of people's resistance till now, are coming undone. And it is this process that will hasten the evolution of an organic political movement for change, perhaps the only long-term resistance to the US imperial advance in periphery countries such as Pakistan.

It is now three years since Anjuman Mazarain Punjab (AMP) (Tenants Association of Punjab) came into being as an organisation of landless sharecropping tenants on state land in the Punjab. The AMP has resisted the arbitrary abuse of power by the Pakistani state, something that virtually no other entity in the country has been able to do with any degree of consistency in recent years. The AMP's struggle is important for a number of reasons, including the manner in which social norms limiting women's mobility have been challenged in the areas where the movement has taken root. The most conspicuous site of the struggle has been Okara military farms, where a direct standoff rages between ten-

ants and paramilitary forces.

Since August 2002, Pakistani Rangers – the border patrol troops – have imposed a reign of terror on over 100,000 people living in 18 villages in Okara. While the AMP represents almost one million people from over 10 districts in the province, the largest and most populous farm is in Okara. And because it is controlled – although not owned – by the military, the stakes are also the highest. The authorities in Okara and the rest of the province want tenants to accept a limited-year contract that will effectively revoke tenancy status. Instead of paying harvest shares in-kind, the authorities want the ex-tenants, aka new contract labourers, to pay cash rents. From the beginning, the AMP has maintained that changing the tenants' tenure arrangement is simply a convenient legal cover for eventual eviction.

There is serious merit to this suspicion, given some of the stipulations in the contract that tenants have been asked to sign. There is also clear inter-governmental correspondence indicating that the authorities have every intention of having the land vacated. Accordingly, in August 2002, Rangers descended upon Okara to force tenants to put their thumbprints on the contracts. They killed a young boy, and a murder case was promptly registered against AMP activists. On 11 May 2003, a 60-year-old man was gunned down, again by the Rangers, and another murder case was lodged against AMP activists.

In this whole period, a handful of people have died, including a pregnant woman, because they were prevented from leaving their villages by Rangers who have set up permanent barricades. Hundreds of people are harassed daily, some detained, some even arrested on trumped-up charges of terrorist activities or anti-state conspiracy. Overall there are now some 1700 criminal cases filed against AMP activists across the province. Since the movement started three years ago, at least 50 people have been jailed for extended periods, and they continue to be jailed on a regular basis.

The lies emanating from the state machinery on this issue are almost laughable. Despite the fact that the disputed land is owned by the government of Punjab, military officers and sympathisers either claim that the land belongs to the military, or simply disregard ownership altogether. At a broader level, most observers know that land grabbing by the military has reached monumental proportions. More importantly, this rent-seeking activity has become highly institutionalised. In the so-called 'national interest', land and other resources are captured by the military – meanwhile, dissenters are treated like war criminals in their own homes. Kashmir, anyone?

State repression is likely to continue. However, what the ruling classes did not account for is the ongoing



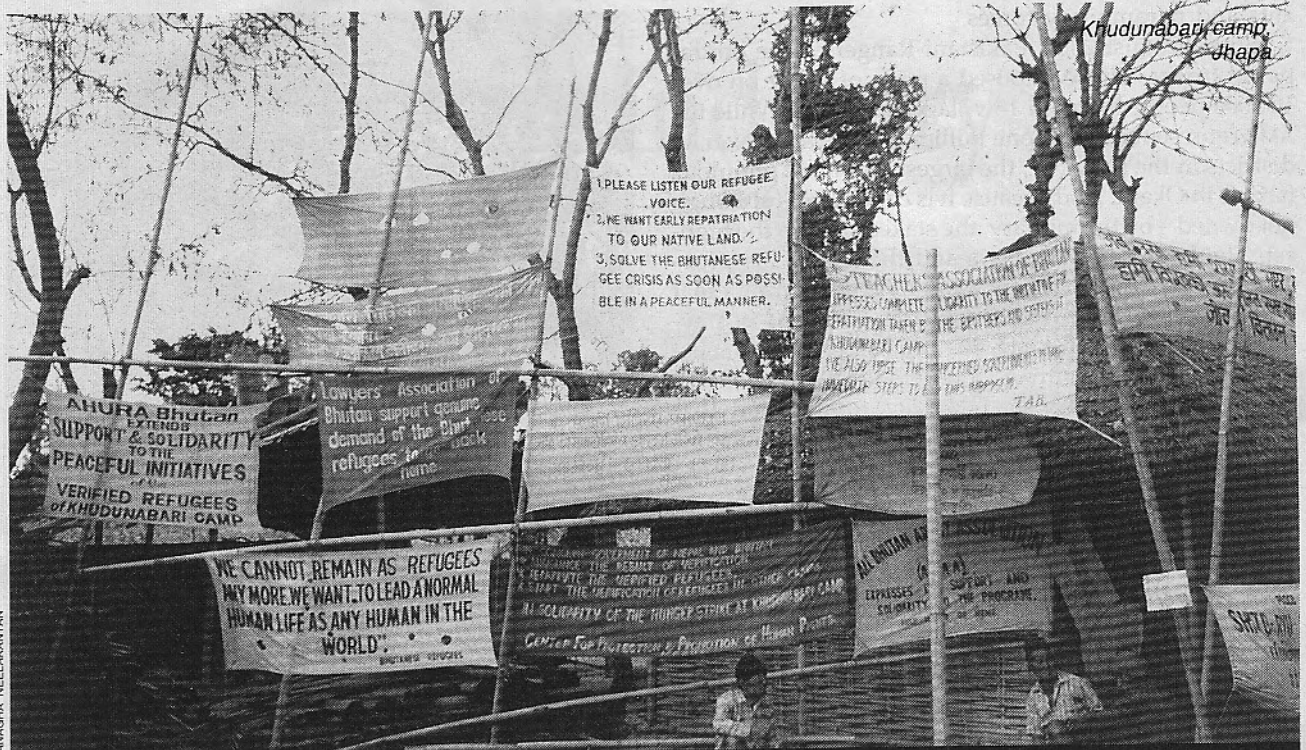
AMP rally.

**The lie industry
faces a contradiction
– the lies only make
sense insofar as
they are given cover
by distractions and
temporary relief from
time to time**

resistance of the one million tenants across Punjab. They refuse to pay cash rents, and they refuse to give up harvest shares. There should be no doubt that the tenants are bleeding the state, slowly but surely. Then again, the officers in Okara rake in good money from their daily allowances, money that comes from the national exchequer, extracted from the pockets of ordinary Pakistanis (the comparisons to Kashmir truly are compelling).

So the standoff can be expected to continue. But anyone who thinks that more conciliatory approaches to protecting the basic freedoms of citizens should be adopted needs to think again. There are now so many flagrant violations of even the liberal capitalist order's own norms and ethics – whether by the US itself, or by the dozens of satellite states that subscribe to US hegemony – that it is imperative that clear and principled dissent be expressed at every possible juncture.

In much of the world, the empire enfranchises corrupt and obsolete elites. There is no shortcut to doing away with these regimes other than to challenge them directly. The fact of the matter is that there is only so much to go around, and as increasingly obscene methods of appropriation are devised by the US and the elite, more people will be pushed down into a rapidly growing underclass. The lie industry faces a contradiction – the lies only make sense insofar as they are given cover by distractions and temporary relief from time to time. When however, for example, the Pakistani state engages in direct repression, the lies are difficult to uphold. And with poverty shooting through the roof and people's daily livelihoods threatened, the chances are that more Okaras will emerge. Everyone should sit and up and notice. The frustration and resentment many people feel due to US imperial designs and the complicity of the elite in Pakistan and elsewhere can be given voice by supporting struggles such as that in Okara. It is time to make the decision to act. Those truly at the frontline of resistance to empire demand it. ▽



ANAGHA NEELAKANTAN

Who cares?

The Bhutanese refugees have been short-changed

by *Rakesh Chhetri*

The first Nepal-Bhutan Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC) meeting for a resolution of the Bhutanese refugee problem was held from 4-7 October 1993. It was a step towards deciding the future of the tens of thousands of Bhutanese citizens of Nepali origin who were forced out of the country, and arrived in Nepal mainly between 1991 and 1993. They have lived in camps administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in east Nepal ever since.

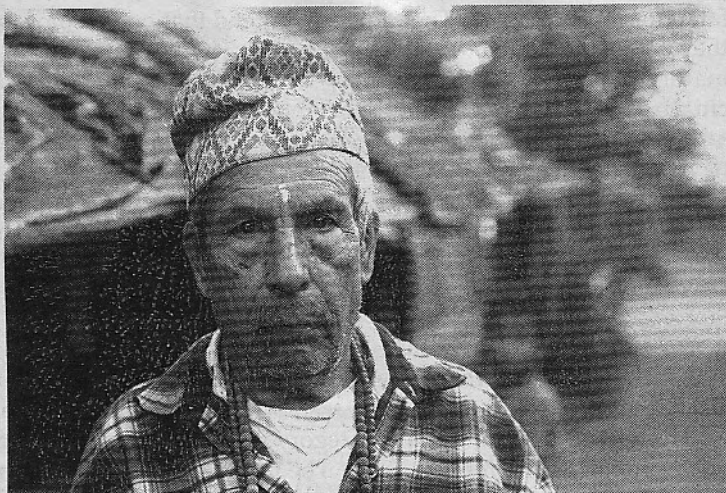
Subsequently, the Nepal-Bhutan Joint Verification Team (JVT) was formed to authenticate the bona fides of the refugees. It started its work in Khudunabari camp, Jhapa district, one of the smaller and better organised of the seven refugee camps, which in 1993 received the most recent wave of refugees. The verification process of checking documents and interviewing refugees lasted from 26 March 2001 till 15 December 2001. Following this there was a hiatus of one and a half years until the 12th MJC meeting held on 6 February 2003 directed the JVT to undertake the categorisation of the verified refugees. The JVT completed the categorisation of 70

percent of the verified refugees by the first week of May 2003, and the unresolved cases were left for the MJC to decide politically. It submitted the report to the MJC, which adopted and considered it, and categorised the unresolved cases.

The 14th MJC meeting was held from 19-22 May recently in Kathmandu. It was expected to declare the results of the Khudunabari verification; instead it concluded by issuing a press communiqué and a statement of Agreed Position on the Four Categories (APFC). Until now, the disagreement on categorisation deadlocked every MJC meeting. The 'harmonisation' of the Bhutanese and Nepali positions on the four categories of Bhutanese refugees means that the categories proposed by the Bhutanese side at the first MJC, so far unacceptable to the government of Nepal, will be applied to the nearly 110,000 Bhutanese refugees in Nepal's camps, as they have been in Khudunabari. Thus, even as no more than 11 percent of the refugees have been categorised, the Nepali government has committed itself to these categories: 1) bona fide Bhutanese, if they have been evicted forcefully, 2) Bhutanese who emi-

grated, 3) non-Bhutanese people, and 4) Bhutanese who have committed criminal acts.

The 14th MJC also directed the JVT to complete the verification and categorisation of about 600 people who were absent during the verification at the Khudunabari camp within two weeks. Upon its completion, the JVT will officially release and make public the results of the Khudunabari camp verification. The MJC directed the JVT to inform the camp residents about the terms, procedures and facilities regarding voluntary repatriation or reapplication and similar information to those seeking to remain in Nepal simultaneously. The MJC also reached an agreement on the implementation schedule of the outcome of categorisation. Refugees may appeal against their or their family's categorisation within 15 days after the release of the categorisation results. However, "appeals will be considered only upon the presentation of new material evidence or determination of clear error in this process". The MJC will hold its next meeting in Thimphu from 11-14 August 2003.



Resident of the Beldangi I camp, Jhapa.

Slotted to lose

The following is the position of the MJC on the four categories of refugees.

The first category is that of "bona fide Bhutanese, if [they] have been evicted forcefully". The statement says, "The Royal Government of Bhutan will take full responsibility for any Bhutanese found to have been forcefully evicted from Bhutan. People under this category shall be repatriated to Bhutan". According to reports in the Nepali media quoting unnamed official sources (*The Kathmandu Post*, 22 May 2003), only three percent (360) of 12,000 refugees at Khudunabari are deemed to have the papers that allow them to fall under this category and return home as bona fide Bhutanese citizens.

The very basis for de-categorising from this category is called into question by refugee leaders who are deeply dissatisfied with process for its opacity, secrecy and for not involving either them or international monitors. The international human rights and refugee rights community is aware that officials of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) confiscated original documents of the fleeing or forcefully evicted refugees. In any case, the negligible number of people that has been categorised as bona fide Bhutanese would indicate that the JVT did not recognise even those documents, such as the citizenship card and other documents issued by the RGOB, which the RGOB has since disowned on the grounds that they are easily duplicable.

The Nepali government, the only hope for the refugees in this strictly bilateral agreement, it seems was

bent on achieving a breakthrough at any cost to cater to a domestic constituency disappointed by its dismal performance on various fronts.

The second category of "Bhutanese who emigrated" is a contentious section of four subcategories. The APFC statement envisages that "... people falling under this category and desiring to return, will be given the option to re-apply for citizenship". This means that the refugees that have been deemed as having "emigrated", a term which implies a departure from the home country through an exercise of choice, will have to re-apply for citizenship as per the naturalisation procedures in Article 4 of the draconian Bhutan Citizenship

Act, 1985, as fresh immigrants like aliens. This act envisages, inter alia, that "A person desiring to apply for Bhutanese citizenship to the Ministry of Home Affairs must fulfil all the following conditions to be eligible for naturalisation: The applicant must have resided in Bhutan for 15 years in the case of Government employees and also in the case of applicants, either of whose parents is a citizen of Bhutan, and 20 years in all other cases, and this period of residence must be registered in the records of the Department of Im-

migration and Census; the applicant must be able to speak, read and write Dzongkha proficiently; the applicant must have good knowledge of the culture, customs, traditions and history of Bhutan; the applicant must have no record of having spoken or acted against the King, Country and People of Bhutan in any manner whatsoever". The implication of this is that the Bhutanese refugees will be in a state of statelessness for 20 years before they can claim citizenship; at the same time, there are some reports that the RGOB will re-assimilate people in this category by special arrangement in two years.

75 percent of the verified refugees (9000) reportedly

The Nepali government wanted a breakthrough to cater to a domestic constituency disappointed by its dismal performance on various fronts

fall under this category. The refugees contend that once they are inside Bhutan, the RGOB will apply its discriminatory citizenship laws, and they will have no legal citizenship rights. They will not be able to claim naturalisation – the documents that prove their citizenship have already been rejected by the JVT. Going by the experience of how the RGOB summarily and without just cause evicted the Lhotshampas, there is no guarantee that they will be given citizenship after 20 years either. The majority of refugees cannot speak Dzongkha anymore as a result of the exile, and most refugees have spoken against the king and his government, participated in public demonstrations for their human rights inside and out of Bhutan.

The agreed position on this category is not a realistic resolution of the refugee issue. The criteria used to bring as large a number as 75 percent of the verified refugees under this category is questionable and unacceptable to the refugees. They were forcefully driven away from their homes and as such should be placed under category one. Refugees ask the basic question: why should Bhutanese people migrate voluntarily to a relatively poor country like Nepal when Bhutan had or has better living conditions and better economic opportunities? Normally emigration is towards rich countries from the poor.

Point (d) in the second category is perhaps the most insidious part of the agreement. It states that "... people under this category, who do not wish to return to Bhutan, will be given the option to apply for Nepalese citizenship in accordance with laws of the Kingdom of Nepal". This provision has been included at the insistence of Bhutan to discourage the return of refugees. The Lhotshampas were driven from their homes by human rights abuses. The history behind the refugee situation is of persecution, indiscriminate arrest, torture, killings, discrimination, amounting to what was practically 'ethnic cleansing'. The political conditions back in Bhutan have not improved and the northern Bhutanese elite is still hostile to Lhotshampas, as is apparent from reports of debates in the national assembly over the construction of camps for returning refugees in Bhutan. Lhotshampa homes and lands have been resettled. Several thousand Lhotshampas in Bhutan, who have relatives in the camps have been denationalised by the RGOB recently.

The majority of refugees, if given the option of Nepali citizenship will not return to Bhutan under present conditions and terms of reference for repatriation and their settlement in Bhutan. Few will choose to remain stateless for another 20 years and uproot themselves again not to return to their homes and society but to live in transit camps inside Bhutan. The legal responsibility of granting citizenship to Bhutanese refugees has

now shifted to Nepal from Bhutan. This will create enormous legal problems for the host country. Can Nepal afford to grant the citizenship to 100,000-odd Bhutanese refugees without any national or regional consequences – especially when the citizenship of tens of thousands of inhabitants in southern Nepal is still unresolved?

The third category applies to "non-Bhutanese people". The APFC states, "Those persons found to be citizens of countries other than Bhutan and found to have come from other countries must return to their respective countries". What criteria were applied to denationalise such a high – 20 percent – of the refugee population and place them under the category of non-Bhutanese no one outside the establishment can be certain of. These refugees originated from Bhutan and were genuine citizens inside Bhutan prior to their exodus. They are now arbitrarily deprived of their nationality because the RGOB has an interest in reducing the number of those it is willing to recognise as refugees. These so-called non-Bhutanese lived in Bhutan for years, owned houses and property, paid taxes to the government and contributed to the nation building of Bhutan. Some of them served in high government offices, armed forces and the police and studied abroad under government sponsorship. The question begs to be asked: how could illegal immigrants acquire land in a small country like Bhutan and remain undetected for 30-40 years?

The fourth category refers to "Bhutanese, who have committed criminal acts", and states, "Repatriation of people under this category shall be in keeping with the laws of the two countries. These people will have full opportunity to prove their innocence in the court of

law in Bhutan". This is the same law that by international standards would be judged, at the least, as regressive. Bhutan's National Security Act (NSA) and the Law of Thrimsung (penal code) severely restrict the rights of the Bhutanese people. The penal code declares any act of "making conversation and correspondence" criticising the king and his government by Bhutanese citizens as tantamount to treason. The NSA imprisons any person whose "words, either spoken or written, or by any means, create misunderstanding between the government and people of Bhutan".

Dissident activism and literature (articles, reports etc) exposing the abuses of human rights by the RGOB are deemed as "waging a war against the Royal Government of Bhutan", inviting imprisonment of at least five years. These acts are regarded as legitimate conduct in democratic countries such as India and Nepal. Tek Nath Rizal, once a member of the national assembly and a Royal Advisory Councillor who even went abroad to study on a government scholarship, was ar-

If the Khudunabari results are any indication, it is evident that Bhutan is looking at absolute numbers; it wants to take back less than 5000 refugees

rested and given life sentence for his criticism of government policies, which he was invited to present to the king. He served 10 years of his sentence before he was allowed to leave prison and had to leave Bhutan. Given contexts such as this, the criminality of Bhutanese refugees must be established in an international tribunal. Of the categorised Khudunabari refugees, a reported two percent fall under this category.

If the Khudunabari results are any indication, it is evident that Bhutan is looking at absolute numbers; it wants to take back less than 5000 refugees. As per the APFC, only five percent of the refugees are bona fide Bhutanese citizens. (Those that fall under the fourth category are evidently Bhutanese citizens since they have been deemed fit to be tried under Bhutanese law.)

The APFC has also created a dangerous precedence for the host country, which is now forced to grant citizenship to asylum seekers who were forced out of their homes. This example will discourage other countries from granting asylum to refugees, leaving them at the mercy of perpetrator states.

The situation needs to be reversed. There is a need for reworking the entire process of verification and categorisation. The Lhotshampa refugees want verification against the categories 'Bhutanese' and 'non-Bhutanese'; other categorisations are not acceptable to them.



JVT office, Damak, Jhapa.

There must be an international tribunal for the appeal, which is neither the JVT nor the MJC. The UNHCR and the international community, kept out of the talks so far, must play an active role in helping the statelessness of Bhutanese citizens in and outside Bhutan.

The 14th MJC was expected to offer a breakthrough in the resolution of the Bhutanese refugee problem. Instead, matters have come to a more contentious pass, with legal implications of regional and international dimension. As for the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, as things stand, they can expect to be rendered into a state of perpetual statelessness, even if repatriated. ▽



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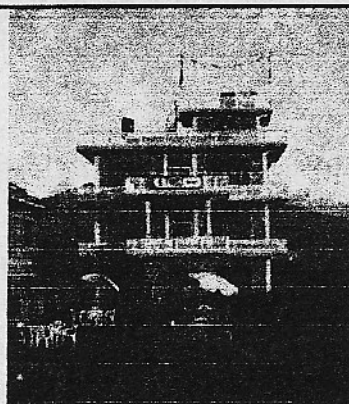
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Feeding profits

Eliminating not hunger, but the hungry

by *Devinder Sharma*

The grip is slowly tightening. The United States has launched an all-out offensive using the three most important instruments of global economic power – the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – and bilateral pressure applied directly on governments of the South. This time, the theme is not oil but global acceptance of genetically modified (GM) foods and crops.

The battle for control of the global food chain has begun. The Bush administration fired the opening salvo in May by announcing that it would lodge a formal complaint with the WTO against the European Union (EU) for the latter's five-year ban on approving new biotech crops, setting the stage for an international showdown over an increasingly controversial issue. Interestingly, the US trade representative, Robert Zoellick, says that the EU policy is illegal, harms the American economy, stunts the growth of the biotech industry and contributes to increased starvation in the developing world.

Coinciding with the frontal attack through the dispute panel of the WTO is a seemingly harmless exercise to close ranks around flawed economic policies. Senior officials of the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF met at Geneva in May to deliberate on how to bring greater "coherence" into their policies through "liberalisation of trade and financial flows, deregulation, privatisation and budget austerity". As if loan conditions of the World Bank-IMF that have forced developing countries to lower their trade barriers, cut subsidies for domestic food producers, and eliminate safety nets for rural agriculture were not enough, the WTO Agreement on Agriculture could be used very effectively to allow the US – and 12 other food exporting countries – to dump unwanted GM foods on markets throughout the world, thereby destroying food self-sufficiency in developing countries and expanding markets for the large grain exporting companies.

Trade and financial manipulations alone, however, are not all. With the UN no longer relevant, any such global offensive needs political allies. Therefore, three ministers from each of 180 invited countries – those

holding the portfolios of trade, agriculture and health – will assemble in downtown Sacramento, California, from 23-25 June. The invitation, which comes from US Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, is essentially for 'educating' country representatives on (in reality, intimidating them into accepting) the virtues of GM foods, and why they must back US transnational corporations' fight against global hunger. And, failing that, the lesson is on why they must remain quiet, just as they did when the US was searching for 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq.

The multi-pronged attack will force the EU, to begin with, to either alter its policy toward GM crops and foods, which some consumer groups call 'Frankenfoods', or face economic sanctions across a range of sectors. For the US, the European market for GM crops and seeds is potentially worth several billion dollars a year. For the rest of the world, Secretary Veneman will explain the consequences – both economic and political – of not accepting the fruits of 'cutting-edge' technology, as genetic engineering is fondly called. The first GM ministerial, as might be expected, is not open to the public.



Ann Veneman, 'educator'

Scientific apartheid

The overt and covert machinations to promote unhealthy and risky GM foods actually began a decade ago. The US has to date opposed the January 2000 Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, a supplementary agreement to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which has been signed by over 100 countries and was intended to ensure through negotiated international rules and regulations that countries have the necessary information to make informed choices about GM foods and crops. Earlier, the US made every possible attempt to prevent the Cartagena Protocol from coming into being, failing which it has attempted to diminish its effectiveness.

Whether it is the Cartagena or Kyoto Protocol, the US continues to defy the international order. Since the US has still not ratified the CBD, it has no need to follow the Cartagena Protocol and therefore will try to force GM food down the throat of every other country. The

US continues to hold the world's largest collection of plant germplasm, some 600,000 plant accessions, which actually belongs to the developing world. These plant collections, forcibly held in custody, are the raw material of the multi-billion dollar American biotechnology industry. In addition, the biotechnology industry has earned an estimated USD 5.4 billion from biopiracy alone.

With biotech patents coming into force, and the definition of micro-organism extended to include genes and cell lines, the US has ensured that once the TRIPS agreement is internationally harmonised in 2005, it will be the beginning of the end for public sector agricultural research in developing countries. In the words of a former chairman of the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR), Dr Ismail Serageldin, "Whenever the product and process patents in food and agriculture come into effect, it will be a scientific apartheid against the Third World".

Agricultural research, which was instrumental in ushering in food self-sufficiency in many developing countries in the post-Green Revolution era, is being gradually dismantled. The CGIAR itself is under tremendous pressure from international agri-business, which sees it as the main obstacle in the process of control and manipulation. With research priorities shifting from national requirements to servicing the biotechnology industry, as is the case in India, it is only a matter of time before developing countries begin to return to the frightening days of 'ship-to-mouth' existence.

Food aid to starving populations is about meeting the urgent humanitarian needs of those who are in dire want. It should not be to push the commercial interests of biotechnology corporations through the violation of international consensus as seen in agreements such as the Cartagena Protocol, or planting GM crops for export, or indeed finding outlets for domestic surplus. First finding an outlet for its mounting food surplus through the mid-day meal scheme for African children (forced through the World Food Programme), the US then arm-twisted four African countries to accept GM food at the height of food scarcity in central and southern Africa in 2002. It even tried forcing the International Red Cross to lift GM food as part of an international emergency so as to feed the hungry in Africa. This effort, however, failed, with Zambia leading the resistance to GM foods, arguing that unhealthy imports would not improve the people's situation.

Ever resourceful, the US has perfected circumvention techniques to force African countries into submission. The US Congress passed a bill in late May entitled "The United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003" (HR 1298), which in a diplomatic way (calling it "Sense of Con-

gress") links financial aid for combating HIV/AIDS with GM food acceptance. After noting in the "findings" section that "a few" food-recipient countries object to assistance "because of fears of *benign* genetic modifications to the foods" (emphasis added), Section 104A states:

Individuals infected with HIV have higher nutritional requirements than individuals who are not infected with HIV, particularly with respect to the need for protein. Also, there is evidence to suggest that the full benefit of therapy to treat HIV/AIDS may not be achieved in individuals who are malnourished, particularly in pregnant and lactating women.

The "Sense of Congress" clause following immediately thereafter argues that, "United States food assistance should be accepted by countries with large populations of individuals infected or living with HIV/AIDS, particularly African countries, in order to help feed such individuals". The underlying objective is very clear: the US Congress will allow a halt to humanitarian aid for HIV/AIDS unless recipient countries first buy GM food.

What is more, this is not an isolated effort. The Rockefeller Foundation, in collaboration with the US-based Madison Institute, earlier launched a project dubbed the 'Madison Initiative'. Under the guise of humanitarian aid and support, this project pushed GM crops to overcome increasing food insecurity arising from the growing vulnerability of HIV/AIDS-affected economies, the basic premise being that HIV/AIDS has taken a heavy toll on able-bodied rural males in most parts of Africa. Consequently, so the

argument goes, there is not enough manpower in rural areas to undertake agricultural operations such as the spraying of pesticides. Therefore, these countries must accept biotechnologically manipulated GM crops like Bt corn, which they say require less chemical sprays.

This 'wonderful' initiative was to be executed with CGIAR as an active partner. Such was the desperation that agricultural scientists had actually gone and met former president Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, who agreed to officially support the Madison Initiative, subsequently to be extended to other African countries, including South Africa, and then to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Way back in 1986, the US enacted legislation to similar effect called the "Bumper's Amendment" that prohibited "agricultural development activities, consultation, publication, conference, or training in connection with the growth and production in a foreign country of an agricultural commodity for export which would compete with a similar commodity grown or produced in the United States". As a result, US support for research and development for crops competing with those

Never before has anyone tried to force-feed a hungry continent by creating the false scenario of a famine

grown in the US was stopped. No wonder, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, CGIAR and numerous other developing country agricultural programmes continue to remain starved for financial support. With national research programmes closing down due to paucity of funds, the field is now open for the biotech industry to take over.

Consuming the world

Never in history has any government stepped in to force the world to accept, literally down its throat, what it produces. Never before has the world been forced to accept technologies (howsoever risky these might be), including nuclear power, in the name of sustainable development for the poor and hungry. Never before has any country tried to force-feed a hungry continent by creating the false scenario of a famine yet to materialise. Never before has science and technology been sacrificed in such a shameful manner for the sake of commercial growth and profits. The tragedy is that 'good' science has been given a quiet burial. Meanwhile, the biotechnology industry's party has just begun.

The reality of hunger and malnutrition is too harsh to be understood in simple terms. Hunger cannot be removed by producing transgenic crops with genes for beta-carotene. Hunger cannot be addressed by providing mobile phones to rural communities. Nor can it be eradicated by providing the poor and hungry with an 'informed choice' of novel foods. Somehow, the international community misses the ground realities, the woods for the trees, in an effort to bolster the commercial interests of the biotechnology industry. In its over-enthusiasm to promote an expensive technology at the cost of the poor, what has been overlooked is that biotechnology has the potential to further expand the great divide between the haves and have-nots.

While the political leadership procrastinates on the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of the world's hungry by 2015, the scientific community has found an easy escape route. At almost all the genetic engineering laboratories, whether in the North or in the South, the focus of research is on transgenic crops that add to profits, and edible vaccines and bio-fortification to address the problems of malnutrition or 'hidden hunger' by incorporating genes for vitamin A, iron and other micronutrients. What is forgotten is that unless hunger is removed, 'hidden hunger' cannot be eradicated. In other words, if the global scientific and development community were to aim at eradicating hunger in the first place, there would be little 'hidden hunger'.

Much of the existing hunger in the world is because of lopsided international trade and economic policies that keep farmers in rich countries plump with massive subsidies, the impact of which creates more hunger, malnutrition and destitution in the majority world. Much of the world's hunger and the crisis on the farm front is because of these massive subsidies that contin-

ue to be paid in the richest trading block – the 30-country Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Let us not forget that subsidies are paid not only to keep the miniscule population of farmers on either side of the Atlantic happy, but also to keep the elected governments in saddle. The "US Farm Security and Rural Investment Act", for instance, signed into law in May 2002, brings in an additional USD 180 billion in support for US farmers over the next 10 years. This is a small price (and that too from the state exchequer) to be paid for the sparsely populated but agriculturally frontline mid-west region of the US. George W Bush desperately needed a Republican majority in the US Senate, which the 2002 elections delivered with the help of promised farm aid.

As a result of the subsidy hike in America, millions of small and marginal farmers in the developing world will be driven out of agriculture to move to urban slums in search of a menial living. Highly subsidised agriculture in America, and for that matter in all of the OECD, is the root cause of growing hunger, destitution and poverty in the majority world. GM foods, produced by the biotechnology corporations, will further exacerbate the food crisis – eliminating in the process not hunger but the hungry. ▽

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Girls in the war



KYOKO OGURA

A visit to the hill districts of Dailekh, Kalikot and Jumla in west Nepal in February 2003, three weeks after the declaration of the ceasefire between government and Maoist forces, reveals that the much-touted female involvement in the Maoist movement is ethically problematic for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M). An analysis of conversations with girl cadres of the CPN (M) also reveals that the unresponsiveness of the state in post-1990 Nepal, and the limited ability of civil society to press for change, has greatly helped to attract girls to the logic of violent revolution.

by **Manjushree Thapa**

The girl had a soft, childish face and a singsong voice. "What do you think they will do?" she asked the driver of our pickup truck. "The army will recognise us at once if we go by ourselves. There is a ceasefire, and both sides have said they will not do anything to each other, but what does that mean?"

She wanted a lift past the army check post into Dailekh bazaar.

The driver hesitated. The girl leaned against his window, playing coyly with the side mirror. Glancing at the back, she noted an empty seat. "Both sides have said they will not do anything to each other, but what does that mean?" she said again, in an entreaty voice. "You know they will take one look at our shoes and recognise us". Women of the CPN (M) wore closed shoes so that they may walk easily, and when need be, run. Local women wore sandals.

The girl stood out as a Maoist cadre in other ways as well. She and another younger girl in her company were wearing plain *kurta-suruals* and no jewellery. The other girl's hair was cut in a rough modern style, and she had covered her face with a bandana. Both were carrying backpacks. This was an area where women and girls dressed in traditional clothes and finery, and would more likely be carrying loads of grass or firewood on their backs.

The driver of our vehicle could hardly refuse the girl's request: he had to ply these roads often, and could not risk the enmity of Maoists. He told her that they could get into the back of the pickup. This they did, but then, just before it started off, the girl who had spoken jumped

This article has been made available by the Centre for Investigative Journalism (KhoPaKay), Patan.

out of the back and came into the vehicle and sat next to us.

In the next 45 minutes, as we wended our way up the rough road to Dailekh bazaar, she spoke openly, and amicably, about herself and about her experience in the CPN (M). She was, she said, 17 years old. "I will be 18 soon", she added quickly, and repeated, "I am almost 18". Her friend, she said, was 15. They worked in a team as motivators for the party, going from house to house in Surkhet district talking to people about the movement.

Now that there was a ceasefire, she was on her way to visit her family. She had not been back in the year that she had been working for the party. She had three brothers, all older. "I am the only daughter. And I am the only one who joined the party".

She spoke easily, as though she were used to talking to strangers. She did not mind our questions, and even welcomed them: "I will tell you anything I can". Her family did not mind her joining the party, she said, though they had wanted her to finish her studies first. She had dropped out of the ninth class to join the movement. She said she enjoyed her work for the party.

Martial training was only given to the army wing of the party, she said. "And to those who request it. I did not take any physical training, though I could have, if I had asked for it". She did not carry any weapon, she said, though during the state of emergency, between November 2001 and August 2002, all cadres were given socket bombs for their safety. "We were all trained how to pull out the pin, throw the bomb and run away. You have four seconds before it explodes. We all had one bomb each. I carried mine with me, and almost used it once, against the army, but did not". At the end of the state of emergency, most of the cadre stopped carrying socket bombs. "Now there is no difficulty at all in moving around and doing our work. But earlier, during the emergency, things were hard".

Did the party pay her for her

work? "No!" She laughed. "We get 150 rupees a month for soap and emergency expenses, but we have to support ourselves". She ate for free at the houses of people, like most Maoist cadres.

She said that her party bought firearms from communist parties in India and the parts used for socket bombs from the border town of Nepalganj. Nepalis living in India supported the party. She had not heard of the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, an organisation of several Marxist parties from around the world that has been vocal in claiming Nepal's Maoists, as Nepal's Maoists have been in claiming them. She could not say whether it provided any military support to her party.

Her mind was on the ceasefire. "Both sides have said they will not

"Both sides have said they will not do anything to each other. What do you think that means?"

do anything to each other. What do you think that means?" she asked again and again. The code of conduct agreed upon by the government and the CPN (M) states, among other things, that both parties will allow the unrestricted movement of people. She agreed that the need for peace was urgent, and that the destruction of power plants, telecommunications towers and other infrastructure by the CPN (M) in the past year had harmed the country. "The people have suffered", she conceded.

Then, looking out of the vehicle, she suddenly became anxious. "Is that the army camp out there? Shall I get out here? What shall I do?"

After some fretting she decided that it would be safer for her to stay in the pickup. She signalled to her friend at the back to take the bandana off her face, and then she became tense as we approached the army check post.

Outside, an army man strolled over to the vehicle. The girl stiffened visibly as he circled the pickup, scanning the passengers. The driver got out to register the vehicle number, and the army man moved away, but still the girl kept her head down. "I will tell you later", she hissed when I asked her name.

Once we got on our way, she lifted her head and asked the driver, "Dai", using the Nepali word of respect for any older male, "They will not stop us again, will they?"

When he said no, she turned to us and said, "My name is Binita. My home name is D Kandel, but my party name is Binita".

She went back, then, to answering our questions in her open, unassuming manner.

Was it hard for her to live such a rough life? "There are lots of women in the party", she said. "There is even an all-woman company". A company had three platoons; and each platoon consisted of 45 armed personnel. "Even the commissars and commanders of that company are women", she said with pride. She herself had never seen the all-woman company, but she had heard about it: it was stationed in another part of Surkhet district.

Comrade Binita got touchy when we asked if she had ever killed anyone. "I have not done anything", she said quickly. "Who knows what would happen if I had to? But I probably will not have to". Neither had she witnessed killings carried out by her party members. "I have never even recommended that anyone be killed. Our work is to motivate people". She talked to villagers as she had been trained to be the leaders.

Her work was dangerous but she had never been apprehended by the security forces. "When you see them, you think it is better to die than to fall into their hands, so you run". She laughed. "What happens when you run is, the bullets land either in front of you or behind you. You just keep running. Once I sprained an ankle jumping across a ditch. They were shooting from

above, and I did not know what to do. So I jumped”.

What did the party do if its cadres were wounded? There were doctors in every platoon, she said. And if they could not treat the wounded, the party would send them to the district headquarters, or if that was too dangerous, to India.

She had no regrets about joining the party. “The movement is changing so many things”, she said. The only thing she wondered about was whether she should not return to school for her School Leaving Certificate (SLC). “Maybe afterwards, if there is peace, I could go back and complete my SLC”, she said. Then added, “Though it will be odd. I will have lost a year or more”.

How did that matter?

“I would feel embarrassed being older than everyone else”.

Does she feel, we asked, that girls like her are being used by the party? There are examples of women activists who worked for the political parties in the Panchayat era when party politics was banned for 30 years, who had given up their ‘bourgeois’ education in order to help their parties – only to find that they were unqualified to hold top posts when democracy was finally won in 1990. “Will the men of your party not take all the top posts as soon as they get a chance?”

Comrade Binita shook her head – no. “It is not like that”, she said. “Women and men are equal now”.

“Then why are there no women in the Maoist negotiating team that is meeting with government representatives?”

Her face suddenly darkened. Quietly, and sounding puzzled, she said, “I do not know”.

As we neared Dailekh bazaar she repeated what she had said earlier, more to herself than to us: “If there is peace, I could get my SLC. That is the only thing my family pressures me to do. I should do it. It would be good if I could do it”.

She and her young friend got off in Dailekh bazaar, and headed off with thanks.

Comrade Binita and her companion were the only female Maoist cadres we were to meet in Dailekh district. Some of what she had said to us was in line with available information about the CPN (M): the party was divided into a political wing and a military wing. From early on, the party has made claims that women comprised one-third of its cadres. This has not been independently verified. Neither is it clear what positions the party’s females occupy – whether there is space in the party for women in leadership positions, or whether the majority of the party’s female cadres fill the bottom ranks. The presence of females in the military wing has tended to come to most attention, but there has been little opportunity for independent analysts to examine whether or not these women merely served as “cannon fodder”. Neither is it known what percentage of these female recruits are underage girls. The nature and scope of female involvement in the party can only be studied after the party comes fully above ground.

Girls at war

From our travels, however, it would seem that the CPN (M)’s claims to enjoy the wide participation of women are exaggerated. As we wended our way north from Dailekh bazaar on foot, through the villages of Dullu, Dandibandi, Sukhatiya and Raraghat in Dailekh district, we met Maoist cadres at every stop but they were all men or boys. The vast majority of them were of the Bahun (hill Brahmin) caste. In Kalikot district as well, there was not a single woman cadre among the Maoists we met. In Pakha village of Kalikot district, the CPN (M) Area Secretary Comrade ‘Sandesh’ assured us that his party had many women cadres. He repeated the claim that the party had an all-woman military company, though the one he was talking about was based in Rolpa district, due east, the birthplace of the Maoist movement. And he said that his party had been working hard to end discrimination

against women.

“There is a local practice of segregating women when they are menstruating and after they have given birth”, he said. “These women used to have to stay apart, in sheds. Now we have put an end to that practice. Even when women are having their periods or have given birth, they are kept in the house, and are no longer barred from the hearth and other ritually pure places”. He added, “Just next door, a woman gave birth to a son yesterday. Today she is cooking fish for us”.

He laughed when we suggested that perhaps she would enjoy her rest better, and said that it was important to eradicate the notion of impurity that traditional culture imposes on women. This was part of a larger movement to rid society of superstition and religious faith. Comrade Sandesh insisted that his party was truly different from the other political parties. The lack of women in the Maoist negotiating team did not indicate discrimination within the party, he said. “Can only women represent the interests of women?”

Some of the social drives that Comrade Sandesh mentioned were evident along the trail. The anti-alcohol campaign led by the All Nepal Women’s Association (Revolutionary), a “sister organisation” of the CPN (M), had driven the consumption of alcohol underground: many people now drank in the privacy of their homes, and they did not dare create a commotion in public, as they earlier might have. Card playing too was done surreptitiously. Past the village of Sukhatiya in Dailekh district we saw men playing a game of carom. Had the Maoist cadres been present, they told us, they would not be able to idle about so openly.

The spirit of these social drives was unmistakably youthful, and the behaviour of local motivators and cell members exuded Red Guard zeal. In his 40s, Comrade Sandesh was one of the older Maoist cadres we met. He reprimanded us

when we referred to porters as *bhariya* (literally, 'bearer'), and asked us to call them 'helpers' instead. At the end of our meeting, he fed us some trout that the woman who had just given birth had cooked. "This is the culture of the communists", he said in an oddly bracing mix of hospitality and menace. "We share everything that we have".

This was the kind of pedantic, big-brotherly leadership, it was evident, that attracted the following of the ideologically fervent youths of these parts.

As we approached Jumla district, we were assured by male Maoist cadres that we would meet female comrades along the way. "There are many of our women along that stretch" we were told at almost every stop. In several places we were told we had missed them by a day; they were said to be putting up plays and cultural programmes, or attending rallies in villages nearby. There would not be many women in the military wing in these parts, we were told, but there would be political workers along the way for certain.

The female Maoist cadres that we did meet at long last turned out to be girls and not women. They were walking in a scattered group along the trail an hour down from Tatopani village, in Jumla district, having staged a play the day before in a nearby village. We spoke to one girl, as two younger girls sat by listening. All three were unsure in their manners and shy. As we talked, we were quickly surrounded by passing villagers, and a uniformed boy who greeted the girls energetically, with raised fists and firm handshakes, accompanied by greetings of "*lal salaam*" ('red salute') stopped by. Comrade Jamuna, the girl we spoke to, said she had been in the party for only four months. The other girls were even newer to the party; they had joined only two months ago. At first they could not remember the names the party had given them in order to protect them, and initiate them into their new life.

After consultations, they finally told us that their party names were Pragati and Sangeeta.

What had you been doing before joining the party?

Comrade Jamuna shrugged. "Nothing". She had never attended school, though one of her brothers was a graduate and another one was studying in class seven. "Even my sister-in-law has passed her SLC exams", she said with pride. Comrade Jamuna, however, used to do housework: cutting grass, working in the fields, gathering firewood. She said, "There was nothing interesting to do at home, so I decided to do party work. I wanted to join the revolution". She was 15, she said, and from nearby Nuwakot village. Then she retracted her age, "I am 18". "She is 15", said one of the village women who was listening in on our talk. "And the other girls are 12 and 13".

"I am 18", Comrade Jamuna insisted.

"You were born after my son", said the woman. "He is not above 15".

I asked the other girls what their ages were, and they agreed that they were 12 and 13.

Comrade Jamuna said that she worked in a team that reared chicken and sheep for the party, and grew potatoes, corn and green beans. There was one male cell member in the group, whom she referred to as 'dai' and three girls altogether, amongst whom she was the only cell member. Cells were the most local-level unit of the CPN (M), extending all the way to small neighbourhoods.

But was this not exactly the kind of work she was doing for her family? We asked if her family disapproved of her work for the party?

"Why should they disapprove? They are happy for me", she said. Her brothers had not joined the party, but her family, she said, was different from most village families. "They do not say that a daughter must get married. They agree that things should change".

Did other village women support them?

She said yes.

And did she enjoy her work?

She nodded yes. "There was nothing to do at home".

Did she feel that perhaps girls like her were being used by the party?

She said no. Then, for no reason, she said in an exhorting tone, "We must not feel discouraged. There is no reason for that. We must realise that there is nothing to be discouraged about".

The involvement of girls in the CPN (M) raises problematic ethical questions for the party: girls of 12, or even 17, are simply too young to know if they are being exploited by those more powerful than they. They are certainly vulnerable to emotional manipulation and sexual abuse by men within their party. To add to this is the danger from the security forces that they are exposed to. In a country where half the population is below the age of 20, it is to be expected that the young would be targeted for politicisation. Yet the CPN (M) must accept its culpability for recruiting children, including girls, not just to forward its politics but to fight its war.

At the same time, it is obvious from talking to these girls that joining the CPN (M) was the best option that was available to them. They have been denied any meaningful participation in the rural societies that they live in: most of them have not been formally educated and are not fit for employment as teachers, government workers or staff in the non-governmental organisations that used to be active in development work here. These girls cannot participate in local government bodies because of age, inexperience or gender discrimination. There are few social movements at the grassroots that they might involve themselves in, and the other political parties have not carried out programmes that may have sparked their youthful imaginations. There is simply no means of expression, in these areas, for their desire for

advancement, other than to answer the Maoists' call. There is no less militant option by which they might exercise their agency.

The failings of Kathmandu

The broad context for the participation of girls in the CPN (M) is, then, the non-responsiveness of the state to long-overdue demands for women's legal equality, political participation, and social and economic empowerment. The post-1990 period has witnessed the proliferation of social movements in Nepal, among them the nascent women's movement. Yet, because these movements are yet to mature, they have had limited success in forcing the state to respond meaningfully to the widening democratic aspirations of ordinary citizens.

So scattered has the women's movement been in Nepal, many feminists would contest that such a thing even exists. Shova Gautam of the Institute for Human Rights Communication, Nepal, expresses the prevailing sentiment of many feminists when she says, "Nothing will come of the women's movement. The women affiliated with the political parties will only take up an issue if their party raises it. They do not independently pressure the leadership of their party. Then there are the women activists of the NGO movement, who will only take up an issue if they can make a 'project' out of it, and get funding for it. There are too few real women's activists, who will take up issues based on the logic of rights".

Yet there is no doubt that there was the intention, in 1991, to launch a broad-based women's movement with the formation of the Mahila Dawab Samuha (the Women's Pressure Group). This group was composed of a coalition of women leaders and activists from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) (CPN-UML), the Nepali Congress Party and smaller centre/left parties, and some prominent unaffiliated women. The left politician Sahana Pradhan was its chairperson. The group first came

to prominence by galvanising public outcry following a spate of rapes of young girls in the Kathmandu valley in 1990. After that, by the admission of its own members, the increasingly bitter rivalries between the political parties pushed the group into dysfunction.

Since then, the women's movement in Nepal has drifted into the hands of a variety of actors. These include the women's wings of the major political parties, whose struggles begin with internal discrimination in their parties. They form two camps composed, loosely, of 'bourgeois' or liberal feminists and 'progressive' or leftist feminists. Just as important are the growing numbers of 'star' activists based in Kathmandu, such as advocates Shanta Thapaliya, Sapana Pradhan

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Malla and Meera Dhungana in the field of public interest litigation, or Meena Acharya in economics and Seira Tamang among scholars. Though leftist feminists would pointedly disagree, the NGOs providing services for women's social and economic empowerment have also contributed towards the cause of gender equality. And mass-based local initiatives such as the mothers' groups of west Nepal have also helped to carve a greater social space for women in rural communities.

Because these efforts are scattered, and sometimes fitful, they have not coalesced into an articulated women's movement of any kind. This has allowed the state to respond lethargically, and often insincerely, to women's demands for equality, making three scant concessions in the course of 12 years.

The first of these came in 1997,

when the minority Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) government established the Ministry for Women, Children and Social Welfare. Though leftist feminists lauded this move as an effort to support women's rights, many liberal feminists viewed it as a token gesture that would ghettoise rather than mainstream women's issues. In its years in operation, the 'women's ministry' has had mixed success: its most notable work was perhaps done in drafting a bill for women's rights, a bill which was not without its share of critics. Since then it has gained the unfortunate image as a convenient place to provide employment to the women activists of the party in power.

The state's second concession to the women's movement came with the passing of the 11th amendment to the civil code in 2001, after six years of protracted struggle by legal activists. In 1995, Meera Dhungana filed a writ petition at the supreme court asking that the term 'son' in clause 16 of the civil code's inheritance law be repealed as it discriminated against daughters: prevailing inheritance laws allowed a woman to inherit paternal property only if she was over 35 and unmarried. By contrast, all men over 18 enjoyed the right to inherit paternal property in Nepal's system of *angsha*, or birthright inheritance.

In a tellingly conflicted response to Dhungana's petition, the supreme court ruled that the clause in question did discriminate against women, but that repealing it would grant women dual rights to inherit their parents' and husbands' properties, and would thus discriminate against men. The court ordered parliament to submit a 'just' bill within one year, but it also tacked on a note that changing current laws could "affect" the "patriarchal order" of the country. The ruling warned: "Society cannot accept it when social values are changed suddenly".

Though mixed, this ruling did force parliament to do *something* to address gender inequality in the

civil code. In 1997, the Ministry for Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs submitted the bill for the 11th amendment to the civil code, popularly known as the 'women's bill', to parliament. The rights it granted women were limited: most controversially, inheritance rights were granted only to unmarried women, who would have to give up their inheritance upon marriage. The bill also proposed stiffer punishments for rape, and the legalisation of abortion for married women with the consent of their husbands, or for women who had suffered rape or incest.

The women's movement was divided over the bill. It did not touch on most of the 54 discriminatory laws in the constitution and in the civil code that had been identified by the NGO Forum for Women, Law and Development. Nevertheless, liberal feminists tended to favour the bill, arguing that further concessions could be won in the future to consolidate the bill's limited gains. Leftist feminists, however, wanted it defeated so that parliament would be obliged to draft a more progressive set of bills covering the issues of inheritance, rape and abortion. The women's wings of the CPN (UMI.), the United Leftist Women's Group and the Nepal Women's Association demonstrated against the bill, as did the by-then mostly inactive Women's Pressure Group.

In any case, parliamentary action on the 'women's bill' was delayed for years due to the rapid succession of governments. When the bill finally came up for consideration in December 2000, the parliament's Law and Justice Committee sent it for discussion to the grassroots level. This was a clear indication of ambivalence: in 10 years of democracy, no other bill had been sent to the public in this manner. Over the course of several months, however, the bill received resounding support at the grassroots level. It was eventually passed in 2001 with a few amendments. It was received with mixed reactions by the women activists.

The third and final concession of the state to the women's movement was the formation of the Women's Commission in 2002. This commission, headed by Durga Pokharel, has yet to be activated, and it is uncertain how much more effective it will be than the near-defunct Ministry for Women, Children and Social Welfare.

That the incipient women's movement has had such limited success should not be of surprise. Social activism is very young in Nepal: the human rights and environmental movements, the language and *janajati* movements, the dalit rights movement and the demands of smaller pressure groups in areas such as human rights are only now beginning to gain pace.

Sickles and automatic rifles

The reasons for this are clearly rooted in the country's authoritarian past. Though philanthropic works have been performed traditionally through private donations, *yagya* offerings and *guthi* services, modern social activism in Nepal began as late as the 1930s, as individuals critical of the Rana regime took their political consciousness to action. Tulsi Mehar introduced Gandhi-style spinning wheels, and was arrested for it. Kathmandu intellectuals got together to start libraries, for which they met with prison sentences. The father of Nepali Congress leader and first democratically elected prime minister (1959) BP Koirala famously sent the tattered rags of a poor man to the Rana prime minister Chandra Shumshere, and had his properties confiscated. Home schooling began to take place in secret. Shukra Raj Joshi in Kathmandu valley, Yogmaya in the eastern hills, as well as other religious reformists called for justice in their religious discourses. By the time the political parties formed in the 1940s, 'subjects' all over the country were organising their defiance, giving voice to widening left/liberal aspirations to citizenship.

With the formation of the politi-

cal parties, activism got channelled against the state. Through the 1960 royal takeover and the consolidation of the panchayat system in the 1970s, political activism began to overshadow social activism. Nepal is witnessing the legacy of this today.

"There was not, in Panchayat times, what we today call social activism", says advocate Gopal Siwakoti Chintan, one of the growing numbers of forceful, targeted social activists to emerge since 1990. "There was social *service*, led by those in the palace. Then there was political activism, which was limited to organising against the state". Though the underground political parties also did 'sectoral work' – calling for cultural reform in relation to gender and caste, for example – their main goal was to topple the Panchayat system. All social causes were secondary, he says.

The sudden proliferation of social causes after 1990 seems to have caught the political parties by surprise. The *janajati* movements and the dalit rights movements have taken place at the peripheries of the political parties, rather than at their centres. The environmental movement has had to battle, at times fiercely, with successive democratic governments: the anti-Arun III campaign in 1993 engendered much ill will when it successfully pitted the local people of the Arun valley against the central government for control over water resources. This was perhaps the first example of truly successful social activism in Nepal.

The main challenge now, says Chintan, is to consolidate the gains of the social activism of the past decade. His view is that effective activism can only take place through community organisations, run by local people who are accountable to their own communities and have the greatest moral authority to steer social movements.

One such example was the summer 2000 movement to free bonded labourers in far west Nepal, the Kamaiya Mukti Andolan, led by the

community NGO, Backward Society Education (BASE), which has mass membership of former bonded labourers. Dilli Raj Chaudhary and other leaders launched the organisation with literacy classes and other social services traditionally considered 'NGO work'. They gradually expanded into advocating the end to bonded labour at the local and district levels. To do so, they enlisted the support of human rights organisations such as the Informal Sector Service Centre, and international donors and development agencies that were willing to fund their cause.

When met with resistance from the local administration, BASE shifted its advocacy efforts to Kathmandu, successfully combining street-level activism and a savvy media blitz with the selective high-level lobbying of individual politicians. Ironically, BASE's success earned them the enmity of the CPN (M), for bonded labourers had been an easy source of discontent that the Maoists could tap. BASE is now focusing on the rehabilitation of the freed labourers, warding off the CPN (M) at the grassroots level and lobbying the government and international donors in order to provide the services that fall under the ordain of 'NGO work'.

Given the fledgling state of social activism in Nepal, then, it would be difficult to argue, as even feminists do in moments of frustration, that the women's rights movement has failed; rather, one could say that it is gradually coalescing. The scattered loci of women's activism today are the women's movement. It may not look like much of a movement, but it is undeniably more powerful and broad-based than it has ever been. However limited its gains, the women's movement, for example in the 11th amendment that grants some property rights to women, has helped to slowly make joining the radical fringe a less appealing option for those who want change.

To most of the women of Nepal, of course, such a gradualist view

smacks of complacency. The indicators of women's status in Nepal have been consistently appalling: women have far lower literacy rates than men; women are not recognised for their economic contributions; women suffer from poorer nutrition than men, and two-thirds of women of reproductive age are anaemic; women here suffer one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. In a country where 42 percent of the population lives below poverty level, women constitute the vast underclass. Indeed, Nepali women would be very well served well by increased pressure, worldwide, to include economic rights in all charters on human rights, for the conditions in

Joining the Maoist party offered girl cadres perhaps the best chance available for wider social engagement

which they live arguably betrays criminal disregard on the part of the government.

This has undeniably strengthened the logic for violent revolution in grassroots Nepal. Further along our walk into Jumla district, past the village of Tatopani, we passed a large group of girls the age of Comrades Jamuna, Pragati and Sangita. They were returning from a wedding of two CPN (M) members. They were all wearing red *teekas* on their foreheads to mark the festivities, and looked very much like schoolgirls anywhere on a picnic or outing; the occasional greetings of "lal salaam" were the only indication of their political bent.

We fell into a conversation with one of these girls, who was dressed like her comrades in a simple kurta-sural. "The girl and the boy both have to like each other", she said, trying to explain her party's views on marriage. "Then the party will

hold a ceremony for them". This entailed an exchange of garlands, and some singing and dancing afterwards, she said.

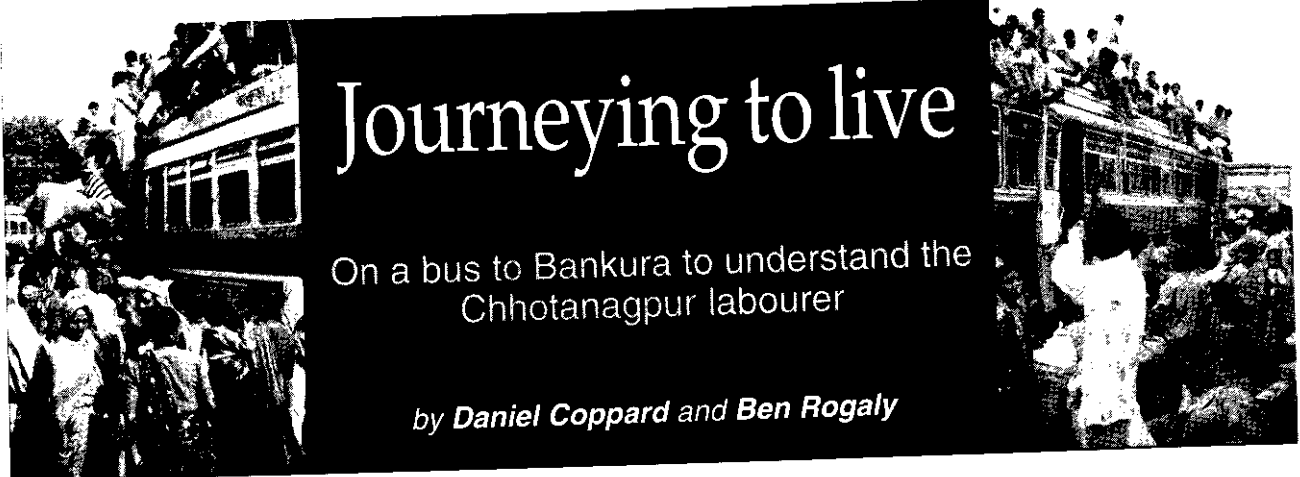
The girl was, again, very young: she said she was 16. She was originally from Kalikot district and had been working in Jumla district throughout her year and a half in the party. She was in the armed wing, she said, though nothing in her bearing gave off any hint of militancy. She was curious about my mission, and asked why I was unmarried, and how my family accepted my travelling with men. "It is the same with us", she said enthusiastically when I told her that women must be ready to travel in any condition if they are to have the necessary mobility for their work. She said, "We too have to travel with men for our work".

What was she doing before she joined the party?

"Nothing", she said, "I was at home, spending my days cutting grass". This was a story that had by now become routine coming from the girl cadres of the CPN (M). Joining the party had offered them perhaps the best chance available for wider social engagement.

The girl said she had received physical training, including on the use of firearms. She was not involved in the Maoists' November 2002 attack on Khalanga town, headquarter of Jumla district, one of the clashes that with its end-game brutality is thought to have pressed the government to agree to the ceasefire. But the girl was willing to go to war if her party instructed her to.

With a soft tone that belied the hardness of her message, she said, "That is why I joined the movement. You see, there used to only be sickles and grass in the hands of girls like us. And now there are automatic rifles".



Journeying to live

On a bus to Bankura to understand the Chhotanagpur labourer

by Daniel Coppard and Ben Rogaly

Each year hundreds of thousands of workers journey to the fields of central southern West Bengal to transplant and harvest rice. Some come from the Chhotanagpur plateau to the west, others from Santal Parganas to the northwest and still others from the northeast and the southwest. Migration east (*pube jawa*) for rice work from the Chhotanagpur plateau is not new. Even before the canals were constructed in the alluvial plains of Bengal's Bardhaman district in the 1960s, workers from Chhotanagpur were involved in West Bengal's rice cultivation. Indeed, they claim to have been central to the canal construction as well. What has changed is that there are more roads and more buses and a larger number of days' work available.

Local migrants' narratives suggest that as recently as the 1950s, it would have been common to walk to the area of intensive rice cultivation. At that time, men travelled alone or in small groups and did not wait to be solicited by employers. Payment was commonly in kind – migration meant survival and there was little to save. With the coming of a second rice crop in alluvial West Bengal from the 1970s, the number of days of available employment doubled. This crop became much more widespread in the 1980s as farmers invested in shallow tube wells and the agrarian conflicts of the previous two de-

acades appeared to have been put behind them. West Bengal's Communist Party of India (Marxist) government has been able to take credit for this capitalist revolution in agriculture, which continued well into the 1990s. It was not the second crop alone which increased the demand for labour, but also the more intensive cultivation of monsoonal rice with new 'high yielding' varieties of seeds and the now almost universal use of chemical fertiliser. Only, since the late 1990s the prosperity of rice cultivation in Bardhaman has come under threat because of a decline in prices associated with newly liberalised rice imports.

While these changes have been going on at the destination of the Chhotanagpur migrant labourer, Chhotanagpur has lacked comparative agricultural growth, further hindered by intermittent drought. When one of us was in the area to make the journey with the employment seekers of a village in eastern Puruliya district one cold November morning in 1999, the drought was in its third year – agricultural activities in this part of Chhotanagpur had had to be drastically curtailed and more people were seeking work, some of them now for different reasons. In more prosperous periods, landed people – albeit cultivators of very small plots of land – would migrate to bring in additional lumps of money for small investments, perhaps to-

wards the cost of a marriage ceremony or the purchase of a goat. Now the money was needed, as it always had been for the poorest landless people, in order to make ends meet across the year.

The journeys, though over relatively short distances, were often experienced as long and dangerous, while the distance away from the familiarity of home was perceived as great. In most other migration streams, journeys were made on a combination of bus and train or by truck, and from certain areas and social groups men alone made the journey with women and children staying behind at home. In this stream, the journey was made at a stretch by bus. In the bus, women and children would be crammed inside with men on the roof.

One popular destination in West Bengal for the Chhotanagpur migrants was Bankura bus stand, the location of an important regional labour market. The workers on the journey whom we were with were anxious about leaving people and property behind, as much as they were fearful about their own safety away from home. There was no sense of excitement at the prospect of earning the additional money.

Pube jawa

At the bus stop on the morning of the journey, the moon still visible, our migrating companions gradually trickled in in small groups, un-

concerned about the time; the bus owner knew they were leaving today and would wait till the last of us was in. In a quarter of an hour, the group expanded to 14 people, including two women and a small child wide-eyed in anticipation, in addition to an equal number of large plastic woven sacks containing bedding and cooking utensils. The women sat apart watching silently, while the men stood talking amongst themselves. Despite the cold, the men wore a standard attire of knee-length *lungis*, their shoulders wrapped in small blankets. All but two were bare-foot. One of their mothers had come to see them off with her granddaughter. "*Chaillam go kaki, chhilapula ghar-duar tar jimma*" – we are going auntie, she was told, the children and houses are now in your care. A woman who worked at the local hospital stopped by. "*Chhelepule ele diendibe, osudh pattar ja darkar*" – if the children come to you, give them medicine and whatever else they need, she was requested.

The bus arrived on time at six. Only the women and the group leader, Jaladhar Kaibarta, sat inside, Jaladhar directly behind the driver. The bus owner and supervisor, nicknamed 'Mutton' for his love of the food, was anticipating a crowd of passengers to Bankura, and migrating groups would not board the bus if the women had to sit on top. Thus, despite the ample room inside, all the men climbed directly onto the roof with the luggage. "*Kulir sijan bothe bitichilla gula seat libekei*" – this is the season for labour, joked one non-migrating passenger, women, of course, will take all the seats. This fell on unamused ears. One female labourer replied, "*Etadin pube jaichhi, kunodin seat pelinain, darhain jaoa*" – I have been going east for so many years, but never have I got a seat, she retorted. We, however, regardless of sex, were forcibly taken by Mutton and given front seats and a clear view of the chaos of rural roads hurtling towards us. A request to sit on top with the men was greeted with a look of utter disbelief



ALL PICTURES BY DANIEL COPPARD

and considered strictly out of the question; far too dangerous for 'guests'. (While we treated his concern humorously, we later learnt that on the return journey two men were struck by low hanging trees and killed instantly; nor was it considered an uncommon occurrence).

We sat next to a young woman who was wearing two blouses in an attempt to insulate herself from the cold. She was travelling with a group of labourers to Asansol for agricultural work, prearranged by an employer for whom they had worked many times before. After a few stops along the Puruliya-Manbazar road, three other migrating women whom she had planned to meet on the way joined her. They were accompanied by four children and two fierce fighting cockerels. One of these, a Mike Tyson of birds with a particularly vicious streak screamed and flapped its resentment at being held in such confined conditions. The women (two of whom were sitting on the floor) talked busily amongst themselves whilst the children either slept in their laps, or gazed at the strange faces in a state of heightened bewilderment.

After half an hour and several short stops wherever railway tracks met the metalled road, the bus seemed filled to capacity. Women, children, and a handful of non-migrating men stood packing every

available space, and frustrations began to be voiced. "*Samachhena tobu jaoa chai. Kachekache dhuk*" – there is no space inside, complained one, but even then they have to take more. Make some space, move over. Their chatter could barely be heard above the incessant blast of the bus's horn, which tore its way through herds of unimpressed cattle and piles of drying grain as we raced eastward along the empty early morning road towards a rising sun.

Neither Mutton nor the ticket inspector could say how many passengers there were since fares would only be collected at the end of the journey (unlike the usual pay-on-entry practiced outside the migrating season). But, the ticket inspector estimated some 190 passengers, of which 170 were migrating labourers. He explained that normally he would take 150 passengers, and 50 on the return journey. These however would alight at various points along the way, so the bus would never grow so crowded as it was this morning: all these passengers were heading for Bankura. He predicted this exodus would continue for another three or four days, between seven to eight days in total. Mutton complained this was creating a shortage of agricultural labour in his own locality that cultivators had not had to face before, and the harvest would suffer because of it.



At half past seven, we reached the important town of Manbazar, the bus stand of which, we had been told, was the location for a smaller seasonal agricultural labour market. We expected another large crowd of labourers to climb on. However, before we could reach the bus stop, a large festive arch of bamboo and paper spanning the road blocked our way. The number of men on top of the bus was such that it was unable to pass underneath. We thus made a detour and bypassed the bus stand altogether. Neither Mutton nor the ticket inspector, usually so keen to pack the bus beyond all physical limits, seemed particularly concerned by this. As we left Manbazar we passed two other buses, top-heavy with labourers spilling over their sides. In the shadow, our bus looked similarly crowded. For all the women standing inside, an at least equal number of male counterparts was perched precariously above. How must the 150 people travelling each morning at other times of the year travel now?

From the driver's cabin only a wall of faces was visible; the tired sitting, others sitting on the seated, and a packed majority standing, wedging each other into a state of immobility. Tyson, being passed from one stranger to another was

now thrust directly opposite us. His thick viscous beak screamed dangerously close while its holder gently pulled its tail feathers in an attempt to pacify the disturbed bird. By eight, the sun had risen higher, adding shimmer to the mucus haze of Mutton's sneezes. The air grew uncomfortably hot and thick. Fatigue subdued the early excitement and both the seated and the standing fell into a silent slumber. A smartly dressed commuter looked at the others pushing against her with uncomfortable disdain, and drew her sari over her mouth. When a seat next to us became free, she criticised one of the migrating women for taking it: "You were sitting on the floor, but I can't. Why don't you leave me that seat?" Her request was not granted.

Groups of both commuters and migrant labourers were now mostly being denied entry, although the latter seemed to be given priority. The bus was now so crowded that the ticket inspector would not allow larger groups in. One group of 15 men and women, with an equal number of children and infants were refused. There was no settlement or road in sight, they had clearly walked a long way already, and the next bus would not come until the next morning. "Moire jabe bachha, jaisna barancha, ami boile

dichhi" – the kids will die, the passengers joked to them, it is better you don't get on, I'm telling you! The group however was unimpressed: "Raat dutarle boisen acchi, ainya gari pabo thore" – we have been waiting since two last night. There is little chance of getting another bus [today]. They watched anxiously as we pulled away without them. Shortly after, we reached the small town of Pirachelli on the Puruliya-Bankura border. Some labourers ran up excitedly, eager to get a place, whilst others sat with their sacks, content to watch the bus pass them by.

The journey into Bankura continued for the next two hours. Labourers continued to climb on in small groups. The bus had seemed filled beyond capacity only half an hour after the initial departure, but space was found for more. It soon became impossible to close the doors as people spilled out. The women sitting silently on the floor now looked ill and unhappy from travel. They had been unable to sleep the night before, anxious about the morning's journey and the possibility of missing the bus. A young migrating child sitting opposite us repeatedly slid off her young mother's lap onto the floor, while the latter, tired and irritated would tug her up by the hair. The well-dressed woman laughed dryly, "Bankura [bus

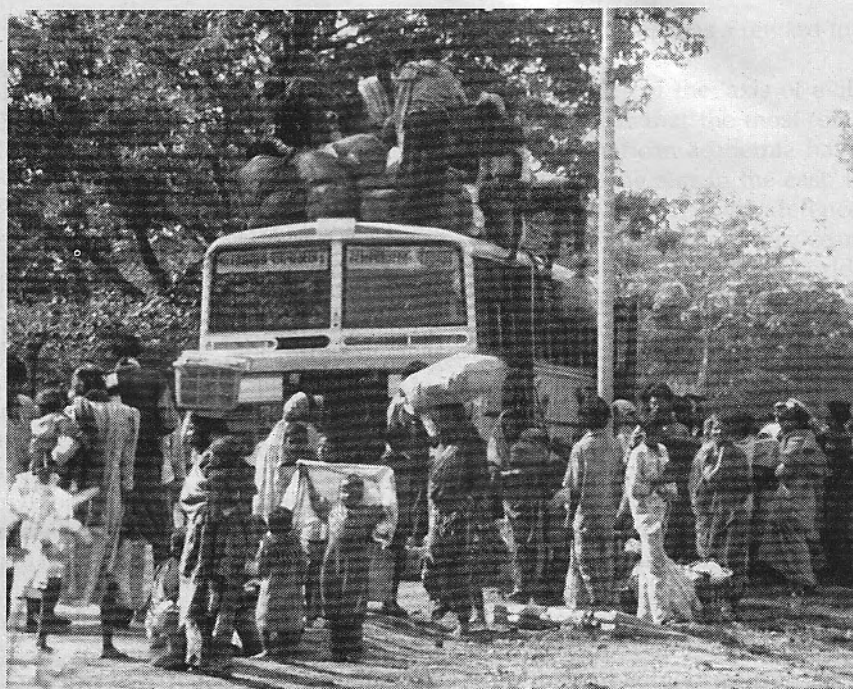
stand] is still far from here. We shall all die before that!"

Fortunately, there were no such casualties, and at 10.20, the bus pulled to a final halt some 10 minutes away from the bus stand. Mutton explained that it would be impossible to collect the fares if they stopped at the stand itself, so they preferred to do so somewhere quiet where passengers would not be able to slip away undetected. For the next half-hour luggage was unloaded and groups collected themselves together. Even Tyson seemed dazed and harmless. One of the labourers riding on top complained of the cold, cramped conditions: "With one man sitting on one leg, and one man on the other, I haven't been able to move my legs at all!" The women and children sat in small groups whilst their men (through the group leaders) negotiated bus fares with the bus owner and ticket inspector. Our group finally paid Rs 22 per head, instead of the normal Rs 25. Later, once all the fares had been collected, we were told that based on ticket numbers, some 300 adults had made the journey. Now that everyone had descended it was evident that the number of children was also significant. We counted at least 50.

One by one, the migrant groups retrieved their baggage, lifted the young under their arms and made their way single file towards the bus stand, and the next, for many, unknown part of their seasonal journey. The empty bus pulled away with a few commuters to make ready for the return journey.

Identity and the desh

Seasonal migration necessarily involves more journeys than the more commonly studied longer-term migration. Thus, it is the journeys, and labour market places (such as the Bankura bus stop), which, as pointed out by sociologist R Jenkins, become the sites that shape the migrant worker's identity through the interrelated processes of self-identification and categorisation of and by others. The self-identification by



migrants, employers, transport workers and others, such as small shopkeepers, whose businesses are built on the expenditure of migrants' remittances during the return journey, shifts across space. During the outward journey, increasingly as it progresses, identification with the particular caste or social rank in the village of origin diminishes, and there is a greater sense of being part of broader groups and of being connected to a bigger home country or *desh* – in this case the eastern part of Puruliya district in the Chhotanagpur plateau.

A comparison of such processes across studied streams reveals that seasonal workers are both attracted to and repelled by the relatively wealthy destination area. There is a tendency for interactions on journeys and at the workplace to strengthen affinities with home areas. These are also used instrumentally to avoid humiliation in labour market negotiations and even to frighten employers through making reference to being a people of wild, *jangli*, places such as Chhotanagpur. In addition to the displacement across social and physical space, the regular journeys to the rice plains of Bardhaman are them-

selves an integral component of what it means to be a seasonal migrant labourer in West Bengal.

It is important to analyse the interaction between the migrants, their employers and local workers on the one hand and economic and social structures in which they are embedded on the other. Similar structuration approaches have been used in other migration studies, but these do not usually focus on seasonal migration. It is also interesting to analyse the extent to which seasonal migrant workers have been able to use new earnings and consumption possibilities to challenge the material and symbolic dominance of employers in their home villages.

Because of the predominance of static village-based studies, there has not been a study that compares the causes and consequences of this seasonal migration for workers in the different streams and their employers. There had been no estimates published of the scale of the migrant workforce involved. Yet West Bengal's recent agricultural successes appear to have depended on these workers. ▽

(Translations by Sujata Das-Chowdhury)

Wary lies the dragon

*Ever present high wind
Sweeps the fog in
Blocking all that is dear to the eyes.
There is a lull, the air rests.
The fog remains.*

—Gujarati poet Sitanshu Yashchandra in *Encirclement*

AMERICAN STIMULUS is still working wonders in South Asia. Hamid Karzai, the 'former' UNOCAL employee, has convinced General Musharraf that the benefits far outweigh the costs of pursuing local warlords in the Hindukush. Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, His Military Lord's most loyal premier of Pakistan, has realised that the promise of Pakistan-India talks is a good ruse to push the controversial Legal Framework Order to the back burner. Musharraf can remain president-in-uniform as long as he can assure the Islamabad elite that he has the blessings of the top brass in the 'war on terror'.

In the excitement of being invited to the high table of the G8 in Evian, France, Atal Behari Vajpayee is once again singing the *kavita* of the Lahore-Amritsar peace process. Vajpayee's promise that he will retire from active politics if he fails to normalise the relationship between the two nuclearised twins is largely symbolic – the *Bhartiya Janata Party's* agenda is firmly in the hands of its hawks who dream of an America-Israel-India military axis.

Weak kneed – no dig intended at the septuagenarian Atalji – politicians of the non-aligned school have no place in the hyper-power scheme of things fashioned by Sub-continental and American Bushies. The loyalty of South Asian neocons is rewarded with invitations for Musharraf to the White House, and some fancy Israeli toys for George Fernandes (he of the 'China is the main enemy' fame).

With a heat wave sweeping much of peninsular India, it is just as well that Colombo has agreed to grant Vellupillai Prabhakaran's Tigers a face-saving device in Jaffna. Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar will advise Colombo and the Tigers on the stickiest issue of all – de-escalation. Apparently, ex-Indian peacekeepers still have their uses in Sri Lanka.

The summer after Basra seems to have warmed up neighbourly relations all over South Asia. Bangladesh and Burma have just concluded three-day border talks with the signing of the Joint Record of Discussions. The Rohingya refugees were ignored but the two sides ex-

changed pleasantries for the press to prove to the diplomatic mission of a particular power that they do not need prodding.

Dhaka also hosted Indian foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal. While Sibal engaged his Bangladeshi counterpart Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury in diplomatic niceties, real negotiations were held between the Border Security Force and the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) on the challenges of patrolling the 4095-km boundary. Whether the straight-talking Sibal managed to instil the fear of the eagle flying over South Asia is not yet clear, but the BDR brass must learn that even the suspicion of harbouring United Liberation Front of Assam and All Tripura Tiger Force militants will do Dhaka's image incalculable harm.

Royal ride

On 1 June 2003, it will be two years since the Narayan-hiti massacre, but that unprecedented event in world history has already been forgotten, lessons about the perils of a closed palace remaining unlearnt. Many of the shaven-headed hoodlums who were railing against King Gyanendra back then now hold rallies in support of his 4 October 2002 dismissal of the elected government.

Meanwhile, the Royal Nepalese Army has been uncharacteristically circumspect in criticising the Maoist-government 'understanding' of confining soldier movement to a five-kilometre perimeter of existing barracks,

but it issued a strong statement opposing the peaceful 'people's movement' started by the five mainstream political parties of the country.

Irony has taken residence in Narayanhiti Palace and Singha Durbar (the first housing the king and the second the secretariat of the government appointed by him), for they are wooing armed insurgents fighting for a republic while doing everything in their power to discredit parliamentary parties committed to a constitutional monarchy. But even by the standards of "yo Nepal ho" ('this is Nepal, what to do'), the acquiescence of the government team in negotiation with the Bhutanese delegation to grant Lhotshampa refugees Nepali citizenship is unbelievably inept. It defies even elementary political logic.

Granted that forcing Lhotshampas back to Bhutan before a 'regime change' in Thimphu would be akin to throwing them back to the wolves that had driven them from their homes in the first place. Yet, Singha Durbar



Atalji arrives at the big table in Evian.

owes an explanation at least to all the international organisations that helped the refugees survive in the camps of southeast Nepal for over a decade.

The power elite of Kathmandu never discloses the motivations of the state to the people, but has Nepal taken donors and INGOs and the UNHCR for a royal ride? Things are so bad that there is even a bright side to this bleak deal. And that is that if any government could take such a politically suicidal decision, it was the one composed of King Gyanendra's newfound loyalists. The king finally had to let go of them when the cabinet formed by him 'resigned' under mounting public pressure and street protests by the main parliamentary parties. But the riddle remains: why is Kathmandu paying such a heavy price to keep Thimphu in good humour?

Oblivious of all this – the failure on the foreign policy front, the near stalemate in government-Maoist talks, and the suspension of democratic process – the glitterati of Kathmandu are still celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first ascent on Mount Everest.

Meanwhile, as they have done for so long, Nepali commentators continue to find it necessary to debate the 'citizenship' of summiteer Tenzing Norgay. Born in the lap of Chomolongma on the 'Tibetan' side, brought up in the shadows of Sagarmatha on the Nepali side, and sustained by those who wanted to climb Mount Everest, Tenzing knew that all these were merely names of the same peak. He was, and remained, a true Himali – a citizen of the highest mountain ranges in the world. With the benefit of hindsight, one can perhaps call this Tibetan-Nepali-Indian a true South Asian.

Himalayan thaw

It is interesting how people can be on Everest one day and be in Kathmandu to be feted within two days courtesy the helicopter conveyor belt service to base camp. It used to take weeks. While mountaineers from all over the world were falling over each other in self-congratulation in Kathmandu during the weeklong festivities, Chinese climbers went ahead and broadcast the first live television pictures from the summit of Chomolongma. Yet another example of the diligent tortoise of the Middle Kingdom that just keeps at it while the rest of the world including South Asia, rabbits all, gives itself to laziness and celebration.

Right up to China's entry into the WTO, 'let the sleeping dragon lie' had been the cautious approach of the West towards Beijing. But after the unilateral colonisation of Iraq by American forces, the West is no longer the monolith it used to be in the cold war years. The break-up with 'old Europe' was indicative, and Beijing woke up to the reality that it cannot evade a global role and responsibility. However hard it may try to project itself as an unwilling conscript in the 'war on terror', it

will not be allowed to march into Taipei as a reward for good global behaviour.

The rhetoric about the dangers of the 'axis of evil' notwithstanding, it is almost clear that the most 'embedded' intellectuals of the American academia have their eyes firmly fixed on the rising star in the east. It has recently been pointed out that Chinese defence spending is growing at the rate of 17 percent every year; the economy is already the second largest in the world, right after the United States, in purchasing power parity terms. If empires survive by preventing the rise of an emergent challenger, the great game of the 21st century will most likely be played in the backyard of South Asia.

The real test of Atal Behari Vajpayee's diplomatic mettle is not the restart of Indo-Pak talks, which will happen sooner or later. To ensure a place for himself in the history books, Atalji needs to initiate the process of the 'Himalayan thaw'. He needs to save up his *khadi boli* couplets not for Lahore, but for Beijing. And get a competent Chinese translator before taking the flight 'over the hump' of Arunachal (claimed by Beijing) into the Chinese mainland.

Both China and India have punched much below their weight in international affairs, and this largely because they do not have confidence in each other. New Delhi wastes all its diplomatic energy on its small neighbours. Similarly laughable (in the international geopolitical context) is Beijing's obsession with Taiwan, especially since the encirclement being promoted by geo-strategists across the Atlantic is tightening, India being thus far a willing participant in this low-key play.

During his visit to South Asia in March 2000, Bill Clinton had proposed his "four-r formula" for the normalisation of Pakistan-India relations. These were: respect for the LoC, rejection of violence to settle the border issue, a resumption of dialogue, and restraint.

Actually these are even more appropriate for the longstanding Sino-Indian border disputes. There is no reason why the Clintonian roadmap cannot be followed to bring nearly 2.3 billion people closer.

The groggy dragon must wake up and take a close look in the mirror. The elephant must stop dancing and begin using its legendary brain, thus far underused in the arena of international diplomacy. The Asian century beckons, but it cannot wait for the giants forever, nor can it happen without the giants.

Pawan Chamling, the street-smart political survivor of Sikkim, wants to begin a bus service between Gangtok and Lhasa over the Nathu La pass and Chumbi valley. May Vajpayee accompany His Holiness the Dalai Lama on its maiden journey, and may the great sage Padmasambhava bless this mad wish to make it reality.

—CK Lal

Both China and India have punched much below their weight in international affairs

'Hamro Tenzing Sherpa'

Giving the great climber his due as a Nepali

by **Deepak Thapa**

"Tenzing, your immortality is assured the world over", sang Nepal's folk poet Dharma Raj Thapa in celebration of Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary's ascent of Everest on 29 May 1953. A joyous Nepal had welcomed him on his return from Everest. So intense was the feeling at that time that other members of the expedition, including Hillary, felt quite left out in the cries of 'Tenzing Zindabad' that rent the air wherever he went. Dharma Raj Thapa penned two songs glorifying Tenzing. King Tribhuvan awarded him the Nepal Tara (Star of Nepal) medal, the highest civilian honour of Nepal (Hillary and Col John Hunt, the team leader, were granted lesser medals), and an offer was made of a house and other facilities should he decide to live in Nepal. Fifty years later, the name of Tenzing, the man who helped put Nepal firmly on the world map, seems to have been all but forgotten by the state.

Tenzing, the climber

Born in 1914 in the Kharta valley of Tibet, northeast of Everest, Tenzing moved with his family to the Khumbu area of Nepal when he was a child. He spent his early years in Thame village on the route that led to the Nangpa-la, the pass that allowed cross-border trade between the Tibetans and the Sherpas of Khumbu. As a young boy growing up in the shadow of Everest, he heard stories of men from foreign lands trying to climb Chomolungma, the Mother Goddess of the Earth, as the Sherpas and Tibetans called Everest. That would have been the first three attempts on Everest by the British from the north. Nepal was literally a 'forbidden kingdom' and totally off-limits to foreigners then.

At the age of 18, Tenzing left for the hill station of Darjeeling in India, following a path that had been taken by many Sherpas before him in search of a livelihood. Sherpas had become an integral part of Himalayan climbing, providing the much-needed high-altitude support for the 'assault' that characterised climbing in this part of the world, and he hoped he could be one of them. He tried to get into the 1933 expedition to Everest but was unsuccessful since there were many other experienced Sherpas who got first preference. He survived by doing odd jobs before receiving his first break as a porter with the 1935 Everest reconnaissance expedition led by Eric Shipton.

He was back on Everest in 1936 and 1938. In the course of the latter expedition he was awarded the Tiger Medal for reaching Camp VI at 27,200 feet. In be-



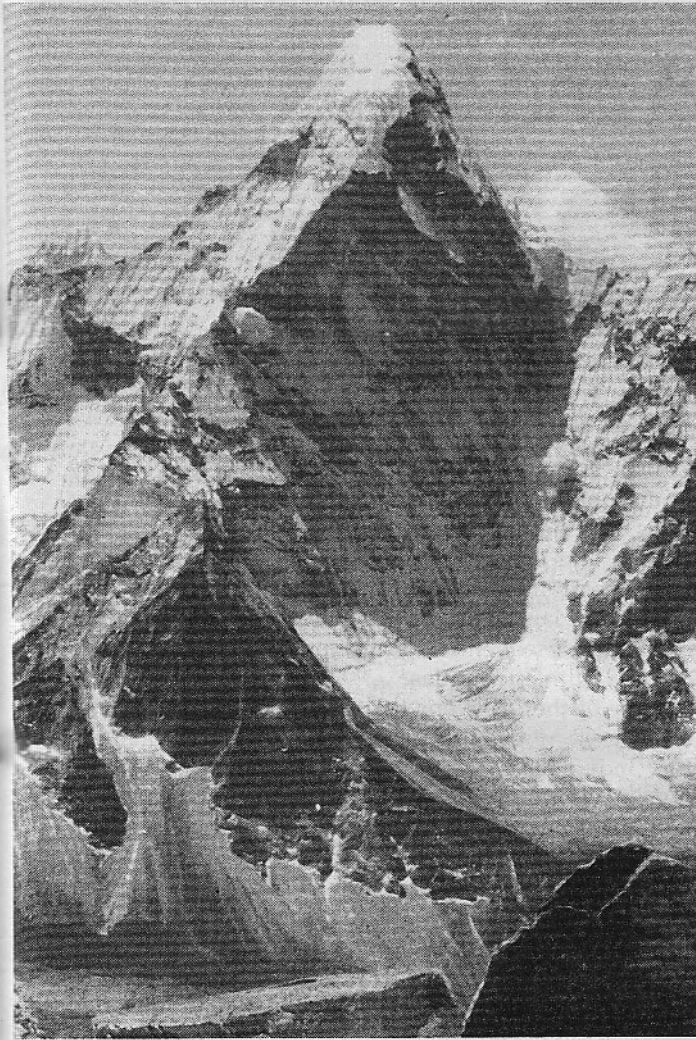
JOHN HUNT

tween he took part in teams exploring the Garhwal Himalaya. After the second world war started and the expeditions stopped coming, he moved his family to Chitral (now in Pakistan) and worked in the officers' mess of the Chitral Scouts. After the war ended Tenzing returned to Darjeeling and survived by taking foreign tourists on trips around Darjeeling.

In 1947, he led a trip to Everest as part of a clandestine expedition for an eccentric Englishman. He did some more climbing in Garhwal that year and became the *sirdar*, head of porters, following an accident that incapacitated his predecessor. In 1947, he travelled to Tibet as *sirdar* of the well-known scholar Giuseppe Tucci, and in Lhasa met Heinrich Harrer (of *Seven Years in Tibet* fame).

Tenzing came to Nepal in 1949 with HW Tilman, the leader of the 1938 Everest expedition, who had managed to wrangle permission from the Nepali authorities to explore the central Nepal Himalaya and do some climbing. Then it was to other parts of the Himalaya again, Bandarpunch (which he scaled), Nanga Parbat and Nanda Devi.

By then, the southern route to Everest from Nepal



had opened up, and in 1951 Shipton was again leading another reconnaissance expedition. But Tenzing could not join that trip due to prior commitments elsewhere, and he felt quite disappointed. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Tiger of the Snows*, "I had been so many times to Everest, and I felt so much it was my mountain, that I hated to miss this chance".

His opportunity came a year later when he became the sirdar (head porter) of the Swiss expedition on Everest, the first to tackle the mountain from the south side. With Raymond Lambert, he reached a height never before reached by humans, but had to turn back 800 feet from the summit. The Swiss made another attempt in the autumn of that year, without success. The latter expedition was to prove a milestone in Tenzing's career since he was finally made a climbing member of the team as well, apart from his duties as a sirdar.

He was back the next year for his seventh attempt on Everest, and succeeded in reaching the top of the world with Edmund Hillary on 29 May 2003.

Tenzing, the hero

On his way back from Everest, Nepal's king sent an

emissary on horseback to meet Tenzing on the way and to ask him to declare that he was a Nepali. He was even forced into the Nepali *daura-suruwal* attire to emphasise his Nepali-ness. In a fit of misplaced nationalism, the illiterate Tenzing was even made to sign papers stating that it was he who had reached the top first. Nepal had found a true hero. For a country coming out of a century of a dark age under the Rana shogun rulers, it was sorely in need of one, and Tenzing's fame spread far and wide in the land. In a new biography of his, a Nepali public figure is even quoted as saying, "At one time Tenzing was more popular than King Tribhuvan".

But the Nepali establishment's enthusiasm died out when he decided to make India his home even though that was a most natural decision for him to take. For 21 years since leaving Khumbu, apart from a quick visit back to Thame and the expedition with Tilman, Tenzing had lived in India, and that is where his family lived. After all, Tenzing was only doing what millions of Nepalis have done over the centuries. At the time he left Nepal to seek work in Darjeeling, it was easier for him to reach India than it was to go to Kathmandu, which symbolised everything of the state. As he writes in his autobiography: "In Solukhumbu we were remote from the rest of the country. What went on there did not seem to affect us; we had our own customs and ways of life and knew almost nothing about the nation of which we were politically a part".

Tenzing opted to live where he was comfortable. He did not disown Nepal. It is the latter that has done that. Despite his association with Nepal and his having made the name Sherpa a household name the world over, there is nothing in Nepal to remember him by. And because of that Nepalis are woefully ill-informed about him or his life. As would be expected, school children do not read about him in their texts, and neither has any monuments have been erected to the most famous Sherpa of all. He seems simply to have been erased from the state's official memory.

In his latter years he seems to have felt the slight rather deeply. In his second autobiography, *After Everest*, he said, "Since then [ie 1932] I have lived in Darjeeling continuously – for one thing it has been necessary for my work as a mountaineer – but it is one of the reasons for a certain amount of hostility to me in my native country of Nepal, not whilst I was unknown but only since I acquired fame on Everest".

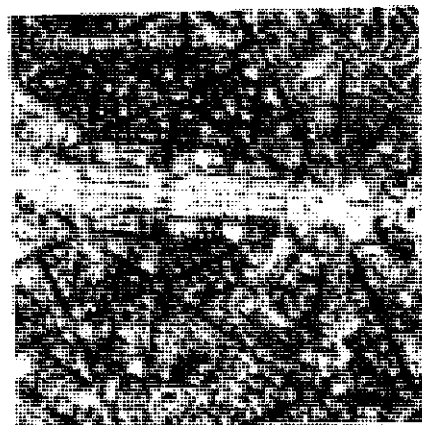
During the 50th anniversary celebrations of the first ascent of Everest, the Nepal Mountaineering Association did raise the question of recognition for Tenzing and proposed declaring him a national hero. But there has been no official response so far on that.

Nepal may have chosen to forget Tenzing, but Nepalis, wherever they live, Nepal, India, or elsewhere, never will. The second song by Dharma Raj Thapa mentioned above is the more famous. The first line of this song that almost every Nepali knows begins with "Hamro Tenzing Sherpa", *Our Tenzing Sherpa*. ▽

Nostalgia, secession and the absurdity of it all

Some reflections on the Indian city

by Sunalini Kumar



"Cities provide important public spaces streets, parks, plazas where people stand and sit together, interact and mingle politics critically depends on the existence of spaces and forums to which everyone has access".

"Situated in the quiet but well-developed Wanowrie area, Clover Citadel has been created to be "your fortress" secure walls shutting out the worries of the world. And yet it provides more than just security. Clover Citadel is also a haven of beauty where you can enjoy scenic surroundings. Spacious 1,2 & 3 bedroom apartments with the luxurious terrace option at Wanowrie".

The first statement above is by the political scientist IM Young. The second is an advertisement for a housing estate in one of India's fastest growing metropolises, Pune. Which of these two images of urban living rings truer in the context of India, is a moot point. Traditionally, social scientists have had a problem taking the Indian city seriously. India continues to remain a land of villages and fields in the popular imagination. While tomes have been written on the countryside and its toiling masses, the Indian city's self-image remains that of a refugee camp, a halfway house marking a period of struggle for most of its residents. Accompanying this self-image is usually a permanently unfulfilled fantasy of a more rooted existence someplace else. For the privileged with the means of exit, this 'someplace else' is, more often than not, the West. For the poor for whom mobility is either violently imposed or severely restricted, the fantasy revolves around a return to their place of original emigration. At some level, the step-motherly treatment of the Indian city in popular Indian imagination has over the years seeped into academic research also, to the extent that until recently not many good studies of the Indian city existed.

Lately however, researchers in India and elsewhere have been engaged in producing a growing body of excellent work on urban development in India – a recent example being the book *Slumming India* by Gita

Dewan Verma (see *Himal*, May 2003). There are today numerous detailed ethnographic portraits of Indian cities, especially Bombay, highlighting aspects like migration and employment of labour, the nature of the urban remittance economy and the manner in which patterns of land use and urban development have far-reaching consequences for the construction of communal and ethnic identities.

One of the questions that needs to be asked relates to the possibilities and perils offered by the contemporary Indian city as a location for politics. I live on the outskirts of Delhi. It is a relatively older suburb, with a general air of infrastructural collapse infusing it. Streetlights are almost always on the blink, sagging electricity cables sway precariously between ageing poles and there are dirt paths where pavements should have existed. Nothing unusual as anybody familiar with

Indian towns will tell you. Over the past few months, however, among the faded apartment blocks has sprung up the most exquisitely maintained park with loud green imported grass and neat little rows of imported plants labelled for the benefit of the English-speaking retired government servants who jog there every morning – *lanterna* (lavender colour) or *ficus panda* (non-flowering)".

In the midst of this botanical paradise, standing in all its phallic glory (why do monuments always have to rise vertiginously up into the sky?), is a gleaming marble monument dedicated to a young army officer killed in the Kargil war between India and Pakistan. At the entrance to this park is a long and stern list of injunctions (neatly stencilled, and again in English of course): "the park will be open to the public for a limited period only", "please do not bring dogs or food" and "this is a sacred place and sanctity must be maintained". Upper-class patriotism makes for pretty lavish civic monuments. After all, one cannot imagine a park like this being dedicated to the martyrdom of a mere jawan. Worse, the park is clearly not open to all. Along with the profusion of notices one can clearly sense an invisible but very real sign saying, "Riffraff keep

In the developing world, the size of the urban poor is reaching explosive proportions

out". Thus, what used to be an ordinary but bustling neighbourhood park, overrun at all times by humans of all shapes and sizes, has now become what sociologists and urban anthropologists refer to as a 'gated community' – a jealously guarded space. And this sterile fiefdom of affluent patriotism boasts about as much atmosphere as a graveyard.

Polis and politics

The developing world is familiar with certain buzzwords – 'participatory politics', 'democratic citizenship', 'civil society' and many other joined-at-the-hip terms that the World Bank and other international bodies love to wave solemnly and regularly in our faces. But what are the concrete conditions under which such lofty ideals may come an inch closer to realisation? For most of the post-Enlightenment period in European thought and in actual practice for the past three centuries, the material 'container' for notions of citizenship and democracy has been the nation-state. Indeed, traditional disciplines such as political philosophy have become so accustomed to the 'imagined community' of the nation as being the quintessential political formation that the idea of citizenship being exercised in any other context (for instance, the city) was not explored until very recently. However, even such a conventional text such as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines a citizen as one who is a member of a nation-state or a city. The notion of urban citizenship is not new at all but at least as old as the Greek city-state (of course, keeping in mind the fact that we know precious little about urban settlements outside the western hemisphere in the ancient world).

The Greek model of politics being such a powerful philosophical underpinning for western political philosophy, one may wonder why it has not informed discussions of citizenship or democracy until very recently. The main reason for this oversight may be located in the powerful hold that the nation-state and ideas of nationalism continues to exercise over modern minds. However, developments in the 20th century, especially towards the end of the century, have made the nation-state look like a very bad candidate indeed for any progressive politics. Even die-hard adherents of the idea of nationalism have had to concede that its most recent manifestations have shown a disturbing tendency to lead to the most reactionary politics within and outside its borders. The meteoric rise of the political right on the back of xenophobic national hysteria in the developed as much as the developing world has now led intellectuals and activists alike to believe that

the hope for democracy must be invested in sites other than the mammoth and alienating institutions of the contemporary nation-state.

Thus, exit nation-state, enter city. The comeback of the city as a site for politics is now well established in social and political theory. Writers defending the civic ideal have emphasised the element of commonality and accessibility that public spaces in the city can and must provide in order to be a real setting for politics. This defence of urban politics is no doubt very inspiring. Images of impassioned men in togas spring to mind. It is worth wondering how we may best simulate the Greek model in contemporary political life. Over half the world's population now resides in settings that can be described as 'urban'. All cities today and especially those in the third world are dense nodes of social, political and economic conflict. The reasons for this phenomenon are not difficult to gauge. Every city performs simultaneously the roles of political power base, employment hub for millions and public opinion-generator.



These diverse roles are bound to clash as they do on a regular basis. The very fact that there is such a concentration of populations and issues in urban areas could mean that cities can be a fertile and vibrant setting for politics. Indeed, much literature on the topic has suggested exactly that, some going as far as to say that the city and the municipality are the *natural* contexts for politics. But before we start celebrating the discovery of the new champion of grassroots democracy, we may have to look closely at what is happening in our immediate environment. Whatever fond illusions we may harbour about the potential for democratic politics in urban areas, examples like the neighbourhood park have to be reckoned with. The manner in which the park has been claimed by obviously upper-class residents of the neighbourhood over the past few months is surely an example of the way that processes of definition and exclusion are constantly at work in cities all over the world today.

Delhi, as the national capital, the seat of power and culture, neck-deep in history and now a rapidly growing industrial centre, provides an interesting case in point. Guidebooks love to tell us that over the ages, seven (some say nine, at last count it was 14) cities rose and fell in succession on the site where Delhi stands today. From the ancient city of Indraprastha to the itinerant capital of the Mughals, Delhi has never enjoyed a reputation for continuity. It would seem that the 20th century has finally laid this disjointed history to rest following the aggressive settling of the city by two massive waves

of migration. In the first half of the century of course arrived the British with the paraphernalia needed to sustain a self-indulgently colonial lifestyle. The more far-reaching migration however was in the second half of the century. By the millions came those who were displaced during partition with (as legend has it) little else but their enterprise and a desire to start anew. 50-odd years and millions of tonnes of concrete later, nobody can accuse Delhi of having an ephemeral existence. However, where the city has gained in *temporal* unity, it seems to have lost in *spatial* harmony. It has often been remarked by visitors and residents alike that the city gives the distinct impression of not one seamless whole but that of many cities shackled up uncomfortably together. This is a truism that could apply to any modern metropolis but nowhere is the fact made more painfully and repeatedly clear than in present-day Delhi. Upper-class 'Punjabi Gothic' bungalows jostle for space with cattle sheds in the southern and eastern parts of the city, and the chaotic bazaars of the old city, with their promise of disorder, loom dangerously close to the manicured lawns of Lutyens' Delhi.

Further, globalisation has had far-reaching implications for modern cities, a fact that is increasingly being recognised by those at the receiving end of this process. In the developing world, where governments do not provide most of the cushions required to absorb the continual economic risks and miseries that are thrown our way by the global juggernaut, the absolute numbers of the urban poor are reaching explosive proportions. As previously available sources of employment have dried up for the urban labouring classes in India, they have resorted to various forms of subsistence activity that barely sustain them. The result is the proliferation of small-scale industries, what one writer refers to as 'upgraded artisanal units' often employing as little as two or three people. Despite their contribution of partially processed raw material to larger industries and to the urban economy in general, such small-scale industrial units function under a constant threat of closure. Unstable employment outside the formal economy for the urban poor translates into reduced unionisation of workers. The lack of collective bargaining rights including housing rights for workers in turn has led to over a third of Delhi's poor living in what are euphemistically known as 'unauthorised housing colonies', slums with sub-human conditions of living.

The great unwashed

It gets worse. Let us consider transport. The manner in which the public transport system of Delhi has been allowed to die a sudden death with the arrival of private car companies into the Indian market is well known

by now. Not only has the drastic rise of private vehicles in Delhi spelt doom for the quality of air that the non-air-conditioned resident breathes, nobody seems to be blaming the real culprits. A convenient bogey has been found in the handful of 'polluting industries' identified by some crusading citizens. Meanwhile, Delhi's roads are being reshaped to suit the needs of those who have the privilege of using private transport. The speed with which four-lane freeways around the margins of the city and flyovers in the heart of the city have been built over the past five years has left most Delhi-ites astonished. Some more angry than astonished – many main arterial roads in Delhi have taken rebirths as American-style freeways, with exits blocked for miles on end. This has meant that bus-routes have changed and bus stops have been summarily moved so as to not obstruct high-speed private traffic. This in turn means that the average non-car-owning Delhi resident, who is dependent on whatever public transport that survives, has to cover much further distances everyday.

The results of these changes are plain to see on city roads. The hundreds of cyclists and pedestrians caught in these new and unfriendly high-speed roads now wear the haunted look of zombies.

That is the face of the city today – the baffled tired face of thousands wondering where their place in the city is. Most accounts of the city however, not simply in local and national dailies but also in more sophisticated narratives on the city, succumb to what may be called the 'nostalgic temporal narrative' in describing Delhi. These

accounts emphasise how this once proud and elegant imperial capital is now a sprawling, teeming, overpopulated urban agglomeration. This is the well-loved and well-tested story that 'Delhi-ites' tell themselves. It involves the fall from glory of a city that was historically a vibrant amalgam of benevolent emperors, generous courtesans and great poets like Ghalib and Zauq. One could be forgiven for concluding that the same sun that scorches us today used to once set gently over the colourful bazaars of Chandni Chowk and the Yamuna, meandering lazily along the eastern end of the Walled City. It is easy to succumb to the charm of the nostalgic temporal narrative – to lament over how a glorious past has now gone.

It is not as if at least some of these facts are not true. Delhi is indeed today a picture of urban chaos. The point is rather that Delhi has never been a haven for all its residents. Accounts of one of the previous avatars of Delhi – the city of Shahjahanabad – describe in graphic detail the manner in which the toiling classes of Delhi were condemned to a deprived existence outside the ramparts of the city. The main issue in contemporary Delhi remains the same as it was in previous eras – one

How is one to make sense of this chaos, this urban stew created by over 20 million souls pushing and yelling their way through their daily work?

of the reshaping of public space to suit the needs of those in power. It is this constant hegemonic claiming of urban space by the privileged that largely creates the sense of alienation and fragmentation that is characteristic of urban chaos. The larger danger with the nostalgic discourse on the city is that it cleverly deflects attention from the spatial to the temporal level of analysis. This shifting of perspective allows one to overlook the amazing structural inequalities that are built into the very fabric of Delhi.

On the occasion that a spatial perspective is included in public debate, it ends up mirroring the xenophobia of the immigration debate in the West. Notwithstanding the fact that the urban poor are the mainstay of an economy that would collapse without them, a discourse regarding the decay of the city due to the incursion of the Great Unwashed Masses is constantly set up in the upper-class and middle-class media. As recent research has pointed out, the trope of illegality has been used repeatedly against Delhi's poor in the past decade in order to deprive them of even the marginal urban existence they are allowed at the moment. In the words of the historian and political theorist Partha Chatterjee, they are the functionally irrelevant, disorderly element, always to be barely tolerated, and if needed, thrown out.

Particularly dubious has been the blatantly upper-class discourse on environmental pollution that has arisen with the express aim of relocating polluting industries outside city limits. In an interview, the 'crusading' environmental lawyer MC Mehta, who was responsible for carrying out this aim through a court order, has revealed some very interesting ideas on pollution in Delhi. In a situation where over 70 percent of air pollution in Delhi is caused by vehicular pollution (Delhi being home to more private vehicles than Bombay, Calcutta and Madras put together) Mehta has spoken at length about the way in which pollution is caused by these industries since they require raw materials which are transported by freight vehicles. Workers commuting to and from these factories further cause pollution, he believes. Denying a case for favouritism for Delhi, Mehta has said the aim behind his efforts was rather to check migration into the 'fragile' environment that is Delhi and preserve it for its citizens. It is obvious that the term 'citizen' has always been distinguished in a discourse such as Mehta's from the term 'population'. Mehta perhaps would reserve the term for his friends and neighbours while considering the



'workers' a part of the 'population' of Delhi.

At the time this article was written, newspapers and news channels were full of stories accusing the Delhi government of not doing enough to remove illegal Bangladeshi nationals living in Delhi colonies. One such 'Bangladeshi' national works in my home. Last month her son, daughter-in-law and young grandsons were among thousands of supposed 'Bangladeshis' rounded up by the police from their slum and taken to the railway station. They were then asked (to put it mildly) to go back home. Some who could not produce adequate papers and ration cards were actually taken to the India-Bangladesh border. Such evictions and harassment have been the norm during the reign of the BJP government looking to drum up national hysteria on the 'border problem'. At a more everyday level, the discourse on illegality can be handy for local governments and municipal bodies forced in post-liberalisation India to raise their own finances.

One of the easiest ways to achieve this is to force slum dwellers to vacate their 'unauthorised housing' and force factories to shut down and relocate outside city limits. Land freed up from such displacement is instantly offered to property sharks for speculation and sold at massive profits to a select few among the former factory owners and real estate dealers. Since the arrival of the aggressively liberalising BJP government, at least 900,000 slum dwellers have been relocated in Delhi, often *outside* Delhi. At times the new colonies allotted are as much as 40 km away from the original settlements. The INR 15,000 crore Delhi Metro project has been designed in such a way that trains run underground where there are posh colonies and run *over* the ground where 'illegal' colonies used to exist. Thus, even the limited space previously available to over a third of Delhi's population living in unstable circumstances (as



little as 12.5 sq m per family when the original Master Plan of Delhi in 1962 provided for a minimum of 80 sq m) has been narrowing in the most recent phase of urban 'planning' in India.

Absurd times

These are desperate times for the urban poor. These are also often *absurd* times for all those who dwell in urban India. Globalisation in third world contexts has meant that whimsical elites seeking to recreate some ridiculously western-centric ideal of urban aesthetics invest masses of energy (not their own of course, that of the labouring classes) into reshaping urban space. In the manic drive to make Indian cities conform to 'global standards' with the mandatory neon-lit MNC signboards and shopping malls dominating skylines, the changes created by these new global imperatives have produced results that are nothing short of absurd. Take platform number 12 of the New Delhi railway station – a glittering, well-ordered island of brightness in an otherwise dingy and overcrowded station. An elevator (mostly non-functioning but standing proudly nevertheless) and numerous eateries, bookstalls and vending machines are the main attractions of this platform.

What is the story behind this haven of efficiency and order? In India certainly, if not elsewhere in South Asia, it is a well-tested strategy to maintain a strictly guarded, under-utilised 'model' public amenity that is probably designed to draw attention away from the general state of decay that everything else is in. Delhi residents are now accustomed to seeing brand-new touch-screen telephones that have been installed at some offices and public sector commercial concerns. They look great but normally do not work. Often there is a surly guard hovering around such amenities. This now extends to certain government offices too. The government of India seems to have recently employed corporate consultants to conduct workshops aimed at enhancing interpersonal skills for a select few officers. To a population inured to years of being treated at best by government officials as if they were invisible, complete

bewilderment is the only response should they run into the totally out-of-character cordiality of these select few officials. Of course, these officers are entirely in keeping with the spirit of the fancy elevators and telephones – they do not work but they look and sound great.

Given this phenomenon, it is easy to conclude that platform number 12 is simply meant to be a model platform inaugurated with pomp (or more accurately, pompousness) by some limelight-seeking politician. On closer observation, however, it dawns on you that the platform is right next door to the VIP parking area of the railway station. In the era of state control over public infrastructure VIP meant the political elites. In the democratic capitalism of the post-liberalisation era, it apparently means all those who have the means to pay extra for their cars to be brought right up to the platform. Platform number one in the Pune railway station has been 'renovated' along similar lines. Both stand as rude reminders to the general population about the way public amenities are meant to be, but will never be for those without purchasing power in India. Crucial public infrastructure in India has always been deeply segregated – education and health care being only two instances. But in the Delhi of the 1990s, the examples of absurdity, of such oases of luxury can be multiplied: the park in the neighbourhood, numerous traffic 'roundabouts' that have suffered the same fate and housing estates in Delhi's upmarket suburbs bearing names like Malibu Towne and Manhattan Towers without a trace of irony.

Secession of the middle class

Of course, much more than absurdity and aesthetics is at stake here. Delhi today is an everyday drama of conflict over public space, with millions of what one writer referred to in another context as 'flat-out, ding-dong, slap-up kinds of quarrels. How is one to make sense of this chaos, this urban stew created by over 20 million souls pushing and yelling their way through their daily work? Given a ground situation where the most basic infrastructure remains a distant dream for most of the population, the setting up of parallel infrastructure has been widely described as the *secession of the middle classes* from the city. Secession is certainly part of the problem, but is that the sum of the problem. Does the term 'secession' adequately describe the processes of definition and exclusion? Consider the term 'middle classes'. In the mid-1980s there was a hugely popular television serial called 'Hum Log' (roughly translates as 'We Folks'). The serial revolved around a Punjabi family in Delhi and was peopled by characters who were so distinctly, so quintessentially middle-class – schoolteachers, struggling theatre artistes, small business owners and shopkeepers.

Today the term is so heavily loaded, so indiscriminately wrapped in claim-making by anybody who cares to use it that it is now more an obfuscation than a description. Every culture in the modern era has its be-

loved class myth. Socialists believed that the proletariat would seize political power and use it responsibly and democratically, the capitalists believe in rags-to-riches under the incredibly open economic system that capitalism is meant to be. Our very own Subcontinental version of the class myth is that of the benign but enterprising middle class. Describing anybody other than the handful of big industrialists as 'middle class' is a well-tested strategy with the Indians who make up this pampered class.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Recent work by sociologists and economists has questioned the validity of the widespread use of the term 'middle-class' to describe an obviously pampered and privileged upper crust that influences most major educational, financial and political decisions in the country. And the one thing that so-called middle class in India not simply influences but *controls* is the public imagination. Often this is literally true. Compare the severe difficulty that community radio initiatives like *Namma Dhwani* in Karnataka have had in taking off to the recent deregulation of private FM radio channels dedicated to low-information, high entertainment (dare we say low-IQ, high bullshit) music programmes. These FM radio channels, like most television news and entertainment channels, have incredibly narrow class bases compared to the reach of the state-controlled Doordarshan and community radio (if the latter were ever allowed to flourish).

Ironically, as many have noted, privatisation in India has meant that the government continues to control public broadcasting media with massive untapped potential for education and information dissemination (such as community radio) while it gives a free reign to middle-class entertainment channels. Thus the middle-class maintains near-complete influence over the public imagination in Indian cities. The discourse on illegality versus citizenship and the domination of the nostalgic narrative on discussions on the city would not be possible without this influence. The term 'secession' usually describes a group of people hitherto constituting a polity who have for some reason withdrawn entirely from the polity. If this simply were the case with the middle classes, it would not pose such a severe problem.

The 'middle class' in India has not simply set up parallel infrastructure; it seeks to go further by dominating public policy and public life. Even when it hibernates in its centrally air-conditioned spaces it is really everywhere – constructing flyovers, parks and shrill discourses. It has succeeded in transforming its peculiar and whimsical notions of urban aesthetics, hygiene and citizenship into a generalised public discourse on these matters. While earlier the members of this class at

least paid lip service to the notion of public opinion and the media as windows to the rest of the country, now all they seek is that public discourse and public space should become mirrors reflecting their dearly held notions. This is the reason that platform 12, every neighbourhood park and every posh new housing estate and bowling alley have become polished shining surfaces throwing the glory of the middle class back onto itself.

What, in the circumstances, is the potential for politics in Indian cities. Given the daily assault on the urban poor, it would be difficult to imagine such a powerless, floating population to engage in politics of any meaningful kind. A dense heterogeneity of populations such as that found in urban areas does not necessarily mean a diversity of issues at the political level. For the everyday conflict in urban settings to translate itself into a vibrant spring of political activity, one needs to ensure a more level playing field. In other words, a degree of *accessibility* of different sections of the population to the skills, tools and material resources required

for political organisation and articulation is crucial. This in fact is impossible under the present circumstances since the one thing that is regulated to ridiculous extremes in our cities today is access; access to housing, water, electricity, transport, employment indeed, to the very category of 'resident' or 'citizen' itself.

Yet, it may be possible to end on a positive note – the intense and dizzying spatial dislocation effected by the global juggernaut has made people's organisations consciously reclaim their

immediate environments as a site for their politics. The work of some exemplary urban political organisations in Delhi needs to be mentioned here. Through a sustained campaign of protest and consciousness-raising, such organisations have continually questioned the processes of exclusion that are the premise of urban living in India today. Radical politics has often emerged from situations of absurdity and desperation and these organisations have through their version of urban politics refined our understanding of citizenship, democracy, participation and civic engagement. Political organisation and work will have to be sustained over a much larger period for it to make a significant dent in public opinion and more importantly to make a serious difference to the status of the non-privileged in urban areas. Only then can we begin to share the optimism in the vision of urban life quoted at the beginning of this article. For the moment however, urban grassroots political organisations have shown the way. Most importantly, they remind us of the need to retain a commitment to the politics of the possible in the increasingly impossible situations that the Indian city creates everyday. ▽

'Middle-class': an obviously pampered and privileged upper crust that influences most major educational, financial and political decisions

Flowers and dust

Irony and brilliance in Tibetan literature

Red Poppies is a deceptively simple novel. We get sentences such as "I am an idiot" standing alone as paragraphs and descriptions of a girl's breasts as "a pair of frightened little rabbits". But just as the supposed idiocy of the narrator contrasts with his flashes of wisdom, so there is an intentional dissonance in the politics, allusions, style and opinions of the author, Alai. If at first this seems just a crazy tale of love and war in the feudal highlands, the story insidiously works its way into being the contemporary masterpiece of Tibetan literature.

The recognition of literature from this otherwise immensely popular part of the world as exactly that, literature – not journalism, political commentary, religious text or human-interest story – does not come easy. This difficulty certainly has to do with a relative lack of Tibetan fiction (written in any language) but it also has to do with an emphasis on the religious, historical and political over the literary. In Kathmandu, the book, which was completely sold out in its hardback version at major bookstores in Oxford, London, Boston and New York, did not elicit any recognition from the normally knowledgeable manager of a bookstore specialising in things Tibetan. At last she vaguely recollected some new novel that was tucked into a small shelf in the back with a few East Asian paperbacks, *Sorrows of War*, *Wild Swans* and *Shanghai Baby*. For most people, including the bookstore proprietor, Tibet and novels just do not go together, even less so if the novel has been written in Chinese.

As many scholars have recently pointed out, international interest in Tibet has focused on very particular religious and mystical elements of its culture that have been deemed valuable and endangered, to the unfortunate neglect of other important aspects, including secular literature. Since the early 1980s, the publications of writers such as Dhondrup Gyal and Tashi Dawa



Red Poppies

by Alai

(translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin)

Penguin Books, India, New Delhi, 2002

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reviewed by
Kabir Mansingh Heimsath

have been immensely popular within Tibet, but little has come out to the exile or international community. While writers such as Jamyang Norbu (*Mandala of Sherlock Holmes*) and Patrick French (*Younghusband*, and *Tibet Tibet*) have been hailed in India, the writers from Tibet itself have remained in relative obscurity. This is changing now as scholars, translators, and an interested international community slowly realise that Tibet is an extant and culturally vital place. There is also a

reluctant but inevitable acceptance of Chinese as a language that Tibetans may utilise, just as Indian writers have thrived writing in English. Two collections of poems and short stories from Tibet have been recently published (*Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses* edited and translated by Herbert J Batt in 2001, and *Song of the Snow Lion* edited by Manoa's Frank Stewart in 2000), and Alai's full-length novel is a fresh breeze, if not a whirlwind, in the literary offerings from Tibet now available in translation.

Frozen tradition

Red Poppies is set in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham during the first half of the 20th century. Many areas of Kham and Amdo, not close geographically or politically to either the Chinese or Tibetan administrative centres, were ruled during this time as independent kingdoms. Though the setting of this story is crucial, there is no pretence of it being historical in any strict sense. Real place names and dates are left out and there is an almost flippant attitude towards the happenings of the world. The story opens one snowy spring morning in the estate of Maichi; the chieftain and the elder son have gone over the mountains to request military help from the Chinese, but the reader is with the younger, idiot, son, who frolics in bed. In the first chapter we hear,

Since earliest childhood, I never understood why the land of the Chinese was not only the source of our much-needed silk, tea, and salt, but also the source of power for Chieftain clans. Someone once told me that it was because of weather. I said, "oh, because of weather". But deep down I was thinking, Maybe so, but weather can't be the only reason. If so, why didn't the weather change me into something else? As far as I know, every place has weather. There's fog, and the wind blows. When the wind is hot, the snow becomes rain. Then the wind turns cold, and the rain

freezes into snow. Weather causes changes in everything. You stare wide-eyed at something, and just when it's about to change into something else, you have to blink. And in that instant everything returns to its original form.

Clearly, Alai and the idiot son have priorities other than politics.

The metaphor is not just a politically correct way for Alai as a writer in China to deal with a sensitive topic but also sets the sarcastic tone for the entire story. When an emissary of the Chinese republic who has supplied machine guns to the Maichis and is encouraging them to grow poppies for opium sits under a plaque from the Qin emperor that pronounces "INSTRUCT AND ASSIMILATE BARBARIANS" the irony is intentional. We know for whom the plaque was intended and for whom it is applicable.

There is a sense that the Tibetans find the Chinese to be somewhat weak in character and culture but unfortunately strong at times in military and money. Dealings with them are inevitably blemished, "You've already tainted your reputation by seeking help from the Han Chinese. You have violated the rules, so how can you expect to preserve your name?", and a latent racism runs through the story. When the Chinese emissary makes a gift of opium paraphernalia to the chieftain's wife, she asks, "Why didn't he give this to the Chieftain?" The Tibetan maidservant answers, "Maybe he's in love with you. After all, Mistress is also a Han". The narrator's mother is also a Han Chinese wife of the chieftain. She was a prostitute gifted to the Maichi Chieftain, who had drunken sex and then married her when it became clear she was carrying his child. Not exactly a flattering view of the Chinese mother(land?). There is no question that these are Tibetans and anyone else is looked upon with a mild disdain. Political alliances are made for the sake of expediency, but not out of any real tie to China itself.

As events play out, the communist-nationalist civil war is discussed in terms of "Red" and "White" as if the problem is not about ideology or strategy but simply about whether it is going to rain or snow.

Lhasa, meanwhile, is far away and exerts no political influence over this region. The one character that hails from central Tibet ends up retreating to a cave and gets his tongue cut out. A woman who returns from an arduous pilgrimage to the holy city is scorned and thrown out of the house in which she suckled the younger son. There is a fierce pride in local clans, tradition and the land itself that does not seem to include any such greater

There is a sense that the Tibetans find the Chinese to be somewhat weak in character and culture but unfortunately strong at times in military and money

"Tibet" even in the face of Chinese invasion. An exile Tibetan activist once complained about how post-modernists were busy deconstructing the 'nation' while the Tibetans were fighting just to get one recognised. Alai's portrayal is definitely post-modern (or pre-modern) and also that of the borderlands; his characters take pride in a genuine identity that has nothing to do with a nation of any kind. The structure and institutions change around and within the Maichi fiefdom, but there is a strong sense that these are just changes moving across a land and people that will remain, whatever the weather.

Without over-reading, it is easy to see several parallels between the climate of Alai's fictional fiefdom of early 20th century Kham and contemporary China. The most striking similarity is the sense of change, of imminent happenings that pervade both the novel and mainland Chi-

na. This is a common theme in world literature but it will be unfamiliar to those who have tried to become acquainted with Tibet. In almost any other context – scholarly, Buddhist, political, journalistic or even the little fiction from exile – Tibet is presented as a land stood still, static and peaceful and secure in its traditions prior to the Chinese invasion. Not so in *Red Poppies*. From the very first pages Alai draws a sense of tension, not calmness: "This waiting was always accompanied by fearful anxiety. The cascading water splashing on the flagstones four storeys below made her quaver, since it produced the shuddering sensation of a body splattering on the hard ground". A sense of mistrust and unease pervades even as the kingdom/country becomes more and more powerful. As someone who grew up during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Alai's preoccupation with erratic displays of human cruelty and weakness is understandable.

The idiot, and most young Chinese, are frustrated with the customs and traditions that have been in place for too long. Yet there is also a suspicion of the trends forcing themselves from outside. The idiot realises, and his chieftain father grudgingly concedes, that the way of the future has less to do with military might and more with economic astuteness. China's embrace of market capitalism is mixed with a distinct nostalgia for a more unambiguous and noble, if imagined, past. In *Red Poppies*, competition between the brothers centres on one who sticks to old standards of heroism and power and another who is open to change and able to foresee the trends of history, mimicking the current politicking going on in Communist Party circles. The Maichi Chieftain's half-successful attempts to reconcile between hard-line and reformist sons also reflects the position of recent Chinese patriarchs with respect to their successors. The scepticism, or even cynicism, with which the idiot views the entrenched authority of his family is also

familiar to post-Cultural Revolution Chinese and Tibetans. This has less to do with one institution or another and more to do with wariness towards authority in any form. It is important to realise the tone has nothing to do with the denigration of "old" Tibetan in favour of "new" Chinese, but only the criticism of entrenched ideas of any kind. The much applauded father of contemporary Tibetan literature, Dhondrup Gyal, wrote a story called "The Flower Killed by Frost" in which the frost of old traditions and values kills the flower of love between two innocent lovers. Similarly, but not without extra irony, Alai's 'smart' characters are unable to cope with change (which, to mix metaphors, comes in the form of flowers) because of their entrenched attitudes, while the 'idiot' muddles through the confusion with a wisdom born from impudence.

Epic intrigues

In terms of material it is hard to imagine a more exciting combination: noble families, sons coming of age, beautiful princesses, love and sex (only rarely together), battles and intrigue, opium, daggers, horses and machine guns... all in the vast grasslands of eastern Tibet. The book has already been adapted into a Chinese TV serial. It will not be a feel-good war story in Hollywood or Madame Mao's propaganda style but rather more film-noir with violence erupting when least expected, quirky camera perspectives, and an anti-hero stumbling through the tumult of reality. In some ways the plot is the most traditional aspect of the book, not just in terms of love and war, but also in its similarity to the oral epic of King Gesar of Ling. This collection of somewhat savage legends about Tibet's ancient warrior king, his minister, his horse and various women and enemies is especially relevant to the area of Kham from which Alai hails. The stories of King Gesar offer an alternative to the more conventional Buddhist histories of Tibet and are decidedly violent and fiercely regional in tone.

These days so much writing about Tibet seeks out the mystical; Alai seems to tease us even when admitting the fantastic,

...we received reliable information that a large group of shamans working for Chieftain Wangpo was gathering at the southern border to prepare curses for the Maichi family.

An extraordinary war was about to begin....

The magic was spectacular, but I was bored – the sky was as clear as if it had been washed, and I couldn't see any meteorological changes.

While there is no denying the excitement, it is hard to miss the seriousness of his book. Alai confronts difficult questions that an action writer would simply gloss, and even seems eager, with his idiot's voice, to comment on some of the more problematic relations of society. Those who are generally called servants in most English writing dealing with Tibet are referred to as slaves or even livestock. The immense authority of the chieftain in his own lands and the inequalities of traditional Tibetan society are laid bare. This is not class-criticism in the communist style though, the mutual friendship and responsibility that exists between the so-called slaves and the aristocratic family is as evident as the exploitation and abuse. Communist ideology is irrelevant here and it is the chieftains themselves, not the masses, who bring about the destruction of the noble families. Other attitudes that reek of chauvinism are those towards women and Han Chinese; but even here Alai displays a sensitivity through the idiot that questions, and implicitly comments upon, what might be considered the standards of society.

The Chieftain's second, shrivelled, drug-addicted, rat-eating, Han Chinese prostitute of a wife might seem a formulaic character except that she is also a loving mother, a competent manager and a

trusted confidant who, above all, has an individual personality. When things approach climax and just about everybody in the story has betrayed everybody else, she remains the locus of love and loyalty to more than one sordid Tibetan man. This is no cartoon evil witch but an individual brought to life in the midst of a tumultuous adventure. Another Han character who initially seems a stereotypical arch villain re-emerges as a genuine friend and advisor at a time when close ties are being severed. There is no question that this is a tale of Tibet, but it is even more so a story of humans – of growing old, love, jealousy, betrayal, cruelty and affection. In this way Alai does not write of the 'Tibet' that foreign readers have come to expect, but rather as a place as unique and real as any other, as his home.

The tone of Alai's writing is difficult to place, which is what makes this a great novel in addition to an enthralling one. Discussions with those who read Chinese suggest that the eccentric ease of Howard Golblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's translation is faithful to the innovative technique of the original. There is an almost humorous cruelty here that is disconcerting but somehow cumulatively conveys a rough tenderness for his place and time, "Only with me could she wave her ladle with such style in front of a mob of starving people who were staring hungrily at her hand". Alai manages to evoke the tragic (but all-too common) paradox of wealth in the midst of famine with this simple but sinister turn of phrase.

The use of an idiot as narrator is of course notable, but Alai's reliance on his voice is as casual as the hero's own idiocy.

Once in a while I wanted to look smart. The Chieftain had clearly intended for his sons to compete with each other, mainly to see if his idiot son was more capable than his brother of becoming the next Chieftain. I'd seen through his intent, and boldly said so.

But the words were barely out of my mouth when the mistress turned to the Chieftain, and said, 'Your younger son is truly an idiot.' She slapped me again.

'Mistress,' my brother said, 'what good does that do? He'll still be an idiot no matter how much you hit him.'

Mother walked over to the window to look outside, while I stared at my brother's smart face and smiled foolishly.

He burst out laughing, even though nothing funny had happened.

Alai is not careless towards his writing but rather takes advantage of this nimble voice to break away from tradition and create a perspective that does not pretend to be entirely of one time and place. The idiot is a trickster character who takes the role of leading protagonist as well as a narrator who is often absurd – the unusual combination gives this story its peculiar yet intense flavour.

The irreverence with which Buddhism is treated will strike those who have the standard misty image of Tibet. The violence is graphic and in far more evidence than any spirituality,

In my tale, two people deserved to die, a man and a woman. But only the man had died. His mouth was open, as if he were confused about all that had happened. My brother stuffed a green berry into the dead man's mouth to improve its appearance.

After a series of murders and suicides that result from raw lust, this: "From then on, the incinerated woman and her sons entered my father's nightmares, and his only path to tranquillity was to hold a large-scale Buddhist ceremony". While rituals seem efficacious in obtaining sleep, another episode seems to convey the ultimate futility of belief,

When they first appeared, I often heard the buzzing of muted prayers, but that had stopped. Now they simply died, one after another. They died by the creek and were baked by the sun, swelled up like bloated sacks that were carried on the water to edge of heaven.

There are four religious figures in the story and each is quite distinct but none especially favourable. The family's lama and the head of a nearby monastery are used only as pragmatic magicians or ritualists and each competes for the chieftain's favour in sometimes childish and petty ways. The third, a monk from central Tibet, enters the tale at

China's embrace of market capitalism is mixed with a distinct nostalgia for a more unambiguous and noble, if imagined, past

the same time as the fourth, a British Christian missionary, and the comparison between the two is explicit. Each unsuccessfully tries to convert the locals to his creed. While most of the locals find the Englishman likeable, they take an immediate aversion to the monk-scholar from Lhasa and his particularly puritanical school of Buddhism. The Englishman rides away on a mule but the Lhasa monk ends up in a dungeon, and finally his tongue is extracted for his arrogance. When this monk, incidentally named Wangpo Yeshe – 'Powerful Wisdom' is humiliated it is clear that neither Lhasa nor its big religious institutions have much authority in these grasslands.

Later, the tongue-less Wangpo Yeshe becomes the official historian – is Alai restoring voice to a mutilated but still active monastic institution? Or is he commenting on the persistence of true scholars in

the face of persecution (so recently experienced in China)? Or is he just being caustic towards the role of both monk and historian,

I'd wanted to take the tongueless historian, but Father said no. 'I'll send him as soon as either one of you can prove you deserve someone like him.'

'What if we both deserve it?' I asked. 'We don't have two historians.'

'That's easy. I'll grab another arrogant scholar and cut out his tongue'.

As a writer, Alai is obviously aware of the precarious position that scholars hold in the presentation of 'facts', especially in contemporary China. In several instances the 'idiot' comments on the value of historiography and the importance of having an impartial writer to witness events in person; and it is to his benefit that Wangpo Yeshe survives the mutilation and becomes his trusted, if speechless, friend.

Bardo

The final and 49th chapter of the English edition is subtitled with the name of the original Chinese publication – 'The Dust Settles'. Again, the irony is explicit when the coming of Red Chinese and the destruction of the Maichi estate are evoked with a sense of calm and closure. But, the 49th day also marks the end of the passage between death and rebirth, the *bardo*: Alai has written *Red Poppies* as the first part of a trilogy.

The standard perspective on Tibet has the chaos beginning with the Chinese invasion in 1950, but in this story the frightening transition occurs within the Maichi family prior to the coming of the communists. To be sure, the implements of destruction are from China – the opium trade, modern weapons and even disease – but the corrosive agents are Tibetans themselves. Blood feuds, betrayal, decadence and other human foibles take their toll before any real destruction from

the communists. Syphilis comes with Chinese prostitutes, but it is the decadence and ignorance of Tibetan chieftains that enables it to spread.

All this political allusion and interpretation is demanded by the place and time, but the heart of this novel unquestionably resides in its characters. As mentioned, Alai and his narrator are generally dismissive of outer events and it is individual thoughts and relations that take priority. In a characteristically ruthless moment (emphasis in original),

I really was lonely. So too were the Chieftan, the future Chieftain, and the Chieftain's wives, now that there were no wars, no holidays, and no reason to punish the servants. *Suddenly I understood why Father kept creating incidents*: over the defection of a minor fortress, he'd gone in-

land to petition the provincial government, planted opium, and ordered his soldiers to undergo a new style of training; over a

In this story, the implements of destruction are from China – the opium trade, modern weapons and even disease – but the corrosive agents are Tibetans themselves

woman, he'd killed a loyal headman; and he'd let monks fight over favours, like women do. But understanding this didn't lessen my loneliness.

The killing, starvation, and betrayal proceed, after all, from our own emotions and afflictions. Yet even while understanding this we still continue to feel the same pain and produce the same causes that bring about the cycle of life and death. The dust in chapter 49 arises from the destruction of the estate and contains the remains of the Chieftain and his family. It rises in a small whirlwind up to the sky... but, as the Red Army moves over the next pass, the remains drifts down to settle on the same stones and the same land from whence they came. There is a saying in Tibetan, "The clouds move past, but the sky remains". Despite severe changes in the weather Tibetans are still very much present in Tibet, and they can look forward to the coming incarnations of this brilliant story. Δ

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The Oxford India Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology (2 volumes)

edited by Veena Das
OUP, New Delhi, 2003
pp xvi, viii+1660, INR 3750
ISBN 0 19564582 0

In what is probably the most comprehensive compilation of essays on South Asian sociology, the *Oxford India Companion* brings together the work of 62 leading scholars on topics ranging from conceptual frameworks to agrarian practice. Edited by Veena Das, professor of anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, USA, the handsome two-volume set is divided into nine sections on social ecology, social morphology, culture, family and kinship, religion, economy, education and politics. In presenting this work, writes Das in the introduction, "I hope for reflection on the processes through which forms of knowledge about Indian society and culture have been generated, as well as the institutional mechanisms for the consolidation of concerns in social science research in the country".



The nature of underdevelopment and regional structure in Nepal: A Marxist analysis

by Baburam Bhattarai
Adroit, New Delhi, 2003
pp xx+540, INR 600
ISBN 81 87392 39 8

Baburam Bhattarai, architect, student of development, and ideologue of Nepal's Maoist movement, is leader of the five-member Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) negotiating team currently in talks with the Nepali government. This work, material from his mid-1980s doctoral thesis, with an updated preface by Bhattarai and foreword by CPN (M) chairman Prachanda, presents "an historico-materialist interpretation of the Nepalese society so that it may help to change it for the better" (emphasis in original). With many endnotes, charts, diagrams and maps, this work is a Marxist perspective on the history and political economy of Nepal and presents the guiding thoughts of the Nepali Maoists' leading ideologue.



The Empire of Capital

by Ellen Meiksins Wood
LeftWord, New Delhi, 2003
pp 153, INR 275
ISBN 81 87496 29 0

Drawing on theoretical perspectives and a wide reading of classical and modern history, Ellen Meiksins Wood, scholar of political science and former editor with the *New Left Review*, analyses the current features of American global

power. Noting that neither the US nor any other power bloc constitutes an empire in the colonial sense of direct administration, Wood nonetheless draws attention to the political, economic and military might of the US, arguing that in essence this constitutes a modern-day *imperium*.



Blood Against the Snows: The Tragic Story of Nepal's Royal Dynasty

By Jonathan Gregson
4th Estate, London, 2002
pp xiii+226, GBP 8.99
ISBN 1 84115 785 6

Nepal's palace massacre of June 2001 sparked interest around the world in the country's history and current affairs. Here, British journalist Jonathan Gregson traces the evolution of the Nepali state from 18th century founder Prithvi Narayan Shah up to the time of the current monarch, King Gyanendra. Drawing on "unique contacts among the surviving courtiers and members of the royal family", Gregson, the only non-Nepali journalist to interview King Birendra in the decade preceding his murder, closely narrates the months leading up to the massacre and its immediate aftermath.



Displaced within homelands: The IDPs of Bangladesh and the Region

edited by Chowdhury R Abrar and Mahendra P Lama
Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, Dhaka, 2003
pp 213, BDT 300/USD 20

During the last two decades, approximately 25 million people have become internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 40 countries, often as a consequence of development projects, conditions of violence, or environmental disasters. A large number of these IDPs live in South Asia, where they are denied special legal status as refugees, despite the fact that they have many special needs arising from migration under duress. With contributions from 15 researchers, this volume, edited by Chowdhury R Abrara of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit and Mahendra P Lama of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, focuses principally on IDP issues in Bangladesh, though cases studies are also drawn from Burma and Sri Lanka, and several essays explore legal, political and theoretical dimensions of coerced migration.

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

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

Zabardast nayi duniya*

If South Asia were more prosperous and less divided politically, our skies would be congested with aircraft flying hither and yon keeping pace with our population. Sure, the railways left behind by the British (because they could not very well uproot the tracks and cart them back) serve the purpose of transport in the Subcontinent. But people take the train mainly because they have no planes. Show me one man, woman or child from Sasaram, Bihar, who would not prefer a direct flight to Vellore for a cataract operation rather than a three-day schlep on second class three tier, that too sometimes on wooden berths.

And then there is the matter of borders, those frontiers that we are making more sharply defined by the day on the ground so that it is impossible to easily fly back and forth above. There is barbed wire on the ground and warped wires in the brain. Which is why we remain the most backward region in the world after Saharan Africa, where, too, people take surface transport because societies cannot afford the air.

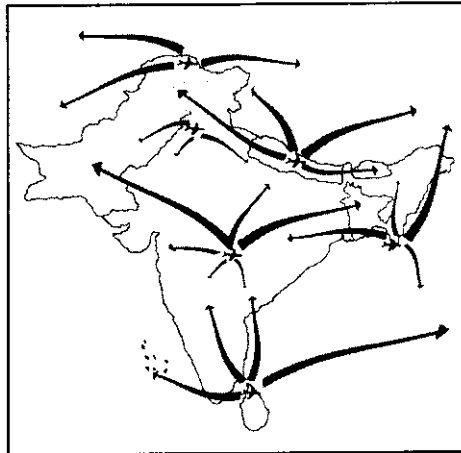
Because South Asia is so poor, the air links between its cities are designed to cater to the ultra rich. (What is known as the all India urban English-speaking middle class (IUESMC) is ultra rich, by the way, by average all-India and South Asian rural standards.) So, imagine the enormous dullness of being when all you have filling our

skies are Bata Shoe Company salesmen travelling from Kolkata to Chennai for an annual motivational conference, starlets flying from Mumbai to Dilli (or Deh'li) to inaugurate a Swatch showroom, Haryana real estate brokers salivating on their way to the Kathmandu casinos, morose Dhaka matrons with appointments to catch at Kolkata nursing homes, and track-two India-Pakistan peaceniks zipping in to Lahore from Dilli (when the flights start, as they will, mark my words, as surely as the cookie crumbles and the *poori* puffs up) for a round of self-flagellation ('why do we do this to each other, waaah, sniffle sniffle, sharp intake of breath').

My South Asia of tomorrow is a land of *gur* and honey, where prosperity has arrived because the corrupt decided to share their ill-gotten gold with the rest of the population, and where Jamali and Vajpayee have decided to become pen pals and let each bygone be a bygone. In this brave new egalitarian society, brother

will not bash up brother across the LOC, and sloppy kisses will replace eye-for-an-eye, and shouts of 'bhaijaan!' will rend the air making it difficult to concentrate on one's *daal roti*. In such an incredibly *zabardast nayi duniya*, friends, there will be prosperity so that there will be a seat in an airplane for everyone. And every city of any note will be linked to every other city of any note.

The projected flight paths of nayi duniya can be seen as they begin to take shape in the accompanying map. This is an airline consortium, the largest in the world, whose participating companies include Jaffna Airlines, Cherrapunji Aviation MCD-PWD Airline Cooperative, Indus Delta Airlines, Shigatse Air Taxi, Upper-Lower Assam Airlines Corporation, Pathanavigation, Trans Khulna Airways and Madhesi Vayu Sewa Nigam.



These airlines serve hubs that are shunned by the IUESMC, and the air network is dense enough to make one weep for what is not yet but what will be if only that pen pal idea works. Simultaneously with this other great things would happen in the world. Begum Zia would attend Sheikh Hasina's *iftaar* party, Girija Prasad Koirala would send King Gyanendra a *chatamari* for reconciliation, Ranil and Chandrika would decide to together attend Prabhakaran's parties to indicate that there were no hard feelings (meaning, between Ranil and

Chandrika), and Benazir, Mian Nawaz and the generalissimo would take the Indus Delta Airlines that takes off from Multan and lands in Hyderabad (Sindh) for a togetherness holiday.

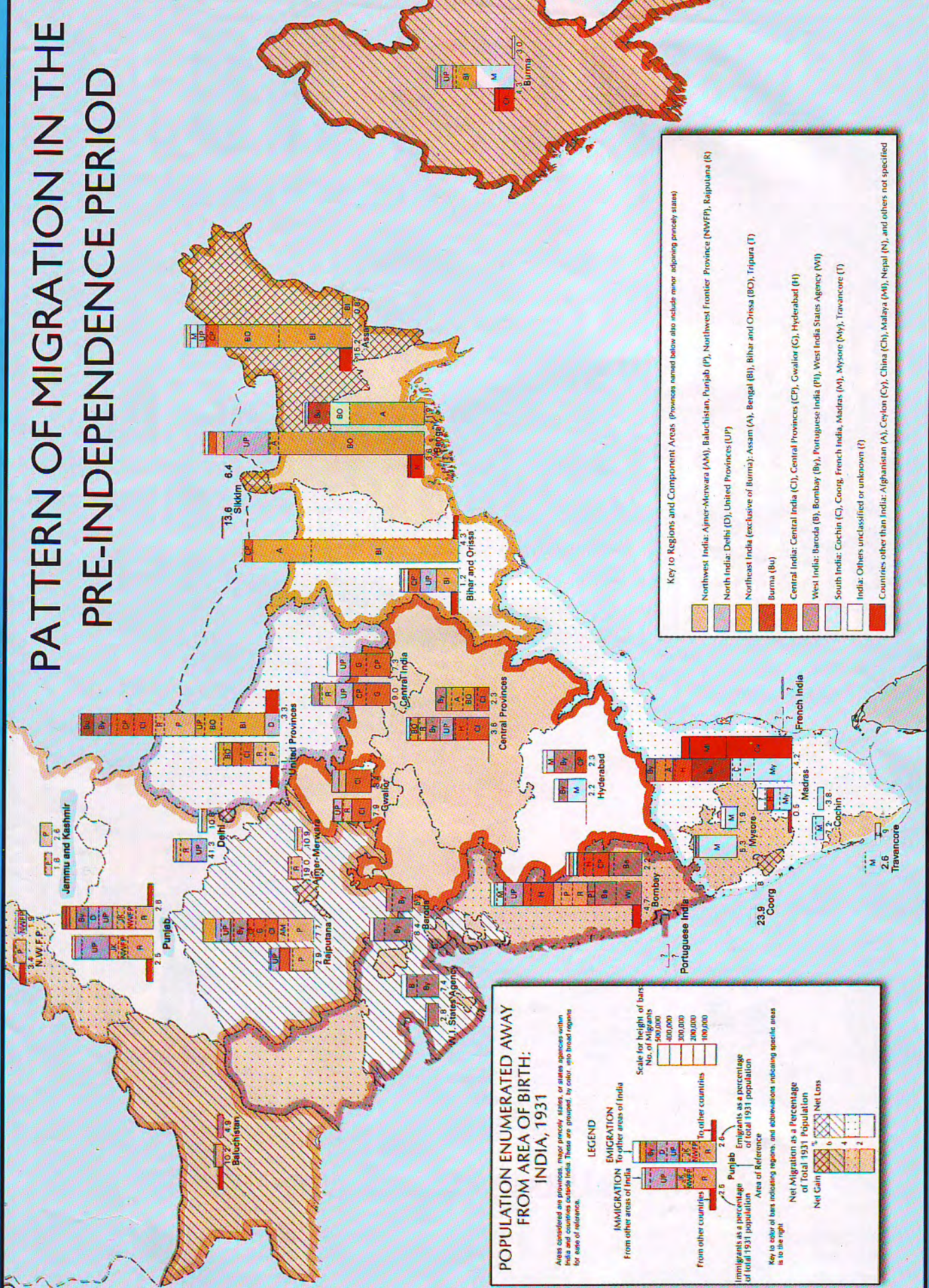
Multan would be an airline hub, linked to Iranian cities and those in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana. Asansol in West Bengal and Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh would similarly cover the great Northern Gangetic Plain. Jaffna would have flights to Rangoon and Lashadweep. Guwahati would have regular flights not only to Chittagong, but also to Lhasa and Shigatse and Biratnagar. Passengers flying to Vaishno Devi from Pokhara would change planes in Pilibhit for Jammu. And so on and so forth.

This is the future I see for us all. You go work it out.

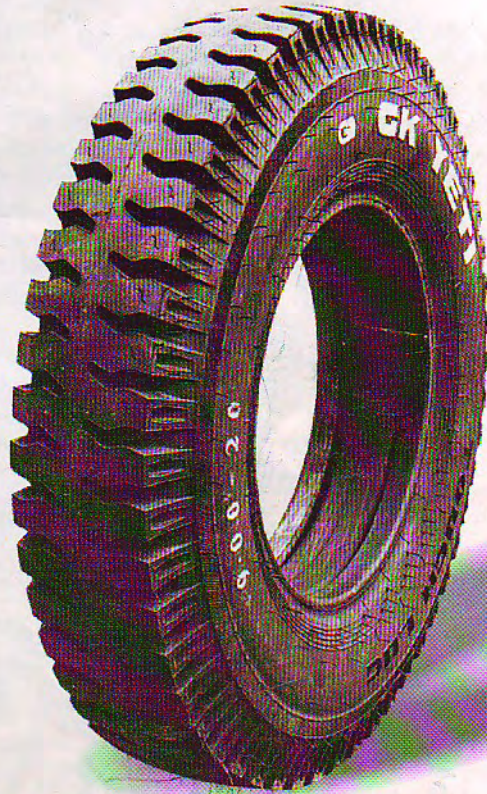
Kamoh Dixit

* fantastic new world

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Tyre: GORKHKALI RIB
Size: 6.50-16-8PR
Uses: Mini Bus/Jeep

 **GORAKHKALI RUBBER UDYOG LTD.**

Marketing Office:

P.O.Box No.: 1700, Kalimati, Kathmandu

Tel: 274537, 271102, 276274

Fax: 00977-1-270367

E-mail: grul@wlink.com.np

Plant & Head Office:

Majuwa, Deurali, Gorkha, Nepal

Tel: 065-40079

Fax: 00977-65-40080