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HIMĀL

SOUTH ASIAN

Jadoo come home

Fire on the beach

WTO Debacle: Now wait for the backlash

Lankan women in search of peace

The arid orthodoxy of hydraulic despots

The Enlightenment vs. ~~Hindutva~~ Hinduism

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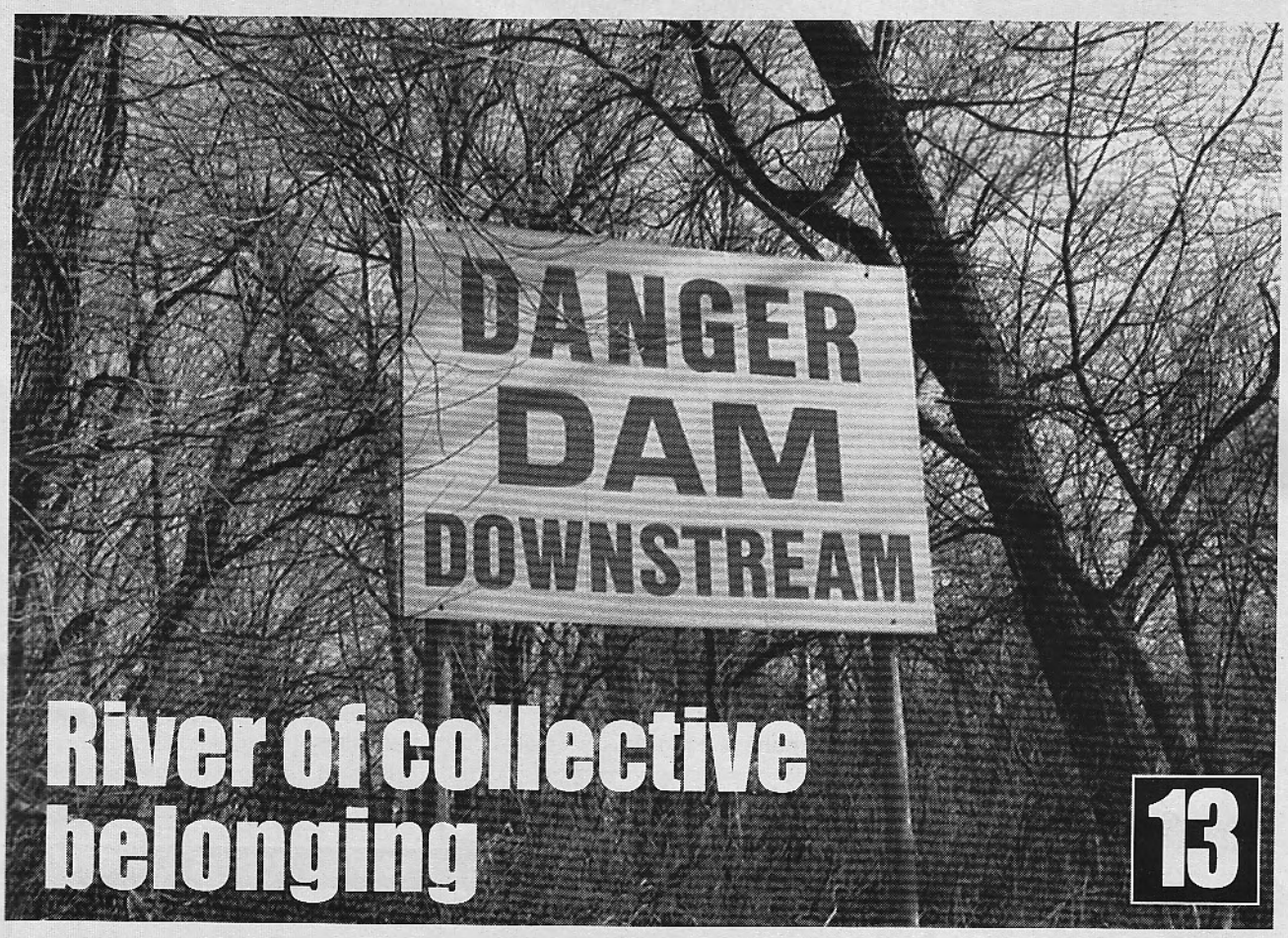

River of collective belonging

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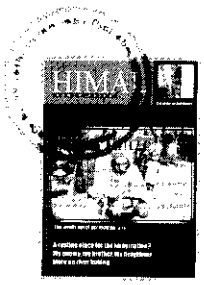
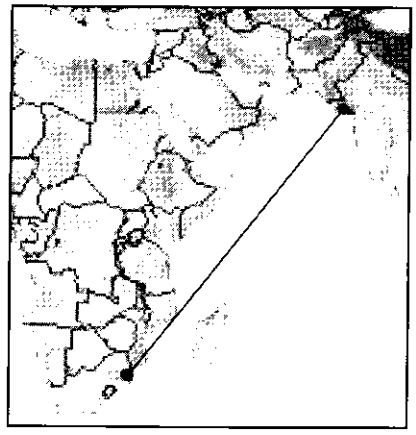
Cover design by **Indra Shrestha.** A pristine Maldivian resort against flame from the fire of the riot in Male on 20 September.



The ironies of history

IN HER interesting article "A Resting Place for the Imagination" (*Himal* September 2003), Parvati Raman discusses the meanings of the term 'diaspora'. She joins issue with what she interprets as my "questioning of the legitimacy of diasporic identities" in the case of South African Indians in my essay 'Diasporic dispositions' (*Himal* December 2002). There is much to both agree and disagree with in her article and I welcome a productive and historically informed debate on what analytical and political meanings the much used, and abused, category 'diaspora' have today.

Let me start by assuring Raman that my intention in the admittedly polemical essay under discussion was never to question the "legitimacy" of diasporic identities as genuinely held political-cultural identities, and even less to assume the existence of any "authentic diasporic subject" modelled on the Jewish experience, as Raman claims. My intention was to demonstrate the profound irony that resides in the fact that those of Indian origin in South Africa today who most eagerly embrace a diasporic identity organised around a central theme of loss, of displacement (not migration) from the motherland, and of overcoming hardships in their new land of residence are those who suffered the least.



Imagined woes

Although the Gujarati passenger Indians suffered under the racist governance in Durban and elsewhere, their predicament bears no resemblance to the plight of the indentured labourers from 1860 onwards. The nature of the predominantly Gujarati migration to various parts of Africa and elsewhere from the nineteenth century onwards can best be described as driven by transnational familial economic strategies of trade. Gujaratis in the region, including South Africa, have maintained close links with Gujarat through religious institutions, ties, marriages, regular visits, and so on.

There is no doubt that India, and more specifically Gujarat, was, and remains, absolutely vital to the identities of these relatively affluent groups. In fact, that significance is much more than just as a resting place of the imagination but as the very origin of the cultural practices, language and moral habitus of these communities. This pattern of sustained contact and interdependence was true of the period Raman deals with, as well as during the apartheid era and after.

The same environment of transnational Gujaratis and some north Indian migrants also provided, from an early point in time, an alert and interested audience for news of India (still reported on one page in the old Durban based weekly *The Leader*). They embraced the anti-colonial ideology and the new 'Indianness' which arose in the twentieth century, articulated first and foremost by a Gujarati Hindu, Mohandas Gandhi. The family histories of Gujaratis I know in South Africa have not been related to me as stories of loss and displacement, but as stories of daring and adventure sometimes under adverse circumstances, crowned by success and affluence because of thrift and hard work.

Even more interestingly, the framing of such stories in terms of 'diaspora' is a very recent phenomenon, conditioned by the fact that the foundational and hegemonic narrative of post-apartheid South Africa is that of a suffering people. The history of Indians has, accordingly, been framed as a homogenous story of loss, displacement and suffering, ie, a standardised version of the history of indentured labourers. There is a further irony in the fact that this version of the South African Indian history, which has been elaborated and painstakingly documented by generations of progressive and non-racial intellectuals, today is eagerly embraced and appropriated by the most conservative and communal, and even racist, forces in the 'Indian' community in South Africa.

The second intention of my essay was to show how problematic the encounter with the actually existing India is for many South African Indians who embark on roots tourism with only vague ideas of the Subcontinent. Raman is absolutely correct in pointing out that this is a broader and more general problem of what I would call transnational populations. It is also true, as Raman suggests, that a large part of the elite and middle-class in India and other countries in the Subcontinent have a very problematic relationship with the realities of their own countries.

There is no doubt that a growing resentment against the poor, and the 'backward Muslims', have been central motives in the widespread middle class adoption of a hard-headed Hindu nationalist rhetoric in India. However, my intention was to question the existence of any "authentic diasporic subject". The people described in my essay (and many other similar accounts) are all descendants of indentured labourers who left the Subcontinent lured by the prospect of a new life across the *kala pani*.

For these people, success in life in South Africa has been accompanied by a desire to learn about their own origins. I am not questioning the legitimacy of this desire. On the contrary, the search for some kind of authenticity—to be found in a sense of history, in religion, in music or other practices—is a crucial force in human

life and something that needs to be understood and appreciated by anyone dealing with identity questions. What I tried to show is that for these South African Indians, an 'India' of the imagination is a more effective touchstone of authenticity than the physical realities of the Republic of India of the 1990s.

I agree with Raman that instead of assuming "diasporic sentiments" to be a natural or unproblematic constant, we need to investigate what the 'homeland' or 'Indianness' has meant at various junctures. As historians or anthropologists, our job is to bring to light the complexities and paradoxes at the heart of such narratives and identities. But we also need to be aware of the necessary distinction between a language of politics (based on moral and political judgement) and a language of analysis (based on presentation of evidence, descriptions and arguments that can lend themselves to different interpretations). These two languages can never be separated and 'objectivity' is impossible except as an always incomplete aspiration.

This notwithstanding, widely circulating terms like 'diaspora', 'identity' or 'culture' mean different things in the mouth of a political figure, and in that of a social scientist. The political activist is trying to talk something into existence (as Gandhi did with 'Indianness', which would have had no meaning 50 years earlier), while the analyst is trying to map and describe the genealogy and meanings of a certain term and its uses. Politicians and cultural entrepreneurs are extremely attentive to the meanings and connotations of the terms they use, and social scientists should be equally attentive to the precision of the terms they employ.

I have strong doubts about the usefulness of 'diaspora' as a noun, as a descriptive category that says something meaningful about a group of people and their history. This is not merely because the concept has been used both by the left and the right, as Raman points out, but because it implies 'diaspora' to be a 'total identity', a condition that informs and structures many facets of life. This is plainly wrong. Diaspora should be used as an adjective (diasporic) or as a verb (diasporisation) to describe an aspiration, a fleeting, at times important, form of imagination that may, or may not, succeed in providing an effective framework of interpretation of a given social situation.

Raman's example of Indianness of the early decades of the 20th century was exactly such a yearning and aspiration that gave a sense of dignity and certainty to its adherents and yet, as a lived reality, was blocked and disturbed by countless divisions of class, religion, language, etc. So, we can use the adjective 'diasporic' to describe such sentiments and identities that establish imaginary and practical links with a (lost) homeland, or point of origin. But to use the term diaspora to meaningfully describe entire groups of people is a cul de sac.

I do not believe in an objectivist 'check-list sociology', but one needs to ask what remains of the term diaspora if we remove notions of home/origin, and if we remove the central trope of loss? We are left with nothing, or a misnomer. Even the most anti-essentialist elaborations of diaspora or hybridity could not escape the idea of displacement, or of the mixing of cultures—thus implicitly assuming a place-bound and holistic notion of culture that most anthropologists have abandoned quite some time ago.

Instead of scrapping the concept altogether, I suggest that we recognise that there are 'diasporic' sentiments, and attempts at 'diasporisations' that, in our case, aim at turning various groups of 'brown folks' into an Indian diaspora. It happened in the beginning of the twentieth century as the creation of 'India' as a political project, and it happens now in the attempt to create a global Hindu culture.

An 'India' of the imagination is a more effective touchstone of authenticity than the physical realities of the Republic of India of the 1990s

Indianness sans indianness

Raman's depiction of the importance of India as a "resting place for the imagination", and the depiction of Indian community solidarity needs some qualification, however. The efforts to make 'Indianness' a common denominator in South Africa had a long and difficult gestation. Gandhi was only gradually persuaded to take up the plight of the indentured 'coolies', and deep-seated caste and community prejudices meant that many Gujaratis were reluctant to see 'coolies' as part of their concern.

There were long-standing efforts in the 1890s on the part of Gujarati merchants to be reclassified as 'Arabs' to escape the stigma of being an 'Asiatic'. At that time, 'India' was an idea, not a reality and the bonding of a Tamil untouchable with a Gujarati merchant was less than self-evident. There is little doubt that the spurious racial classification and governance of everybody from the Subcontinent as 'Asiatics' was fundamental to the emergence of 'Indianness' in South Africa.

Throughout, Gandhi and subsequent Indian leaders stressed the status of Indians as 'imperial subjects' to be granted certain rights and protections as opposed to the Africans or 'natives' whose capacity for self-rule Gandhi never deliberated on or assumed. The racial basis of 'Indianness' was also reflected in later political formations that were all mono-racial (except the Communist Party after the 1940s). Indians were organised in the Natal Indian Congress and Transvaal Indian Congress, while Africans were organised in the African National Congress and other formations.

In spite of the formal co-operation between these outfits in the 1940s and after, their mono-racial charac-

ter did not change, even up to the 1980s. The racial basis for Indian solidarity in South Africa was both imposed by the sheer force of its government, and derived from deep-seated caste ideologies that, like racial ideology, are based on ideas of immutable essences transferred through blood and lineage. This does not alter the fact that 'Indianness' became a very effective basis for political and communal organisation (under leaders like Yusuf Dadoo and others) that was emancipatory and pioneering in the resistance against white dominance in the country. However, this legacy of community solidarity has also, as Raman points out herself, become something of a liability in the new South Africa.

India was, however, not merely a resting place of the imagination among politically alert South African Indians in the first half of the twentieth century. The relationship between the two colonial territories also displays interesting contradictions within the colonial project itself. During the protracted attempts to repatriate and relocate Indians in Durban in the 1920s, the Congress movement in South Africa sent a deputation to India to mobilise political support for the cause of the Indians in South Africa. Mass meetings were held in various parts of India to protest against the move and the Viceroy of India, Lord Reading submitted an official protest against the legislation.

Gandhi outside his Johannesburg law office.

Interestingly, the Government of India acted as an advocate of Indian interests in South Africa and pressed for a round table conference where the issue could be settled and negotiated between the two governments within the Commonwealth. The conference took place in late 1926 in Cape Town. The Indian delegation consisted of six civil servants, three Indian and three British, and was led by Sir Mahomed Habibullah. The South African delegation was all white. After protracted negotiations, the so-called Cape Town Agreement was signed in 1927. It stipulated a new voluntary repatriation scheme that built certain financial incentives (free tickets, a fixed sum per adult and child, etc) into the repatriation procedure.

The more remarkable part of the agreement was that a review of Indian education was to be undertaken, with the assistance of experts in education from India, that the South African government promised to provide better housing and living conditions for Indians and that Indians should receive "equal pay for equal work", and that no unreasonable obstacles should be put in the way of Indian business initiatives. It was also agreed that a permanent Agent General of the Government of India should be posted in South Africa to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

The repatriation scheme did have some effect in the first five years after its implementation, but the worldwide economic crisis slowed down the pace. As stories of untold hardship among repatriates in India filtered back into South Africa, the numbers applying for repatriation fell dramatically in the early 1930s.

In 1946, the South African government passed the highly controversial Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act—an explicitly discriminatory piece of legislation. The Government of India, still under British administration, protested strongly and withdrew its High Commissioner in South Africa. An Indian delegation from South Africa met Gandhi in Pune in March 1946, and Gandhi assured the delegation of his unconditional support and that the matter would be taken up in international fora, and in the negotiations with the British Government (*Bombay Chronicle*, 4 March, 1946). On behalf of the Government of India, the issue was put before the newly formed United Nations General Assembly as a clear example of discrimination on the basis of race and culture.

A few years later, India led the international protests against the new apartheid legislation and in 1949, after the riots in Durban which left dozens of Indians dead and thousands homeless, the Government of India tried to flex both political and military muscle to prevent further abuse of Indians in the country. None of these measures had any effect on Indian conditions in South Africa, but the examples indicate the depth and vigour of pan-Indian solidarity in this early phase of decolonisation.

A closer look at these concerns betrays the somewhat paternalist character of this solidarity, however. Since the 1890s religious and cultural figures in India had expressed concern about the fate of the expatriate Indian populations in Mauritius, the Caribbean, Fiji and South Africa. Missionaries were sent out by the Arya Samaj and later by those adhering to the orthodox (*sanatan*) interpretation of Hinduism, despite initial worries about the polluting effects of crossing the ocean. Also, Muslim organisations like the Deoband madrasah in Uttar Pradesh and Sufi orders sent missionaries abroad. The mission was to uplift the lower caste 'coolies' and to prevent conversions to another faith. Beneath the progressive veneer of pan-Indian solidarity, communal divisions were deepened and the purification of practices and categories commenced. One of the victims of this work of purification was in fact the celebration of Muharram as a pan-Indian festival, which ceased to play a role in the 1970s.

Bollywood imaginations

The final issue that Raman touches upon is what India means to South African Indians today. The brief an-

swer is three things: a site of religious pilgrimage for some, a site for shopping for others, and for most, the land of Bollywood and film stars. The need to look beyond South Africa, to identify some sort of 'Indianness' is still there - today in the face of a sense of marginalisation and non-recognition in the post-apartheid order. But India is not a destination of migration or a place to seek education.

Many young Indians leave South Africa and they go where young whites and coloured are going: Australia, US and the UK. The resting place for the imagination is today in the culture of modern transnational Indian communities in London, Melbourne, New York or Toronto. Bollywood products experienced a steady decline in popularity in South Africa for decades until a new wave of films targeted a teenage audience and took up themes around non-resident Indian (NRI) identities, and more importantly, arrived in South Africa with English subtitles. A new generation which grew up almost without Indian vernaculars could now follow and understand a new generation of Hindi films.

These films and their stars have achieved an unprecedented global mainstream status, making them perfect and well-packaged symbols of recognition of modern Indianness—of an identity as modern Indians, distanced both from Indian tradition and from an erstwhile 'coolie' status. While this phenomenon can be regarded as a symptom of a 'diasporic desire'—a certain longing for a glossy and global Indianness, it coexists with the splintering of smaller groups of South African Indians into multiple transnational identifications: descendants of Gujarati Muslims seeing themselves as parts of a universal Muslim civilisation that converses in Arabic and English; a global Tamil network that projects Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka onto a global narrative of Tamil loss and misrecognition; recently converted Pentecostal Christians for whom Jerusalem and Kentucky become more important than Madras and Jaffna; and of course conservative Hindus whose solidarity with the Indian nation state is reproduced through identification with a protracted and global conflict with Muslims, Pakistan and 'Islamic terrorists'.

It is in view of these indisputable facts that I propose that we critically rethink whether 'diaspora' is a useful concept that can help us to understand the complexity of contemporary identity politics in South Africa and elsewhere.

***Thomas Blom Hansen**, Edinburgh*

SRI LANKA

THE PEACE PROCESS AND THE PEACE TALKS

IN THE resolution of a protracted conflict, it may sometimes be necessary to have visible breakthroughs in order to keep morale high, both of the negotiators themselves and also the interested public. Virtually all rounds of the peace talks that commenced with the first one in Sattahip, Thailand a year ago, had such moments of brilliance. These moments were accentuated by the flamboyance of the LTTE's chief negotiator at those talks, Dr Anton Balasingham, who had a sure grasp of the Tamil cause and the LTTE's history.

Whether it was the redefinition of the LTTE's concept of Tamil Eelam in Sattahip in September, the Oslo declaration on federalism in December, or the acceptance of a human rights framework in Hakone in February, every round of the peace talks brought with it news of a positive breakthrough that the international media could carry to all parts of the world. But with the apparent withdrawal of Dr Balasingham from the scene, and his replacement by less autonomous negotiators, it is unlikely that visible breakthroughs of the same kind will take place at future talks.

It is therefore important that those who are following the Sri Lankan peace process should draw a distinction between visible breakthroughs at peace talks and the overall strengthening of the peace process that is taking place. There is a need to bear in mind that peace talks are, by and large, a matter between the government and LTTE. But the peace process is more than peace talks between the government and LTTE. The well-being of the people of Sri Lanka, north and south, should not be held hostage to the agendas of either the government or LTTE, or both of them together. The peace process includes the government and LTTE; but it also includes the other political forces in the country, not to mention the 18 million people who constitute the population of the country. The peace process should not be limited or equated only to the presence or absence of peace talks.

The difference between the peace process and peace talks can be seen most clearly in some of the events of these past five months. During this period there were no peace talks between the government and LTTE. But a strong case can be made that the peace process did not get weakened even though there was a hiatus in the peace talks. Instead, overall, the peace process seems to have got strengthened.

Have they fallen out?

In the past five months there has also been a great deal of constructive and positive work that has been done, both by the LTTE itself and also other parties, to take the peace process forward. A most valuable contribution in this regard was the LTTE's highly publicised deliberations in Paris on an interim administrative framework to govern the North-East. The LTTE's decision to include the diaspora community, as well as leading academics and former senior government officials in a broad-based effort to come up with a concrete proposal, has served to strengthen confidence in their commitment to a negotiated settlement.

A further strengthening of the peace process has taken place with the increased interaction between the LTTE and international organisations. An example would be the action plan drawn up by UNICEF that the LTTE has endorsed, and is in the process of being implemented, under which the rebel leadership has agreed to an awareness programme on child rights to be carried out in the North-East within the next few months. The LTTE has also agreed to the publication by UNICEF of a monthly child situation report that would cover such areas as child recruitment and rehabilitation and child labour.

The well-being of the people of Sri Lanka, north and south, should not be held hostage to the agendas of either the government or LTTE, or both of them together.

The challenge for UNICEF would be to ensure by non-confrontational and problem-solving methods that the LTTE honours the terms of the action plan for a restoration of the lost rights of children in the North-East. The LTTE would also be aware that an agreement with an internationally recognised organisation such as UNICEF has to be taken seriously if it is not to suffer serious erosion of

credibility. In endorsing UNICEF's action plan, the LTTE has gone beyond the verbal assurances that they once gave to the UN's Special Envoy on Child Rights, Olara Otunu, which they failed to honour. This shift of attitude on the part of the LTTE is evidence of how the peace process is continually being strengthened even in the absence of peace talks between the government and LTTE.

Kumaratunga's commitment

Yet another major contribution towards the strengthening of the peace process has been President Chandrika Kumaratunga's rejection of a political alliance with the JVP. This political alliance would certainly have strengthened the political opposition to the government, both at the electoral and ideological levels. The President's decision to forego this political advantage was due, in large measure, to her refusal to agree to the JVP's demand that the new alliance should oppose the devolution of power as a solution to the ethnic conflict, and Norwegian facilitation in the present peace process.

Had the President agreed to the JVP's terms, the peace process would undoubtedly have been seriously jeopardised. With the mass base of the PA behind it, the JVP would have organised mass events that had the potential of generating open confrontation with the government. In turn, the perception of a government on the defensive would have weakened the peace process. But due to the fact that the President publicly, and courageously, upheld her commitment to a negotiated political solution through the devolution of power and with Norwegian facilitation, she helped to consolidate public support for the present peace process and

PEACE DIVIDEND AND THE TIGERS

IN RECENT weeks, the Colombo government has been announcing massive governmental investments to be made in rural infrastructure, such as roads and electricity. Not without reason, government politicians can claim that the employment and ripple effects generated will spark off an economic boom in the near future.

An element of potential instability in this optimistic scenario is the continued deprivation being suffered by the most severely war-affected parts of the country. These parts of the country are under LTTE control, and their continuing deprivation would put the LTTE leadership under pressure to show economic peace dividends to convince its cadre that the peace process is worth the silencing of their guns.

The problem for the LTTE is that they seek economic peace dividends that they alone should implement and distribute to the people of the North-East in the manner of sole benefactors. No doubt they feel that they are the ones who have single-mindedly fought for Tamil rights over the past two decades at tremendous cost. But economic peace dividends cannot be unilaterally obtained. They come from partnership, and by adhering to the rules of partnership with donors, such as transparency and accountability, and respect for human rights.

One has only to travel the length of the A 9 highway from south to north to see a different reality emerge when entering or leaving the LTTE controlled areas. Here, there is the shocking sight of the utter destruction of war and spartan conditions of living bereft of the basic amenities of motorable roads, electricity and telephone lines. A systematic effort to reconstruct public buildings, such as government offices and schools, is yet to commence.

There are two reasons for this unhappy state of affairs. One is the failure of the government and LTTE to develop an appropriate mechanism by which funds can be made available for the development of LTTE controlled areas. Prior to the suspension of peace talks in April 2003, the LTTE was on the verge of signing an agreement to establish the North East Reconstruction Fund (NERF). The government had already signed it and the World Bank had to sign it after the LTTE did so. The LTTE decided to suspend peace talks with the government and the signing of the NERF agreement was also suspended, presumably as they did not wish for any more partnership with the Sri Lankan government at that time.

A second reason for the neglect of LTTE controlled areas is the LTTE's reluctance to permit foreign donors to come in directly to those areas. This is not a problem limited to donor agencies, but extends also to commercial ventures. For instance, an expatriate Tamil business venture, led by a person with sound Tamil nationalist credentials, was unable to make much headway for a project it had for the Wanni. The reason was the LTTE's reluctance to provide statistical information and survey data that were needed for the feasibility study.

thereby served to strengthen it.

A final factor that has contributed to the strengthening of the peace process should also be noted. This is the ceaseless work being done by a multitude of civil society organisations to build bridges between the ethnic communities and to make them feel more comfortable about the political compromises necessary for a negotiated peace. Organisations such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives are developing cutting edge thinking on issues of federal power sharing and human rights protection. Others such as the Anti War Coalition recalled the events of July 1983 and called on political leaders to apologise to the victims. Through such activities the thinking of people about the ethnic conflict is in the process of transformation.

Overall, there has been a strengthening of the peace process, one that the suspension of peace talks has not stopped. So long as a return to war is kept at bay, the natural resilience of Sri Lankan society and its facility for multi-ethnic coexistence, so easily visible on the streets of any big city, whether Colombo or Jaffna, will ensure that the peace process grows from strength to strength. When assessing the situation in the country, therefore, it is only fair that the entirety of the peace process be evaluated rather than only harp on the suspension of peace talks.

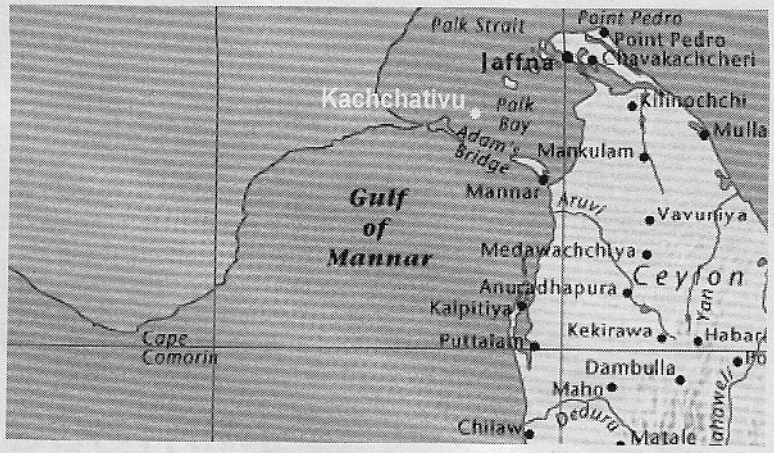
–Jehan Perera

INDIA

FISHING FOR TROUBLE

THE BURGEONING problems of the fisher people of Tamil Nadu do not catch the ears of the powerful, either in the state or the centre. Madras seems to be far from Nagapattinam, Ramanathapuram, Thuthukudi or Kanyakumari, the hubs of fishing activity in the state. As for New Delhi, it is almost a distant planet from there. Those in the corridors of power, instead of solving the problems of the fisher folk, are asking them to change their profession.

Their demands have been put up in a 42-point charter, which includes implementation of the 21 recommendations of what is known as the Murari Committee, which had been approved by the central cabinet

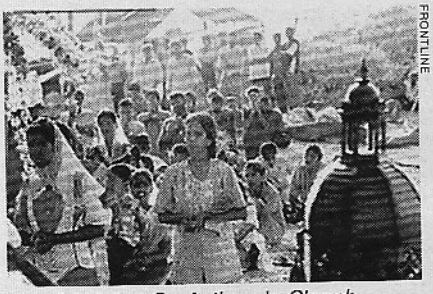


on 28 September 1997. That 42 member committee, comprising parliamentarians from all political parties, was constituted in order to look into the grievances of the fisher community arising from Government of India's (GOI) issuance of licences, in 1991, to joint venture, lease and test fishing vessels. Opposition voiced by the national trade union federations and various political parties reflected the fear of the depletion of fish stock in the Indian Ocean, consequent on unrestrained deep-sea fishing through the use of mega-machines, which would quite literally leave the fisher folk stranded on the shores.

The Murari Committee recommended, among other things, the formulation of proper marine fishing regulations in the exclusive economic zone, a savings-cum-relief scheme for fishermen, subsidised fuel, a monsoon trawling ban, and the central government's withdrawal of the Aquaculture Authority Bill. This bill allows for large-scale, intensive aquaculture by industrial and tourism lobbies in the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ), which afterall is the survival mainstay of traditional fisher folk. The government accepted all the recommendations, only to toss the mandate about from one ministry to another. It is an expression of just how much concern the government had for the fisher people of the country that the administration of deep-sea fishing was eventually entrusted to the Ministry of Animal Husbandry!

Since the 1980's, Sri Lankan Navy has been objecting to the Tamil Nadu fishermen fishing near Kachchativu. Fishermen are rounded up and incarcerated. Repatriated fishermen complain of being roughed up

The fisher folk want irksome fishing regulations to be repealed. As of now, fishermen are allowed to venture into the sea between 5 am and 9 pm for three


FRONTLINE

The faithful at St. Anthony's Church.

days in a week. However, bad weather conditions keep them shore-bound for 45 days in a year. This has led them to demand financial compensation, which they say, should be extended to their women folk as well. They had taken these demands to the Prime Minister, who had promised to accord all facilities to both the fishermen and their womenfolk. But the President of the Fishing Labourers' Union, Baluchamy, who had met the Prime Minister with these demands, laments that the state governments approach remains lukewarm when it comes to their implementation of specific proposals.

Tamil Nadu fishermen have demanded an extension in the fishing time, now restricted from 5am to 9 pm, after the state government clamp-down owing to the periodic conflicts between fishermen using mechanised boats and those in traditional country boats and catamarans. Fishermen using traditional methods also demand that mechanised boatmen should not be allowed to fish within three nautical miles of the coast and the ban should be strictly implemented. They complain that the use of trawlers or mechanised boats has created havoc on the seabed.

The basic demands of the fisherfolk pale in comparison to the pompous rhetoric of Tamil Nadu's political leaders such as Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa.

There is an international dimension too. One of the demands of the state's fishermen is the restoration of their fishing rights in Kachchativu Island. This is a small island between the Indian mainland and the island of Sri Lanka, which once belonged to India. Tamil Nadu fishermen have been using the Kachchativu Island for resting and drying nets. Under treaties in 1974 and 1976 between the countries, the island was ceded to Sri Lanka but it has since then remained a bone of contention between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. The Tamil Nadu government quotes archival sources to claim that the island formed part of the zamindari (revenue territory) of the raja of Ramnad. It protests the central government having unilaterally given it to Sri Lanka.

The waters around the island are known for their lobster catch. Tamil fishermen use Kachchativu as a halting point after laying their nets, before returning to their coast after collecting their catch. The island is also known for its religious festivities in which Tamil Nadu fishermen have participated since long ago. On certain days of the year, fishermen throng the island with their families to worship at the St Anthony's Church. The site is revered by the fishermen and a priest from Ramnad goes there to conduct regular mass.

Since the 1980's, Sri Lankan navy patrols have reportedly started objecting to the Tamil Nadu fishermen fishing near Kachchativu. The Sri Lankan navy round up these fishermen and incarcerate them. Related to this is the issue of frequent detention of Tamil Nadu fishermen by the Sri Lankan navy for allegedly straying into Sri Lankan waters. Earlier, the Tamil Nadu fishermen used to be repatriated back to India. Since ethnic conflict erupted in Sri Lanka, however, suspected of being LTTE sympathisers, the fishermen are also shot at. Over a hundred fishermen have lost their lives in such incidents. Even though shooting incidents have stopped since the commencement of peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, the accosting and detention of Tamil Nadu fishermen continues. When the fishermen raised their concerns, the Indian government told them that the agreement allows Tamil Nadu fishermen to use the Kachchativu Island as before, even though it now belonged to Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, repatriated Tamil Nadu fishermen complain of being roughed up while in Sri Lankan custody. Protesting against action by the Sri Lankan navy, a relay demonstration was held in Rameswaram recently where the fishermen charged the central and state governments in India with a callous attitude. Ironically, the basic demands of the fisherfolk pale in comparison to the pompous rhetoric of Tamil Nadu's political leaders such as Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa, who has gone so far as to declare that the island be retrieved by force if negotiations fail to yield the desired outcome.

Recently yet one more dimension has been added to the suffering of Tamil Nadu fishermen who stray into Sri Lankan waters. They are now first detained by the LTTE, who levy fines and penalties before the Sri Lankan authorities even get into the act. The fact of the matter is that LTTE has intensified its patrolling in the Palk Bay

region. "If this trend continues unchecked, soon the Indian government instead of the Sri Lankan government will have to approach the LTTE for release of the fishermen", says Professor Surinayarana, a Sri Lanka expert in Madras.

The problem in the Palk Bay is overfishing accompanied by pollution that has led to the depletion of the fish and the destruction of the marine ecology. Fishing by mechanised trawlers has further accentuated the problem. Pearls were once found in plenty in and around the Gulf of Mannar till at least as late as the 1960s. But Thoothukudi, the 'pearl city', has witnessed a severe dwindling in the number of oyster catch over the years. The age-old diving profession is in rapid decline.

Another issue which concerns the Tamil Nadu fishermen is the ambitious Sethusamudram project linking Palk Bay with the Gulf of Mannar on the east coast of India by creating a shipping canal through the Rameswaram Island. Doubts were raised by the green lobby about the environmental impact of the project, since it involves extensive dredging of the Pamban channel where coral fish abound. Because of this sustained pressure, an initial environmental examination was carried out through the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), Nagpur in 1998. The Sri Lankan Government has also communicated its opposition to the project because of the perceived threat to marine life in the territorial waters along the Pamban Channel.

Though the NEERI pre-feasibility report indicated that the project was environmentally safe, with little effect on the ecosystem and on the Gulf of Mannar's Marine National Park, there is, however, no clarity as to how much the Sethusamudram project would help or affect the fishermen. If all the hype about the shipping activity that the Sethusamudram project may generate is to be taken seriously, then it is clear that there will hardly be any scope for much profitable fishing in the area.

As always, when confronted with the problems of livelihood being affected by state-initiated projects, the bureaucrats always trot out a stock solution. The talk in the state government is about getting the fishermen to switch over to some new profession. And now a feasibility report on this matter is being prepared by the state and the central governments, the big question is will the fishermen be forced to abandon their profession? And if they are, what measures will be taken to ensure that they will get another source of income. The paucity of options stare 20 million fisherfolk in the face.

–Syed Ali Mujtaba

PAKISTAN

INELASTIC DOCTRINE

PEOPLE CAN be charged for blasphemy under section 295 A, B, C and 505 of Pakistan Penal Code. Recent instances of blasphemy cases have once again brought the issue into the public sphere and prompted a discussion on whether or not blasphemy is an Islamic concept. Blasphemy laws have been severely misused in the past. One such tragic case was that of Gul Masih who was sentenced to death in 1992 for allegedly passing a remark on Prophet Mohammed. In a more recent case, Munawar Mohsin, a subeditor of the *Frontier Post* was sentenced to life imprisonment and a fine of PKR 50,000 in July 2003, for publishing a letter to the editor titled "Why Muslims Hate Jews", which contained allegedly derogatory references to Prophet Mohammad. Most recently, an accused in a blasphemy who had been released on bail was killed early last month. In another instance, a Lahore shoemaker also attracted charges under the blasphemy law. And in one of the most celebrated cases in the country, which attracted international attention, a medical lecturer in Rawalpindi, Younus Shaikh, was sentenced to death in 2001. In 1998, High Court Judge Arif Iqbal Hussain Bhatti was shot dead in Lahore for reversing the death sentence against two people charged for blasphemy. The number of blasphemy cases is on the rise but the level of insecurity is now so high that many lawyers are afraid to take them on.

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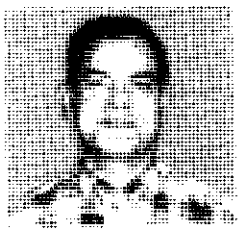
At the root of the problem is a small segment of religious hardliners who exploit religious sentiments and inflame popular passions using any excuse available. Blas-



Younus Shaikh: a victim of the laws.

phemy cases are useful instruments for them and they use religious hypersensitivity to add to the general climate of sectarian intolerance accompanied by violence and death. The hardliners have been consistently exerting pressure on the government to strengthen blasphemy laws. They ignore the historical fact that blasphemy laws were introduced by the British back in 1860 in a misguided attempt to reduce tension between Hindus and Muslims. The laws were instituted for purely administrative reasons and do not have any basis in religious tenets.

Pakistan maybe a theocratic state, but socially the country is variegated in its ethnic, cultural and religious composition. The Muslim hardliners do not want to accept that contingent factors such as education, cognitive ability and personality traits influence peoples' interpretation of doctrines. Therefore, the interpretation of Islamic codes will vary and in many instances differ from that of the small segment which proclaims itself the sole authority on the subject. This group wants to impose its views on society by agitating for laws that restrict the elasticity of doctrinal interpretation

Section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code pertains to the use of derogatory remarks—"...whoever by words, either spoken or written or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine". Many have argued that this section is against the teachings of the Prophet. Works of legal luminaries like Justice Shafiq Usmani endorse the view that the concept of blasphemy is unknown to Islamic jurisprudence. Many cite the fact that there are only three verses in the *Quran* (7:180, 41:40 and 33:57) that are actually relevant to concept, as distinct from the act, of blasphemy. None of these verses says that people can be charged and brought to trial for blasphemy. The *Quran* does not confer any authority or despotic power to any individual, community or state to act as the guardian of the religion. In fact, there are explicit proscriptions on the arrogation of such powers, which are to be found in the Quranic verses 6:107, 88:22 and 64:2.

Such is the hold of hardliners these days that even those proposing moderate reforms have to tread with caution.

But such is the hold of hardliners in Pakistani society these days that even those proposing moderate reforms have to tread with caution. In 2000, President-General Pervez Musharraf had announced that measures would be taken to amend the procedure for the registration of blasphemy cases to prevent misuse. However, nothing came of it owing to the protests by religious groups. That the political leadership of the country and the government should step around this issue so gingerly is not surprising. The relevant law that concerns blasphemy was introduced in 1986 by General Zia-ul Haq. This was the period when the state had embarked on an overtly theocratic vision of itself and was working in close cooperation with the religious lobby which viewed the law as its special creation and instrument of control.

The mainstream polity of Pakistan, in moments of competitive populism, cultivates the hardliners by pandering to their special interest in the blasphemy laws. In 1992, then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, went so far as to make capital punishment the only possible sentence that could be awarded for those convicted under blasphemy law. So long as this end of the political spectrum—the religious extreme— retains influence, little change can be expected in the current status of the law and its use or misuse.

–Mohammad Nadeem Yousaf

Quran, relevant verses:

6:107 If it had been Allah's plan, they would not have taken false gods: but We made thee not one to watch over their doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs.
64:2 It is He Who has created you; and of you are some that are Unbelievers, and some that are Believers: and Allah sees well all that ye do.
88:22 Thou art not one to manage (men's) affairs

English: Yusuf Ali translation
[http://www.islamicity.com]

Rivers of collective belonging

Continuing the debate on the river linking proposal of the Government of India, a Kathmandu-based water engineer-turned-social auditor examines the history of the emergence of the hydraulic technocracy in the Subcontinent and the principles on which it operates.

by ***Ajaya Dixit***

Hum us desh ke vasi hain jis desh main Ganga baheti hai ("we are dwellers of that land through which the Ganga flows") is a line from the melodious song sung by the late Indian playback singer, Mukesh. The song transcends the nation state because its motif—the river Ganga—cannot be contained within boundaries either physically or symbolically. It is a pan-South Asian emblem for all that is life-sustaining and sacred in rivers. What for the science of hydrology represents merely one more immense mass of moving water, is for a population of a billion and a half a cultural metaphor for life itself. For the present day Bangladeshi, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, or Indian, the Ganga is a denominative absolute, be it the Burhi Ganga of Bangladesh, the Trisuli Ganga of Nepal, the Mahaweli Ganga of Sri Lanka, the Sindhu Ganga of Pakistan, or the Cauvery Ganga of peninsular India. The Trisuli Ganga hurtling past the gorge evokes in the Nepali villager the same sentiment as the Ganga entering from upstream to join the Bay of Bengal does in the Bangladeshi farmer. The priest solemnising puja in the Himalayan foothills recites the invocation, "*Gangecha Yamunechaiva Godavari Saraswati, Narmade Sindhu Kaveri, Jalesmin Sannidhimkuru*" signifying a deeply ingrained sense of collective belonging, tied to a common coordinate. *Hum us desh ke vasi hain* captures this simple but pervasive ethos of freely flowing water encapsulating within its hydrological cycle, life, livelihood, sustenance, culture and identity.

The Ganga is, however, more than just a cultural metaphor. It had in time become an arresting allegory for engineering progress as well. The American 'Wild West' invoked the Ganges in precisely this way. According to the historian, Donald Worster, "In the West, Americans wanted Colorado to become an American Ganges". American engineers believed that they lagged far behind their counterparts in India in harnessing rivers for irrigation, and wanted the New Civilisation to outgrow the Old Empire. In their more detached perspective, the flowing river was a resource to be exploited for the glory of science and the profit of capital, which together augmented the power of the nation and the state, with little heed to the consequences for the people and the environment. This was an echo of the same impulse that drove the engineers of colonial South Asia to conquer the Subcontinental and Himalayan rivers. This vast difference between the popular and the engineering perceptions is evident in the very different conceptions of use of water and exploitation of water.

Historically, human intervention in addressing water problems has seen attempts to adapt to climatic, hydrologic and socio-economic conditions. As water increasingly passed from the hands of local users to engineers, there was a concomitant elaboration of new concepts, categories and definitions. One of the fundamental ideas on which the new paradigm of hydraulic engineering rested was a functionally defined notion of 'waste'. This functional definition, invested with an absolute meaning, is substantially different from the relative idea of 'surplus' or 'excess' that informed traditional water-management practices. Because water is in excess quantity where it is not needed, when it is not needed, and to the extent that it is not needed, appropriate modification of the stock and flow to suit different needs in space and time has been a part of human history. Consequently water transfers and diversions through open channels is not a new or recent invention of civil engineering.

However, there is an important difference between interventions based on the contemporary paradigm and

those of the past. In present times, climatic, hydrologic and socio-economic conditions, which are even in the natural course subject to extreme variability, are susceptible to much greater stress because of the sheer scale of the technology available to unleash potentially fundamental change. This makes the task of achieving water security that much more complex than in the past.

Colonial science

Egypt of antiquity build dams and Roman engineers brought water to the imperial cities via aqueducts. The Chola kings of ancient south India built anicuts to irrigate fields far from the sources of water. Communities in the Nepal hills resorted to similar techniques and, even today, a six-hundred-year-old irrigation system diverts water for irrigation. These engineering works of the past were based on the idea of surplus. Today, the language of 'waste' has become the dominant principle in the development discourse and has become the dogma of the engineering profession to justify intervening in rivers for commercial ends.

This language of waste has introduced new stress points. The use of the term 'waste' began in colonial Punjab, as well as in the frontiers of western United States in the middle of the 19th century. In the western US, the Colombia Basin Development League asserted that "Every drop of water that runs to the sea without its full commercial returns to the nation is an economic waste". Rivers had to be put to work, by first damming and storing the natural flow, "until not a single drop escaped control".

The belief in this idea runs deep, not just within the engineering fraternity but among the intelligentsia and the publicists of progress too. In his book, *We, The People*, whose 14 reprints is a testimony of its popularity among the English reading public, the late Indian constitutional lawyer, Nani A Palkhivala, reiterated the argument of commercially-oriented engineering that, "Three-fourths of the total flow of our rivers is wastefully emptied into the seas". The historian, David Gilmartin, observes that in 19th century India, the term 'waste' was central to professional irrigation-engineering theory, and was critical to the structure of the British colonial state's revenue collection apparatus. This convergence of science and the financial interests of the colonial empire expressed itself in the relentless effort to salvage the 'wasted' potential of rivers and to recover the financial promise that was hitherto being squandered. This enterprise of averting waste not only increased the power of the state but also gave its capitalist clients greater control over land and resources and, hence, also over local communities, which were left with little choice but to succumb to the dictates of the new commercial logic.

Repeatedly, the colonial Indian government invoked the idea of waste to initiate grandiose projects designed to increase agricultural productivity and yield greater revenue. In 1911, the government of the United Province pushed through the Sarada Irrigation Canal, which had been pending for 40 years, by using precisely this formula. The proposal for this canal was first made in 1869, but its implementation was held up due to local opposition, particularly by the influential *talukdars* of Awadh, landowning magnates on whom the British depended to maintain their rule in the region. In 1911, the government decreed that the waters of the river Sarada, which were being 'wasted' because the people of Awadh were not using it optimally, would be transferred to Punjab via the Agra Canal. The talukdars objected to this proposed transfer and consented to the construction of the Sarada Canal.

This notion of waste was based on the implicit assumption that when water was not earning a return, it, for all practical purposes, was flowing from a source to a sink and down the drain. In a strictly utilitarian sense this may have been a valid point of view, but from a more scientific perspective this amounted to hydrological imprudence, because water is indisputably part of a continuous system that circulates in its different forms on a periodic basis. From ancient times, the hydrological cycle was treated as the basic unit for comprehending water in its totality, as is attested to by references in puranic literature. The *Brahmananda Puran* traces this cycle of water, its different manifestations like lakes, rivers, groundwater, sea, and the cyclical change in its forms from water to vapour and back to water. For several millennia there was no change in this basic conception.

BABIN SAYAMI

In fact, the US Academy of Science's definition of the hydrological cycle is extraordinarily similar to the puranic idea. It defines hydrology as "the science that treats waters of the earth, their occurrence, circulation, and distribution, their chemical and physical properties, and their reaction with their environment, including their relationship with living things". Whereas the hydrological definition sees water in all its multifaceted functions, roles and forms, the dominant

form of putatively scientific water use has reduced it to a single dimension, capable of being looked at discretely and therefore amenable to manipulation along fiscally rewarding lines. In this scheme of things, the prudent conservation of the substance is precluded by the possibilities of limitless exploitation of its properties.

The practice of colonial science, in fact, reflects the contradiction between its conception of the hydrological cycle and its reckless pursuit of optimising the efficiency of water use. Thus, whereas optimum use minimised the waste that running water represented, floods did not fall within this mandate. Referring to the inundations in the Orissa floodplains, British engineers argued, "the problem...is not how to prevent floods but how to pass them as quickly as possible to sea". The paradox of utilitarian thinking is obvious and stark. How could, on the one hand, riparian flows be conceived of as 'waste' to be averted through productive redeployment while, on the other hand, flood waters, which are as inextricably a part of the hydrological cycle as the fluvial rhythm of rivers are, become so undesirable that they had be conveyed to the sea with utmost speed.

In other words, flowing water in one context was viewed as a commodity whose optimal exploitation is predicated on minimal waste, but which, in another less controllable context, became eminently 'wastable'. This conception of flowing water renders the hydrological cycle into a discrete phenomenon that is made up of separable components whose utility and value can be distinguished by criteria that serve social, political and commercial purposes and needs and therefore classifiable into categories like low, medium and excess flow, and so on. The integrity of water has been broken into its constituent parts, in a way that it has not been done to some of the other forces of nature. Is it conceivable to speak of the sun or the wind in the same fashion? Is there 'wasted' wind or sunshine?

> For the water bureaucrats the problem was not how to prevent floods but how to pass them as quickly as possible to sea

In this sense water has been a special victim of commercially-oriented science. A canal transferring water from a river to new locations became an end in itself, justified by the promise of greater revenues. For the colonial bureaucracy, the irrigation canal was a machine, which used human skill and expertise within organisations to manipulate water for commercial returns. But these machines were rather inefficient. British-built canals had an overall efficiency of only 28 per cent. As much as 72 per cent of the water fed into the system did not reach its intended destination, namely the commercially viable crop.

More than a hundred years later, and despite the refinements in technology, the improvement in efficiency has been negligible. Even today, canal efficiency is just 30 per cent of its projected 'command area'. Water lost in seepage causes head-end and tail-end asymmetries, besides water logging and salinisation. This level of loss has prompted some water experts to claim that the water lost within the canal system is actually recycled back into the natural system. If that is indeed the case, then it is not at all clear why so much expenditure and effort is incurred to avoid waste, if the net result has only been to put water back to where it was going anyway.

Spurious assertions cannot conceal the fact that canal irrigation systems have always faced problems of allocation. The tail-end reaches of many large-scale irrigation systems have not once seen a single drop of water in them. If it were not for groundwater pumps, food production would have dwindled in areas where the cropping patterns have changed on the tall promises of canal-delivered water. But then the pervasive use of pumps has led to the depletion of groundwater, to water transfers from rural to urban areas and to high fiscal costs for sustaining power-pricing that favours prosperous pump-owning commercial farmers.

Engineering godhood

Specious claims have ruled the hydraulic roost for too long and the canal solution has still not been discredited in policy circles, perhaps because of its long pedigree. The first law of technocracy is that failed solutions must be persisted with if the fact of failure has to be concealed. Therefore, failed solutions have long histories, and the longer their history the greater their credibility. Canal systems are perfect examples of this logic. The first integrated proposal to link the rivers of India had come from Major Arthur Cotton, under whose guidance the Grand Anicut in peninsular India had been rehabilitated. When he first drew a map of India showing the possible links of rivers, he was concerned primarily with navigation, though irrigation was also a part of it. According to the India Public Works Department's, *Triennial Review of Irrigation in India, 1918-21*, Cotton's plans involved "a navigable line 4,000 miles long, from Karachi via Cawnpore, Calcutta and Cuttack to Bhatkal, Mangalore, and Madras".

Cotton's plans did not remain unchallenged. His contemporary in the north, Probey Cautley disagreed with the idea of using canals for navigation. Instead he advocated the construction of canals for irrigation, a view that Cotton himself subsequently campaigned for following the Madras Famine of 1876. The Kurnool-Cuddapah Canal in Andhra Pradesh, which took water from the Tungabhadra at Kurnool to Cuddapah on the Pennar, 300 kilometres south, is a product of Cotton's grand plan. Not coincidentally, and more than just incidentally, the Madras Irrigation Company, which built and operated the canal, was promoted by

Cotton himself and its chief engineer was his brother. The canal was the first effort at privatisation of irrigation in India. The Kurnool-Cuddapah canal was an unmitigated disaster. Financially it was a drain on the company that built it. The company went bankrupt in 1866. Eventually, the government of Madras had to purchase the canal from the company at a price that could not be recovered from the canal's users. As an irrigation system it was an outstanding failure. Designed to irrigate some 120,000 hectare of land, the canal in its early years fed only 5 percent of its projected command, and decades later achieved a peak efficiency of only 30 percent. As a navigation system it failed so spectacularly, because of problems at its head-end, that the Indian Irrigation Commission's report commented that it "runs from nowhere to nowhere in particular and consequently there is nothing and nobody to carry".

This failure was not sufficient to deter more ambitious plans. The colonial government opted for more schemes guaranteed to fail and this policy was carried forward in independent India with even more vigour. Presently, India has 13 water transfer arrangements for augmenting irrigation and meeting drinking water needs. To add to this, the Government of India has now, through the National Water Development Association (NWDA), formulated a proposal to link all the rivers of India, on the rationale that there are floods in some areas even as droughts affect other regions. The linking of the rivers will allegedly mitigate the effects of both by transferring water from the flood-prone regions to the drought-prone regions.

This is a novel argument. A new and more convoluted dimension has been added to the idea of waste. Whereas hitherto, unused running water was a waste, which had to be retrieved and put to use for commercial ends, now 'waste' is sought to be reallocated to restore the hydrological balance that nature in its folly had omitted to provide. Until now, the engineer was merely facilitating capital. With the new scheme, the engineer has reached godhood. When British engineers argued that the, "the problem...is not how to prevent floods but how to pass them as quickly as possible to sea", they were at least recognising the limits imposed by nature on their profession and its technological capacities.

With godhood has come a new level of conceit and the water technocracy, confident in its own prowess that a long history of failures has done nothing to undermine, has decided it can make India a land of plenty by simply eliminating drought and flood simultaneously. It has evidently not stopped to ponder why nobody thought of implementing this visionary solution before, even though there has been no dearth of creative thinkers who have come up with specific proposals for maintaining a perpetual harmony of water in the country.

According to MS Reddy, former Secretary for Water Resources, Government of India, "in all the existing inter-basin transfers, the flood-drought syndrome never figured". Since the current proposal has the explicit objective of mitigating floods and droughts, it is important to track the history of ideas and institutions that lie behind this unprecedented venture. What configuration of forces has led to revival of a 200 year old concept of supplementary irrigation as a source of revenue with the objective of mitigating the adverse impact of flood and drought? And why did it acquire such a stranglehold on the official imagination?

In the late1960s, KL Rao, then Union Minister of State for Irrigation and Power, proposed the idea of the Ganga-Cauvery link. A few years later, in the early 1970s, after he left the Union Council of Ministers, he converted his proposal into a National Water Grid Plan. The proposal did not move forward because of its technical limitations and the high costs involved. The NWDA's recent proposal is of a similar nature and is based on achieving supply augmentation through bulk transfer.

From an engineering point of view, while Rao's proposal did have its drawbacks, it also did have some technical foundation. The Garland Canal plan put forward by Dinshaw J Dastur, however, was so 'visionary' in its sweep that it abandoned engineering fundamentals altogether. This whimsical plan, so completely devoid of any trace of scientific thinking, never quite dropped out of the establishment's fantasies. That the logic behind this preposterous plan is at the heart of India's water technocracy's river linking plan reflects poorly on the country's scientific scholarship.

> Failed solutions have long histories, and the longer their history the greater their credibility...

Dastur was a pilot who used to fly DC-3 Dakotas between Kathmandu and New Delhi, which is what must have given him this idea. His plan was to tap the rivers flowing from the Himalaya in a 2400-kilometre long contour canal that would extend from Meghalaya in the Indian Northeast to the river Ravi in Punjab in the Northwest at an elevation of about 400 metres above mean sea level (msl). The objective was to transfer the water so collected to the region south of the Vindhya mountain range via pipe systems or aqueducts, which would connect the northern and southern canal systems. If built, each of the proposed aqueducts would be about 400 kilometres long, and at Patna would be situated about 380 metres above the ground level.

The plan had several technical flaws, all of them fatal. When a canal is built at a constant elevation, it is without a slope, which is a necessary precondition for water to flow. A canal of constant elevation would essentially have been a 2400-kilometre long reservoir to intercept and store the waters of the Himalayan rivers. If the 400 msl contour in the hills that Dastur suggested

was to be literally followed, the alignment of the canal would be serpentine along the northern face of the Siwalik or the southern lower slope of the Mahabharat hills.

According to the latter alignment, the canal would intercept the Arun river at Tumlintar, the Marsyangdi river at Gopling Ghat, and the Karnali river at Kasara Ghat. If the canals were to be aligned along the 400 msl contours on the southern slope of the Siwalik (Chure), then its bottom would be 300 metres higher than the Kosi river at Chatara, 250 metres above the Narayani river at Narayanghat and 200 metres above the Karnali river at Chisapani. Water would have to either jump into the canal or would need to pumped up on a massive scale to keep the canals running.

Siphons and aqueducts would have to be built to route the canals over numerous streams and rivers. Building them would be a feat in itself and the cost would be astronomical. The canals would be a maintenance nightmare, which itself would be a massive budgetary drain. At each section where the canal intercepted the river a dam would have to be built to transfer water into the canal. The dam building would need to address the question of cost and benefits, including the social and environmental impact.

> For the engineerer, unused running water was a waste, to be retrieved and put to commercial use. Now 'waste' is sought to be reallocated to restore the hydrological balance that nature in its folly had omitted to provide

The matter of dams

Building a dam for storing water is more straightforward than making one for the purpose of complex reallocation through canals to ensure a constant supply of water annually. A major limitation that applies equally to canals and dams is the sediment load whose high volume is unique to the Himalayan rivers. In his critique of the Garland Canal scheme, KL Rao did point out many of its technical incongruities but left out the problem of sedimentation that would be encountered.

Furthermore the kind of bulk transfer of water that was envisaged would not be possible without storage. Take the Himalayan rivers, for example. The lowest flow of a river could be as little is 150 cubic metres per second (m^3/s). The instantaneous monsoon peak flood can be as high as 26,000 m^3/s. By contrast, the proposed canal capacity was 2,000 m^3/s. In short, either the flow falls far short of the proposed installed capacity, or the volume is far too large to be accommodated.

In the circumstances, only storage can make the wet season excess flow available in the dry period. But building storage projects brings social, economic, environmental, and technical challenges, which are neither new nor have been overcome in the case of existing facilities. They also bring in very fundamental questions about riparian rights, community resources and the principles of end-use that might justify diversion to the detriment of communities living around the rivers, including the displacement of marginalised people by storage facilities to meet the interests of capital- and water-intensive activities elsewhere. None of these questions have been answered satisfactorily to date.

The proposed layout of the so-called Himalayan canal, when transferred to the present map of Nepal shows the utter disregard for good sense in its conceptualisation. The canal would enter the country somewhere around Ilam district in the east, traverse the midland region to the neighbourhood of Parasi district and head west to exit Nepal in the vicinity of Pancheswar at the western end, carving though the Himalayan landscape. In South Asia, bureaucratic civil engineering may have been swayed by gigantism but the discipline itself has a scientific basis to which the plan is oblivious.

Not surprisingly, KL Rao, in an article in *World Water* questioned the proposal's many incongruities. He wrote, "The Garland Water Project should warn the nation that all fanciful projects should be given up". Incidentally Rao's critique was based on purely technical considerations and did not include social and environmental dimensions. As a result, he too ended up proposing that the northern rivers be linked to the southern. Even judged on purely technical feasibility, some of his arguments, too, contradicted his own logic.

This is the pedigree of the river-linking scheme that the Government of India and its NWDA have now placed before the public as the panacea for the country's water problems. Projects usually proceed from first principles to the drawing board. In judging the feasibility of projects, therefore, it is usually a good idea to work backwards from the drawing board to first principles. From an engineering perspective, the most significant drawing board indices are maps and drawings. For one, they allow a better understanding of the physical context and geography. Secondly, they are the instruments that translate concepts into projects.

River-linking entrenchment

The river-linking proposal formulated by the NWDA follows the disoriented logic of Rao's and Dastur's fanciful schemes. One glance at the maps prepared for the scheme suffices to show how superficial, slipshod and unprofessional the technocratic planning apparatus has been in translating a foolhardy concept into an ill-advised project. When the NWDA map is juxtaposed with the map of Nepal, the two of ends of the northern canals connecting the Gandak and the Karnali rivers

fall well within Nepal. This is anomalous because both the Gandak and Ghagara barrages are situated much to the south.

It could be argued that the map is only indicative and therefore the complaint amounts to nothing more than nitpicking. Yet, it could equally be argued that the cartographic lapse is itself indicative of the morass into which hierarchic civil engineering practice has fallen. A discipline as old as industrial civilisation should show better judgment because the location of the intake as plotted on the map will involve the trans-boundary dimension. This presumably is an important aspect of project feasibility. Such a basic error notwithstanding, the multi-billion rupee proposal has obtained sanction and secured the endorsement of influential organisations in India.

It is not just that the most basic technicalities of the project are flawed; even the financial projections are way off the mark. The budgetary calculations are naïve at best or misleading at worst. Working out the preliminary arithmetic of the river-linking proposal, the economist, Nilkanth Rath, assuming a 7 percent interest rate and a 5 percent rate of inflation during the construction period, estimated that at the end of 20 years the project will require an outlay of INR 2,017,468 crores. This is four times higher than the estimated expenditure of INR 560,000 crores and involves an annual allocation of one lakh crore rupees. An economy as large as India's may well be able to spare this amount, but it begs the obvious question: will spending that money secure the future? Doubtful.

Perhaps it is for precisely this reason that tortuous arguments are increasingly being put out to justify what is, on the face of it, a patently absurd proposition. So we have the misfortune of reading, in the pages of *Himal South Asian*, the convoluted justification by a member of the Task Force on Linking Rivers, no less, that connecting the rivers of India will promote "gender equity". At a seminar in Kathmandu on "Social Science and Resources" organised by the Social Science Research Council, New York earlier in the year, this writer, while commenting on the proposal, had jocularly remarked that gender equality was the only missing factor in the litany of benefits that the implementation of the scheme would allegedly lead to. Some eminent participants then seemed to think the joke was in bad taste.

We are thus being fed improbable fables about incidental spin-offs that have nothing to do with the ostensible reasons that prompted the river-linking project, like the flood-drought dichotomy, and have everything to do with all the other ailments of Indian society. Perhaps we will soon be told that linking rivers will bring about, inter alia, peace on earth, an end to domestic violence, child labour and trafficking, the abolition of the caste system and all the other recalcitrant problems that otherwise refuse to go away. Is the Task Force looking seriously into the technical issues or is it simply immersed in politically correct public relations management?

The latter is quite obviously the case, and one of the gambits of this exercise is to make the time tested plea that there are no alternatives to a course of action that has already been decided. Of course, alternatives do exist and the choices lie at both the institutional and technological levels. The question of technological choices brings in what the historian of technology, David Collingridge labels the "control dilemma". At the early stage of a technology's use we do not know enough about it and by the time we know enough about it, it is too late to make a shift. The result is an entrenchment, as we find ourselves locked into a particular course of action and less and less able to switch to another possible path because of technological inflexibility.

When it comes to technology, is it possible to identify, distinguish and separate flexible options from the inflexible choices? The evaluation process called Technological Assessment says it can be done. Technological Assessment is relevant more in the case of a developing technology than an entrenched technology, but it can nevertheless be used to assess the flexibility of the bulk water transfer proposal of the Government of India. The procedure employs eight indicators to separate the inflexible from the flexible. Four of these indicators are technological and four are organisational. The technical indicators are: a) large-scale, b) long lead-time, c) capital intensive and d) require major infrastructure investment early on in the instituting of a particular technological regime. The four organisational indicators are, a) single mission outfits, b) immunity to criticism, c) hype (every thing under the sun will happen by doing this or that), and d) hubris. If the selected technological option shows red on all eight indicators then the chosen trajectory is littered with obstacles and the end result is an impasse.

The river linking proposal fails against every indicator. Publicly available information shows that the scale is large. It involves 30 systems stretching over several hundred kilometres of canals. The project will take a long time to complete, a minimum of 20 years if noth-

INR 2,017,4

The outlay for the river linking proposal spread over 20 years, as computed by an economist.

ing goes wrong along the way. It will incur enormous costs, realistically estimated at INR 2,017,468 crores at 2003 prices. It will entail massive infrastructure, not the least of which is a conveyance system that will have to be put in place before the water can even begin to flow.

The organisational inflexibility is equally stark. Pushed by the single mission outfit, the NDWA, its promoters have displayed a high degree of contempt and intolerance for critiques and alternative suggestions. Hype surrounds the project and is reflected in the numerous statements by politicians and policy makers about the omnipotence of engineers who have "found the perfect solution to simultaneously solve the problem of flood and drought". The hubris is evident in the denial of alternatives as seen in the response in *Himal* that sought to justify the proposal.

Despite such ingrained inflexibilities the proposal has emerged as the preferred choice. Why was the proposal selected? The answers lie at several levels. The first is the belief that water problems have supply side solutions and those espousing this view are committed believers in the tenet that the road to prosperity is technocratic. Anyone questioning this technocratic vision is dubbed an irrational romantic. Second, it allows the source of the problem and the solution, be it for flood or drought mitigation, to be located outside one's own domain. A lower riparian state can always claim that the upstream state did not release enough water in the dry season, thereby creating scarcity, or that it released too much water in the wet season and so causing floods. Third, it circumvents the need to address the messy business of water management or equitable reallocation or social and economic upliftment by simply asserting the claim that once this or that link is completed every problem will be solved. Fourth, it makes political sense to offer the extravagant promise to farmers facing drought that extra water will be made continuously available. This is particularly significant given that the region has faced consecutive drought in the last few years.

The Supreme Court of India's directive on river linking (which requires of the government to complete the project in 10 years) is an opportunity for the resource starved water hierarchy of India to implement projects. As the environmental critique beginning in the late 1970s gathered momentum and gained in public influence, the water establishment has been without major projects. It has for some time now been on the defensive and has reacted apologetically to its critics, but it has steadfastly refused to move up the learning curve. But it is not just the water establishment that wishes to create monuments in its own honour. National level leaders also have a propensity to have their names associated with large projects. After some of the Punjab canals were built, colonial administrators had boasted that they had created greater monuments than those constructed by the Muslim and Hindu rulers of India. Within this overall milieu that determines public policy choices, the challenges this proposal brings to the fore are both conceptual and practical. How water should be managed or how the world ought to be fifty years from today is not the prerogative of any single entity, be it the technologists, the political establishment, the market, or even the greens.

Hierarchic engineering and the new era

The way forward needs to emerge from a more creative engagement among 'social solidarities', based on normative models of resource use predicated on a clear conception of fundamental categories like 'benefit' and 'progress'. Today's real challenge lies in defining what constitutes a benefit, how it will be distributed and to whom. Standardised 'solutions', with their familiar institutional and technological matrices, cannot yield the same results in different contexts and over time under different conditions. The challenge is also to develop and institutionalise sets of governance principles that will enable society to organise effective and equitable responses to water problems when and where they are needed.

The problems that pose themselves today are not engineering puzzles concerning soil mechanics or the behaviour of concrete in the construction of dams or canals. Problems of that order were solved through techniques perfected in the 1930s with the execution of the Hoover Dam in 1936. The challenge in fact is to find a way out of the problems created by purely technological solutions. From the 1930s to 1970, the United States Federal Government built hundreds of dams on every major western river. They laid the foundations for the powerful, modern and economically prosperous West. But, the deficits of that prosperity have been immense: irreversible ecological damage, the concentration of power with economic elites, the accentuation of socio-economic conflict, the annihilation of native Americans and their cultures, and social injustice legitimised by the ideology of triumphalism and 'success'. By the end of the twentieth century, that logic of development has also led to the rise of the military-industrial complex with its extraordinary capacity to influence the state to

68,00,00,000

the detriment of the citizen.

Not only native Americans, but also unsuspecting all-American Americans have paid a heavy price for this prosperity. Hollywood's *Erin Brokovitch* dramatises the story of one such injustice in rural California, how small city, predominantly White America, exemplified by the town of Hinckley, is slowly poisoned by industrial effluvium. Thanks to a persistent social auditor, the residents of Hinckley were awarded USD 330 million in damages because they had been drinking groundwater polluted by toxic plume from the boilers of the conglomerate Pacific Gas and Electric. Unregulated capitalism, driven by the ethos of accumulation has caused and will continue to unleash adversity.

Given that the current system of decision-making is such that this adversity is never anticipated in advance and is only brought to light post facto, after the victims have already suffered the consequences, how can those who are responsible for other peoples misfortunes be penalised? Will there ever be Bollywood parallels of *Erin Brokovitch*? It is hard to imagine Aishwarya Rai playing Medha Patkar, or Shah Rukh Khan playing Chandi Prasad Bhatt or Hrithik Roshan cast as Sundar Lal Bahaguna, in films that portray the social consequences of unbridled technological arrogance and profiteering.

Even if Bollywood ignores these issues, and even if the polity imposes no penalty on those who wreak havoc on others, the critique of orthodox engineering has nevertheless gone too far in society to be disregarded by engineers. In the past, civil engineers did not have to worry about questions of benefits and their distribution, but now there is a persistence with which they demand answers through stubborn social movements. Those on the social and physical margins, the romantics, the tribals, the eco-freaks, and the lumpen proletariat, who throughout the long years of industrial civilisation could safely be neglected, cannot be ignored anymore in the age of information and popular democracy.

Hierarchic civil engineering faces the choice of a transition to a new era. But this ossified establishment shows no signs of making the appropriate choice, responding as it does in the same old defensive and apologetic manner when it has to, and bludgeoning its way to dominance when it can. But civil engineers cannot evade confronting the problem and modifying their inter-nalised understanding that has served them so well for so long. That understanding is increasingly out of step with the social reality and it is no surprise that mechanical, electrical, instrumental engineers and even medical practitioners chide civil engineers for still being so profoundly dominated by the gigantism, shackled to age-old concepts that have remained unchanged since the days their predecessors erected the pyramids.

The manner in which the river-linking proposal surfaced also shows the deep-rooted stress facing civil engineers dealing with water and working in centralised management structures. The traditional definition of civil engineering is the harnessing of the forces of nature for the benefit of mankind. One of the benefits that civil engineering provided came from manipulating stock and flow of water. Historically, the benefits were obvious. It ensured the regulated supply of water and energy. But with these solutions came many technical hurdles as well. Early civil engineering attention was focused on the science that allowed it to understand and explain the forces of nature with a view to using engineering skills to overcome the hurdles that stood in the way of obtaining benefits. But there are civil engineers and there are civil engineers. A civil engineering that serves the benefits of a few is one that colonises nature and leaves in its wake more problems than it solves.

River linking: The maps prepared for the scheme show how slipshod the technocratic apparatus has been in translating a foolhardy concept into an ill-advised project

This unfortunately is the kind of civil engineering that has come to dominate South Asia and reflects a hierarchic ethos that denies the plurality of interests in society and therefore rejects the need to examine alternatives that better accommodate the needs of a greater diversity of people and livelihood forms. No alternatives please, because the sine qua non of hierarchism is, "There is No Alternative". This is deemed to be a self-evident axiom that requires no proof.

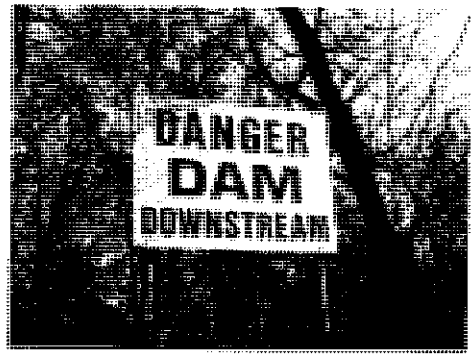
So, averting water problems, we are told, can happen only through augmentation of supply and the manipulation of stock and flow on a scale that exceeds the limits of a reasonable engineering of nature. We are further told that the burgeoning population, fifty years on, will face an unimaginable water crises, and hence the bulk transfer of water must be initiated now. Those who have been trained to exploit nature also believe that they can anticipate the future with unerring accuracy, and since they can where others cannot, their judgement on the choice of solutions cannot be faulted.

This allegedly faultless choice is based on the simplistic and entirely ignorant equation that an increase in the number of people translates into a proportionate increase in water consumption. But is that what really happens in human societies characterised by enormous differences in consumption patterns and practices? In the 1970s, the physicist, John Holdren and the biologist, Paul Ehrlich popularised the IPAT (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) model to explain environmental crises. Environmental impact, the model suggested, is the combined outcome of population, affluence and technology. The model assumed that people everywhere are same and behave in similar fashion and this behaviour is positively related to standard of liv-

ing and technological growth.

But this is an assumption neither physics nor biology can prove. For one, neither affluence nor technology is uniformly distributed across this increasing population, and per capita water consumption has increased disproportionately among a smaller group of more prosperous users than it has among the larger group of less affluent users. But that in itself does not add up to the full picture, for, though water consumption is income elastic, there are also numerous instances of net water use having stabilised even at higher income levels, in part due to the development of relevant technology. There are technologies of conservation that have come to play an important part in mitigating the effects of the technologies of consumption.

Simplistic assumptions and equations often lie at the heart of so-called scientific forecasts about future demands. To that extent, the solutions chosen for the future by the present have little justification, and the denial of alternatives in the name of knowing the future have even less. Doomsday predictions are usually invoked to provide the rationale for ambitious technological innovations, and invariably the cause of the projected doom is always attributed to ordinary people going about their everyday lives. The engineer watching with alarm then comes up with mechanisms that will solve the problem and save people from their own follies.



Hazard and vulnerability

In the course of implementing solutions that save the future of the planet, natural resources pass from the hands of the users to those of the experts. Thus, the peasant depletes water and to secure the future the engineer must take it away elsewhere to ensure rational use. The villager depletes the forests and so the forester takes it over and puts it to more efficient use. The poor destroy the commons and hence it is handed over to commercial developers so that its potential is not wasted. Nature and society, however, are not reducible to such self-serving equations that portent doom unless engineers get down to the urgent task of saving humanity.

But they are routinely invoked for reasons that legitimise the technocratic establishment by creating a narrative justifying intervention. This is how the idea of 'waste' articulates itself with the idea of 'mitigation' to produce excesses such as the river-linking proposal. Using unsound predictive tools, large problems of great urgency are forecast, for which large solutions are then posited. These solutions usually affect large numbers of vulnerable people. Even if we ignore the flimsy ethics that rationalises the ousting of so many people from their meagre resources just to secure the future for an abstract humanity, there are still the consequences of the intervention to be dealt with, because these process introduces destructive externalities, which, in ever-increasing spirals, demand greater doses of the same therapy that invited the problem in the first place.

The engineering solution to an ill-diagnosed problem gradually inserts itself into the cycle of what has conveniently come to be labelled 'natural disasters'. The idea of a natural disaster is very appealing to the technocratic establishment for this very reason. The utilitarian idea of 'waste', having unleashed its own developmental wasteland, reinvents itself in a compassionate and heroic guise, by proposing the humanitarian idea of 'mitigation'. Hedonism and humanism now become indistinguishable. Technological hedonism first defines 'disasters' as natural and then sets about mitigating them. Profligate solutions set up extravagant problems to address, so drought and flood become the obvious targets of the kind of engineering self-indulgence that culminates in the plan to link all rivers.

Will the bulk transfer of water mitigate drought and flood, and avert water-related natural disasters? To asses that it is first necessary to outline what these so-called natural disasters actually are. Natural disasters, in reality, are not any more natural than the hole in the ozone layer, or the rapidity of climate change in the 20th century. A growing body of research has persuasively demonstrated that disasters are outcomes not only of natural hazards, but also of socio-economic structures and political processes that make individuals and families vulnerable. This perspective focuses on the various ways in which social systems operate to make people susceptible to disasters. The capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recuperate from the impact of a natural hazard determines the impact. Those who are more vulnerable are at greater risk of being stricken by disaster.

In South Asia, people live in vulnerable conditions even during normal times, and it is hardest for them to salvage their livelihood immediately after being affected by a hazard. But is the solution to this technological? Vulnerable people do not live in vulnerable conditions out of ignorance about natural hazards or poor assessment of the risks. It is because they have little freedom to choose how and where they live. Low-income families often have no alternative other than to live in vulnerable locations such as flood plains, and the vulnerable conditions contrive to keep them economically on the margins. They are forced to live in such conditions not because regulation or planning of land use is poor, but because prevailing agrarian relations, and the attendant procedures of social and economic exclusion, deny them sources of livelihood in safer areas.

The propensity to disaster, whether from flood or drought, is the outcome of hazard acting on vulnerability. When social vulnerability is accentuated, the scale of loss and destruction increases. Conversely, strengthening social institutions that conduce resilience reduces vulnerability. Therefore, the idea of mitigation in the river-linking proposal is vacuous, since the solution relies on manipulating the hazard and not on minimising vulnerability. As a justification for the project the idea of mitigation is limited in its conceptualisation because it simply does not admit that disasters are the unresolved problems of societies during 'normal' times. Disaster is the latent complement of the South Asian normalcy. Misplaced 'scientific' enthusiasm has reduced the problem to a set of static factors that science can comprehend, leaving out causes that lie within socio-economic relations and are therefore outside science.

Even if we were to grant that the solution lies in controlling the hazard, there is not much that can be done with a hazard that is not even understood, let alone controllable. In 1998, floods caused extensive damage in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Mitigation of the hazard, had the idea been entertained, would have been pre-empted by the fact that the flood was caused by a massive cloudburst along the region south of the Chure range. What is the possible technological response to such a deluge? The floodwaters could not have been stored in dams because there are no sites where they can be built. There is no option but to let the floodwaters drain. The hydro-meteorological characteristics of the region and the social conditions of agrarian society in the affected region compel a re-conceptualisation such that there is a transition from hazard mitigation through drainage control and risk management to flood-disaster mitigation through strengthening resource capacities among vulnerable people.

How are those responsible for other people's misfortunes to be penalised?

The Supreme Court

Given the corpus of knowledge about the physiognomy of disasters and about water management, drought- and flood-impact mitigation, why did the Supreme Court of India succumb to the unqualified technological exuberance exhibited by the NWDA in preparing its proposal? Judicial activism has in the past helped address many social issues, including creeping environmental problems. However, in recent times courts have allowed themselves to answer questions about matters that lie outside the ambit of jurisprudence. These include ruling on questions of historical interpretation, the veracity of mythology or the development paradigm. This is especially a problem when facts involved are uncertain, when values systems differ drastically and the stakes are high. In venturing into such areas the judiciary risks lowering its own dignity and credibility. The long-term consequences for the authority of the judicial system are adverse and self-defeating. Courts that compromise their judicial dignity by making questionable decisions and recommendations cannot command respect.

In this particular case, the court acted in breach of its own mandate. A court of law can pronounce on questions of law or of fact. A bench of judges can make decisions based on the laws, protocols and proprieties of evidence. Private opinion, personal prejudice and articles of faith, even irrational faith in science and technology, are inadmissible in the working of the courts of law. Most importantly, courts must function with the laws given to them. They cannot create laws in accordance with their views. Court systems are created for different purposes—to adjudicate, and to provide a systemic check on violations of the law by the executive.

The courts can direct the executive to perform necessary acts that it is required to perform and to proscribe acts that it is not authorised to perform. It can order the government to ensure that suffering caused by drought or floods be mitigated. But it cannot, under any circumstance, dictate to the government what specific methods it should adopt in attaining this objective. Most certainly, it cannot prescribe remedies of a technical nature about which it has no technical expertise and also institute a timeline for the technical 'fix' that binds society. The Supreme Court in the present instance explicitly decided that the macro-method of bulk water transfer was the solution to India's problems. Macro-responses do not address micro-level concerns at the household, family and community levels, where flood and drought respectively have a highly visible but differential impact. The court has voluntarily ventured into an arena of knowledge, politics and dispute that is far beyond its competence.

Modification of stock and flow of water is a practice that goes back to the dawn of human history. That is in itself not the problem. It is the assertion by the technocracy and the judiciary that the linking of rivers is the *deus ex machina* to simultaneously solve the problems of flood and drought once and for all that constitutes a deep conceptual threat to the emergence of a plural intellectual environment for the formulation of public policy. This is all the more so since, in the current political-economic milieu, at least some part of the river-linking project will be implemented, yet the vulnerabilities to flood and drought will remain. And when problems come home to roost decades hence, there will be no mechanism to ensure that irresponsible and hasty conduct on the part of the judicial and technological bureaucracies will be penalised.

Hum us desh ke vasi hain echoed a sentiment that runs deep in the Subcontinent. Are we living with the banality of listening to a preposterous remix of the song. ∆

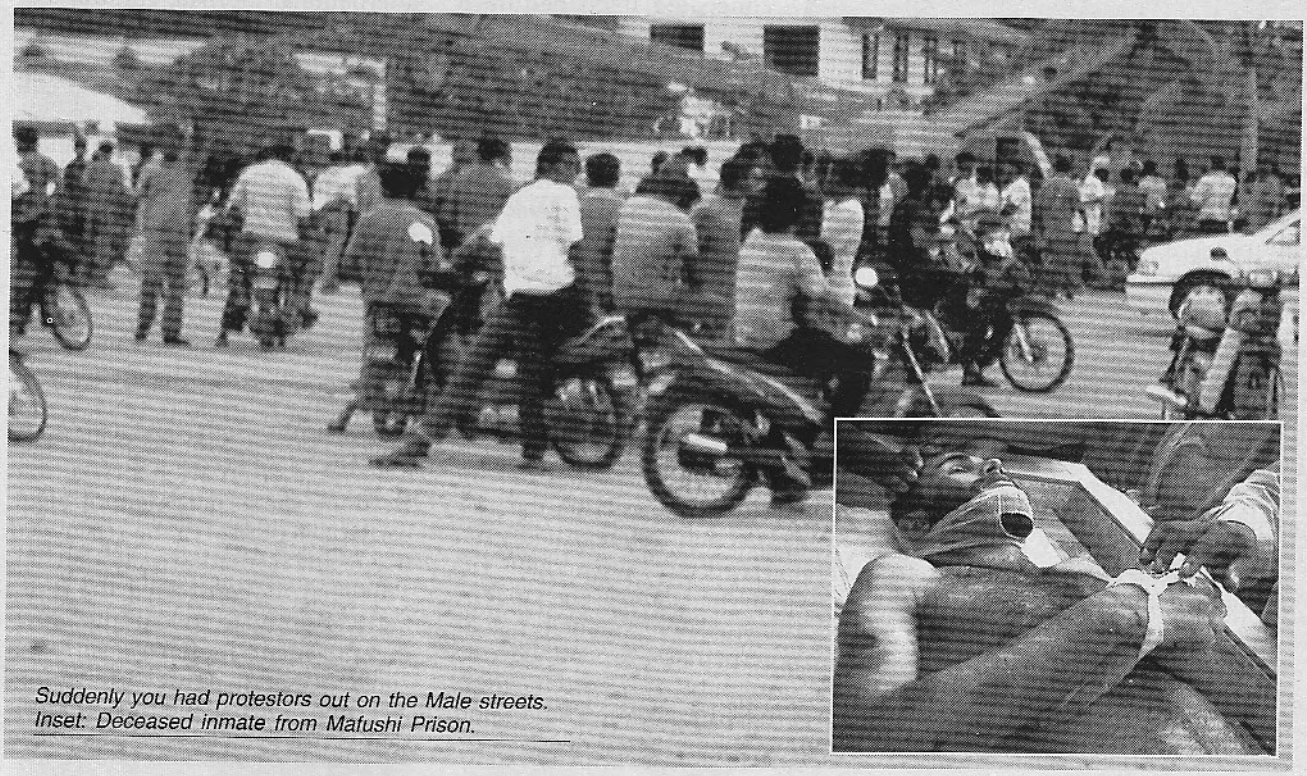
Flush funds and family games in the Maldive Islands

by ***'Maldivian'***

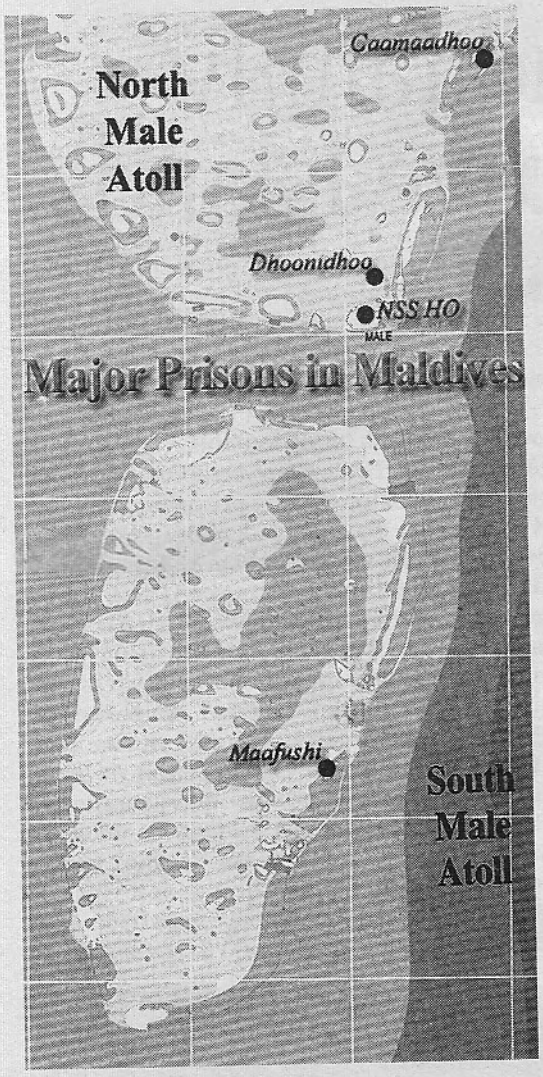
The combination of feudal patriarchy, big business and religious extremism that exists in the Maldives is not only lethal for the future of the country and its people but also has serious implications for the South Asian region. The milky white and spotless beaches of the archipelago can give the casual observer the impression that all that there is to those beaches are the white sands by the blue lagoons. What they do not see are the numerous crabs with sharp claws that live in the sand. This is an apt metaphor for the political scene of the Maldives. The government rules unopposed with no political strikes, demonstrations or agitation. There is a seeming air of serenity in which it is easy to miss out the resentment against the government. At least, that is how it was until a few weeks ago when the popular image of a tranquil and placid archipelago was shattered by the sound of gunfire, rubber bullets and tear gas canisters. Angry rioters ransacked government buildings and burnt the office of the Election Commissioner in Male, only a day after Maumoon Abdul Gayoom submitted his application to remain President for a sixth consecutive five-year term. Suddenly, the myth of a peaceful polity and stable society was being shattered and without any warning at that. International correspondents were as baffled as regional governments were by the brutal turn of events in the islands' capital.

Atolls of repression

On 20 September 2003, the dead body of a young prison inmate from the Maafushi Jail, in the South Male atoll, was brought to Male for burial. The body was covered with burn marks and other visible signs of torture and beatings. Even as the grim evidence of police brutality was just sinking in, the city's residents got news of a prison riot and shooting of inmates by guards. Many young people who knew the victim went on a rampage, leading a spontaneous riot unseen for decades in the country. Riot control police were deployed on the streets as news and rumour spread, and the mobs began



Suddenly you had protestors out on the Male streets. Inset: Deceased inmate from Mafushi Prison.



to burn and ransack public buildings. Their anger was clearly directed at the government. As the hours passed it became clear that the prison riot at Maafushi broke out following the beating and killing of the first victim. But to add insult to injury, the police had used live ammunition to quell the protesters in prison, killing at least two more and injuring several others in the process.

Police brutality and torture is nothing new to many Maldivians. "The killing of at least three prisoners by the National Security Service (NSS) and the injury of a dozen more in Maafushi Prison, is only the latest chapter in a catalogue of human rights violations in the country by NSS personnel who function under the President's command", said Amnesty International. Over the years, many people have died in prison. Others have managed to survive. Some of the survivors are still struggling with the physical and psychological effects of torture. Those who were forced to stay in stocks for weeks live with excruciating pain in their joints and spine. Their stories are told only in confidence for fear of inviting further reprisals, but history will tell the gruesome facts of torture and killings carried out by a government that is supposed to protect and defend the civil rights of the people and which tries to projects the image of a benign authority to the rest of the world .

The repression by the authorities in the Maldives has, as its backdrop, a long history of denial of basic human rights to its citizens by the state. The totalitarian government that has sustained this repression has concealed itself behind a veil of what President Gayoom calls a "model democracy". This version of democracy has no conception of individual freedoms. The freedoms of expression, assembly or political association have been denied to the people. It was this veil which was finally lifted on 20 September 2003. Thanks to those who expressed their anger and pent up frustration despite the certainty of violent response, the world now knows the reality of Maldivian democracy.

Amnesty International put the responsibility squarely on the government. It said, "By repeatedly dismissing reports of human rights violations in the country, the Government of President Gayoom has allowed perpetrators to continue to act with impunity. This has effectively perpetuated a cycle of repression, eroding people's confidence in the state's institutions to protect their fundamental rights. It is high time that government authorities accept their own responsibility and failure to protect and promote human rights".

Serial dictatorship

Why should the world be concerned about this small nation of under 300,000 people? For one, it can serve as an important lesson for many other nations. The state of Maldives is not a singular or unique entity. It resembles the autocratic states of West Asia. Posing no obvious threat to any other country and with the proscription of any independent press, including the foreign media, the government is largely insulated from external scrutiny. This is perhaps the first time in the country's history that it has attracted such negative attention, having revelled for the most part in the reputation of being a pleasant and attractive tourist destination.

The unfolding of contemporary Maldivian politics can be understood by examining the political, economic and cultural factors that affect its society. Arab socialism, international tourism, cultural and educational integration, and Islamic extremism have all contributed to the formation of the social and cultural fabric of the Maldives. The current political system was installed nearly 50 years ago by the first generation of Arab-educated elite. Its perpetuation and maintenance is guaranteed by another generation of Arab-educated elite who took over the government in 1978.

The politics of Maldives has been dominated by one dictator after another. President Gayoom came to power with the promise of a new age of political and cultural freedom. The socialist rhetoric of the early days of his regime resembled that of any revolutionary leadership. This sharply contrasted the quiet and very private style of the previous president, Ibrahim Nasir, who ruled the Maldives for 20 years, first as Prime Minister and then as President. President Gayoom was hailed

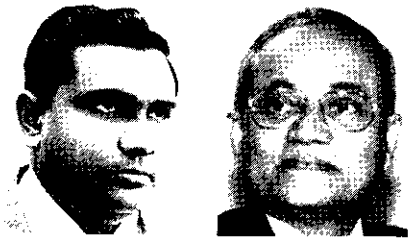
as the only hope for the Maldives, with his advanced university education and as a scholar of Islamic studies. In contrast Ibrahim Nasir had barely completed his secondary education. However, unlike Gayoom, Nasir was a visionary and a pragmatic, who it was that introduced Western style education and opened the country to international tourism.

When Gayoom took command 25 years ago, most Maldivians did not understand the political background of the new leadership, including that of Gayoom's friends, the Foreign Minister, Fathulla Jameel and the Youth Minister, Zahir Hussain. They had contributed to pan-Arab and Islamic socialism and had aspired to rule the Maldives ever since they were students at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo in the 1960s. They were heavily influenced by Arab Socialism and the teachings of the likes of Libya's leader Muammar Qadhafi and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. This background is important to understand the political history of the Maldives.

If Maldivians expected a leader to introduce democracy and individual freedoms in the country, Gayoom could not have been the one to do that because he did not believe in individual freedoms any more than Hafiz Al-Asad of Syria or Saddam Hussein of Iraq. Gayoom and his Arab educated friends have operated as a close-knit group, very similar in its functioning to a politburo, while denying the privilege of political association to their potential opponents. They demand absolute loyalty and anyone who challenges the political system, let alone the legitimacy of their authority, is treated as an enemy of the state. By not allowing formal political parties, the ruling politburo ensures that legitimate opposition to the government cannot be expressed in peaceful ways.

The inner mechanisms of this autocratic system are controlled and operated by an intricate network of family and friends who occupy positions of power, with President Gayoom playing the role of the godfather. In a system like this, absolute and unquestioned allegiance is a must. Family connections and friendships are everything. Gayoom's younger brother, Abdulla Hameed and, until recently, brother-in-law Ilyas Ibrahim are family members who wield extraordinary power and play a critical role in the maintenance of this regime. It is they who have been instrumental in securing absolute power for President Gayoom.

They were once close confidantes of the previous President Ibrahim Nasir and therefore knew the tricks of manipulating the public vote. They controlled the Majlis, the parliament. It is not in their interest to reform the age-old political system in the country. Until today, Hameed is the Speaker of the Majlis, appointed by Gayoom and in addition he holds the sensitive and strategic post of Minister for Atolls Administration. His primary responsibility is to secure votes for Gayoom from the rural islands through the aegis of the island chiefs appointed by him. His other task is to control the Majlis so that any non- government bill submitted to the parliament will never get through unless it has the blessings of the President. Hameed is his elder brother's biggest political asset.



Past and present: Nasir and Gayoom

Gayoom and his Arab educated friends have operated as a close-knit group, very similar in its functioning to a politburo, while denying the privilege of political association to their potential opponents

Like Hameed, Ilyas has held strategic positions in government. He was Deputy Defence Minister and head of the NSS for many years (The President always reserved the defence ministry portfolio for himself). Ilyas, an old time Nasir protégé, knows only the power of money and the police. Gayoom used Ilyas to maintain law and order. The latter's close friend Adam Zahir, an Australian trained schoolteacher, was appointed chief of police immediately after Gayoom came to power in 1978. Adam Zahir and Ilyas perfected the art of torture and repression for Gayoom's government.

The Maldives is too small a place and the position of the President as head of the police and armed forces is so visible, it is inconceivable that he would be unaware of the gross violations of human rights in the prison system. Following the recent killings, Adam Zahir has been removed from his post. He quickly left the country for the United Kingdom. Gayoom is hoping that the entire blame for the killing of prisoners can be put on Zahir and a few prison guards. However, it is essential that responsibility be borne by all who have condoned such brutality over the years.

Handout islands

The senior figures in the Maldivian government have all enjoyed full immunity from investigations and prosecution. It is widely believed that in addition to being accomplices to human rights violations, many of them have misappropriated large amounts of public funds, transferred huge amounts of foreign exchange to offshore banks and engaged in shady business deals with overseas companies, especially in the fisheries sector and the airline industry. Following major corrup-

tion scandals among senior officials, the government did set up an anti-corruption board. But, when the ruling elite are bound by such powerful political and economic ties, and the judiciary is just an extension of the executive branch, such anti-corruption initiatives and investigative committees have little chance of ever getting started.

The international community may not have heard of torture and repression in the Maldives until now, but it is common knowledge in the country that gross violations of human rights are a standard feature of the prison system. Such practices have continued down through the last several decades, and the regime of President Gayoom is no exception. Using the excuse of an attempted coup, Gayoom arrested his opponents as early as 1979, barely a year after he took office, when a number of supporters of former President Nasir were imprisoned.

Stories of torture began to emerge from then on. Several people have died in prison and independent investigation has never been carried out. The recent riots that began in the prison, and the shooting of several prisoners by armed guards are a natural outcome of many years of repression. Unlike earlier incidents, however, this time dead bodies were brought to Male, clearly a grave oversight from the perspective of the regime managers. When the gravity of the mistake was realised, the rest of the injured prisoners were flown out of the country to Sri Lanka for treatment.

The existing system of repression is perpetuated through the continuous reproduction of social and political relations between the political apparatus and the tourism industry. The tourism sector is the backbone of Maldives' politics and economy. In the early 1970's, some of the Western educated youth who were then frustrated by Nasir's autocratic rule went into tourism, giving up their dreams of a just society. Today, they form the crust of the wealthy class in the country. The state uses the most important asset of the country to buy political allegiance.

Uninhabited islands are dished out to government supporters, who in turn rent them out to Western travel companies. These few families led by one-time progressives have now acquired a substantial stake in the maintenance of the regime. Many members of the cabinet fall in this category. The revenue accruing to the government itself from such handouts is only a fraction of the total revenue being generated from the tourism industry. The bulk of the national revenue is skimmed off by this handful of Maldivians and their foreign financiers and partners. The few Maldivians who actually run their own resorts are struggling to compete with large international hotel operators because they have to make regular payments both to the government and to members of Gayoom's cabinet.

Continued repression will only build more pressure and when it explodes, it will not only pose a danger to the Maldives but also to the security of the entire region

The events of 20 September have grave implications for the tourism industry. As the European tourism industry becomes more sensitive to the human rights abuses of the current regime, they will look for other holiday destinations. Many Western tourists are no longer willing to be party to repressive systems or contribute to regimes that deny basic freedoms of speech, assembly and political association to their people.

This feudal system of patronage and rewards is constructed and reconstructed to maintain absolute authority. The system is designed to keep the country's wealth and sources of income concentrated in the hands of a few families and to keep the rest of the population silent. Some of the wealthy resort owners provide the financial backing to government-supported candidates in the election to the Majlis. They also finance the expenses for the re-election of the President. That explains how the entire cabinet gets re-elected to the Majlis on a regular basis. The ministers together with the eight members of the Majlis, and the Speaker appointed by the President ensure that he remains in his position for life.

Cultural dichotomies

In addition to political and economic factors, cultural interventions have played an important role in maintaining state hegemony. The press is under tight control. The only newspapers in the Maldives are owned either by cabinet ministers or by the President's family. Only state run television and radio are allowed. Private cable operators are required to censor sensitive news on political changes in other parts of the world.

The events following the riots demonstrate that the days of information blackout and press control are numbered. Changes in information technology will erode the walls of secrecy around the Maldives. The younger generation is connected globally through the internet. Most young people today watch CNN or the BBC World Service. They identify themselves with youth in other parts of the world. The internet and the mobile telephone have become the tools of communication and inevitably the international community will get to know a different Maldives from the one that gets projected, that of a beach resort for the world's rich and the famous.

Another aspect of cultural hegemony is the monopolisation of religious thought. Only those persons with an Arab education have the right to express their thoughts on religious matters. This policy has

become a double-edged sword. For a while, President Gayoom was the only source of religious opinion and interpretation. With a growing body of Saudi Arabia-educated elite in the country, this is no longer the case.

One dimension of Gayoom's regime that is little known is its contribution to creating and fostering extremist Islam in the Maldives. Having secured his position as the head of state and head of Islamic affairs in the country, he instituted strict Islamic education. It was a source of legitimacy for his role as head of Islam in the country and a move to counter the influence of the pro-Western education introduced by his predecessor. Islamic schools teaching in the Arabic medium were introduced at the primary and secondary level, to function alongside secular schools where Islam was taught as one of the subjects of study. Mohammed Rasheed Ibrahim, the Chief Justice of the Maldives is the patron and champion of this project. Educated in the Islamic schools of Cairo and Saudi Arabia, the project leaders promoted a version of Islam called Wahhabism, totally unknown to the Maldives until a few years ago.

Wahhabism is a puritanical version of Islam promoted by a Saudi extremist called Abdul Wahab. It calls for a jihad for the establishment of a Muslim state based on the Sharia law. Twenty years down the line this tilt towards fundamentalist Islam seems to have become a thorn in Gayoom's side. Many outspoken young Muslim scholars have been arrested and tortured but their followers have multiplied throughout the country and have become a significant political force. The Chief Justice continues to be the quiet force behind this movement.

It is important to note that the majority of the population, however, has gone through a predominantly secular education with expectations of greater political, social and religious freedoms. The resulting divisions in education and culture have thus created a deep schism in the national society. One group favours an Islamic state with little or no individual freedom. They are rapidly converting the women into wearing the Islamic *hijab* (veil) and the men to grow beards. By contrast, the Western educated youth are demanding greater freedoms, including elimination of gender biases. In the Male streets, therefore, veiled women walk side by side women in short skirts. This is not a sign of mutual admiration but rather a passive acceptance of a dichotomy within society, one that is symbolic and symptomatic of a deeper division.

NSS on guard.

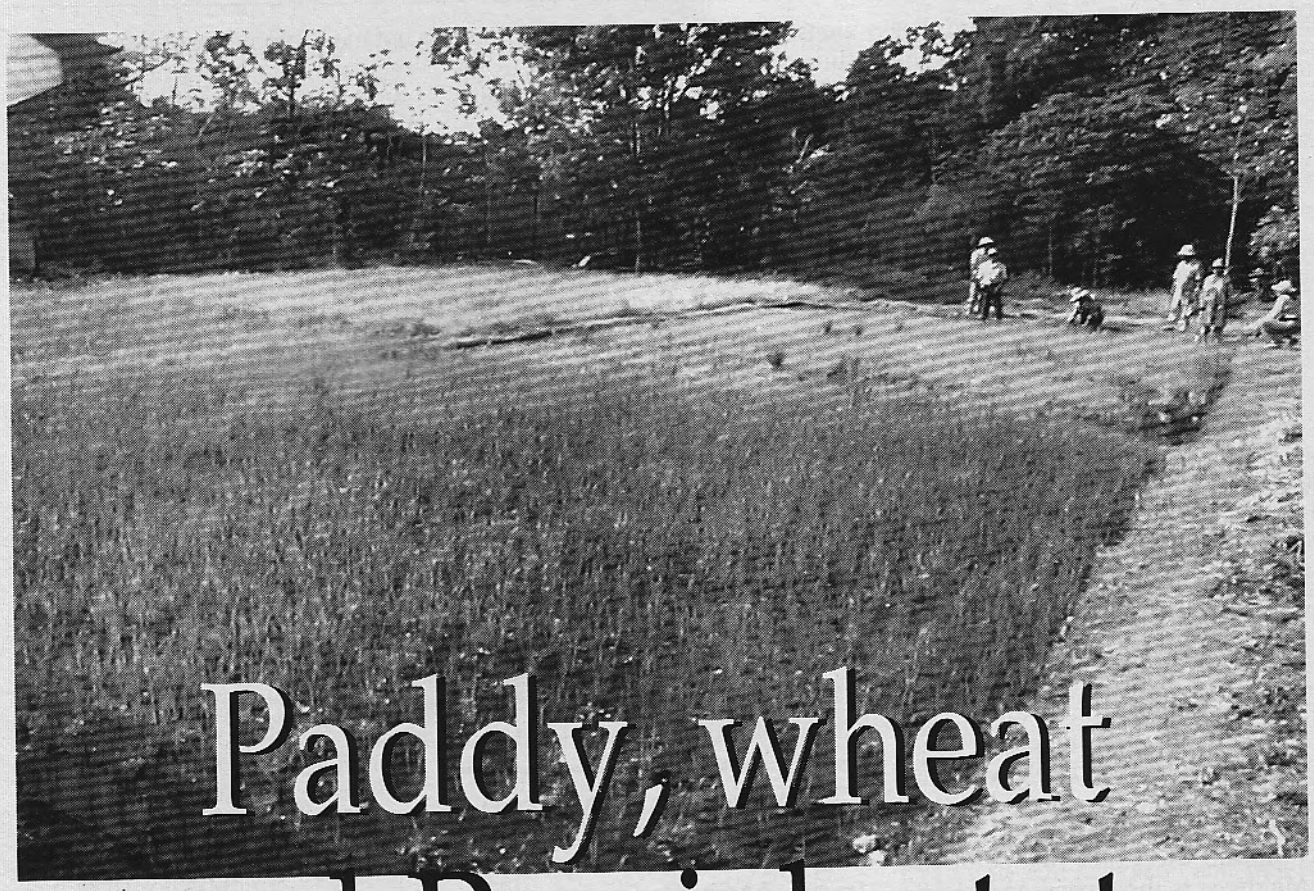
The existing system of repression is perpetuated through the continuous reproduction of social and political relations between the political apparatus and the tourism industry

It is possible that a relaxation of the existing controls on the freedom of expression can contribute to the surfacing of these underlying differences. This is the dilemma confronting the government. Gayoom would like to keep the system under tight control as long as he can. He does not have the energy or the creativity required to fashion a new and open system. On the other hand, the longer he insists on control - the more intense the pressure will become, until it begins to rip society apart. We have yet to see if the events in the Maafushi prison and in Male are the beginnings of a systemic breakdown or a careless slip that will be fixed with thicker layers of 'band aid'.

The rest of South Asia cannot afford to allow the Maldives to become a hotbed of religious extremism. It is incumbent on Gayoom to take more enlightened steps to confront that possibility. Continued repression will only build more pressure and when it explodes, it will not only pose a danger to the Maldives but also to the security of the entire region.

The country has often been seen as a point of strategic importance to security in the Indian Ocean. The Maldivian archipelago extends between the Indian Subcontinent and the Chagos islands, where a major US military base is located. It is in no one's interest to see an extremist and repressive state in the Maldives, most importantly the Maldivians themselves. The peaceful resolution of social differences requires an open system in which individuals and organisations with differing views can freely express themselves without infringing on the basic and fundamental rights of every citizen.

The Maldives is no longer an isolated beach for recreation. It is part of a global community and a microcosm where political, economic and cultural forces are at play as in other much larger countries such as Indonesia, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. What happens in the Maldives will largely depend on the extent to which the global community is interested in the human rights of its people as much as it is interested in the pleasures of its sandy beaches.



Paddy, wheat and Punjab state

by **Sudhirendar Sharma**

The state of Punjab which has been literally feeding India, with its annual contribution of 53 percent of wheat and 40 percent of paddy to the food stocks of the country was, at the time of India's independence in 1947, a food grain deficit area with only 52 of its area under irrigation. The 1960s Green Revolution changed all of that. Introduction of dwarf wheat germ-plasm and dwarf varieties for paddy crop resulted in quantum leaps in production. The high tide of the Green Revolution led to intensive production which then led to the emergence of crop monocultures, in general, as farmers, enticed by the productivity of the high yielding varieties of seeds promoted by the agricultural establishment of the country, switched to rice and wheat rotation. Pulses and coarse grains were sidelined – paddy and wheat was where the money was and to which over 71 percent of the gross cultivated area was put. Farm machinery, pesticides and fertilisers and irrigation dramatically increased the productivity of land. Today 95 of the net sown area gets irrigated by a web of canals and tubewells.

But, land as a factor of production has its limitations to support the intensity of such agricultural practises. Crop yields and water resources have started to decline steeply as a result. Realising that the ecological threat was real and closer home, the state government now plans to wean away farmers from such paddy-wheat cropping patterns. With stagnant growth rates of 73 percent, Punjab has been forced to undertake this shift in farming practises. It is now seeking a INR 1,280 crore support from the central government. It needs this money to compensate its farmers for switching from the traditional cropping system. By giving an incentive of INR 12,500 per hectare, the state hopes to be able to relieve some one million hectares under paddy-wheat rotation to be replaced by alternate crops like pulses and oilseeds.

For the central government it is the bigger question of feeding the country, should the flow of wheat and paddy stop flowing from this machine. However, for Punjab it is a question of ecological survival, of sustaining its natural resources like water and soil in a healthy state. Politically and economically it is also a question of the sheer survival of its farming community. The proposed change in crop patterns for Punjab will save the country an estimated INR 8,976 crore in procurement, handling and storage costs. It is also intended to provide some relief from the high incidence of pests, diseases and a host of ecological problems, like the alarming depletion in the water table, water logging, soil salinity, toxicity and micronutrient deficiency. These are the less-talked about afflictions of the high yielding variety boom, which was once talked about as the engine of food security and the driving force behind farm prosperity.

A reduction in paddy and wheat production by 30 percent is being suggested as the antidote to the current stress on the state's water resources. Rice is not a traditional crop in arid states like Punjab. Rice fields alone consume some 85 per cent of all freshwater supply. This adds up to a total annual consumption of 44 lakh hectare metres of water. Being a water guzzler, paddy is the key crop being targeted. Undoubtedly, a shift in the cropping pattern will ease the pressure on the already over-stretched groundwater resources in the state.

Since the prosperous farming community in Punjab is extremely influential, this depletion of groundwater in the service of rich-farm productivity has been aided and abetted by successive governments to gain political mileage. The inevitability of the ground-water crisis was built into the political-economy of the state from the very inception of the Green Revolution. Government support in the form of virtually 'free-for-all' electricity for tubewell operation led to the overuse of even poor quality water (This has added another dimension to the burgeoning ecological crisis by increasing soil salinity). Statistics indicate that 35 percent of the total electricity consumed in the state is being used to run 7.5 lakh tubewells—mostly for irrigating paddy.

Not surprisingly, water tables have long dropped beyond the reach of muscle-driven water lifts, dipping down to as low as 400-450 meters in many places. As a result, some 84-development blocks out of the 138 in the state have already been declared as being in the dark zone, where the level of groundwater exploitation is over 98 percent, as against the critical level of 80 percent. Six out of the 12 districts in the state have recorded a groundwater utilisation rate of over 100 percent. Consequently, in many parts of Punjab water tables are falling by up to one meter per year.

Dipping water tables and rocketing electricity bills.

This crisis of overuse is the ostensible reason for the Punjab government's measure to reverse the existing agricultural regime. In his report, 'Agricultural Production Pattern Adjustment Programme for Punjab', noted agricultural scientists SS Johl has drawn up an ambitious plan to wean farmers away from cultivating paddy and wheat on one million hectares. If the state is allowed to have its way and implement this plan through central assistance, the consequent reduction in wheat production by 4.7 million tonnes and paddy by 3.4 million tonnes will mean a net saving of 14.7 billion cubic meters of water each year.

There is no doubt that a shift from the current cropping pattern will help the state curb the unintended and unanticipated trade in virtual water. Each ton of wheat and paddy sent to the central food stocks entails a virtual transfer of 1200 and 2700 cubic meters of water respectively, as that is the amount of water required to produce a ton of the harvest. The Punjab government has realised that in producing food for the nation it is losing dearly in terms of its non-renewable natural resources, for which there can hardly be any compensation.

Howsoever justified from the perspective of the state, the solution proposed by the Punjab government raises some fundamental questions. Undoubtedly, subsidies and incentives on crop inputs during the Green Revolution era have brought about significant changes in the cropping pattern and the crop harvests in the state. Can the same technique be used to reverse that trend now? Albert Einstein once remarked that, "you can't find a solution to a problem by employing the same thinking that moved you into the problem in the first place". This principle ought to inform the debate in today's context. The present subsidy being sought from the central government will be used to encourage vertical integration through "contract farming", wherein private companies tie up with farmers and ensure a buyback arrangement for their produce. Considered innovative, this farmer-corporate partnership is likely to open the floodgates of corporatisation of agriculture on the one hand and marginalisation of farmers on the other.

Contract farming, defined as a system for the production and supply of agricultural/horticultural produce under forward contracts between producers/suppliers and

buyers, rests on the commitment of the producer/seller to provide an agricultural commodity of a certain type, at a time and a price, and in the quantity required by the buyer. Contract farming by large private groups such as Rallis, Mahindra, United Breweries and Tropicana is permitted in Punjab. Already in the state, 90,000 acres have been shifted to alternate crops like basmati, maize and pulses in the past one year, alongside the involvement of private companies in marketing tie ups with farmers.

Though this move will gradually ease the pressure on the state by way of eliminating farm subsidies on the one hand and the onus of minimum support prices on the other, Punjab's farmers will be at the mercy of uncertain markets driven by global corporate interests. It makes for fallacious reasoning that such contract farming policies in any way address the ecological threat they were intended to avert. What is the incentive for a private player to ensure that over-use of fertilisers and pesticides is avoided, that water should be used in moderation, that cultivation cycles should follow soil-recharging principles and not market values? There is every reason to doubt the claim that the proposed policy intervention will reverse the trend in resource degradation.

Punjab's proposal to replace the government-farmer relationship with a corporate-farmer relationship does not seem to take into account other, less uncertain, alternatives that have been suggested. Daler Singh of the JDM Foundation in Ladhowal, Ludhiana, has been working on the concept of a low water-use variety of paddy. During the last four years, Singh and his colleagues have demonstrated to farmers in several locations in Punjab that paddy can survive and thrive on much less water. The innovation is simple: Rice seedlings are transplanted onto the ridges spaced 24 inches apart by furrows that are filled with water. While the crop is irrigated daily for the first week after transplantation, subsequent irrigation is at weekly intervals, with special attention during the tillering and grain setting stages. Since less water is used in the ridge-furrow system of paddy cultivation than in flooded rice fields, the crop requires about 30 per cent less fertiliser application.

Sadly, the idea of corporate farming seems to make more sense to the authorities than these alternatives. The innovation does not seem to get the desired official patronage primarily, it would seem, because the government is already committed to resolving the crisis through private companies providing inputs and buying back the harvest as envisaged under the crop diversification plan.

The Punjab government has realised that in producing food for the nation it is losing dearly in terms of its non-renewable natural resources, for which there can hardly be any compensation

Agriculture as a production industry depends on inputs from several industries, and additional services like transport. In a situation where competition amongst the multi-national firms has led to price wars, it is not difficult to visual them resorting to various undesirable methods of cost-cutting. It is very likely that price stability will be compromised, leaving farmers in the lurch. Besides, there could also be managerial arm-twisting to undercut the flow of inputs to rival companies, and other profit-only strategies. These are legitimate causes of worry in the case of agriculture.

Whatever gains accrue to Punjab in the short run will be counter-balanced by significant problems in the long term. And these problems are unlikely to be very different from the one that has prompted the state government's proposal in the first place. Developing country farmers are already fighting a losing battle because of the global imbalance in the volume of farm subsidies as between them and their counterparts in the developed countries. By losing the cushion of subsidy from the Indian state, farmers may well find themselves under the total control of corporations, which will not only decide the type of crops to be grown but will determine the procurement price as well without being constrained by the factors that prevented the government from pushing the floor price below the sustenance level.

The government of Punjab seems to have taken a blind plunge into the unknown. In effect, it might be (un)intentionally setting a trap for itself. A series of questions await the state government's clarification: What has prompted the state to encourage contract farming? Why has the government not adopted a coherent and competitive marketing strategy for crops other than paddy and wheat? Why have minimum support prices for pulses and coarse grains not been announced?

It is apparent that in the haste to reverse the ecological degradation in the state, the government has overlooked some of the serious dimensions of its proposed solutions. Indeed, there may be problem in the very idea of providing an incentive to get farmers to change their cropping pattern. As things stand, farmers are not only getting negative returns on their current investments but are also witnessing a decline in markets for their present harvest as well. Therefore do farmers need the financial inducement of subsidy support to switch over from the paddy-wheat rotation? Or is there some other motivation behind the scheme? Perhaps there is more to Punjab's ambitious crop diversification plan than meets the eye. △

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Mining uranium in the mountains

by Nava Thakuria

In Domiasat, in the West Khasi hills of northeast India there is trouble brewing. The story dates back to 1976, when the Atomic Minerals Division (AMD) of the Atomic Energy Commission set up its Northeastern Circle Office at Shillong, in Meghalaya. The AMD, known successively as the Rare Minerals Survey Unit and the Raw Materials Division and currently renamed the Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research (AMDER), soon commenced uranium exploration in the state and discovered large deposits of uranium oxide in Domiasat and Wakhyn, both in the West Khasi Hills, not far from the border with Bangladesh, in 1984.

The Uranium Corporation of India Ltd (UCIL), a state-owned company under the administrative control of the Department of Atomic Energy, and the only body authorised to mine uranium in India, soon formulated plans to set up a uranium-processing unit at Domiasat. This naturally enough provoked protests by various local organisations, which were conveniently ignored by the company. An assessment of the deposits was completed in 1992 and exploration activities carried on till 1996. By this time public opposition to the project had become strong enough to force AMDER and UCIL to terminate the exploration and abandon the location.

This retreat is clearly only temporary, and plans for mining operations have not been shelved. As the UCIL's website puts it, "[t]he large sandstone type deposit discovered in cretaceous tertiary sedimentary basin ... has been planned for commercial exploitation. Different mining methods and extraction techniques have been studied to find the most suitable alternative keeping the cost and the environmental impact as low as possible". Mining has not commenced till date but that is no reason to believe that attempts will not be made in the future. The only factor that has come in the way of extraction is the strong local opposition.

The discovery in Domiasat is far too important for the nuclear establishment in India to give it up merely because of popular objection. For one, this is reckoned to be the largest and richest deposit to be discovered in the country so far. For another, the deposit is very near the surface and therefore will be more economical than the other UCIL mining operations, which are at some depth below the surface. The ore in Domiasat is spread over a 10-square-kilometer area, in deposits varying from eight to 47 meters from the surface. The significance of this can be gauged from the fact that at Jadugoda in the state of Jharkhand, the site of the UCIL's largest uranium mine has been prospected to a depth of about 800 m below the surface and it is expected that it would continue further in depth.

More importantly, the uranium ore at Domiasat and Wakhyn is much better than at Jadugoda, in Jharkhand, which supplies the bulk of India's uranium requirements. According to AMDER's regional director in Shillong the recovery percentage in Domiasat is 0.1 percent, which compares favourably with US and Canadian recovery percentage of between 0.2 and 0.5. By contrast the deposits at Jadugoda are of relatively poor concentration, with the recovery percentage being as little as between 0.02 to 0.06. This grade is generally considered too low to be worth extracting.

"Yellow cake" bounties

Since India had very early decided on building up capacity in nuclear power, an extensive geological survey had been undertaken in the 1950s to identify the domestic availability of nuclear materials. These exercises suggested that India had limited and poor quality uranium reserves and vast quantities of thorium deposits. Accordingly the Indian nuclear programme while relying primarily on thorium, envisaged the creation of reactor systems that would use to the maximum possible the limited stock of uranium. Hence the heavy investments made in Jadugoda, Bhatin, Nawapahar and other places.

Consequently, the Domiasat deposit introduces a different complexion altogether in the overall capacity of the Indian nuclear environment. Such mineral bounty — an estimated 10,000 tonnes of double grade uranium — gives it second place in the aggregate availability of the "yellow cake" (U_3O_8), after Jadugoda. But the Domiasat and Wakhyn deposits have by far the best concentration in India so far, thereby giving them an importance that is not lost on the nuclear establishment, particularly since, currently, all the uranium for India's Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs), comes from the lower-grade Jadugoda facility.

Both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the Domiasat deposit are significant in the overall context of the 15-year plan formulated in 1985, which proposed a mammoth expansion in capacity so as to increase the total national generating capacity to 10,000 MWe (megawatt electrical) from 1360 MWe being generated then from six nuclear units. This was to be

achieved through the establishment of eight 235 MWe units and ten 500 MWe units.

Since this entailed the production of additional uranium, the plan envisaged increase in mining capacity, with a gross production of 1700t/y (tons per year) to meet the purified U_3O_8 need of all the reactors. By 2000, 18 additional plants that were to have come online. Of these, by the year 2002, nine had begun operating, while another nine, were reportedly under construction. Given this expansion in requirements it is not difficult to see why the UCIL has made a strong pitch for the ore in Meghalaya, which alone has, at current levels of identified deposits, roughly 16 percent of India's reserves.

The UCIL has applied for a mining lease to execute a USD 100 million project. But since 1992, when mining was supposed to commence on completion of the assessment report by the AMD's regional division, UCIL's attempts have so far not been successful, largely because of the scale of local opposition to it. This resistance to the UCIL's proposed activities are the result of both direct experience with the consequences of the company's activities and familiarity with the effects of three and a half decades of mining in the nearby state of Jharkhand.

Domiasat has registered an extraordinary increase in child ailments and deaths, miscarriages, cancer and asthma- or tuberculosis-like conditions of dry cough and severe chest pain ever since UCIL operations commenced in the area. This is despite the fact that, as yet, the company has been able to undertake only very limited activity. This has given rise to justifiable fears among residents of the fear of radiation effects and boosted the resistance to mining. The even more damning evidence from Jadugoda only confirms the public's reservations about giving permission to UCIL for full-scale mining.

Repeating Horrors?

Jadugoda has suffered horrific costs in terms of both human and ecological health. It has witnessed disproportionately high incidence of cancer (especially leukaemia), congenital deformities, sexual impotence and reproductive sterility because of prolonged exposure to low-level radiation (see *Himal* May 2003). A 1998 survey in seven villages in Jadugoda located within a kilometre's distance of the waste impounds from the mines, found that 47 percent of the women reported disruptions to their menstrual cycle, 18 percent had suffered miscarriages or given birth to stillborn babies in the previous five years and 30 percent reported fertility problems. Nearly all women complained of fatigue, weakness and depression. It also found a high incidence of chronic skin disease, cancers, TB, bone, brain and kidney damage, disorders of the nervous system, nausea, blood disorders and other chronic diseases. As a result of genetic damage caused by radioactive exposure children have been born with skeletal distortions, partially formed skulls, missing eyes or toes and fused fingers or limbs, often accompanied by brain damage.

The nuclear establishment is now eyeing the Indian North-east for mining uranium after having caused extensive damage around its existing mines in Jharkhand sate

Conscious of this legacy and its influence on the Domiasat opposition, UCIL chairman-cum-managing director Raminder Gupta is quick to allay fears about the hazards of radiation. He maintains that reports about the health effects are baseless. Speaking to reporters at a seminar organised by the Northeast India Council for Social Science Research in June at the Raitong Building in Shillong on the "Environmental and Sociological Implications of Mining of Minerals and Oil Exploration in North-east India" Gupta said, "these are rumours designed to prevent the development of Domiasat". In keeping with time-honoured UCIL tradition, he emphatically denied that UCIL's activities in Jadugoda had affected residents. Instead, he added, the tribal population in the vicinity of the mine has greatly benefited from the project because of the development it brought to the area.

Human Rights groups, NGOs and political figures in Meghalaya remain highly sceptical of these claims, and with good reason. UCIL has a notorious reputation for concealing facts and concocting data. For instance, in Jadugoda, following the 1998 report of an investigation by the environment committee of the state legislative assembly, the then UCIL technical director had written to the state government, regarding 54 people suspected to be suffering radiation-induced disorders, saying, "As regards the cause-effect relationship of these diseases with radioactivity, we can neither establish nor exclude the same at this stage". Other institutions in the nuclear establishment joined the fray to endorse this whitewash. A medical survey recommended by the legislative committee was blatantly rigged. It was conducted by a medical team dominated by doctors from the Bhaba Atomic Research Centre, Bombay and which included the UCIL chief medical officer. To nobody's surprise it found that the diseases in Jadugoda were not related to radiation, but to poor nutrition, malaria, alcoholism and genetic abnormalities.

Given this history of dereliction it is not surprising that there are few takers for the UCIL view on the development benefits to Domiasat. According to Dino DG Dympep, a Shillong-based human rights activist, "neither the government nor UCIL has done any health and environment impact assessment study".

The *Rongbhasnong* or the village headman of Domiasat says many villagers were suffering from mysterious diseases now, which were never reported earlier. His observation is endorsed by Hopingstone Lyngdoh, the local legislator to Meghalaya legislature and president of Hill State People's Democratic Party, an ally of ruling Congress government in Meghalaya, adding that radioactive pollution is a serious possibility.

Meghalaya and Jharkhand

The resistance in Meghalaya to mining is active, vocal, articulate and well-informed. But in India, these attributes are not sufficient to ensure even a modicum of efficacy or success against projects undertaken in the "national interest" on lands belonging to people who do not belong to the cultural mainstream of the nation. In Jadugoda, the mining continues in blatant disregard of civilised norms despite a strong local movement involving organisations like the Jadugoda Organisation Against Radiation, the Bindrai Institute for Research, Study and Action and other NGOs, besides left political groups. The fraternity that serves the Indian nuclear interest has not only been dumping radioactive waste there for the last 35 years, but have also since then extended the scope of their activities, the latest in the region being commencement of mining at Turamidh in the same district.

One of the reasons why UCIL can continue its activities with impunity is that the affected people are *adivasis* (tribals) of the Chhotanagpur plateau, mainly Santhals and Ho, 'indigenous' peoples who have been historically exploited and expropriated by successive centralised regimes run by the cultural and economic mainstream of India. Even the political forms that allegedly guarantee protection from this kind of expropriating dominance has also not been particularly useful for the adivasis. The creation of Jharkhand state was ostensibly to rectify the historical domination of the adivasis, but the structures and systems that modulate the politics of the state are such that the procedures of exploitation remain substantially the same. The difference is only in form. Today, an adivasi-elite, articulated to the incentive schemes of Indian politics, presides over the misappropriation of Jharkhand's resources and the coercive subjugation of its people.

The lands on which the uranium deposits in Domiasat have been found belong to people of the Khasi tribe. In the more cultured conception of the Indian nation, tribes are a deplorable incongruity, useful at best for some ethno-tourism, but otherwise of such little merit that subjecting them to prolonged radiation in the national interest is a trivial issue compared to the immeasurable benefits to India from the additional generation of a few thousand megawatts of power, and perhaps even the detonation of a bomb or two. Jadugoda is proof of this attitude and the same fate may befall Domiasat's Khasis.

But before that happens there are still some hurdles in the way of UCIL. Domiasat has some advantages that Jadugoda lacked. As a relatively more recent target of the UCIL, it had the history of Jadugoda before it to evaluate the company's many claims and promises. This is all the more so since Meghalaya is a far more literate society than Jharkhand, or the bulk of the lowland plains for that matter. Consequently, groups from Domiasat were able to mobilise opposition on an empirically demonstrable platform based on the history of destruction that UCIL left in its wake. This is important since early UCIL activity did not witness any organised opposition until much later when mining operations were well underway and had become part of an entrenched way of life. Generally speaking, it is a little easier to thwart or delay a project than it is to dismantle one that is already in operation.

The most significant factor in preventing full-scale mining activity in Domiasat so far is a seemingly small constitutional advantage that some hill areas in the Northeast have. Domiasat is in the Khasi Hill District. The sixth schedule of the Indian constitution provides for the autonomous administration of "Tribal Areas in the States of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram". Under these provisions Domiasat is administered by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. Under paragraph 3 (a) of the schedule, the district council has the power to make laws with respect to the allotment of land.

As a result of this provision, neither the central government in Delhi nor the state government in Shillong can acquire the land for the mining lease, since that right rests exclusively with the district council. The UCIL's lease application pending with the state government cannot move forward until the permission comes from the council. In fact, in 2000, the Meghalaya government admitted that it had in principle given the sanction for mining in the Domiosiat-Wakhyn area. But the Khasi district council members staged a protest as soon as UCIL brought earth-moving machinery into the area, forcing them to withdraw. When asked about the latest initiative from UCIL to push ahead with mining, David Langwi, Chief Executive Member of the district council said that mining must not be at the expense of the health of the people and the sensitive environment of the Khasi Hills.

The danger to Domiasat still remains for more than one reason. While the district council, being a smaller body, is more connected to the area than a distant legislature or executive would be, it can also be subject to arm-twisting by higher authorities. The council has not categorically ruled out the possibility of giving permission for mining. It has in fact has granted UCIL the authorisation to "conduct exploratory surveys". Though for the present this stops short of permission to undertake commercial mining, there is no saying what the final decision will be. The provision relating to land in the sixth sched-

ule also sates that the council can allot land for "any other purpose likely to promote the interests of the inhabitants of any village or town".

Devils advocate?

Coincidentally, the UCIL's spin doctors have launched a publicity offensive, harping on the benefits of the project and the safety measures that the company will be putting in place. The company says that the open-cast mining that is proposed for the site is safe. It has also pulled out the old Indian argument that popular protests against projects are obscurantist since they are motivated by disruptive elements to prevent development of the region. The promised development benefits include the rapid socio-economic progress of the entire West Khasi Hills.

Company officials claim that UCIL has an outstanding track record in employment, health care, education, environment protection and upgradation over a period of 36 years. Therefore the company would create model mining practices, establish good hospitals, good schools in the area. It would also bring along good roads, banking facilities, telecom services, and postal services among other benefits. The chairman of the company also made it point to emphasis that the project would also generate employment opportunities for local people not only in the UCIL but also in auxiliary and ancillary services as well as self-employment in trade, transport and other services. Endorsing all this is the Khasi nuclear physicist, Mary Jwyra, who concurs with the official view and feels that the tribal leaders are overreacting. According to her, "If done scientifically, and if all care is taken for proper waste disposal, there will be no threat to the environment or the local people".

Local organisations are not in a mood to buy these claims about the environmental precautions and the merits of open cast mining. As one representative of the Peoples Movement Against Uranium Mining, a parent body of NGOs in Meghalaya, put it, "We have seen the negative impact of coal mining in Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. The environmental hazards have affected all the water bodies, land and air in the locality. At least 50,000 indigenous people have been affected in Jaintia hills despite all the assurance and promises made to them. These have not materialised. We do not want the repetition of another disaster".

But such resolve may not suffice in the face of determined lobbying by the UCIL. In the circumstances, it is difficult to predict whether the district council can hold out in the long run, especially since UCIL has promised development benefits to the entire West Khasi hills. Rhetoric of this kind usually has a larger appeal, so that the health of Domiasat residents may well be sacrificed for the larger welfare of the Khasi hills. Even if the district council does hold out, there are other provisions in the schedule which circumscribe its authority. The governor of the state has certain extraordinary powers that he can invoke to bypass the district council should it prove stubborn.

Thus, under paragraph 1 (3) of the schedule, the governor of the state can by public notification exclude or diminish "any area" from within the purview of the autonomous district council or "define the boundaries of any autonomous district". Paragraph 14 empowers the governor to appoint commissions of enquiry into the administration of such districts, particularly on the need for any new or special legislation, besides allocating to a minister of the state government the charge for the "welfare" of such districts.

In addition, paragraph 15 makes the validity of the acts and resolutions of the district councils contingent on the satisfaction of the governor. If the governor believes that a decision of the council is "likely to endanger the safety of India [or is likely to be prejudicial to public order], not only will the decision be annulled, but additional steps may be taken to prevent the "commission and continuance" of such decisions. And all else failing, the governor can by public notification simply dissolve the district council, subject only to the condition that the dissolution is on the recommendation made by a commission of inquiry.

Whatever the final outcome, the spin-offs from the project look good only on paper. Although the UCIL has promised to provide 85 percent of the jobs to residents in the area, the fact is that about 30,000 people are likely to be displaced by full-scale mining. And it may not have to reach the stage of misuse of constitutional powers by the governor, since many families, frightened at the prospect of what is in store, have started leaving Domiasat and have settled in nearby villages like Allawarng, Pandeng and Kuboit. Only the poor remain since they have nowhere to go. This is the ideal condition for UCIL to make a strong pitch for mining on the grounds that the number of displaced will be very small. And since the remaining inhabitants are few and poor they are unlikely to mount any effective opposition to the project. For the UCIL there will be added advantage of compensating fewer people, should it come to that.

To what extent the environmental and anti-nuclear movement in India can make an intervention in Domiasat remains to be seen. The latter in particular is restricted to the 'heartland' of the country and therefore its efficacy will depend on its capacity to expand its base to otherwise neglected corners, like the Northeast which has been the victim of the central governments policies of national integration. Even now, despite the protests that have been going on in Meghalaya, Domiasat does not figure very much on the agendas of India's urban-based anti-nuclear movement. Issues such as mining and accidents at nuclear plants have been left to environmental activists, while anti-nuclear activists concentrate on issues of weaponisation and war. Unless they are able to include 'remote' areas inhabited by the people who do not matter, there is very little likelihood that they will get very far. Meanwhile, Domiasat's future hangs in balance.

Lumpens in the constabulary: Gujarat

by **Subhash Gatade**

It was in the mid-1950s that Justice AN Mullah castigated the police, calling it the "biggest organised goonda (goon) force" in India. Many events have occurred since then to reinforce that perception, and the sentiment expressed by Justice Mullah is probably shared by a broad cross-section of the people. News about the atrocities committed by the police, supposedly in the course of maintaining law and order is regular fare. And the worst manifestation of organised police misbehaviour is on display when they are left to deal with communal conflagrations.

Successive commissions of enquiry into communal riots have reprimanding the police in no uncertain terms for the weak First Information Reports (FIRs) it lodges or for the dereliction of duty on its part in not assisting the aggrieved parties. Over time, from merely being standoffish during communal tensions the police has graduated to playing an active role in vitiating the social atmosphere during riots.

Just a few instances will illustrate the degeneration of the force. Soon after the first major communal disturbance in Madhya Pradesh in 1961 the Justice Shrivastava Commission found that during the riots in Jabalpur, Sagar, Damoh and Narasinghapur, "the intelligence department... [was] entirely inefficient and the law and order authorities were responsible for a laxity in investigation and prosecution which resulted in large [numbers of] acquittals". Thirty years later the situation had deteriorated. The police was no longer just inefficient and lax, it had begun to participate enthusiastically in the violence. The Justice Sri Krishna Commission, which looked into the Bombay riots of 1992-93, found specific police officers to be "utterly trigger happy", "guilty of unnecessary and excessive firing resulting in the deaths of innocent Muslims", "extremely communal" and "guilty of inhuman and brutal behaviour".

Another 10 years on from the Bombay of 1993, the reputation of the police as protectors of the law has plumbed new depths. During the pogrom of Gujarat last year, police brutality surpassed all previous limits. It was the first riot in the country where the state promoted 'retribution' as a matter of policy. Many victims of the riot reported categorically that the police, instead of protecting them, had handed them over to the rioters. And now there is a news report of the ultimate travesty of justice—Gujarati Muslims it is who are being targeted under extraordinarily harsh legal provisions.

A report filed by the Agence France-Presse agency, datelined New Delhi, 15 September, says that of the 240 people booked under the

Justice delayed and denied: Uttar Padesh

Can a government declare members of its own Police Force or Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) who are still on the duty rosters and receiving regular pay, 'absconders'? Can non-bailable warrants issued by competent courts against these accused be returned unserved, not once or twice but 18 times? Further, would it dare to ignore the court's orders to have their property confiscated?

To witness such absurdities one does not have look very far. It can be found in Uttar Pradesh. And the event in question that invited the court's actions is the massacre at Hashimpura- all of 16 years ago- and its investigation. It was only in 2002 that the Supreme Court had asked for the immediate transfer of the case pertaining to the Hashimpura massacre from the Ghaziabad Sessions Court in UP to the Delhi Sessions Court.

There was good reason for the Supreme Court's sense of urgency. The massacre at Hashimpura, when 42 innocent Muslims were killed in cold blood by the UP police had taken place 16 years ago. The circumstances of the massacre are telling. There was communal violence at Meerut, in 1987, when the Congress Party ruled both in the state and at the centre. Both police and PAC pickets were posted in the town to bring the situation under control. A 1994 confidential report of the Central Bureau of Investigation sheds light on the sordid turn of events:

On 22 May 1987 around 8.00 p.m. they herded 40-42 'rioters' in PAC Truck No. UR 1493 at Hashimpura, overtly for taking them to Meerut Civil Lines or Police Lines. However, the Platoon Commander SP Singh drove to the Upper Ganga Canal, Muradnagar (Ghaziabad) ignoring their protests. On reaching there, they started unceremoniously shooting them down. When a few tried to escape they were shot down on the spot and their bodies were cast into the Canal. Rest of them were taken to the Hindon canal and there the sordid show was re-enacted.

This action of the police was basically to terrorise

Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which carries a death penalty, 239 are Muslims. (The sole exception is a Sikh.) Gujarati Muslims have been booked for three different attacks on 'Hindus'—the burning of the Sabaramati Express at Godhra last year, the attack on Ahmedabad's Akshardham Temple and the murder of former Gujarat Home Minister, Haren Pandya. This report comes immediately after the Supreme Court of India's unequivocal criticism of the Gujarat government for the way it handled the 'Best Bakery case' (see Himal, September 2003). The court had gone so far as to observe that it had no faith that the administration would bring to justice the fanatics responsible for the killing of Muslims.

It is worth noting that while the state government did not deem it fit to invoke POTA in cases where some of the worst massacres of Muslims had taken place (which involved many Hindutva cadres and leaders), it did not show a commensurate leniency in cases where the accused were Muslims. It may be recalled that the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in its report, had investigated and focussed on a few of the worst massacres that took place in Gujarat—the Naroda-Patiya massacre, the Gulberg Society massacre, and the Best Bakery killings, among others. In none of these cases were the people involved charged under POTA.

The dubious role of the police was also exposed in the way it handled the Akshardham Temple case. The mythology that the Gujarat police has built around the case says that five people from Gujarat were involved in the attack and charges under POTA were duly levelled against them. But, with the arrest of one Chand Khan, by the Jammu Kashmir Police, a new version of the whole story has come out. Khan gave details of the way in which the operation was conducted and also made it clear that no local person was involved. The Gujarat police has not even bothered to listen to Chand Khan's confession.

To make matters easier for a viciously communalised and lumpen police force, the state government recently passed the Code of Criminal Procedure (Gujarat amendment) Act. This legislation is aimed at doing away with the "formality" of producing an accused in court "in person" while in police custody and, instead, enabling cross-examination through "video conferencing" facilities in jails. This latest addition to the armoury of the police does not bode well for the future of criminal jurisprudence in India. Given the antecedents, it will not be unwise to presume that it will be used with impunity by the police against members of a certain religious community. They can now be put in jails on false charges and subject to extra-judicial punishment, and then be cross-examined not in court, but while under the physical control of the police.

As a significant aside to one of the cases under which Muslims are being targeted, Vithalbhai Pandya, father of the slain ex-minister, Haren Pandya, had at the very outset held Chief Minister Narendra Modi responsible for his son's death and had charged that it was a political murder. He reiterated his allegations at a rally on 15 August in Patan, Gujarat. But looking at the way the police has been domesticated by the political establishment under Modi and trained to be selective in its investigations, no further enquiries in this direction are expected to be launched. ∆

and brutalise the minority population, as pointed out in an article on the massacre in the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties' Bulletin of February 2001. Iqbal A Ansari, Secretary-General, Minorities Council, observed that the massacre took place "while there was no rioting in that area of the city".

That was more than 16 years ago and the delay in judicial proceedings has threatened to make it the "forgotten massacre". The Supreme Court in its judgement had chastised the concerned authorities in no uncertain terms, because despite the fact that a decade and a half had passed no charges had been framed.

This long history of delay smacks of an administrative cover up. The state government had initially directed that the incident be looked into by the Criminal Investigative Department (CID). This internal investigation was completed in 1993, six years after the massacre. Its findings were drawn up a year later. Then there was procrastination in implementing the action recommended. Orders on the matter were issued only in 1995 and 1997. Even these delayed orders were limited in scope since action was only recommended against 19 officials as against the 66 named in the CID Report. Finally, the matter was taken up by the National Minorities Commission, which made its recommendations to the UP government on 12 October 1999, directing it to give adequate compensation to the families of the dead, and to ensure that all those found guilty are punished.

Even this had no effect, and eventually the Supreme Court had to intervene to try and expedite the matter. But even this is no guarantee that the guilty will be punished or that the next of kin of those killed will get adequate compensation. The bitter fact is that, while the accused responsible for the killings of Hashimpura are openly moving about, the few surviving witnesses constantly face danger to their lives. So far, the Sessions Court in UP had exhibited a strange reluctance to summon the police top brass in the state. Now that the case has finally been transferred to the Sessions Court in Delhi, how soon justice will be done remains to be seen. Given the tendency on the part of the state administration to brazenly ignore judicial summons, there is little hope for a happy ending.

Cancun –let the games begin!

by **Abid Qaiyum Suleri**

Ernesto Luis Derbez

Robert Zolleick

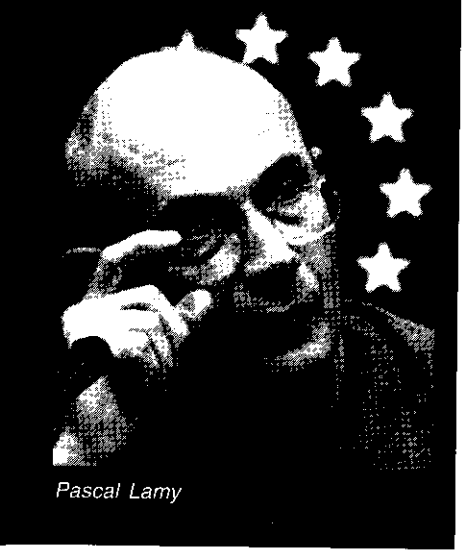
In Doha, you were either with the free-traders or 'terrorists'. The equation had changed by the time the World Trade Organisation (WTO) got to Cancun. The developing world upped the ante at the "fifth ministerial" of the WTO at Cancun, Mexico. The meeting was declared a failure. It was the occasion when developing countries finally said 'no' to a top-down mode of negotiation and agreement with respect to reforms in agriculture, trade, market access, improvement for non-agricultural items, and the launch of negotiations on competition, investment and so on. The unity in the negotiating positions of the developing countries, forged strictly on economic lines, was a surprise to many on both sides of the North-South divide. For these three-fourths of the WTO membership, entertaining the 'hope' of benefits purportedly accruing at some stage of their economic growth from decisions arrived at in multilateral fora, was not particularly 'rational' when contrasted with the perennially suffering domestic constituency back in their countries.

From day one of the Cancun meeting, the WTO member nations disagreed on practically all items on the agenda. The European Union (EU), the main demandeur for the inclusion of these issues, was more interested in bundling the issues of competition policy, investment, trade facilitation and transparency in government procurement (collectively known as the 'Singapore issues') without actually wanting to give up its 'mothering' of the agricultural lobby back home. Despite the EU and Japan trying their best to start negotiations on these issues, the G-21 (the group of developing countries led by India, Brazil, China and South Africa) made it clear that they were not ready to start negotiations on any of the new issues unless there was tangible progress in the areas of agriculture, implementation issues and review of provisions for Special and Differential (S&D) treatments for developing countries (Pakistan joined the G-21 at a later stage in the conference).

First discussed in 1996 in Singapore (from which it gets its name), these issues were again brought up in Doha in 2001, after the failure of the Seattle Ministerial in 1999. However, India took a strict position and it was on the insistence of India that the Doha Ministerial Declaration mandated the members to decide in Cancun by "explicit consensus" whether or not to start negotiations on the Singapore issues. Following the Doha procedures, the chair of the conference appointed group facilitators or "friends of the chairs" who had to moderate the discussion and report back to Heads of Delegations (HOD). The facilitator for the Singapore issues, Canadian Trade Minister, Pierre Pettigrew, reported to the HODs that there was no consensus among the members and suggested that the way forward should be to find a compromise solution somewhere in between. While the majority of the developing countries remained firm on their stance, the EU continued to insist that negotiations had already been launched in this area in the Doha Declaration, and did not agree to the definition of "explicit consensus". It was clear to many that the EU appeared to be backing out of its previous commitment.

The G-21 kept demanding the elimination of agriculture subsidies in rich countries. In a press memo, the Chairman of the US Committee on Finance expressed disappoint-

Supachai Panitchpakdi



Pascal Lamy

ment with eight G-21 members who were in the process of seeking Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with the US. "This makes me question their interest in pursuing the strong market access commitments required to conclude the FTA with the US", he noted. This was an indirect threat that proponents of G-21 may be deprived the US FTA. There were reports that the EU and USA had tried their best to split the G-21 members, clearly their best efforts were not enough.

While the outcome of the ministerial was seen as a victory for civil society groups and representatives from hundreds of NGOs, at the Cancun Convention Centre, NGO representatives were in reality not allowed to enter the premises where the actual negotiations were taking place—not even as observers. All that these groups could do was to organise parallel sessions at the NGO centre (Hotel Sierra, a kilometre and a half away from the Convention Centre). The conditions at Cancun were worse than they were at Doha. The maximum number of representatives from each NGO was restricted to three, and only one representative was allowed to enter the Convention Centre at any given time. However, civil society organisations did manage to protest during the inaugural session of the Cancun meeting. On day one, about two dozen representatives stood up during WTO Director-General, Supachai Panitchpakdi's inaugural session, with tape-sealed mouths and placards critical of the WTO and its procedures. Chants of protest greeted Panitchpakdi's insistance that WTO was working for the benefit of developing countries. Amidst the civil society protests, more than 10,000 farmers were stopped by the local police and were not allowed to enter the Conference Zone. It was then that a South Korean farmer, Lee Kyong Hae read out his protest statement and stabbed himself in the chest. He was later pronounced dead at the local Cancun hospital. Hae's sacrifice was a demonstration enough to the conference participants that WTO can be catastrophic for small farmers, many of whom cannot compete with the heavily subsidised commercial farming of the USA and the EU.

The Mexican Foreign Minister, Ernesto Luis Derbez, also the Conference Chair, felt that though the conference was being closed without an agreement on the Ministerial Text, this outcome was actually a reflection of the transparency in the WTO system. Director-General, Supachai Panitchpakdi, on the other hand, described the failure as a huge loss for the developing countries and poor nations. His request for members to restart the process in Geneva by keeping multilateral interests over national interests can only be sympathised with, since it has been evident for some time that the big players from the OECD are doing anything but that as far 'national interests' are concerned.

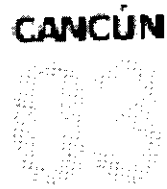
Not surprisingly, the developing world was seen to be asking for the moon. EU Trade Commissioner, Pascal Lamy repeated his controversial remarks about the WTO (delivered earlier at Seattle) to the effect that the failure of Cancun negotiations once again proved that the WTO was a medieval organisation. To him, the EU had gone out of its way to be flexible so as to accommodate the developing countries, an act of magnanimity that was not reciprocated by the other side. "They (the developing countries) attended the meeting with a set-mind and never wanted to get the benefit of the EU's generous offers", observed Lamy. He proposed a revamping of the "decision making process" in the WTO. The US Trade Representative, Robert Zolleick claimed that US had done its best to broker a deal,but he accepted that failure of the Cancun meeting was the collective responsibility of all concerned and remained reluctant to put the blame on any single party.

The positive outcome from Cancun was the inclusion of Cambodia and Nepal, raising the WTO's membership to 148. The rest of the agenda items were derailed due to the failure of the talks. In a sense, this derailment reflects significant changes in the international geopolitical environment. The Doha conference was successful largely due to the effects of 11 September 2001. Then, it had been possible to link the two questions together and posit false equations. In Doha, it was a question of being either in favour of trade liberalisation or being on the side of the 'terrorists'. This time the developing countries backed by civil society protests, both in their respective capitals as well as in Cancun, were able to neutralise the pressure tactics of the powerful trading blocs.

Cancun failed. What is next? The

Islamabad to civil society: get lost

The official delegations from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and many African countries included representatives from civil society organisations who were able to give inputs to their governmental counterparts. In the case of Pakistan, offers from similar groups to be on Pakistan's official delegation were ignored by the Ministry of Commerce. And this was not a cost-cutting measure either, because the groups who offered their services already had their accreditation to attend the Cancun Conference and had pledged their own expenses towards the arrangements. Instead, representatives from trade and industry were included. In the absence of civil society representation, it was one of the presidents of the Chamber of Commerce and Industries who attended the "green room" meeting (typical of the exclusive meetings structures of the WTO Ministerial) on the Agreement on Agriculture. The services of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute and Action Aid, groups that had been working intensively on the Agreement on Agriculture at the national level and the international level, were never sought. At least for Pakistani critics of the global organisation, the conduct of the Pakistani government was not very different from that of the WTO Secretariat in excluding NGOs and civil society organisations from the process.



In Cancun, Pakistan, which was a member of G-21 as well as the Strategic Product Group (comprising 23 developing countries that were demanding special measures in support of their food security and rural livelihood), actually showed a willingness to start negotiations on the Singapore issues, provided they were linked to progress in agriculture. This was one of the main reasons Pakistan could not take a leading role among the G-21 partners. In fact, Pakistan's stance in Cancun on various issues was kept a secret, without a single public briefing by the official delegation during the whole conference. This time around, unlike in Doha, the negotiations on agriculture were not left to the Ministry of Commerce. In fact, for the first time a senior representative of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock (MINFAL) was part of the official delegation. He, however, did not seem to have the time to consult representatives from outside the government, trade and industry circles present in Cancun.

The Sustainable Agriculture Action Group (SAAG), a network of civil society organisations working on agriculture and related issues, the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), and Action Aid were present in Cancun. Four representatives from these Pakistani NGOs, including this writer, were denied the opportunity to meet the Pakistani Minister of Commerce. Even an early morning meeting was denied.

At least in Doha, the then Trade Minister was able to hold a press conference on the Development Box, along with various other trade ministers from developing countries. There, Islamabad emerged as the champion of the food security rights of the developing world. At Cancun, Pakistan squandered an opportunity of enhancing its image at the international level. The performance of the official delegation disappointed many who had looked forward to a progressive stance.

There is an increased awareness about WTO among major stakeholders in Pakistan (including government officials, trade representatives, media, as well as NGOs). Sadly, as the future rounds of negotiations with a belligerent OECD promise to be tough and demanding, the Pakistani government does not give the impression of preparing seriously to participate in what may well be a historic encounter between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped'.

agendas have been sent back to Geneva, and it is left to negotiators at the WTO headquarters to find a consensus on starting the negotiations on the Singapore issues as well as on the modalities of the Agreement on Agriculture by 15 December this year. Will the members feel sufficiently equipped to negotiate on these issues in Geneva in bilateral talks? Will it be easy for the developing countries to pass on quick feedback as well as instructions from their capitals to their negotiators in Geneva? Will the negotiators be invited to attend the exclusive meetings of the working groups in Geneva?

The answers to these and many more questions will determine the real meaning of the failure of Cancun, and how much of a triumph of Third World economic solidarity it was. Cancun was about the unity of the economically weak. Geneva will show whether that unity can be sustained in the face of certain attempts by the EU and the US to split the developing countries. All said, if the WTO is to survive, it must remain a rule-based organisation working on the will of the majority of the members. That is not the case today, and Cancun's failure represented yet another attempt to make it so.

Globalising anger

Developed countries trying to exploit the South were suddenly confronted by a roadblock in Cancun, put up by developing country delegations that had suddenly grown wiser.

by ***Devinder Sharma***

Cancun joins Seattle as the venue of two failed ministerials of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) since it came into existence on the first day of 1995. The WTO, whose stoic exterior is designed to block the views and positions offered by civil society organisations, had to face an abject collapse instigated by its own members from the South. Determined to stand up against the unilateral outcomes of multilateral forums, member states from the developing world refused to accept the draft declaration. The so-called 'Quad' of international trade—the US, the EU, Japan and Canada—were taken aback by the vehemence of the Southern resistance as they realised that this time around they could not muscle their way through and engineer declarations to suit their convenience. The failure of the Cancun Ministerial, however, may generate a backlash and strengthen the Quad's determination to engage in more ruthless manipulations to get its way.

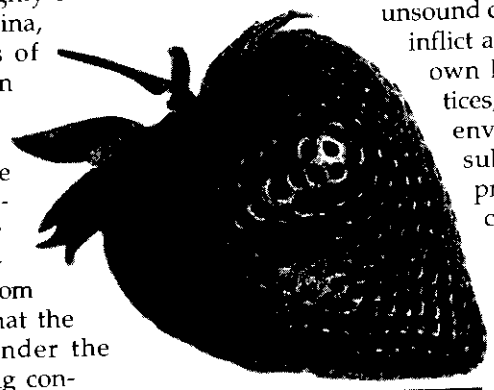
West African farmers stay away!

Developing countries have learnt the dictum of international trade the hard way, for having been the victims of hard-headed lobbying, coercion and deft manipulations. Having learnt the lesson, they gave an exemplary demonstration of their will not to be browbeaten into global agreements that work to their disadvantage. Their anger and 'insubordination' has already caused the biggest derailment so far of the market-led development agenda. And rightly so. Developed country agriculture has so far enjoyed a unique 'special and differential' treatment that was in reality meant for the developing and least developed countries. The impregnable wall that was being built since the days of the Uruguay Round negotiations (1986-94), is not so easy to scale.

Just before the Cancun Ministerial, President Amadou Toure of Mali was a co-signatory to a letter to the *New York Times* condemning the cotton subsidies in America that have been so devastating for West African countries — Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Benin. His colleague, President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, had spoken in a similar vein to the Trade Negotiating Committee of the WTO in June. They voiced their concern at the way direct financial assistance by a number of exporting countries, including US, European Union and China, to the tune of 73 percent of the world cotton production, destroyed millions of livelihoods in West African countries. As a result, African cotton producers realise only 60 percent of their costs, although their cost of production is less than half of that incurred in the developed countries. More for mollifying public sentiments than for rectifying its fraudulent economics, the WTO did consider the contentious issue of cotton subsidies, as if it was an isolated case of exploitation of developing country farmers.

The lack of fairness can be gauged from the quantum of state support that goes into this industry alone. In 2001, the 25,000 odd US cotton growers received roughly USD 3.9 billion in subsidy payments, for producing a cotton crop that was worth only USD 3 billion at world market prices. One Arkansas cotton grower received USD 6 million, equal to the combined annual earnings of 25,000 cotton farmers in Mali. The story is similar in the case of the European Union (EU). The new EU Common Agricultural Policy reform proposals, announced prior to the Cancun Ministerial, made no attempt at radically reducing commitments, which is what is needed. Operating on the same principle as the US does, it too has shifted most of the 'blue box' subsidies (the category of government support which allows direct payments under production-limiting programmes) to the 'green box' (which allows government support with no or minimal trade distorting effects).

Intractable, the WTO delivered its obtuse verdict—West African farmers should stop growing cotton. The text of the Draft Cancun Ministerial says: "The Director-General is instructed to consult with the relevant international organisations including the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Trade Centre to effectively direct existing programmes and resources towards diversification of the economies where cotton accounts for major share of their GDP". In simple words— there is nothing wrong with the highly subsidised cotton farming in the US, EU and China, the fault rests with millions of small and marginal farmers in West Africa. The Cancun draft had instructed the WTO director-general, the FAO and the World Bank/IMF to make available adequate investments for suitable programmes that enable these farmers to diversify from cotton to other crops. Now that the ministerial has collapsed under the weight of its own overweening conceit the draft obviously and thankfully became a dead letter.



The process of transferring the production of staple foods and major commercial commodities to the OECD had in fact begun much earlier

The lesson for the rest of the world from the Northern 'masters' is crystal clear. The developing world should stop growing crops that negatively affect the monumental subsidies that the rich and industrialised countries provide. For the G-21, consisting of the largest economies of the developing world, that created a lot of noise and dust over the USD 311 billion in farm subsidies that the richest trading bloc—the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—provides for its agriculture, the writing is on the wall. And this is exactly what independent critics have been warning all these years. The process of transferring the production of staple foods and major commercial commodities to the OECD had in fact begun much earlier. WTO is merely legitimising the new farming system.

The World Bank and IMF have, under the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), very clearly tied up credit with crop diversification. They continue to force developing countries to shift from staple foods, which are crucial for food security needs, to cash crops that meet the luxury requirement of Western countries. The SAPs have, therefore, been forcing developing countries to dismantle state support for food procurement, withdraw price support to farmers, dismantle food procurement, and relax land ceiling laws, thereby enabling corporates to move into agriculture. Under this perspective, Southern farmers are to be left to the mercy of the market forces. Being 'inefficient' producers, they need to be replaced by industry and its management and production methods.

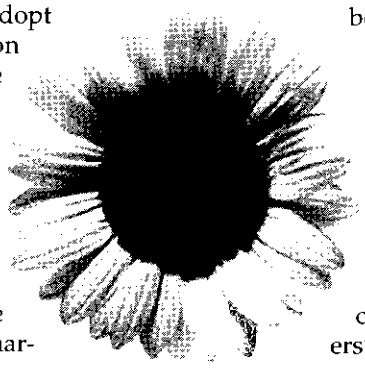
The same prescription for farming has never been suggested for the rich and industrialised countries. And yet, and this needs to be very clearly understood—the one part of the world that needs to go in for immediate crop diversification is the industrial world. These are the countries that produce mounting surpluses of wheat, rice, corn, soybean, sugar beat, cotton and a handful of other crops, and that too under environmentally unsound conditions. These are the countries that inflict a dual damage. First they destroy their own lands by highly intensive crop practices, pollute ground water, contaminate the environment, and then receive massive subsidies to keep these unsustainable practices artificially viable. These are the countries that are faced with the tragic consequences of massive farm displacements, and are in the grip of food calamities arising from industrial farming.

If the WTO has its ways, and the developing countries fail to understand the insidious politics that drives the agriculture trade agenda, the world will soon have two kinds of agricultural systems. The rich countries will produce staple foods for the world's six billion plus people, and developing countries will grow cash crops like tomatoes, peas, sunflower, strawberries, vegetables – and cut flowers. The dollars that developing countries earn from exporting these crops will eventually be used to buy food grains from the developed nations. In effect, this means going back to the days of 'ship-to-mouth' existence.

Central America is a case in point. The debt crisis that affected the Central American countries in the 1980s was very conveniently used as the appropriate opportunity to shift the cropping pattern to non-traditional exports. Egged on and generally encouraged by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), farmers were fed the illusion of the great market that existed in the developed world and lured to produce for it. They shifted to crops like melons, strawberries, cauliflower, broccoli and squash that were shipped to the supermarkets, mainly in America. Simultaneously, these Central American countries disbanded cultivation of staple crops like corn and bean, and today they are major importers, that too from the United States.

With regard to India, which only three decades ago emerged from the shadows of massive food imports, the strategy is the same. The World Bank and the IMF

have forced successive governments to adopt policies that force farmers to abandon staple crops like wheat, rice and coarse cereals, and diversify to cash crops. Punjab, the country's food bowl, is presently engaged in a desperate effort to shift from wheat-rice cropping pattern to cultivating cut flowers and the likes. Andhra Pradesh has already embarked on a misplaced rural development vision that aims at industrial agriculture at the cost of its millions of small and marginal farmers. As if this was not enough, biotechnology companies are being generously granted state largesse and prime real estate so as to encourage corporate farming.



The WTO has successfully managed to pit the farmers of the developing world and the industrialised countries against each other

What the developed countries are therefore trying to sell to the world as the "development round", following the undemocratic conclusions arrived at Doha 2001, is in reality a political exercise (under the garb of trade and commerce) for their own economic development. Through a variety of instruments, the rich countries have ensured complete protectionism. Whether it is the case of special safeguards, reduction in tariffs, removal of non-tariff barriers and the like, the developed countries have manipulated the commitments in a way that suits their own narrowly conceived objectives. Trade policies therefore have remained highly discriminatory against the developing country farmers.

Unfortunately, the developing countries are making no concerted effort to demolish the wall of protectionism that the rich and industrialised countries have erected around their highly subsidised agriculture. Even the G-21, in the final stages, was busy trying to work out a compromise formula to save the Cancun Ministerial from going the Seattle way. They did not seem to realise that there was no way such a bad agreement on agriculture could be reformed. For millions of toiling farmers in the majority world, the failure of the Cancun Ministerial does not signal the end of the struggle. It is merely a step in their long and bitter journey to retain control over their own food security needs, and to protect their own livelihoods from the robber barons of international trade.

The move towards a sustainable farming model that functions on the principles of equity and justice must be taken forward with double the intensity with which the 'Quad' can be expected to retaliate after the Cancun fiasco. For a few million farmers on either side of the Atlantic, the cause is no different. Only the scale and home turf is different. Developed country farmers have much in common with the poor farmers in the Third World. What the WTO, however, has successfully managed to do is to pit the farmers of the developing world and the industrialised countries against each other. Unless farmers' association in the developed countries come to the rescue of their less blessed cousins in the developing world, agribusiness companies will continue to have the last laugh.

The Cancun logjam does not mean that the big players will make any significant cuts in their subsidy support. Although the Western countries have blamed the G-21 for "asking for the moon", the fact remains that they have got too used to being parasites on the developing world. The plight of the farming community, following the Marrakesh agreement (the agreement establishing the WTO, signed on 15 April 1994) — from Chile to South Korea, and from India to Brazil—has failed to move the industrialised countries to bring in any meaningful reforms in international trade.

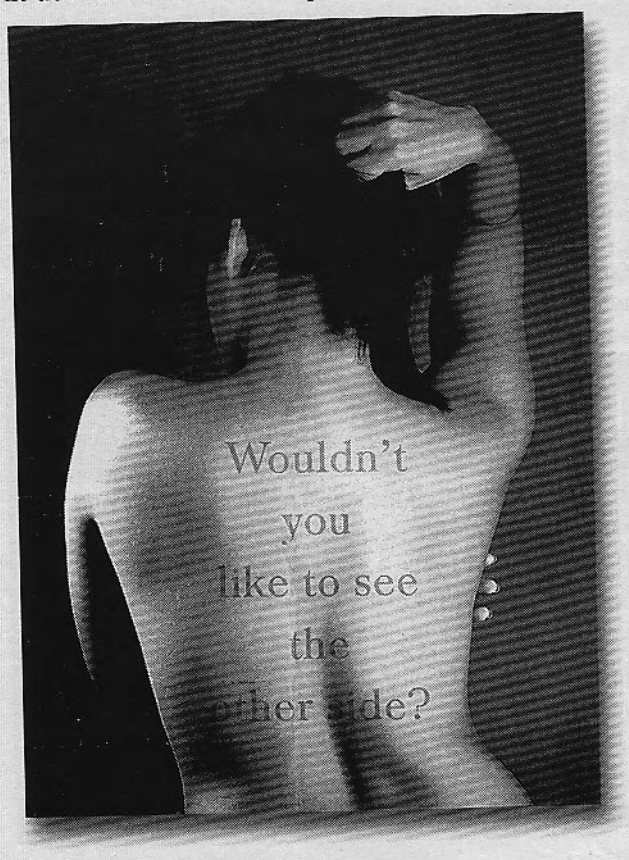
The suicide during the Cancun Ministerial of the Korean farmer, Lee Kyong Hae, illustrates the devastation that WTO has wrought on the farming communities all over the world. Ignoring the voice of the marginalised and the poor farmers will not only be suicidal, but catastrophic for the powers that be. The message from Lee's sacrifice is loud and clear. Ignoring the growing discontent and frustration that prevails on the farming front, accentuated through the trade reforms, will only globalise anger.

WACC taking sides

LUCKY THAT Cancun failed, you might say. A notice sent out by the Third World media support group named WACC in London, which works for the "democratisation of media", had cautioned that at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Mexico, the US Trade Representative would attempt to expand the WTO's power over communications and audiovisual services. This includes film, radio, television, video, and music production, as well as media distribution services such as satellite, cable and broadcast. Writes WACC, "The result could spell disaster for vibrant media systems worldwide: US regulations that favour media diversity, localism and the public interest could be attacked as 'barriers to trade'. Media ownership limits, as well as federal and state programmes that encourage diverse media, could be considered outright trade violations. A massive wave of public pressure is essential to move Congress to block Big Media's power grab at the WTO." As I said, lucky that Cancun failed. Go to http://www.mediareform.net/global.

■

BAREFOOT IS a shopping centre-cum-gallery (pronounced Byar-fut by all citizens south of Pollanaruwa) in downtown CMB which puts up avant garde art exhibits and installations. Sometimes excitement , seems to get the better of taste. An exhibition of paintings, photography & sculpture put up in May by Phoenix Ogilvy and Mather (an advertising agency), had the accompanying poster to pull in the art-lover. At the risk of being charged of being just as insensitive on the exhibitors, Chhetria Patrakar is reproducing the poster, which says "Wouldn't you like to see the other side?" on the bare back of the model. Nice try, O&M, but does not quite work.



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THE *MILLI Gazzette* is a magazine brought out twice a month, whose claim of speaking for the 1.2 billion strong Ummah of Islam may be reaching too far, but certainly it speaks with commitment and strength for the South Asian Muslims. Subscribe by going to their website at www.milligazette.com. A recent issue lists all the reasons why Indians should have protested the Israeli Prime Minister's visit to India in mid-September. The note cites Sharon's violation of human and civil rights of the Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, his excessive use of the latest arms against an unarmed people, his intransigence on the question of Jewish settlements in Arab Palestine, the assassinations of political leaders and reprisals against civilians, and making a virtual hostage of Yasser Arafat. The note further states: "We protest against Sharon's visit because it cannot be rationalized, except in terms of the envisaged strategic alliance between the USA, India and Israel... There can be no meeting point between India, a Secular Democracy, and Israel, a Racist Theocracy. We see this visit as an official seal on the reversal of India's traditional support for the inalienable national rights of the Palestinian people, indeed as a slap in the face of Gandhi and Nehru."

■

THERE IS an appeal letter that is doing the rounds among Pakistanis for the release of human rights activist Rasheed Azam of Khuzdar in Balochistan. Since Pakistan is part of South Asia, there is no reason why all South Asians cannot send appeals to General Pervez Musharaf, President of Pakistan, on behalf of Rasheed Azam. So, send a note to the Chief Executive at ce@pak.gov.pk. While you are at it, also send a note to Barrister Shahida Jameel, Minister of Law, at molaw1@comsats.net.pk.

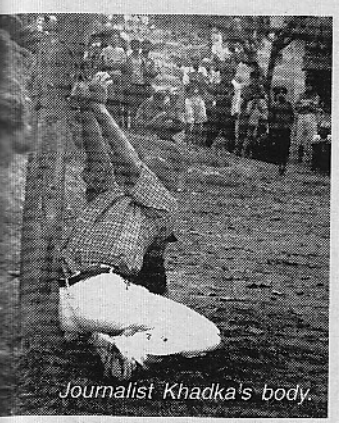
The background: Rasheed Azam 26, is a law student as well as a journalist and human rights activist. Based in Khuzdar, he works as a reporter for two national dailies, *Intikhab* and *Asaap*. He also works as a joint editor for *Roshnai* a quarterly magazine focusing on development and civic rights issues. He has also been associated with several community development organisations, and for the last four years was active as

a member of the organising committee of Balochistan National Party (BNP). On 15 August, 2003, Rasheed Azam was picked up by a contingent of local police supported by their counterparts from Quetta. His friends obtained a copy of the First Information Report (FIR) which states, "It is intimated that an anti Army Poster was distributed in Khuzdar by an individual namely Rasheed Azam son of Moula Bakhsh by caste Gazgi Mengal resident of Khuzdar affiliated with Balochistan National Party (Mengal Group). The distribution of such like calendar depicting Army personnel beating Balochs amounts to sedition against Army which is an offence of a grave nature".

Dear reader of *Himal*, go for it. Write to the Chief Executive of Pakistan on behalf a fellow South Asian and Pakistani Baloch. For more information, write to South Asia Partnership Pakistan in Lahore at info@sappk.org.

■

SOME JOURNALISTS have been murdered over the last month. Ameer Bux Brohi was shot and killed on 3 October by three unidentified men in Shikarpur, Sindh. Brohi, 27, was a correspondent for Kawish Television News and *The Daily Kawish*, the largest Sindhi-language daily newspaper in Sindh province. While the motive for the homicide was unclear, local journalists believe it was in reprisal for Brohi's reporting on sensitive local issues. Binod Sajana Chaudhari, considered a pro-Maoist journalist, was shot and killed on 27 September by security forces in Kailali distrit, western Nepal. A reporter for the *Nepalgunj Express*, Chaudhari was shot by plain-clothes security men. Chaudhari used to be associated with the weekly *Janadesh*, a pro-Maoist publication that has been closed. Also in Nepal, on 7 September, a journalist who worked for the national news agency and a national daily, was brutally murdered by Maoist rebels in Sindhupalchowk district east of Kathmandu. The Maoists tied Gyanendra Khadka's hands to a school ground volleyball pole and slit his throat with a khukuri, while his wife watched the gruesome affair unfold.


Journalist Khadka's body.

■

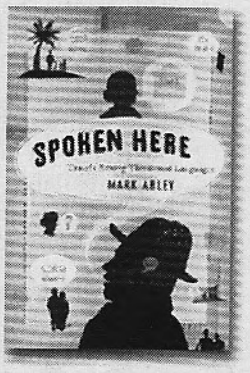
THOSE WHO KNOW Kali for Women (KFW) as India's premier feminist press, publishing works by fearless writers on Indian and South Asian women, will be saddened to hear that the founders Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia have parted ways, as of 1 July 2003. Kali for Women is no more. But you will be happy to note that the demise of KFW, has spawned two new publishing houses – Menon has started Women Unlimited (WU) and Butalia has got going with Zubaan. As Menon says of WU, the plan is to "continue to explore new issues, anticipate trends, develop new perspectives; and offer the best of feminist scholarship, activist material and creative writing, at affordable prices".

■

ANOTHER GEM from WACC: "Scepticism is the basis of justice". Journalists are (or should be born) to be sceptics, says its website. Writes the columnist Sean Hawkey: "If Your Mother Tells You She Loves You...Check It Out! This is the first challenge for journalists, to make scepticism their profession, to question everything they are told, to probe, corroborate and verify everything, whoever the source. That's what journalists are meant to do, to reveal secrets, lies and deceptions, to expose the truths that hold the powerful to account and control corruption and exploitation". I will second that, and recommend the lines to journalists – particularly those who strut the stage and hog the podium – in all of our South Asian capitals.

■

MARK ABLEY is an amateur linguist, a Canadian who has just published *Spoken Here*, a book on the sad fate (death) that awaits thousands of languages around the world. Of the roughly 6,000 languages spoken in the world today, Abley writes, "a maximum of three thousand are likely to be heard at the century's end, and fewer than six hundred of those appear secure". But I bring him up here because he refers to the Boro of Northeast India as a rich tongue with elaborate terms for specific meanings. Thus, reports Abley, *anzray* means "to keep apart from an enemy or wicked company", *gobdobdob* is for "slightly humpbacked", and *gabkhron* refers to "to be afraid of witnessing an adventure". And there are many ways to express love: One can love from the heart (*onguboy*), pretend to love (*onsay*) and love for the last time (*onsra*).



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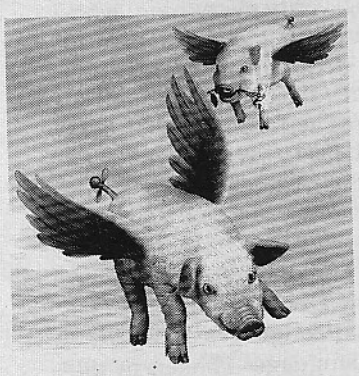
FINALLY HERE, the first album release of the multitasking culture group from Lahore, Matteela. The album is called *Awazay*, and the compilation focuses on the poetry and music of Punjab and Sindh sung by not-yet-known artists singing the poetry of Madho Lal Hussain, Guru Gobind Singh, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Khawaja Farid. Says filmmaker Farjad Nabi, who with journalist friend Mazhar Zaidi and a few others started the venture to bring modern high-end listening and viewing to a mass audience, "It is

hard work to fight the music giants that rule the market and be able to produce music in ways which are beneficial for both the listeners and the musicians". The *Awazay* CD is available only through the website at present, so sales depend on word of mouth and e-publicity (go to www.matteela.com to listen to the music sampling).

■

THE FOOD and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) is always good for press releases that tickle. On 24 September, the UN agency announced that 82 live piglets were airlifted from Britain to Bhutan with a stop-over in Bangkok, in what was termed a "significant logistic operation". *Himal* readers will be interested to note that "all the piglets survived the transport and arrived in Bhutan in good health". Said FAO: "Arriving yesterday in Bangkok from London, via Frankfurt, on Lufthansa flight 0772 were 82 pigs. After a one night rest at Dong Muang's cargo terminal, the beasts continued their journey to Bhutan with Druk Air flight 1202A which left Bangkok today at 09:00 hours and arrived in Thimphu at 11:30". Apparently, the Druk Air aircraft was modified to accommodate the valuable cargo - essentially the fuselage bacame a pigsty. The pigs were selected on the basis of stringent criteria. Says FAO: "Experience shows that white coloured pigs suffer from sunburn at high altitude. Pigmented or black-skinned pigs were the preferred options for farms at 3000 metres above sea-level, a high altitude environment with strong ultraviolet radiation". The transport of live animals was needed "as pigs presently available in land-locked Bhutan are largely inbred and too small to act as a resource for an expanded breeding programme".



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WE HAVE had trainings and booklets and talk fests on "conflict sensitive journalism", up to our ears. What next? How about a handbook on *Suicide Sensitive Journalism*? Well, such a handbook is actually now available on the website of the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Colombo, at www.cpalanka.org/media.html. This is a first, we are told, in the effort "to address the specific issue of reporting suicide in the media in Sri Lanka and South Asia".

■

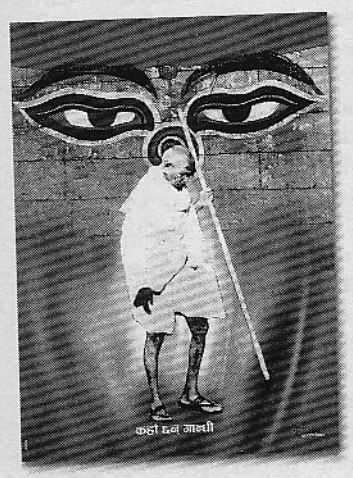
THE SOUTH Asia Tribune website, out of Washington DC, is where you would go for vituperative and occasionally investigative pieces targeted at the Musharraf regime in Islamabad. Here is the roundup of a recent edition of the webzine: Pakistani Generals prepare to grab the country's only Fortune-500 company * Roadmap to removal of General Musharraf in 180 days * Pakistani Experts present their case before UN panel * An Indian Doctor is Jailed after Pakistani Doctor fled US * The truth about Pakistan's over-blown Stock Exchange * The Telling Tale of Little Pakistan in New York * The Official Secrets Act cannot be applied to Benazir Bhutto.

■

WHEN INDIAN publications inadvertently and ignorantly refer to the Sakyamuni Buddha as being born in 'India' rather than Lumbini-which-is-in-Nepal, that sure gets the goat of Kathmanduwallahs who tend to believe that their nationalism is tied to Buddha having been being born in what today happens to be Nepal, that too more than 2.5 millennia ago. Oh well, and so the *Times of India* – which gets the most readership in Nepal for an Indian English daily – created an unforgivable boo boo when in an article about climate change on 3 October, suggested thus: "Mount Everest, India – Khumbu Glacier has retreated over 5 km since 1953". That was worse than Madhuri Dixit claiming not so long ago, upon deplaning at Tribhuvan International Airport, that Nepal was once a part of India. "If Mount Everest is in India", said an incensed Nepali nationalist, "shall we go claim Kanyakumari as ours? Who cares that we are land-locked!"

■

CP HAS had many things to brood over without one more worry being thrust on him. And this one is about M.K. Gandhi. In India, Gandhi usually looks down on you from the walls of government offices. In the other South Asian capitals, you can catch him at the Indian embassy. This is an unfortunate fate for a universal man, which they once said he was. It is still ocassionally necessary to acknowledge him in rituals, but for the rest you can safely forget about him, particularly if you are not from India. CP learns that Himal's sister publication in Nepali, Himal Khabarpatrika carried the accompanying poster of Gandhi in a recent special issue, with a caption querying "Where is Gandhi?" Either the public in Nepal is still looking for the answer or they could not care less. The fact is, and the tragedy is, that in South Asia today, the Mahatma is taken to be an 'Indian'.



—Chhetria Patrakar

Boyhood and the alien: *ET and Koi Mil Gaya*

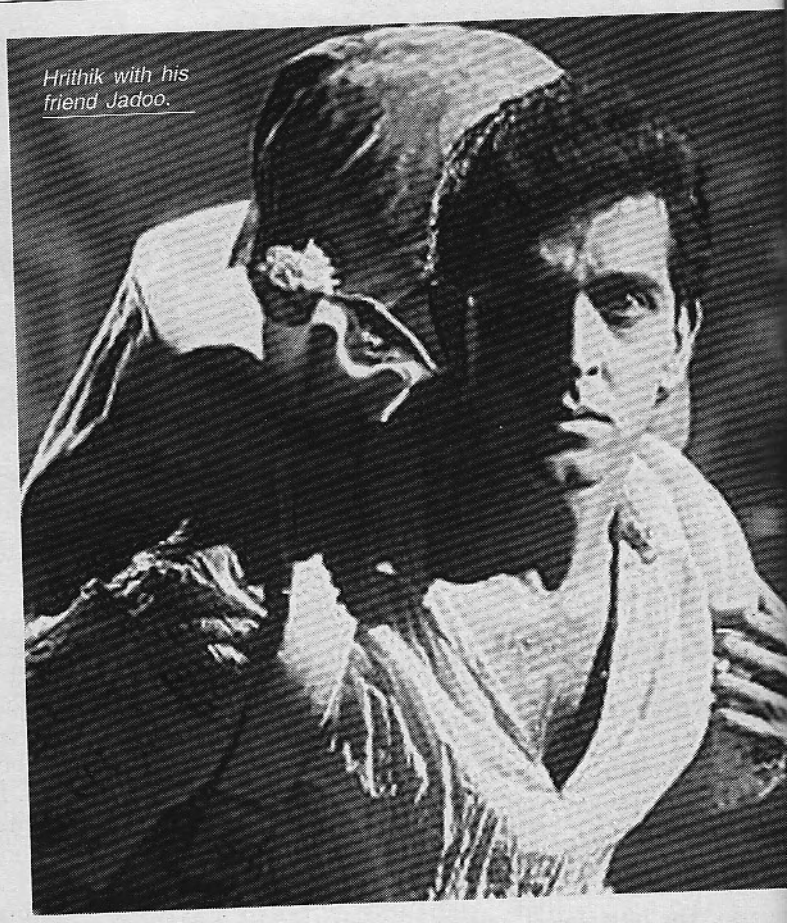
by Genevieve Lakier

Given the perduring distance between Bollywood and Hollywood, two of the largest and most prolific film industries in the world, the recent release of the Bollywood film *Koi Mil Gaya*, loosely based on Steven Spielberg's science fiction classic, *ET the Extraterrestrial*, provides an excellent opportunity to compare this most current of Bollywood products to the original, a classic of contemporary American cinema, re-edited and re-released on its 20th anniversary last year. What is striking about the comparison is how different the films manage to be, despite sharing all essential elements of the plot. Placing these two versions of one story side by side thus helps elucidate the different tropes through which Hollywood and Bollywood succeed in capturing popular desire (and making a buck off it) and in particular, the heroes they construct to do so. The bittersweet paths we see boys take to become men in both *ET* and *Koi Mil Gaya* express more than anything the anxieties which underlie the norms of adult manhood in both contexts. It is these anxieties which the films work to redeem, by resurrecting the ancient hope of the hero who can overcome the dreadful binds we all fear to be caught in.

It is indeed a testament to the imagination of *Koi Mil Gaya*'s film makers that they could take such highly atypical material – a science fiction tale of an abandoned alien and the lonely boy who helps him make contact with his home world – and Bollywoodise it. And Bollywoodise they did! Adding a romantic story line, six songs, an hour to the plot-line, and an ending that thankfully did not involve flying bicycles, motorbikes, or pedal scooters (as it easily might have), but did involve a certain volume of tears shed, a space ship landing and taking off, and the reassurance from our alien friend that "he would be there, watching over" our hero forever, *Koi Mil Gaya* is nonetheless a profoundly different film from the original. While both movies tell a story about childhood, families, and bridging these, about the struggle to be a man, they reveal very different children, families and men. Both are designed as family entertainment, which distinguishes them from other blockbusters of male adventure. Not only do they include women in major roles, but they show us heroism at its sweetest, ie, when performed by boys, who we are supposed to love for their innocence and vulnerability as much as for their power. The sweetness of the boy is what excuses the violence of the man he becomes; it is what marks out our heroes as heroes in the first place. The emotional neediness of the central figures is what motivates their friendships with the aliens in both films, and it is this relationship which then forces them to act within a world which opposes and threatens it.

Both films are thus coming-of-age stories marked by a certain nostalgia for boyhood and its mysteries, even if in both films, growing up is marked by loss as well as gain. But this trajectory is presented as inescapable. The hero must save his alien – and willingly participate in his own separation from what he loves – or else his newfound friend will die. Adulthood thus makes irrefutable demands. One of these demands is the self-sacrifice of love, an interesting metaphor for manhood. The films thus conscript us into the grand adventure of becoming a man but they place, at its centre, a wound. *Koi Mil Gaya* nonetheless ameliorates that wound with an entire social realm and the possibilities of manhood – love and family and power – whereas *ET* concludes only with its young hero's tear-streaked face, looking up at the stars. This makes one movie a triumph and the other a tragedy, even if neither entirely and without ambivalence.

The plots centre on a family which has lost its father and the boy who has to struggle with this absence. In *ET*, the boy, Elliott, played by Henry Thomas, is a very ordinary kid: a prepubescent middle son, overshadowed by his older brother, solicitous towards his younger sister and distant from his mother in the absence of his dad. In *Koi Mil Gaya*, on the other hand, the hero, Rohit, played by Hrithik Roshan (the son of the director, Rakesh Roshan, who also plays his father), is instead a man-child, forever stunted mentally by the accident which saw his father's death and which resulted directly from an earlier visit of the alien spaceship to earth. He is a large man, if skinny, and for the first half of the film the contrast between his size and those of his classmates and compatriots is highlighted to great effect. If the pathos here is visually written in the contrast between Rohit's largeness and his childish clothes, behaviour, possessions, the pathos of the original is



Hrithik with his friend Jadoo.

Elliott's smallness. Elliott is constantly being placed in adult situations and practices he is not quite ready for – getting drunk, kissing a girl, directing the van his brother Mike drives to get *ET* away from his captors, the state scientists. It is the charm of his size which makes these adventures so appealing, a common theme in American movies and one of the reasons child actors have such difficulty when they grow up. The cinema finds touching the figure of the child too wise for its years, signalling perhaps recognition on the part of Hollywood's filmmakers of how immature and incapable even the largest can feel in industrial society. Whereas in *Koi Mil Gaya*, Rohit captures the spoils of victory with the tools of youth and with the help of his youthful compatriots but he is always, visually, a man doing so. While *ET* speaks of the necessity of growing up, fast, *Koi Mil Gaya* resurrects the possibility of the boy in the heart of the man, even, by the end of the movie, in the bulgingly muscled, tight-pants-wearing sex symbol, Hrithik Roshan.

Divine payback

The difference in our heroes is paralleled by a difference in their histories. In *Koi Mil Gaya*, we find ourselves set down in a world of return and recurrence and in a family which is the site of the extraordinary. Rohit is marked from before his birth with the legacy of a tragic past. His father, we learn in the opening scenes, was the space scientist who first discovered the means to communicate with the aliens and drew them to earth. While driving home from a visit to the Space Agency (filled with foreign and comprador Indian scientists, who laugh and insult him for making up his discovery) he sees the spaceship that he has called to earth, that vindicates his work. In his wonder – and perhaps victory? – he pays insufficient attention to his driving and crashes the car, killing himself and throwing Rohit's mother on her stomach, which injures her foetus and leads to Rohit's arrested mental development. Therefore the return of the aliens signals not only the redemption of the son, through their gift to him of special powers and intelligence, but also the redemption of the father, through the son, and of the family itself. It is in many ways divine payback that Rohit becomes a man who can outwit those very scientists who once ridiculed his father and who can return the alien safely to his spaceship, and hence deprive them of what they, too late, desire: the knowledge the father once freely offered.

Elliott in contrast is an entirely normal boy in an entirely normal family which, although shattered from within, is not fateful like Rohit's. The reason the father has left is never made clear. Like the child, we are in the realm of the present, alone with the inconsolable fact of the given. More importantly, the family is not connected in any way to the coming of the alien spaceship: this is not a case of predestination, of divine interconnection, of the mysteries of heredity and family repeating an unfulfilled past. Rohit, in *Koi Mil Gaya*, plays the song his mother taught him as a young boy – the song she learnt from her husband – to call the aliens back to earth, in an unknowing but nonetheless overdetermined imitation of his long-dead father. But, *ET* enters our small hero's world by luck. Indeed, the point about Elliott is his lack of specialness, his anonymity in a suburbia in which each house looks, and we see shots several times to remind us, exactly alike. Elliott's only mark of distinction is his possession of an alien. He himself understands this well. When it becomes clear that ET must go back to his planet, Elliott resists. "He came to ME! He came to ME!" More than the alien per se, that the alien found HIM, and not only that, loves him, saves him from his insignificance in all other ways.

The families in the two films are very different as well. In *Koi Mil Gaya*, it provides the safety from the storm which lies outside, the larger social world Rohit must, but cannot quite, inhabit. Rohit's mother, played marvellously by the experienced actress Rekha, is a wise and benevolent guide who wants only the best for her son and who accepts the alien once she understands the role he plays in her son's transformation. But in Spielberg's *ET*, the storm lives within. Elliott's father,

during the movie, is vacationing in Mexico with his new girlfriend; a fact that, when Elliott brings it up, reduces his mother to tears. It is unclear here where Elliott's sympathies lie. Mike, his older brother, takes it upon himself to protect his mother. Elliott, by far the youngest and smallest of all the boys, is more concerned with his place in the children's pecking order. His mother (played by Dee-Wallace Stone), who the kids call Mary, in Spielberg's comment on modern American family mores, is a distant figure. She is incapable of participating in the central adventure (Mary quite literally fails to see ET even when he is right before her eyes) and is not sufficiently powerful to protect her kids from either the intrusion of the alien or the also mysterious but far more threatening violation of the state and its scientists, who take over the family's house towards the end of the film despite her threats and protestations.

In one movie therefore, heroism involves a certain alienation from the family, or at least the mother, who cannot understand the banality of the miraculous before her (much humour is made of ET's domestication, his encounter and entanglement in the very ordinary stuff of family life). In the other, heroism serves in the name of and as the resurrection of the family. In the former, it requires the demarcation of the individual outside of the domestic world, but in the latter, the hero is reconnected to a lineage of descent and meaning in which he must find his place. And in both, this implicates larger society as well, insofar as it is the problem within the family in both films which forces Rohit and Elliott onto their own devices and out into the world. But these worlds are very different.

Inside, outside

In *ET the Extraterrestrial*, the relationship between home and society is portrayed as one of synecdoche, the part standing in for the whole, whereas in *Koi Mil Gaya*, home and world are connected causally, interrelationally. The family in one mimics society; the family in the other stands within it, is made up and penetrated by it, dependent upon it and eventually redeemed by it. In Elliott's story, the family is not connected to a social world in which inside and outside interpenetrate, but is representative of a world in which the alienation at home signals only a larger social alienation. The secrecy Elliott is required to maintain before his mother he is also required to maintain before the state and scientists who hunt and eventually find his alien. Neither his mother nor the state understands themselves to be his adversary. But Elliott perceives them in their adulthood, to be profoundly dangerous to the mystery of ET. The good intentions of adults are not enough to overcome their ultimate insufficiency and betrayal, because adults

in this film are the repositories of loss. Indeed, the scientists who eventually track ET down, and watch him die think they are saviours (although failed ones). The nameless man who has been shadowing the boy and the alien throughout the movie congratulates Elliott on his care of ET, and tells him he could not have done it better – that he too has been wishing for this since he was ten years old. But, "What more could we do that we are not doing already?" he asks. The scientists in fact arrive too late to manage to do much at all. ET's sickness is not after all the fault of the state or its scientists but a condition of his estrangement from his true home. It is simply their cold, adult reason – the reason that says death is final, that there is no magic, that science is the only hope – that must be avoided. This classic Spielbergian theme is nonetheless dark, insofar as the magic he shows us cannot redeem the larger world; it can only make it bearable, and then fly away.

In the face of an authority which tries to do well but can only do harm, the child is left with nothing but his own determination. The failure of the mother to protect her home is only a larger indication of her failure, to understand what lives within it. Even as it resurrects the essential necessity of home ('ET go home' the central mantra of the movie), *ET the Extraterrestrial* destroys the sanctity of domestic and social authority. Elliott's relationship with ET, his truest source of intimacy and emotional connection, is doomed to lie in the stars, outside the realm of the known and the familiar. Home is that which one is bound to, but it cannot contain one's true desires.

The family does what it can, coming together at the climax of the film, to bid ET goodbye. Mary, crying, looks from afar at her child watching his alien partner walk away and we are meant to celebrate how the adventure has brought everyone closer together. But this closeness is predicated on the essential independence of the child from the mother, his need of something which is not found at home, indeed, which cannot live on earth itself. Manhood here is about breaking away from the smothering realm of the domestic to find one's own true self, a theme repeated over and over in Hollywood, but not through external break but inner. It is as such about the development of a private life. In the face of an alienating society and the inevitable loss of that which he most truly connected with, Elliott has no option but to retreat into the private realm of meaning and memory, the deep inside of intimacy, and to protect this at all costs from the world of adult reason.

If one were to understand Elliott therefore to be left at the end of the film with the memory of his amazing adventure and with the comfort of ET looking down on him, nonetheless his life has not structurally changed. ET is not about external transformation but about inner. Elliott is forced inward by manhood; while Rohit is pushed outward. One would go so far as to say that the alien in the Spielberg film represents the essential 'alienness' of society, whereas the alien in *Koi Mil Gaya* represents exactly the opposite: the possibility of reconnection with it. Elliott's relationship with ET is an essentially private story. The plot as it unfolds takes place within the protected, and then clearly violated, realm of the house. Meanwhile the connection between boy and alien is an interior one. What transfers from ET to Elliott is his experience and emotion, not his powers. But Jadoo functions in Rohit's life to transform his position in the social order through the gift of very visible magic, strength and intelligence. *Koi Mil Gaya* takes place to a great deal outside, in the public spaces of the hill-station Rohit lives in, and among those he loves, competes with and overcomes.

Rohit's problem is that of the reproduction of the family; this drives him out of the nest to prove himself. He is the only child; his retardation makes the continuation of the family impossible. Only after he meets the alien, who he names Jadoo, or magic, can he gain his adulthood and his virility and capture the hand of Nisha, the love interest, played well if rather blandly by Preity Zinta. The intelligence and magical strength Jadoo gives him allow Rohit to take his place socially, in the competition of manhood which is the struggle for respect and marriage as it is portrayed here. This is a profoundly public competition: Rohit shows off his stuff on the dance floor, in the classes and playground of the school, and most extensively during the true climax of the movie which takes place not in the escape of Jadoo from earth, but on the basketball court. The goondas who combat and make fun of Rohit, and most essentially, their leader, Raj Saxena (played by Rajat Bedi), who competes for Nisha's hand, face Rohit and his young friends in a basketball match whose prize is a kiss. That Nisha has not been consulted on this particular question is not an issue here; she participates willingly, sitting on the side of her hero in a clear echo of an earlier occasion when she cheered his opponent to victory. With Jadoo's help, good triumphs, the people applaud, the magic used to achieve this ignored or accepted for what it is and, Rohit kisses the girl – who he will, we understand, eventually take home. The climax of the film, when Rohit almost single-handedly rescues Jadoo from the clutches of the state and returns him to his spaceship, signals the full maturation of his powers as a hero. But the film itself ends in a far different place than Spielberg's: not with the departure of the alien but with a shot of Rohit and Nisha, walking away hand in hand. This is the true victory.

World and the home

The larger political world of the two films is thus very different as well. Both films are sceptical of authority, to a degree, and paint the state and its scientists in unflattering terms. Boyhood would not be boyhood without a moral quest and in both films, that moral quest is to protect the magic of what is unexplained and mysterious from a kind of authority that seeks to know, in order to control. Dramatic tension is built through the race to evade the state and its blazing glare of light – a glare that will extinguish the very thing it seeks to find. The faceless scientist who tracks ET from the very beginning of the film is the one true enemy, and we, the audience, all know this well. This is also, but to a lesser extent, true in the Bollywood version, when Raj takes up a lot more screen time. The state is rather bumbling and late on the scene and anyway, in a very nice take on neo-liberal India, is already in the pocket of capital – the developers of the up-market hill station, who think the discovery of extraterrestrial life would be a boon for business. This scheme is cooked up, not coincidentally enough, by Raj's father, one of the major investors in the hill station. State reason is thus not an inhuman force but plays into human and very familiar power struggles which have far more to do with money than with science.

It is for this reason that *Koi Mil Gaya* is far more violent than ET and also far more hopeful. In a more human and social world, confrontation is inevitable but victory is possible. Although both stories tell a child's fantasy of the triumph of the small over the large via the sudden gift of extraordinary powers, these reach very different ends: Rohit gets to keep his magic, in the end, and the social achievements, most noticeably Nisha, that he has acquired. Elliott does not. If one were to sum up the Hollywood version, it would be to say that it is about how one becomes a man through individuation and repression – through the exquisite pain of loving enough to let go, and knowing enough to keep this inside. Whereas *Koi Mil Gaya*, suggests that the innocent too may be powerful, that good itself can also triumph. Like many Bollywood films, it is a paean to the beauty of this earth – the song sequences showing doves and beautiful mountains and a beautiful girl – and a tale which still keeps possible the hope of social victory. Rohit, at the end, may be sad to see his alien friend leave him, but he is not bereft. He has proved his heroism, he has gotten his girl. His love is neither dangerous nor fragile. It must simply be defended, from the outside rather than within. Spielberg's *ET* can be grouped with a plethora of children's classic mourning the demystification of the world. But if *Koi Mil Gaya* presents us with a predicament and an adventure, it leaves us with the possibility of a healed world from which magic has not departed.

There is something very sad about how alienating the portrayal of home and the world is in *ET*, one of the most famous and beloved of American childhood fantasies. All the advanced wonders of Hollywood are on display here and Spielberg leads the story to a firm and rousing conclusion. And yet its hero, the little boy Elliott, is an expression of wishes that do not get fulfilled outside the movie hall and of a suspicion of authority that places meaning always outside the realm of the social. The Spielbergian injunction to dream is also a suggestion of the fundamental disappointment of the world outside of dreams. American audiences have been presented with a tale in which they can mourn yet again the loss of magic from the world as they know it. Meanwhile Indian audiences are being sold – and are buying – a story in which they empathise with and redeem the tough guy, not because he is tough but because deep in his heart he is a little child, an innocent boy, someone worthy of love. It is not magic that we watch disappear but the innocence of the boy. And yet the audience is not supposed to mourn. The coming into adulthood presented here is an exciting and hopeful passage which leads to something beyond itself, which indeed makes the social itself possible.

One still confesses to loving *ET*, and to a lesser extent – for it is less daring in its form – *Koi Mil Gaya* as well. The movies depict male love and men's vulnerability in the face of love as a productive, generative force. They present hegemonic males, males who act, who connive, who win and save the day, but they reveal these hegemonic figures to be, in reality, young boys imagining themselves into men as we watch. The films offer us forgiveness for men - for the violence and stupidity of those they fight, mirror, become (it is of course a separate question whether or not we should give it). But they provide no alternatives. Manhood in both is a necessity, imposed from outside. It cannot be avoided, or else love itself will die. The sacrifice at the centre is what keeps both stories sweet, and perhaps also terrible. Both reveal a terrible truth: that it is hard to grow up as a man. Even if that occludes so many other terrible truths, it is still one that is important to remember.

Where are the women in the Sri Lankan peace?

If and when peace comes to Sri Lanka, the new structures of political relations must be designed to preserve and advance the gains made by women in the last two decades.

by ***Sarala Emmanuel***

The two parties to the separatist conflict in Sri Lankan—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the federal government—have been negotiating the political future of the country since a ceasefire agreement was signed by both parties on 22 February 2002. This adds a new dimension to the work of the women's movements in Sri Lanka. Though these movements have been active in confronting the conflict over the last two decades, the transition to a potential military and political peace poses new dilemmas in framing women's concerns. The Sub-Committee on Gender Issues that has been instituted within the negotiating mechanism is only one such forum for articulating and placing these concerns within the framework of constitutional and political rights. In addition to this, they will have to consider other important issues that lie outside this framework of rights which will inevitably surface in the post-conflict period.

> In its own perverse way, conflict opens up the scope for greater women's role in the society and economy

In countries around the world that have been stricken by protracted conflict, women have been actively involved in campaigns for peace. In Northern Ireland, feminist writers have documented the efforts of women's groups from both sides to organise on working class lines, while the 'men' were negotiating a 'settlement'. Similarly, one of most striking peace campaigns, the "Women in Black", is active in the Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as in the former Yugoslavia. In Peru, women's organisations persistently lobbied the state to end the war and establish democratic processes. They used the media and other networks to promote peace, and were also directly involved in humanitarian work. In South Africa, women campaigned actively against measures that restricted their mobility in addition to struggling against the apartheid regime.

Sri Lankan women, too, have been campaigning for peace since the early stages of the conflict. Women's activism in Sri Lankan has involved multiple organisations representing different agendas and identities, which have sometimes come together strategically to lobby for certain common causes. Kumudini Samuel, the human rights activist and a co-ordinator of the Women and Media Collective in Colombo, has documented in detail the activities of the Mother's Front of the early 1980s, (which campaigned for peace and demanded the return of their sons who had disappeared in the North), and of the left-oriented Women's Action Committee, formed in 1982, which took up issues such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979), the release of women political prisoners and the rape of women in the North and East. Since those early efforts, with the repeated failure of peace negotiations, the demand for peace by women's groups has only grown stronger, and their activism over the past two decades has varied from lobbying for legal reform to following up individual cases of wartime violence against women. Mothers in the North have come together to demand the return of their 'disappeared' sons and mothers of the soldiers in the Sri Lankan military have actively sought information about their sons missing in action. Groups have also been working on the special humanitarian needs of women living in the conflict areas. These groups have developed links across ethnic communities and expressed and demonstrated solidarity with each other's demands. In many ways, women have been negotiating peace for years in Sri Lanka, even during the worst periods of violence.

Despite this history of activism, women have been excluded from the official peace process. Since the 1980s there have been six attempts to resolve the North-East conflict through negotiations. In 1984 there was the All Party Conference in Colombo. This was followed by the talks held in Thimpu in 1985. In 1987 the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord was signed on the initiative of the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In 1989-90 talks were held between the President, Ranasinghe Premadasa and the LTTE, which resulted in the expulsion of the Indian Peace Keeping Force. The last round of negotiations was initiated by the current President Chandrika Kumaranatunge in 1994. After a gap of eight years the sixth attempt was launched by Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe in February 2002. In all these attempts, women have been excluded from any key negotiating role. (The only woman who has been present at every round of the current peace negotiations has been Adele Balasingham, the wife of the former chief LTTE negotiator. However, she has not claimed to represent a women's agenda for the LTTE at the peace table.) Only the parties responsible for war and its accompanying atrocities are negotiating the terms of the peace, while those who have been lobbying for peace and campaigning against human rights violations over the past two decades find themselves marginalised in the formal process.

Muted presence: Adele with Anton Balasingham

Only the parties responsible for war and its accompanying atrocities are negotiating the terms of peace

This is of a piece with historical trends across the world, of course. In more recent years, however, there have been encouraging examples of women succeeding in securing a place in formal negotiations. In Liberia, women forcibly intruded into the all-male negotiations in Accra in 1994. The six women who stormed the Accra conference won official observer status by the second day of talks, and later succeeded in having a woman included in the five-member Council of State. Subsequently, this council was headed by a woman, Ruth Sando Perry, the first African woman head of state, as part of the revised Abuja Peace Accord of August 1996. Women have also used international agencies such as UNIFEM to facilitate their participation in formal peace processes, as in Burundi. In the case of Northern Ireland in the 1990s, women's groups came together to form the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, a political party which participated in negotiating the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and which was allocated representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Perhaps the most significant example of women's involvement in formal negotiation processes in a "Southern" conflict comes from South Africa. Women were party to the negotiations and three formal bodies were put in place to represent women's concerns—the Office on the Status of Women in the Presidency, a Joint Monitoring Committee in the Parliament, and an independent Committee on Gender Equality.

The sub-committee

Though in the current Sri Lankan process women have been excluded from any negotiating role, one development of significance was the establishment of the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SCGI) during the fourth round of talks between the government and the LTTE in Thailand in January 2003. At the third round in December 2002 in Oslo, both the LTTE and Sri Lanka government agreed in principle to establish a women's committee to explore the effective inclusion of gender concerns in the peace process. During in the fourth round, the representatives to the committee were agreed upon and it was officially constituted. The Sub-Committee is composed of five members nominated by the government of Sri Lanka and five by the LTTE. However, the SCGI has no mandatory power and its role is to provide advice to the main negotiators. Curiously, it was given few formal instructions from the negotiating table. It is also the only sub-committee associated with the negotiating mechanism to be given the freedom to formulate its own terms of reference. This unusual autonomy was also reflected in the choice of the government nominees, who are not members of either the Sri Lankan administration or of any political party. Their Tamil counterparts, however, are all members of the LTTE, and it is not yet clear what degree of autonomy they enjoy. Significantly, SCGI members have decided to work as a unified body, lobbying unanimously with other entities in the negotiating mechanism to include gender concerns.

The apparent independence of the SCGI could be seen as providing valuable freedom for the women in the committee to formulate their agendas. However, as the women nominated by the government have noted, this has also meant a very limited interaction with the state and the formal negotiation process. There are as yet, no formal mechanisms for the SCGI briefing the negotiating parties about its concerns, and the real influence that the Sub-Committee has on the overall peace process is questionable.

It is also important to look at the issue of ethnic representation in the SCGI as, among other things, it goes to the core of the conflict in the island. Among the five government nominees, three women are publicly perceived to be ethnically Sinhala and two to be Muslim. (It is another matter that these women may not neces-

"Post-conflict history"

In the post-conflict situation in Sri Lanka, how will the conflict of the last two decades be represented in historical accounts? If there is one victor, usually the history of the conflict is written by victor. In the Sri Lankan case, both parties play a somewhat equal role in the negotiation process. If the negotiations establish two separate units of governance, will there be two separate accounts of history written by the two key parties? Currently, in areas controlled by the LTTE, the historical accounts of the conflict have been shaped by their ideology. LTTE cadres have been exalted and elevated to martyrs to be commemorated. Schools have photographs of the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in their classrooms, accompanied by a map of Tamil Eelam. There are also accounts that documents the history of the 'cause' of the liberators and narrations of the conflict, have been given to many schools by the LTTE in the East. In similar fashion, state supplied textbooks have pointedly omitted any account of the current North-East conflict. And, the 'official' history of Sri Lanka in the government-issued textbooks endorses the idea of the glorious past of the Sinhala-Buddhist civilisations, leaving out historical accounts of the Tamil, Muslim and Burgher communities.

How will representations of history be recorded in a post-conflict situation? And how will women be represented in the historical accounts of the past two decades? Will the LTTE only record women martyrs for their cause? Will women's activism and peace movements be forgotten? Will women's struggles against and triumphs over the brutal realities of conflict be suppressed? Will the human rights violations committed during the conflict and during the peace process be erased from the records? It will be interesting to see what role bodies such as the Sub Committee on Gender Issues have in representing women's histories and personal accounts of the conflict in its aftermath.

sarily fit into such neatly simplified categories, but this is how they have been defined in the public perception.) The LTTE nominees are all recognised as being Tamil women. The fact that the Tamil representative is publicly perceived to be exclusively from within the LTTE ranks is extremely significant, and has led to much debate within the women's groups in Sri Lanka. Many Tamil women who have been working for women's rights in the different women's movements for many years were irked that the LTTE cadres had taken on the role of sole representative of Tamil women, whilst the government nominees were all "non-Tamil". According to government sources, the LTTE had objected to all the Tamil women nominated by the government, which was what led the government to nominate alternative "non-Tamil" women. Responding to this composition, some women were of the view that the government nominees should refuse to serve on the Sub-Committee to protest against the exclusion of non-LTTE Tamil women. They argued that there are non-LTTE Tamil women's groups which understood the needs of the different civilian communities, as a result of decades of experience in campaigning for rights and peace among civilian populations. A strong lobby, however, felt that the SCGI could be a voice that carried the demands of the different women's groups (especially Tamil women's groups) to the negotiating table, and towards this objective it was justified to make a strategic compromise on the question of representation. After all, the Sub-Committee was the only access that women had to the peace process so far. Proponents of this view felt that the five government nominees should be accessible and transparent to all other groups, and should have a participatory open system of discussing issues to be addressed by the larger sub committee of 10, as well as feeding back details of the sub committee's discussions to this larger plural constituency.

Some critics began to feel that the government nominees, who are predominantly from women's rights and human rights backgrounds, were compromising the strategic interests of the women's movement as a whole by being co-opted by the two parties to the conflict. This would undermine protests against issues such as child recruitment and the intimidation of civil society in the North and East by the LTTE. However, as one government nominee explained in personal communication with this writer, they have to tread carefully and negotiate sensitively and innovatively with the other members of the Sub-Committee on how such issues can be addressed in the future.

The class dimension of the body has also been questioned. As one woman pointed out, at a meeting with the government nominees, the latter are predominantly Colombo-based, middle class women and there was no representation of women who have been living and working through the conflict. She noted that, at least, the LTTE nominees were representative of the different regions within the North and the East of the island.

The strategic and the practical

It is important for the future of women's activism in Sri Lanka to examine the nature of the compromises entailed by participation in the SCGI and what benefits will accrue from it. Is it more important to stick to the principles of human rights, women's rights, representation and participation, and keep influencing the peace process from the margins, voicing anger and criticism against the flaws of the peace process? Or is it more important to try and move into the small spaces emerging within the peace process even if they are flawed and circumscribed, to try to expand them? A third option would be to evolve innovative strategies and use as many mechanisms as possible, both formal and non-formal.

Even as these existential questions of purpose and method remain pending, there are other more immediate matters to be resolved. An important challenge for the women in the SCGI is to put forward a common agenda that addresses the concerns of all the members. As the feminist scholar Maxine Molyneaux, speaking in the context of the movement in Nicaragua and the problems of mobilising women, points out, in forging common platforms, tensions quickly emerge between the "strategic gender interests" and the "practical gender interests". Strategic interests are those concerned with underlying structural inequities, while practical interests are oriented towards more immediate material conditions. As is evident from the debates and disputes surrounding the SCGI, women's movements are never homogeneous. Class, ethnic, religious, caste and political factors influence the work of the different women's groups. The issues that are most commonly experienced and real to most women across these divides are the practical gender interests, such as basic needs and economic needs. And these interests are the ones on which it is easier for different women's groups to unite. Accordingly, the SCGI has, to begin with, put forward very practical demands upon which both major groups within the committee could agree.

As put out at a meeting between the government nominees and women's groups following the first and second sittings of the Sub-Committee, the concerns of priority for the women from the LTTE are primarily practical gender interests that stem from the realities of women who have experienced conflict at close quarters for over 20 years. These primarily involved issues of relief, health, infrastructure and rehabilitation. However, the LTTE nominees have also raised 'structural' issues that fall into Molyneaux's category of "strategic gender interests", such as equal representation of women in decision-making processes and violence against women. The government nominees have been guided by documents such as the Women's Manifesto 2001 and the *Memorandum to the Government the LTTE and the Norwegian Facilitators from Women's Organisations of Sri Lanka*, which present a similar combination of practical and strategic gender interests, but are often couched in the language of human rights. The question remains of how far LTTE members and the women's rights activists nominated by the government can agree to raise fundamental structural issues (or strategic gender interests) such as the subordinate power structures in the communities, violence against women by both the parties to the conflict, issues of justice and accountability, freedom of speech and political activism of women. How the tension between these two types of gender interests will play out remains to be seen.

The recent changes in the peace process are also significant for the Sub-Committee. The earlier mechanisms for rehabilitation and governance established by the LTTE and the government have been effectively dissolved. The two parties are negotiating new proposals for an interim administration to replace these. It is still unclear where the SCGI currently stands in relation to these new proposals and what role it will have with regard to a future interim administration.

Among the realities that must be considered is the empowerment of women that occurred during the conflict. In the post-conflict phase, there should be no sliding back

Given this complex background and uncertain future, it is crucial that civil society and women's groups actively lobby with the formal systems. What the conflict resolution experts calls 'track-two activism', needs to play a more prominent role in the peace process. It was when international lobbies demanded some form of involvement of women in the peace process, that the two parties hastily put together the SCGI. But, the Sub-Committee is just one mechanism and it only provides a narrow entry into the formal peace process. Non-formal organisations and groups must innovatively include themselves at the different levels of the peace process, since there are many post-conflict reconstruction concerns that require the participation of the people of the North and East.

After the war

Very often issues of very great significance for the post-conflict situation are ignored in the process of building peace and unless these are addressed with the necessary urgency, the basis for a lasting peace will be undermined. Among the realities that must be considered is the empowerment of women that occurred during the conflict—such as taking on public roles within the community or becoming the sole breadwinner of the home. In the post-conflict phase, there should not be a sliding back. After the Second World War, women were

compelled to leave their employment and to renounce the new status they had acquired in society during the war. Most went back to being housewives. Even when reconstruction and rebuilding of conflict-affected communities is framed within a rights-based framework, these aspects are still thought of within a patriarchal ideology due to the absence of women with the requisite consciousness in key decision-making positions. Even though women have taken on key roles during conflict, their contributions are seen to 'accidental', 'unusual' or 'anomalous' and in most cases when peace is negotiated and implemented, it is assumed that women would go back to their previous subordinate roles.

The failure to validate women's new roles has much to do with how women are represented as victims. Sepali Kottegoda of the Women and Media Collective discusses, in her work *Female Headed Households in Situations of Armed Conflict*, how the state categorises women who head their own families as 'vulnerable women' or 'destitute women' or 'unsupported women', not giving recognition to their own agency or capacity in their new roles. Therefore, it is crucial that there are women within influential bodies to give a gender sensitive perspective to designing post-conflict policies, so that hard-earned advances made by women made during the past two decades are not lost. Noted South African author, Antjie Krog emphasises this point with regard to the post-apartheid experience. She notes that the African National Congress (ANC) introduced a quota system for women to all its decision-making bodies as part of the new South Africa, giving recognition to the decades of women's political activism against the apartheid regime. It is because of this policy, says Krog, that South Africa is one of the countries with relatively high levels of women's representation in parliament. In its own perverse way, conflict opens up the scope for a greater women's role in the society and economy. It will be unfortunate, if the peace process reverses this trend in the pursuit of a return to normalcy.

The peace process is largely inaccessible to civil society actors and lacks transparency or people's participation

Reconciliation

Another concept popular in liberal civil society discussions at the present time is that of 'reconciliation'. Some countries where negotiations have taken place only between the warring parties have opted for a policy of forgive and forget, as in the case of El Salvador and Nigeria. Scholars such as Ana Ibanez and Murray Last, who have analysed these situations, argue that this policy has not worked as intended. The Nigerian civil conflict was resolved over three decades ago by 'forgetting' the crimes committed by all the sides. As Last observes, "There was no public judgement on what had been suffered, no reparations, no apology; almost no one was held to be accountable for what they had done".

Last notes that the subjects of 'hurt' and 'injustice' were pushed to the 'private' domain, where the process of memory and recovering went on in churches, town unions and family networks. Similarly, in El Salvador, not only was 'forgetting' imposed on people, there was also a condoning of the violence that had taken place. However, as Ibanez notes, even after many years the memories never died in people's minds. It is, on the other hand, heartening that in Peru, after many years, there has finally been an acknowledgement of the violence and killings that took place in the 1980s, due to the conflict between the state and the Maoist group, Sendero Luminoso. The president of Peru accepted the report of the Truth Commission, which had worked for two years documenting the disappearances of over 60,000 people and other human rights violations, and made a public pronouncement that the perpetrators would be prosecuted.

It is still not clear what direction the Sri Lankan peace process will take—whether like Nigeria and El Salvador, the parties to the conflict will decide not to address human rights violations or whether like Peru, they will be compelled to admit their accountability to victims.

Within Sri Lankan civil society, the debates around reconciliation have both applauded and criticised the South African experience. Peace movements, religious movements, human rights activists and psychosocial workers have all been examining the need for processes of reconciliation. For women activists, it is important to maintain a feminist perspective within these discussions. The South African experience itself was clearly designed in such a way that meant many women were unable to approach the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to narrate their own experiences of gender-related violence. Many of the women who had suffered such violence were inducted into important government positions or were prominent businesswomen. Antjie Krog notes that they had strong public roles and could not talk about their very private experiences of sexual violence during the apartheid within the framework of the TRC. According to Sheila Meintjes, the South Africa Commissioner of the Commission on Gender Equality, who spoke at the conference on Women, Peace Building and Constitution Making in Colombo in 2002, out of 21,000 cases presented to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission only a tiny fraction were by women with specific accounts of gender-related violence. Clearly, specific attention needs to be given to developing sensitive and supportive pro-

cesses for hearing women's experiences, so that there can be a systematic acknowledgment of these violations as well.

It is not only important to push the two parties to recognise and put into place a system of accountability and justice, it is also vital that these mechanisms are framed within a gendered perspective. Therefore, it will be important for Sri Lanka's women's groups to intervene in the design of processes for reconciliation and/or justice in order to enable women's specific experiences to be addressed. Women's understandings of issues of justice, suffering and what they want in terms of setting to rest past violations, have to be further explored and brought into these debates.

The remains of the war

There is evidence that in post-conflict situations, violence within communities may actually increase compared to earlier levels. This has been the experience in Bosnia as well as in South Africa. This violence also takes on a specifically 'gendered' dimension, for example in the rise of domestic violence or sexual assaults (as in the case of South Africa). In the Sri Lankan print media, there are increasing links made between violent crime and army deserters. It is important to recognise the link between decommissioning when it takes place and the incidences of violence. Then there are other questions: If an interim administration in the North and East were to be solely controlled by the LTTE, will there be any decommissioning on their part? Will the systematic assassination of other Tamil political figures by the LTTE continue? Given the increasing level of violence in politics, what space will there be for women to enter the political arena in the North and East or the rest of the island?

The complexities involved in decommissioning women militants or soldiers become apparent when one examines the current process being elaborated for child soldiers in Sri Lanka. The current debates have clearly treated child soldiers only as 'victims' and have been pushing for the (temporary) institutionalisation of these children within transitional centres. It appears that this process may completely negate their experiences of 'agency' and power within the movement, although these may be central to their sense of competence and self. There is also a potentially devastating stigma that may be attached to them in terms of both their temporary institutionalisation and subsequent re-integration back into society.

It is possible that a similar disempowering process may be in store for women militants. Ana Ibanez, describing the experiences of women guerrillas in El Salvador, states that for most women, being decommissioned was a very difficult process. Most of the men and women in the movement felt most competent in warfare. They were also used to the regimentation of camp life. Decommissioning meant that they were separated from their fellow cadres. Reunion with their families was very difficult. The skills of warfare (such as intelligence work or use of weapons) which had been glorified during the conflict were looked down upon once these women re-entered civilian life. Women combatants in Sri Lanka may face similar challenges of devaluation of competence and the renegotiation of entirely new roles in a society from which they had been relatively isolated. Although the LTTE's female cadres seem to look forward to a strong role for women in future political processes, it is yet to be seen whether they, through the Sub Committee on Gender Issues or other fora, will be able to significantly influences the policies governing decommissioning of women cadres. Similarly, the fate of women in the state military apparatus in still unclear.

Women have been building peace during conflict and continue to do so as part of their daily work, whilst remaining largely independent of petty political manoeuvrings

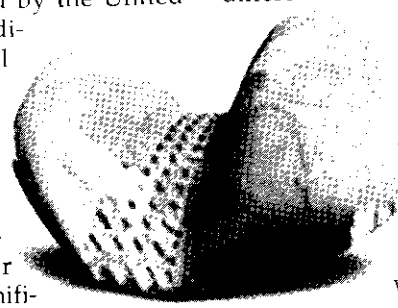
Women, more than any other constituency in society, are faced with the difficulties of engaging with an evolving peace process that consists of structures and mechanisms that have been pre-designed by the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. In the Sri Lankan case, the peace process is largely inaccessible to civil society actors and lacks transparency or people's participation. The final peace deal is likely to be negotiated between the two most serious violators of human rights in the conflict. However, even though women have been engaging with a peace process that has fundamental limitations, this has not stopped women's activisms outside the peace process. The lobbying of international donors, political actors and other community leaders continues. The strongest contribution the women's movements have made for peace so far has been the links built across ethnic, caste, class and political divides. Women have been building peace during conflict and continue to do so as part of their daily work, whilst remaining largely independent of petty political manoeuvrings. However, the real challenge facing women activists is to find ways of exerting pressure on the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to incorporate their perspectives in forging a just peace – which is one that respects women's rights. △

(This paper was originally presented at the Peace Studies Programme of the South Asian Forum for Human Rights)

Collapse of the neo-liberal consensus

by **Aasim Sajjad Akhtar**

Conciliation and cooperation are the catchphrases of the liberal world. However, only a short time ago (even if it now seems like a long time ago), Western civilisation was busy imploding. It was only after the Second World War that the Western powers decided to spend more time sharing the spoils rather than fighting over them. Keep in mind that it is Europeans who have been responsible for the most number of deaths through organised combat through recorded human history, and have been piling up the dead for centuries. It just so happens that the new form of global domination that has been established by the United States has managed to avoid most traditional warfare altogether (on its own soil the record is blotched up by that wretched new enemy, terrorism).



The development of finance has also radically altered the struggle for control over the means of production. While many actions of the empire are still in the form of direct swoops for physical resources, there are now significantly different considerations for the metropolitan capitalist core as compared to even 50 years ago. For a while there was even talk of the new "knowledge-based economy". However, the crash of the virtual economy in the United States two years ago put paid to the delusions that money can continue to be minted in thin air. Even so, the coming to age of financial capitalism has brought a whole new set of 'values' and corporate 'cultures' to the fore.

In any case, it would appear that the so-called liberal values have started to become as global as capitalism itself. In the 1990s, supposedly ingenious new means of attacking poverty were devised, including many of the component practices of community development approaches, based on the notion that poverty and exploitation should not be discussed in the same breath. Rather than go on about how poor people are victims of the prevailing set of social and economic relations, why not directly address poverty through partnership and compassion?

In actuality, the public relations effort of imperialism, as has always been the case, focuses on distracting from the crux of the matter. In other words, let us forget that thousands of Iraqis have been killed and maimed as a direct consequence of the US invasion, and instead let us talk about freedom, democracy, and importantly for the capitalist in us, reconstruction. The imperial effort culminates in the glorious fact that certain norms and values start to permeate what can loosely be termed culture. The question that sticks out like a sore thumb for the ideologues of capitalism as well as for those of us who resist is: Are these values and norms starting to displace previously existing norms and values in the form of a new global consciousness? Or have these norms and values always prevailed and the only difference now is by matter of degree?

Ever since Woodrow Wilson, American statesmen have done their best to depict themselves as humanists. Through the Cold War, it was not possible for the liberal perspective to gain worldwide "acceptance" as it were, because of the existence of another worldview, and with it another set of values and norms that were also constructed to be all-encompassing. Marxism in its very basic form propagates the notion that human history is characterised by class conflicts, and that the struggle of oppressed classes against the ruling classes is what has been, and will continue to be, the reclamation of humanity. Naturally this view of the world is almost diametrically opposed to that which proposes microcredit schemes as a viable means of addressing the root causes of poverty without any mention of power and powerlessness.

And so, the existence of the Marxist antithesis to liberal capitalism ensured that, if nothing else, the values and norms proposed by the West remained only one set of values and norms among many, and not the only set of norms and values that would seem to have some kind of mass acceptability. Be that as it may, the liberal tradition in many parts of the Western world, and in particular in the United States, is quite deeply rooted. In Europe, liberalism is generally equated with a set of values and norms that is somewhat outdated, and seen as tending toward the right. Indeed, it must be postulated that the European welfare state that developed over the past century was a direct result of the fact that the Marxist discourse claimed a place on the main

stage of global politics. Having said that, there has been a steady shift towards the right across the world after the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, Europe included.

Nevertheless, the distinction between Europe and the United States remains, and this explains in large part the strong protests against US (and UK) foreign policy across the European continent in recent times. Regardless of whether there is or there is not a genuine political impetus behind these protests in Europe (and indeed in many other parts of the world even if on a smaller scale), the world has seen the maturing of a process of rejection of liberal values and norms—in short the liberal consensus—over the past few months. This tide emerged some years ago during the protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle and it has continued to manifest itself at various meets and celebrations of the global elite ever since. September 11 provided the impetus for a newer and fresher regurgitation of liberal rhetoric by the empire, even though this 'liberalism' resembles fascism more than anything else. However, George W Bush's ranting and raving about hunting down those who "hate freedom" has probably done the imperialist cause more harm than good, with quite serious questions of credibility of political leadership emerging in the US and UK.

It is true that the 'liberal' perspective now dominates the political mainstream. One need only observe that the vast majority of governments around the world have adopted the Bush-ian anti-terror doctrine to confirm this fact. Nonetheless, much like the manner in which capitalism has taken on a truly global character over the past decade and a half, even as it excludes greater numbers of people, so too the liberal discourse is universally accepted though only at the level of the ruling classes. Within the majority of working class and even white-collar populations around the world, the liberal language of Bush & Co. is losing ground. This might lead one to believe that a new counter-hegemony is emerging, at the local, national, regional and global levels.

Sadly, this cannot be claimed with any degree of seriousness. A genuine counter-hegemony must be based on what the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci called "active consent" of the population, so that its values are exercised in all realms of social relations. As has been hypothesised by many scholars, the prevailing feature of social relations at present is the universality of consumption. Consumption of common goods and services throughout the world lends itself to a "cultural" hegemony that is unprecedented in human history. Whether it is music, food, sport, and most significantly politics, there is a tendency towards convergence in the values and preferences of the global consumer that cannot be understated. It is the uniformity of consumption patterns that thwart any chance of the moral indignation against the liberal banter of Bush and his cronies metamorphosising into the political force that it could so easily become.

The political liberalism that is being propagated by the ruling junta in the capitalist core is being superseded by a cultural liberalism that is reflected in the globalisation of consumerism. Naturally, these consumption patterns, and the accompanying development of complementary value systems, are founded upon the expansion of multinational capital. What has come to be commonly termed neo-liberal economics now dominates the policymaking discourse in most of the periphery, facilitating the capture of resources and markets in these countries by multinational capital. In the absence of the necessary economic mechanisms to permit the free flow of consumer values throughout the world, it would be impossible to conceive of what is propagated as the epitome of liberal consciousness—the global village. However, this global village faces one basic contradiction: while trade and financial liberalisation have permitted any and every form of capital to rush to the periphery, the workers of the world are not given free entry and access, and therefore cannot partake in the pickings.

Neo-liberal economics now dominates the policy-making discourse in most of the periphery, facilitating the capture of resources and markets in these countries by multinational capital

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) has been touted as the success story of the post-Cold War "free" world, a world in which all nations of the world can share in the fruits of technological advancement. As with all of the other liberal fictions that make up global capitalism's ideology, the WTO too seeks only to reinforce the inequities of the neo-colonial regime. Along with the development finance institutions, the WTO is moulding the global economy to suit the needs of multinational capital and to paralyse meaningful political resistance to the neo-colonial system. But there is, in fact, quite a bit of resistance. The effort to derail the WTO has succeeded in creating Cancun. However, there is,at the same time, an acute need to understand that as the global economy becomes more and more intertwined, simply maintaining the consumption patterns of the present will preclude any serious challenge to capitalism. As the pre-eminent revolutionaries of the twentieth century pointed out so insightfully, there must be a direct economic challenge to imperialism, potentially at its weakest link, for it to be challenged.

The cultural-economic-political foundations of the

global system are difficult to distinguish in each of their separate manifestations. There is a need, however, to distinguish between the conflicting roles and consciousness of working people as working people, and working people as consumers. It is only when working people recognise themselves first as working people, and then as consumers, and then embark on the difficult task of organising themselves as working people to be able to improve their lot, both as workers and as consumers, that the system's contradictions will be fatally exposed. As such, the requisite political impetus may well be lacking for such a process to evolve at present. This question must be asked, debated, and then finally answered by those committed to resisting imperialism within the core countries themselves.

Antonio Gramsci, the philosopher of counter-hegemony.

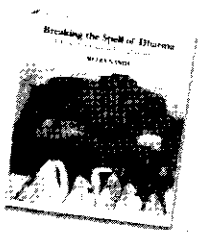
What is more likely is that the working people of the periphery, and especially those that are found in rural areas, will face more and more acute forms of oppression in coming times, and that this will lead to greater and more unified instances of resistance. This constituency has nothing to lose but its chains because it has, as yet, not been fully engulfed by the consumer tidal wave that has blanketed the rest of the world. As the compulsions of over-production push the capitalist core toward those markets that it has not yet captured, there will be direct attacks on the resources of the people of the periphery. Therefore, it can and should be expected that Gramscian counter-hegemony will develop, as cultural resistance to consumerism takes on distinct political form in countries like those of South Asia. In some cases, there is greater resistance, and in others, like Pakistan, unfortunately, there is less. However, it is the sum total of the resistance in all parts of the world that will lead to a weakening of the global financial elite and to more instances such as those that found "old" Europe and the United States divided over the invasion of Iraq. If we make sure that there is that much less to go around, the age-old alliance of the elite will start to crumble. And then the conciliation and cooperation farce will be exposed for what it really is.

Hindutva's Hoax

Taking on the postcolonial postmodernists and reinstating the Enlightenment

In recent times, there have been very few intellectual voices from among the English-using sections of India with the commitment and s of secularism in India seem to invest faith in 'good Hinduism' and its 'plurality' and seem content to direct their critical energies against Hindutva, refusing to see the fundamental links between the former and the latter. But the very rise of aggressive political Hindutva, since the 1980s, owes to the shallow secularism which refused to formulate a strong critique of Hinduism—in its Brahminical and non-Brahminical variations—but instead sponsored the practice of upholding various mutations of Hinduism in the public sphere. Under the guise of equal respect for all religions and cultural practices, the Indian state and society have openly indulged in and encouraged the celebration and prioritisation of Hindu rituals in public institutions, and the sad part is both secular (left-liberal) and anti-secular anti-Hindutva (broadly the 'Ashis Nandy camp') voices have not been disturbed by this. The crimes of public intellectuals have found an echo in the pursuits of their academic kin. Few university-bound academicians in India have been angered by the injustices they are surrounded by.

In such an overall context, Meera Nanda's *Breaking the Spell of Dharma* is a passionate plea for secularising India. Though presented as a collection of essays, the book has the tone and character of a manifesto. As the title of the lead essay indicates, it is an attempt at "breaking the spell of dharma". She states in the introduction: "This book is a plea for serious and critical engagement with India's dominant religious tradition—Hinduism". What is refreshing and reassuring about Nanda's approach is that she locates the resources for this battle against Hindu dharma and Hindutva in Bhimrao Ambedkar's ideas and the alternatives posited by the Dalit movement. But first, we need to come to terms with how Meera Nanda (who, after completing a PhD in molecular biology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, worked with popular science movements and as a science reporter for *The Indian Express*, and then went on to acquire another doctorate in the philosophy of science) views the construction of modern Brahminical Hinduism during the British colonial period.



Breaking the Spell of Dharma and Other Essays

By Meera Nanda

Paperback 81-88394-09-2 Rs.160 (India) $18.00 (overseas)

Hardcover 81-88394-08-4 Rs.350 (India) $27.00 (overseas)

Three Essays Collective, New Delhi

reviewed by ***Siriyavan Anand***

Anti-colonial nationalist fervour, in the context of the attempt by the British to introduce a modern scientific discourse, resulted in a Hindu-nationalist reading of scientific reason in Hindu metaphysical terms. Nanda identifies as neo-Hindus a range of players from Ram Mohan Roy to Vivekananda, Aurobindo to Radhakrishnan, Nehru to Gandhi, and argues that they saw the naturalism and scepticism of modern science to be already present in vedic literature, or as being secondary to "the ultimate spiritual truths of Vedanta". In such a context, "the only consistent and uncompromising voices of a rational re-examination of the core values of Hindu metaphysics came from Dalit and Shudra intellectuals, including above all, Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar. The work of Enlightenment that was shouldered by the bourgeoisie in the West, fell upon the most oppressed and powerless sections of the India proletariat". And she castigates the Indian mainstream left—sparing only MN Roy and DD Kosambi—for not ever seriously engaging with religious questions and taking up the cause of Hindu reformation and enlightenment. Given that the Indian intellectual classes, dominated by Brahmins and *dwija* (upper or twice-born) castes, have never seriously engaged with the ideas of Ambedkar or other Dalit and Shudra intellectuals, the pressure on secularisation was never substantive or serious.

Nanda is not content with critiquing the obviously-Hindutva voices. She takes to task an internationally influential group she broadly categorises as "anti-Enlightenment/ postmodern", whose indigenism, celebration and romanticisation of "alternative sciences and alternative modernities", makes them no less dangerous in real terms than Hindutva nationalists who valorise "vedic sciences and authentic modernity". At various points across the essays, Nanda expresses her philosophical irritation with a range of intellectuals. Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravarty, Ashis Nandy, Vandana Shiva and Claude Alvares, who are labelled "reactionary modernists" for seeking to model alternatives on "innocent", "genuinely archaic", "supposedly subaltern modes of living and knowing". This, for the author, amounts to "epistemic charity" or "epistemic populism", while in actual fact

these local knowledges could be "patently irrational, obscurantist and downright oppressive" to the very subalterns these intellectuals claim to speak on behalf of.

Seeing herself working in times when the designation "... 'rationalist' has become one of the worst insults that can be thrown at an intellectual", Nanda is deeply sceptical of the postcolonial postmodernists who, in turn, are sceptical of Western intellectual legacies. She considers it irresponsible to simplistically relate the political-economic aspects of the legacy of colonialism with the epistemological baggage of the West and reject outright modern science and materialism. "It would be a mistake to reduce the Enlightenment to an ideology of capitalism and imperialism alone".

Nanda vs Nandy

The first essay, "Dharma and the Bomb", examines how the packaging of the nuclear bomb in the idiom of dharma is made possible by the postmodernist-Gandhian-ecofeminist alliance—which sniggers at the grand narrative of modern science— facilitating the advent and entrenchment of the reactionary modernism of "Hindu Science". She argues that the postmodern and postcolonial denigration of modern science—in a context where we witness an excess of technological modernism from bombs to dams, but not the concomitant benefits of secularisation and liberalism—"has provided the philosophical grounds for Hindu science". Mapping the common ground that postmodern and Hindutva/rightwing critiques of modernity (and Western science) share, she calls for an Ambedkarite rejection of "traditional India" founded on the basis of "integral humanism" (the philosophy of Deendayal Upadhyay, one of the early champions of Hindutva and ideologue of the Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh).

The postmodernist and indigenist disregard for the dualism (separation of the realms of matter and spirit, nature and culture) of modern science leads them towards an affirmation of the holism of the Hindu worldview, where "the distinctions between human beings are justified by distinctions in the very order of nature". This translates into the inequalities between human beings being naturalised. In other words, the caste system, the *varnashramadharma*, is seen as an extension of the hierarchies that obtain in the natural world since the doctrine of dharma and karma, central to Hinduism, depends on a "unified understanding of nature and culture". As Nanda points out, "holism lies at the very heart of gender and caste hierarchy in India". Castes, genders, animals, plants, and inanimate objects occupy different positions in the karmic chain of being in a non-dualistic interconnected world where the social order, and the oppression therein, are naturalised. And Hindu metaphysics "rationalizes injustices and misfortunes as the natural consequence of the working law of nature". This hoax, according to Nanda, is best understood by the Dalits and Shudras (not women?) who have been "the staunchest supporters of Enlightenment in India", what with Ambedkar's constant reference to the ideals of the French Revolution—"Liberty, Equality and Fraternity".

In doing this, Nanda turns on the head what Gandhian postcolonial scholars, led by Ashis Nandy, and feminists such as Sandra Harding have been arguing. For them, modern, Eurocentric, patriarchal science is actually an instrument of oppression and violence on colonised 'victims'. Nandy argues that it is "the basic model of domination of our times". From this perspective, modern science has ceased to be a source of orgainsed scepticism against dogma, but is the new dogma which needs to be radically scrutinised. This perhaps explains why the postmodernist, postcolonial, Gandhian, ecofeminist critics of Indian origin have refused to engage with the ideas espoused by Bhimrao Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule or Periyar Ramasamy and have maintained a deliberate silence on their distinctly positive attitude to colonial modernity, modern science and the values of European-style Enlightenment.

Even after the adoption of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in 1990 brought the issue of caste out of the upper middle class closet, even after right-wingers such as Arun Shourie wrote of Ambedkar as a pro-British colonialist who did not engage with the "independence movement", and even after the works of Ambedkar became belatedly accessible following his birth centenary celebrations in 1990, the broadly left-liberal (non-Dalit) intelligentsia in the country refused to engage with this scholar-intellectual-activist who was, by far, the only pan-Indian radical-progressive figure of the pre-Independence period. The few recent engagements with Ambedkar or the views of other Dalits that have happened among Indian academics—notably Gauri Viswanathan's *Outside the Fold* (1998) and Aditya Nigam's essay on what he chose to interpret as the Dalit critique of modernity ("Secularism, Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 November, 2000,)—have indeed cleverly read Ambedkar and the larger contemporary Dalit position into the postmodernist-Gandhian perspective. (Admittedly, in Nigam's case, Dalit writings are read against the grain). More surprisingly, a 21-year-old project that calls itself Subaltern Studies is yet to admit a single Dalit into its charmed circle of *bhadralok* researchers. This calls to mind the structure of Mohandas Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh, where guilty caste Hindus were supposed to work for the 'uplift' of 'untouchables', and there would be no role for Dalits.

Who is Dewey?

It is in this context that Nanda—who identifies her coordinates as a liberal humanist of mid-middle class, upper caste Punjabi Hindu

origins—resurrects Ambedkar, the protagonist of her second essay "A Broken People Defend Science". For, it is Ambedkar who led the rebellion in India against the holistic Hindu universe and turned to the "'reductionist', 'masculine' and 'violent' sciences of the West for help". But in the process of resurrecting Ambedkar, Nanda chooses to read him through the eyes of John Dewey, whose name surfaces in the odd footnote in some of Ambedkar's works and was one of his teachers at Columbia University in New York. Nanda casts Dewey in the role of Ambedkar's 'guru' and goes on to argue that Ambedkar read into the Buddha what he imbibed from Dewey, namely, a progressive, anti-metaphysical, naturalistic view of science. Nanda's essay hereon is littered with expressions such as "Ambedkar's Deweyan scientific temper", "Deweyan Buddha", "bears the stamp of Deweyan thinking", "Dewey's presence is most palpable", "like his hero John Dewey", and "seamless blending of Dewey and the Buddha". She recalls Savita Ambedkar's anecdotal reference, quoted by the scholar of the Dalit movement, Eleanor Zelliott, that her husband even imitated Dewey's classroom's mannerisms 30 years after he sat in those classes. Is it necessary to affirm, in the mythic-puranic tradition, such lore as knowledge? Does Nanda have to go the extra Freudian distance in search of an intellectual father figure for Ambedkar?

Thousands of Indians have read Ambedkar, in English and in translation, and understood the core of his philosophical concerns against Hindu dharma and his investment of faith in a rationalistic neo-Buddhism without having had to be told of his indebtedness to Dewey, one of America's foremost public intellectuals of his time, besides being one of Ambedkar's several teachers at Columbia. Also, Ambedkar and Dewey, Nanda admits, never had any direct communication. Dewey died only in 1952 at the age of 92, by when Ambedkar had written and published a great deal of his work, except *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. However, we do not see Ambedkar sharing his work with Dewey—who was intellectually active even in his old age—nor any exchanges between the two. (In personal conversation, Meera Nanda stood by her reading of Dewey into Ambedkar.) However, while exploring at such length the Ambedkar-Dewey connection, it is surprising that Nanda does not mention KN Kadam who perhaps was the first author to deal with Dewey's influence on Ambedkar at length (*The Meaning of the Ambedkarite Conversion to Buddhism and Other Essays*, 1997).

Ambedkar took seriously Buddha's dictum not to treat anything as infallible and eternal and applied it right back to the Buddha's own teaching to create a new Buddhism that rejected the ideas of karma and rebirth

She also does not refer to the scholar of Buddhism, Christopher Queen's work, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), where he explores the Dewey-Ambedkar connections.

It is not as if Dewey did not influence Ambedkar. Ambedkar did tell the *New York Times* in 1932 that "the best friends I have had in my life were some of my classmates at Columbia and my great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman and James Harvey Robinson". What is disconcerting is Nanda's attempt to attribute all of Ambedkar's insights into Buddhism to Dewey. Her enthusiasm in driving home the Ambedkar-Dewey linkages could also be a strategic ploy to (belatedly) pitchfork Ambedkar into the international intellectual arena, a ploy to attract Western academic attention towards Ambedkar. But for an Ambedkarite in India who has read Ambedkar in the context of Indian thinkers, such a long-winded and patently digressive reading of his intellectual legacy is disturbing. One is not making a case here for Ambedkar's "originality". It is not as if he was not influenced by what he read, and he read widely. Not only does Nanda seem to be stretching a little thread too far, she would not have lost much in considering Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism and his critique of Hinduism on their own terms.

Nanda falters again in introducing Ambedkar as "the most influential Dalit intellectual of the 20th century". She does what most non-Dalits do, which is to label Ambedkar a purely Dalit intellectual. (This should perhaps be a reason for Nanda to reconsider her wholesale dismissal of identity politics of all kinds). This is exactly how the entire 'nationalist' political class of Ambedkar's time, and non-Dalit intellectuals of the post-1947 period, looked at Ambedkar. To some, he was in fact merely a 'Mahar leader'. Most recently, in his much-celebrated book, *The Idea of India*, Sunil Khilnani refers to Ambedkar as "the formidable leader of India's 'untouchables'". But never do we see Gandhi being referred to as the foremost Gujarati Baniya leader (though the construction of his worldwide fame rests on a Vaishya subcaste tag – 'Gandhi'), or Nehru as a leader of the Kashmiri Brahmins, though both of them exhibited unabashed clannishness. (Given this tendency, it comes as a pleasant and welcome surprise that Queen refers to Ambedkar as "the Indian civil rights leader".)

It is indeed true that on the issue of conversion and sometimes in his field activism, Ambedkar addressed himself only to Maharashtrian Dalits, sometimes specifically Mahars. But otherwise his intellectual energies since the Columbia days had

been directed at seeking a solution to the issues that concerned the nation at large. Starting with *Castes in India* in 1916 when Ambedkar was just 25, to *Annihilation of Caste*, or his attempts at writing the history of the Shudras and 'untouchables' and at re-reading ancient Indian history as a battle between Brahmins and Kshatriyas at one time and between Brahmins and Buddhists at another, the legislation-related work on the Hindu Code Bill and the Constitution, to his work on the issue of rivers and water (which has been studied by Professor SK Thorat of Jawaharlal Nehru University), his work on economics (studied by the economists S Ambirajan and Narendra Jadhav, currently head of the Reserve Bank of India's economic research wing), or his reflections on the idea of linguistic states or the question of Partition, Ambedkar's oeuvre reflects the wide-ranging concerns he had and the different roles he played.

Dewey's Yankee shadow and the casual reference to Ambedkar's location notwithstanding, Nanda offers a brilliant reading of Ambedkar's approach to Hinduism. After charting his disgust and disillusionment with Hindus and Hinduism, Nanda examines why the religious question of Buddhism that Ambedkar dwelt upon is central to her concerns of science and scientific temper in social life. Juxtaposing a reading of *Annihilation of Caste* and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Nanda argues that Ambedkar took seriously Buddha's dictum not to treat anything as infallible and eternal and applied it right back to the Buddha's own teaching to create a new Buddhism that rejected the ideas of karma and rebirth. Ambedkar merely updates the Buddha and presents *prajna* (understanding) as the central theme, as opposed to superstition, Brahminic naturalism and supernaturalism. "Ambedkar's Buddha was reason and scientific method sacralized".

The *Satapata Brahmina* claimed that "God loves the mystic". Against this, Buddhism and the Lokayata school of philosophy insisted on a separation of the social and the natural. But Brahminism ridiculed and eventually suppressed the anti-metaphysical worldviews that challenged it. It is this anti-metaphysical bent that inspired Ambedkar and which Nanda tries to hitch with Deweyan pragmatism to attack both Hindutvawadis and postmodernists. For her, "Ambedkar's Buddhism contains the seeds of Indian Reformation and Enlightenment rolled into one", and she concludes that "modern science is the standpoint of the oppressed".

Experience and identity

Nanda also finds useful the Ambedkarite Buddha's position on "experience" as a source and category of knowledge. Expressing her discomfort with the valorisation of "experience" in identity politics and feminist epistemology, she points out that despite his love for his long-suffering community, nowhere does Ambedkar romanticise the experience of untouchability as "a source of superior knowledge". She also seems to have in mind the work of the "Shudra" intellectual Kancha Ilaiah (*Why I am Not a Hindu*, 1996) where he claims commonality with the feminist use of experience as a source of constructing an alternative knowledge-base. She chastises Ilaiah for his celebratory approach to Dalit religiosity and his claim that among the oppressed, Dalit-Bahujans' internal patriarchy is, in turn, relatively more benign. For Nanda, experience of oppression alone—be it Third Worldist, woman's, Dalit's or black's—cannot enable better knowledge. All knowledge, she argues, has to be validated by reason and rationality. If anti-Sanskritic Dalit religiosity is steeped in irrationality and unreason, and merely appears to be relatively democratic in its spiritualism, compared to Brahminic religiosity, one cannot continue to suffer it or posit it as an alternative to the hegemonic variant of oppression.

The author illustrates her point with the self-limiting worldview of Viramma, an unlettered Tamil Dalit woman, who ascribes the loss of her milk while nursing a baby to the 'crime' of having listened to prayers of 'upper-caste' gods at her master's house. (Viramma's life has been the subject of an auto-ethnographic work rendered by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine as *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, 1995.) True liberation, in Nanda's framework, lies only in moving towards the universal-rational, and the sources for this universally testable knowledge can come from anywhere in the world—from the European Enlightenment to neo-Buddhism. Even as she heralds Dalits at one point as "the agents of the bourgeois revolution" she is also quick to warn that, "If dalits are to serve as the agents of reason and Enlightenment in Indian society, they will have to accept that reason will expel their own gods, as well as the gods of the twice-borns [sic], from social life". This lesson she draws, she says, from Buddha. "Buddha encourages his followers not to treat even their own experience as infallible and exempt from revision".

However, Nanda must also be willing to acknowledge the role that the experience of oppression plays in acquiring a perspective against an unjust social order. In her zeal to dismount what the postmodernists and feminists elevate as a source of knowledge (not necessarily 'superior knowledge'), Nanda tends to set aside the value of experience without reckoning with how her own hero—Ambedkar—would have gained insights from an experience she herself probably did not have because of the accident of her birth as a non-Dalit. The role of Ambedkar's experiences as an untouchable was perhaps central to his prajna (understanding) and his radical Buddhism. The stakes that an oppressed person brings to bear on his or her understanding of injustice and discrimination are crucial. It is for this reason that Ambedkar's investment of faith in the values of Enlightenment and Buddhism have a different moral value and intellec-

tual resonance than a similar investment from a white American male like John Dewey. It is a matter of some curiosity as to what Dewey's position on issues of racial discrimination in the New York of early 20th century was and how the blacks view/viewed him.

Nanda could have tried to dig up something on the influence the African-American situation would have had on Ambedkar. Given that Ambedkar lived on the edge of Harlem while attending Columbia University, and his writings feature several comparisons of India's Dalits and American blacks, this is a connection that would have been worth exploring. For instance, according to Jabbar Patel, the filmmaker who made the biopic *Dr Babadasheb Ambedkar*, it was a time when no black was allowed into Columbia University; and there was Ambedkar, a man similarly discriminated back at home, studying for a doctorate at the prestigious university. Clearly, Ambedkar would have related as much to the experience of the oppression of the blacks, and learnt from them, as he did to the abstract intellectuality of Dewey. As Patel said in an interview: "He must [have been] be walking through Harlem. So many dramatic things must have happened to him".

In her keenness to flush the bath water of postmodernism, Nanda seems indifferent to the prospect of throwing the baby of experience with it. She elides the fact that postmodernism and the academic tendencies that mushroomed around this core, tended to emphasis different ways of arriving at knowledge. True, this tendency sometimes led to a vulgarly patronising intellectual tolerance towards, and even celebration of, inherently oppressive traditions merely because they belonged to the oppressed people—what Nanda terms "epistemic charity". However, that is not the whole story. The focus of postmodern concerns was on 'difference' and not so much on intuiting to 'superior knowledge' merely because one was non-Western, woman or black. And it is because Ambedkar had a different experience—as a Dalit—that he propounded a Buddhism that eschewed conventional Buddhisms (Hinayana, Mahayana, Theravada, Vajrayana) and called it "Navayana Buddhism, literally the "new vehicle".

Experience in itself need not become knowledge, but certain experiences certainly can lead some people to certain knowledges. And to arrive at what might be morally and ethically right knowledge (say, Ambedkarite Buddhism) can sometimes take a long and tortuous route in identity and representational politics that liberal democracy entails. This can be seen in the case of Dalits in India today engaging even with Hindutva in order to wrest 'power'. And such power in a liberal democracy—even in the context of a mutated modernity as in India—being a 'modernist' category that a postmodern intellectual like Michel Foucault best understood, what do we do with Nanda's wholesale dismissal of the postmodernist critiques (though she does not mention Foucault in her work)? Should we, and Meera Nanda, join the progressive leftists and the upper middle class, and merely chastise a section of Dalits for such 'wrong strategies'? How can such Dalits be the agents of a "rationalist bourgeois revolution" that Nanda wants them to lead? Does the experience of remaining powerless for hundreds of years make Dalits sick and tired of the endless wait and force them to evolve short-term strategies to take what comes their way, setting aside the idealistic, but practically unrewarding, attractions of radical Buddhism even if it was pioneered by Ambedkar? These are not easy questions to answer and they will remain with us till non-Dalits are willing to do something about themselves.

A 21-year-old project that calls itself Subaltern Studies is yet to admit a single Dalit into its charmed circle of bhadralok researchers

Instant branding

Nanda tends to use labels rather casually, as when Vandana Shiva, Claude Alvares, Madhu Kishwar and Sundar Lal Bahuguna are bunched together as "left wing indigenists". Nanda also succumbs to another tendency among (non-Dalit) academics and intellectuals engaging with the Dalit movement for the first time. This is the formulaic utterance of the names Phule-Ambedkar-Periyar in one breath (this reviewer too was at one point a party to this crime)—proudly positing a counter to the mainstream nationalist Tilak-Gandhi-Nehru trio. Most are unlikely to have really read Periyar since he is unavailable in English. At a time when some Tamil-Dalit critics of Periyar are alerting us to his problematic perspective on Dalits, it would be advisable to tread with caution on what one has not read and refrain from depending on selective paraphrasing and hearsay. Jotiba Phule was of course made available in English only recently. What is also crucially missing in a book that looks up to Buddhism is the absence of any reference to Pandit Iyothee Thass, a Tamil Dalit-Buddhist intellectual-activist of the late nineteenth century, who played a key role in reviving Buddhism and reclaiming it as the religion of Dalits. This omission is all the more striking since the scholar G Aloysius has made available Iyothee Thass' ideas to the English reader (*Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism*, 1998). Besides Thass, Nanda's project would have benefited immensely had she read Lakshmi Narasu, another Buddhist from Tamil Nadu (a non-Dalit), whose fusing of select precepts of Buddhism with the values of the

Enlightenment in the early twentieth century made him a forerunner of Ambedkarite Buddhism. In fact, Ambedkar was familiar with Narasu's important work, *The Essence of Buddhism*, first published in 1907, in Colombo. He even wrote a foreword to the third edition of this book in 1948, issued by Thacker & Co. which published most of Ambedkar's works in his lifetime. Ambedkar perhaps drew more from Narasu than he did from Dewey.

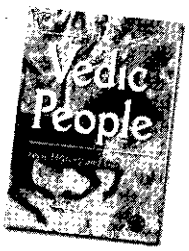
A few words about the readability of the work. Nanda writes with the passion and commitment of an activist rarely seen among scholars. However, the book abounds in casual use of language and a tone that gets too shrill at points, which at least the copy editor should have been alert to. Most unforgivable is the insensitive use of the word 'pariah' as a category in a book that is otherwise full of moral outrage against casteism. At several points Nanda does not substantiate her claims with examples. While discussing identitarian politics and feminism vis-à-vis Dalits, she misidentifies V Geetha as a Dalit scholar. Geetha is in fact a born-Brahmin who is a keen observer of the Dalit movement among other things. She also mistakes Sharmila Rege to be a Dalit. Nanda's arguments, given that they are drawn on the moral ground of citing 'Dalit feminists', lose their weight since she infers Dalitness wrongly. For someone who regards science so highly, such lack of rigour in basing her conclusions on faulty premises is puzzling. In such a context her regular recourse to italics (sometimes three sentences long) to draw attention is not only distracting, but also makes you wonder if lack of rigour can be made up for with intensity of feelings.

In the final analysis, despite the polemical charge of her work and its manifesto-like quality, Nanda is not clear about what needs to be done. Why does she stop short of espousing that we move towards practising radical Buddhism—if not with the entrapments of organised religion, at least as a political position? Instead of treading on Ambedkar's path, she seems to want to 'secularise Hinduism'. On several occasions in the book she regrets the fact that there was no true Hindu Reformation and calls for one. But given her sharp understanding of the religion, it is wishful thinking to hope for the kind of reform she wants within Hinduism. Ambedkar did initially talk the language of reform—as did others in their own limited ways—but he had in the end to move away from Hinduism. How then should we go about the reformation? What can be done? Can the *Gita* and the vedas be rewritten? By whom? We will be told they were never written and pre-existed writing and were passed on orally. Does not vedic religion claim permanence, immutability? And if Hinduism does purge itself of caste, Brahminism and its metaphysical bent, then it will no longer remain Hinduism.

(I thank Ravikumar for sharing some of his views on the book with me.)

The contemporary politics of ancient history

How 'Indian' were the vedic people, and why does it matter so much?



THE VEDIC PEOPLE
Their History and Geography
Rajesh Kochhar
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2000, Paperback, 259 pp
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INR 275

reviewed by
Rhoderick Chalmers

The search for origins lies at the heart of many current debates. In India, claims and counter-claims about nativeness have come to symbolise major political faultlines and the histories of peoples have been subjected to intensified scrutiny. Gradually, such historical probings have been extended further into the past, to the extent that the prehistory of the major South Asian population groups is now inextricably intertwined with the political status of current communities. Amidst concerns for demonstrating enduring historicity and asserting age-old claims to belonging, the word 'vedic' has acquired an ever more talismanic status.

Writing in English on Vedic traditions used to be a dusty corner of textual scholarship peopled by some of the more obscurantist Orientalists and characterised by debates that could hardly be translated into a popular format. Now, however, vedic studies has been reinvented and reinvigorated as a field replete with a rash of new research institutes and vocal scholars and commentators divided by their sharply polarised motivations and methodologies. To publish today on the subject of the hymns and rituals

of an ancient, migratory branch of the Indo-European family is to enter into one of the most testing and politicised of academic arenas. In such a context, the unpleasant controversy that arose earlier this year with the appointment of Professor Romila Thapar as the first holder of the Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South at the Library of Congress in Washington DC was perhaps only to have been expected. The petitions against her selection and counter-petitions defending her academic integrity illustrate only too tellingly that the ancient history of India is an area as controversial as any contemporary topic. Or rather, that India's ancient history is a contemporary topic; that the chronological distance of the subject material is no bar to its ability to whip up passions.

With *The Vedic People*, one of India's most distinguished scientists has decided to navigate a path through this tricky terrain in a work designed to be accessible to a general readership. Rajesh Kochhar is by profession an astrophysicist but his interests extend to science policy, the sociology of science, and ancient history. And the unmistakable subtext of his title is the quest to uncover the origins of the vedic people. In short, where did they come from? Or, in more provocative terms, how 'Indian' were the vedic people? For a non-specialist to venture into the thick of controversies which are shaped by present-day beliefs and whose roots must be sought in a corpus of highly specialised literature is a bold undertaking. So how does Kochhar fare in his exploration and what does he have to tell us of vedic history?

From the start, we become aware that the author is armed with one important weapon. Schooled in the methodologies of the exact sciences, he brings to his research an open-mindedness well balanced by the rigour with which he evaluates evidence and its relevance to his wider conclusions. He weighs his facts carefully—and accumulates no shortage of them in a wide-ranging investigation—before adding them one by one to the complex jigsaw that successive chapters piece together. And this is some jigsaw: the frontispiece diagram indicates that he will bring together approaches from archaeology, natural history, geomorphology, the history of technology, astronomy and linguistics to centre on the *Rigveda* itself. With such an array of scientific or semi-scientific tools to draw on, one might presume that Kochhar will take a strict line with more ambiguous sources, such as the puranas. But to his credit he does not rush to dismiss even the more tendentious of such narratives and genealogies, but rather mines them sensitively for any evidence they may bring to bear on the data gleaned from other investigative methods.

To publish today on the subject of the hymns and rituals of an ancient, migratory branch of the Indo-European family is to enter into one of the most testing and politicised of academic arenas.

The analytical style adopted by Kochhar is clearly set out at the opening, one of the few points where he allows himself to address broader philosophical questions about the role of history: "Our interpretation of the past depends on our perception of the present. That is why history cannot provide proof; it can only provide illustration. This, however, does not mean that history is a free-for-all, and can never be definitive. Uncertainty in history lies at the level of the significance of events, not at the level of events themselves". However, any reader who hopes that the broaching of such questions will lead to further epistemological ruminations or a more probing assessment of the author's own position as a scientist tackling materials which have generally been left to scholars in the humanities, will be disappointed. On the other hand, those who appreciate a matter-of-fact style and a lucid array of factual nuggets presented in simple prose will be more than satisfied.

The Vedic People makes neither pretensions to literary finesse nor any apology for its down-to-earth approach. If at times it reads like an extended report of laboratory findings, that can no doubt be attributed partly to the author's own background and partly to the welcome desire to free this area from the mists of ideologically tinted rhetoric and to concentrate on a logical evaluation of a series of interconnected inquiries. We are then taken on a tour through the landscape of the vedic people such as it can be reconstructed from available evidence.

Consideration of language and literature opens up one of the major avenues for research, while insights offered by puranic history are cross-referenced to corroborating data from astronomy or archaeology. We learn from the outset that Kochhar is going to take the Western tradition of Sanskrit studies seriously, so seriously indeed that we are presented with a dense five-page potted history of the first European encounters with Indic languages and their development as objects of serious study by outsiders. Here the strengths and weaknesses of Kochhar's approach become apparent. While the weight of detail he assembles is impressive, it may occasionally prove crushing to the more casual reader, especially as it is not always clear what value the information being presented adds to the overall argument. The carefully dated and footnoted tales of early Orientalist endeavours may be interesting but until he begins to address the work of Max Müller, they have little bearing on the central questions of the book.

Important issues such as the emergence of the concept of an 'Aryan race' are, unfortunately, skipped over rather lightly. This historical precedent raises particularly pertinent questions for a work such as this: the temptation to conflate linguistic and racial categories highlights one of the significant dangers involved in the combining of evidence from divergent disciplines. Kochhar summarises that: "the Nazi holocaust brought the whole concept of an Aryan race into disrepute", but implies that this was on moral grounds, rather than for sound academic reasons. He himself continues to use 'Aryan' as a term to describe linguistic populations. Meanwhile, the brief early mention of Aryans may also prompt readers to ask why the central construct of the book—the idea of a 'vedic people'—is nowhere explained or justified in any detail.

We are left to presume that vedic people (in fact, the author prefers 'Rigvedic people') are roughly equivalent to the society that produced the Rigvedic hymns. But such classifications are notoriously slippery when subjected to closer analysis: even within the Rigvedic corpus there are occasional Prakrit forms which suggest the artificial preservation of an older language within a community which was already using a new form of speech. Similarly the assumption that the production of these orally-transmitted hymns (and it is worth remembering that these were not originally 'books' or 'texts') is enough to define a whole people as a homogeneous unit may be questioned, and deserves at least to be explained.

Yet it is not surprising if the treatment of early language and literary sources lacks the insights that might be brought by a specialist. After all, the author is constrained to using English translations of all materials and relying largely on secondary sources for his interpretations. Given this, a certain lack of feeling for the subtleties of vedic expression and the difficulties of interpretation is both understandable and forgivable. For when we move on to more scientific territory, Kochhar's narrative becomes more intriguing and his reasoning more compelling. The ground he covers is immense: we sweep through reconstructions of the major puranic dynasties to a scientifically justifiable dating of the events of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*; we are taken on a tour of the archaeological evidence for prehistoric communities and treated to an investigation of the 'Indo-Iranian habitat', a linguistic-geographical conflation which may be excused for its detailed and convincing treatment of the mystery surrounding the vedic libation of *soma*. And there is little time to pause before moving on to an attempt to match the rivers named in the *Rigveda* to potential historical counterparts in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Even within the Rigvedic corpus there are occasional Prakrit forms which suggest the artificial preservation of an older language within a community which was already using a new form of speech

In these areas Kochhar is at his strongest: the pared down prose conveys sometimes complex arguments with admirable simplicity while from a broad array of methods and materials he starts to extract a more identifiable central narrative. Ultimately we return inescapably to the big question of origins. Kochhar's answer is not new but he has presented a solid enough case to allow himself the luxury of stating his findings baldly: "an examination of the evidence in totality leads to the conclusion that India is not the original home of the Rigvedic people". No surprises for scholars here, nor in his rejection of the almost universally discredited 'Aryan invasion' theory and his assessment that the Rigvedic people are distinct from the founders of the Harappan tradition. The details of his arguments are more likely to provoke limited controversy on certain geographical points, such as the attempts consistently to identify vedic rivers with original courses (some now dried up or shifted) far to the north-west of the present-day counterparts that bear their names. Yet the author acknowledges that there remain specific questions to which firm answers cannot be given and he is characteristically careful in distinguishing between reasonable conjecture and demonstrable fact.

The Vedic People has already proved popular, having progressed quickly into a reprinted paperback edition, and it is not hard to appreciate the reasons behind its success. Its attention to the value of evidence, its enthusiastic willingness to engage with a great variety of sources, and its honesty in declaring the limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn in the current state of our knowledge, all offer a welcome change from the overheated rhetorical claims which have too frequently distorted popular understandings of this important area. Rajesh Kochhar himself stands firmly on the side of reason and faith in the slow accumulation and sifting of empirical evidence as the best way to establish a more definitive historical narrative. Yet he does not seek to devalue vedic and puranic traditions or to cast judgment on the systems of beliefs which have emerged from them. Established scholars in the fields of literature or archaeology may not be excited by his findings but nor are they likely to feel that their collective expertise has been traduced by an unthinking interloper. In fact they, and the rest of us, should be glad that such a measured, thorough, and well-intentioned attempt has been made to bring sober academic analysis to a wider audience.

Edward Said
The dissenter in exile

Edward Said died in New York on Thursday, 25 September of leukemia. He was born in Jerusalem on 1 November, 1935, in what was then Mandate Palestine. Professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University since 1970, Said was also well known for his role in the Palestinian struggle and for being one of the pioneers of post-colonial studies. Said was an archetypal polymath and public intellectual, an accomplished pianist, a respected music critic, and an outspoken critic of US policies in West Asia.

I have learned the words of bloodstained courts in order to break the rules. I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a singe one: Home
–Mahmoud Darwish, *"I am from There"*

LAST WEEK, a peculiar, if not weird, event took place. The city was Patan, a centre of urban civilisation for over two millennia. The setting was an oblong hall remodeled from a garage of horse-drawn carriages—a *baggikhana*—that was built over half a century ago for a prince. People attending the ceremony formed an eclectic mix—an academic, three editors, three teachers, a few journalists, couple of students, some activists, and a human-rights activist turned international bureaucrat. People of diverse background, with practically nothing in common except a surfeit of enthusiasm for nothing in particular, congregating to discuss something that very few of them knew well; such an intellectual adventure is possible only in Kathmandu. Mountains do something to the spirit that makes you believe that anything is possible.

The purpose of the meeting was no less strange. The group had gathered there for a reading in honour of Edward Said, the iconic figure of post-colonialism. Said had practically established the creed with his book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. A group of amateurs analysing the icon of post-colonialism in the capital city of a country that was never colonised—this too could happen only in Kathmandu. Amateurs, as Said himself had observed in a different context, are free of fragile egos. Recklessness of the ignorant is emminently suitable for all adventures, including intellectual explorations.

The stage looked set for some arcane ritual with a *khada*-draped picture of the Arab-American professor solemnly placed on a pedestal. Idol worship is taboo in Arab culture, but then in addition to being born a Christian, Said was more of an American than an Arab. Therefore, the idolatry perhaps did not matter. The late professor would have approved of the *mazma*-like atmosphere of the *majlis* too. After all, he had been a prominent non-conformist himself. Once he even penned a moving paean in memory of an Egyptian belly dancer.

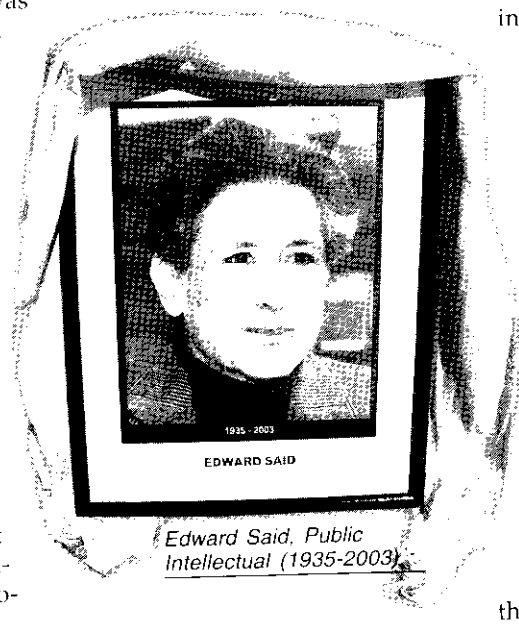
As the shadow lengthened outside, portions from an obituary written by Malise Ruthven and published in *The Guardian* of London (reproduced in the New Delhi edition of *The Hindu*) were dutifully read out. Then the obligatory 'moments silence' in memory of the departed soul was observed. Two readings of Said's work, one about his observation on the role of intellectual and the other from the obituary that he had written for his friend and mentor Eqbal Ahmad followed. A lively discussion then ensued over the role of a rebel, an activist and a dissenter. This too could take place only in Kathmandu—capital city of a kingdom in which rebels, activists, and dissenters are enmeshed in an all-consuming civil war. There is some merit in the logic that we remember the dead to celebrate how lucky we are to be alive.

Even a low-key affair of remembering a life-long dissenter can take place only in places that know their place in the affairs of the world. Moreover, reflections on the works of an exile are best done by people who are at home, wherever they happen to be. Were Edward Said alive, he would have been amused to know that he was being read, and remembered, in a country next to Tibet, the other homeland lost to the twentieth century. However, he would have approved. Said believed in the universality of ideas even as he understood the importance of a location for their application. Said's *Orientalism* was not merely an intellectual framework; it became a tool for him to fight the injustice of victims of the Holocaust victimising innocent inhabitants of an ancient land.

By virtue of being one of the crown jewels of the US academia, Said could have chosen to mystify the struggles of Palestinians in academic jargon, and be admired

by his fawning peers for being yet another master of a universal theory. But he broke the box of the academic calling, and opted to risk crossing the boundaries of theory and practice as often as he willed. It earned him more critics than admirers, but the ones whose respect he valued respected him: the homeless of Palestine, the people who were, like Mahmoud Darwish, from there. He championed the cause of a country that has been, and would certainly be again, but is not here now. Those who denounced Said as "Professor of Terror" deny its existence, but their vehement denial itself is a testimony to its continuous being.

Edward Said's real importance, however, lies in his persona. Even though he did throw a pebble in the general direction of Israel once, Said was more of a dissenter than a rebel. His act of stone throwing was a form of communication, expressing the hopelessness of an orphaned cause—his homeland. His employers, Columbia University, recognised that gesture of delivering a message as part of his academic freedom. On his part, Said was as critical of Palestinian violence as that of the Israelis. To remain engaged and yet maintain equanimity is the mark of a dissenter that separates her from die-hard activists. It's much easier to choose a side—for or against—but to be for and against at the same time is no way of earning friends and influencing people.



Edward Said, Public Intellectual (1935-2003)

Said's unambiguous condemnation of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran (for his call on his followers to assassinate the writer Salman Rushdie) alienated him from the Muslim clergy. He called the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein "an appalling and dreadful despot" and made similar statements at times about the Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, two influential Arab rulers important to the Palestinian leadership. Said went further than that, he dismissed the Oslo Accord as a sell out. However, his dissent did not diminish his importance as the premier spokesperson of the Palestinian cause in the West. He was the only prominent Arab who had access to the inner recesses of the American Mind through his privileged position at a highly reputed centre of learning. He spoke to them with an authority that Yaseer Arafat could envy but never have.

Ridiculed by waspish Bostonians for having a "waspish demeanour and preppy dress-sense of a native-born Bostonian," Said was an outsider who knew the Empire inside out. Its phrases and its rituals were his own because he belonged to the very priesthood that ran it. Thus, he was in a unique position of influencing it from inside even while he had his hand on the pulse of the events outside. Perhaps this was what that made intellectuals of post-colonial societies admire him more than even Noam Chomsky, the doyen of dissent in American academia.

Dissent and resistance

Back in 967, Noam Chomsky had observed, "The slogan 'fro n dissent to resistance' makes sense, I think, but I hope that it is not taken to imply that dissent should cease. Dissent and resistance are not alternatives but activities that should reinforce each other." His prophetic observation is truer now than ever before. It may be possible to contemplate dissent without overt resistance, but the vice-versa is impossible to imagine: there can be no resistance without dissent. Many movements have failed because they refused to see the logic inherent in the "manufacture of consent" ideology—to counter the Empire, there is no choice but to "manufacture dissent".

Mahatma Gandhi had coined a catchy phrase to express the unity of terminological contradictions, "Not 'Opposition' to, but 'Active non-cooperation', with the British Empire". Gandhi went on the Dandi march, Said hurled pebbles, but both these symbolic acts carried larger messages. They questioned the very premise on which their acts were thought to be illegal rather than contesting the illegality of their deeds. Perhaps this is another important difference between the approaches of dissent and resistance. Moreover, it offers a dissenter more freedom than the ones who chose to resist the Empire.

Resistance demands a price that very few can pay—the Empire simply bombs them into oblivion, be they Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Hanoi, Kabul or Baghdad. The ones resisting from within—Noam Chomsky's is the default-name that comes to mind—are even more ruthlessly appropriated. After half-a-century of resistance, Professor Chomsky suddenly finds that he has become an American icon of sorts, but not in the way he would have liked.

The Empire has transformed Noam Chomsky into a name that gives neocons the "legitimacy by negation", the logic being that if the good old professor is against something, anything; it is that much easier to mobilise a phalanx of conservatives, neo-liberals, and all kinds of wannabes for the cause. Howsoever Chomsky may oppose the 'War of Occupation' in Iraq; it is funded in part from the direct and indirect taxes that he pays to the US treasury. Due to this, Chomsky is not merely

tolerated; he is touted as a symbol of the independence of American academics.

The neocon cabal could never play this trick so openly with Edward Said. Despite his American citizenship, Said's very presence was a message to the American public that their government was complicit in the injustice being perpetrated against Arabs in general, and Palestinians in particular, in West Asia. Said could sip a cola in Cairo without suffering the guilt pangs of contributing to the Arab war-chest of neocon cabal back in Boston, because the value of his vocal criticism of Bushism was far higher than the royalties flowing back to the United States through the transnationals' bottles of wines served at the swank bars of capital cities of the Third World.

Washington could ignore the presiding deity of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with patronising tolerance; after all, the 'cantankerous' old don was one of their own. But the professor of comparative literature at Columbia was made from a different mettle. His ring echoed in far-away lands. Hence the vehemence in the vilification of Said by the mainstream media of the United States. One need not scratch too deep to find traces of biological racism below the veneer of sophistication that the Boston Brahmins wear.

Resistance may have been an option available to the concerned citizens like Noam Chomsky, Norman Mailer, Franz Schurmann, Susan Sontag, Arthur Waskow, and Howard Zinn during the Vietnam War, but the Fall of Saigon changed that climate of confrontational scholarship forever. Now, if Arjun Appadurai, Gayatri Spivak, or Homi Bhabha so much as critique the conventional Washington wisdom—by definition conservative—they better be prepared for the alienation that comes from championing lost causes. For many others like them, the Said model of dissent is the only practical option of resisting the Empire.

The Empire of Propaganda

Once again, the propaganda model of running an empire is a concept that owes its origin to the imagination of Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky. In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, the authors unravel the layers of lie manufactured to conceal the truth that the media and military of the United States of America act in unison on crucial issues of war and foreign policy. However, the five "filters" that they had identified are no longer needed. These days, the media looks forward to being "embedded". Perhaps media moguls do not have much choice when faced with the Bushy bluster of "either/or" war doctrine. No wonder, after Gulf War II, even CNN has come to stand for Centcom News Network.

In the Age of Murdoch—that is the title of a long essay in the August issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*—forget resistance, there is very little space left even for the voices of dissent. Relaxation in media concentration rules means that now "Rupert is the first one to have put together an Army, an Air Force, a Navy, and a Marine Corps" of the media. So Noam Chomsky may be the one who speaks most eloquently about Pentagon's adventures and misadventures abroad, but the mainstream media in the United States is not ready to host him any more. The space for dissent is shrinking so fast that unless innovative approaches are not employed, the voice of the margins will stop getting even a perfunctory hearing.

This is where the absence of the restrained emotions and polished delivery of Edward Said will be strongly felt. You need to be a professor yourself to make sense of Appadurai, Bhabha or Spivak. Reading the pamphlets of Arundhati Roy is an emotionally draining experience—at the end of her tirade, the audience is too bewildered and exhausted to contemplate a response. Said gave the language of dissent clarity and respectability that will be difficult to match. Perhaps his mastery over music made Said craft texts of supreme coherence and clarity. Even a bad sentence can make some sense to some of the people, but a single bad note is nothing less than a catastrophe in any orchestra. In the final analysis, it is the cadence of Said's sentences that makes his call so arresting.

Said's waspish demeanour may have offended the true-blue Western Anglo-Saxon professionals, but his respect for "dress and address" gave him a personality that Irfan Habib and Aijaz Ahmad in their bandhgallahs and bungalows will find hard to acquire. Haute culture made Said acceptable in circles that take decisions on our behalf. It is to Said's credit that he did not lose his moorings despite the opulence of his life. He has been quoted as exclaiming in an exasperated tone after a political debate: "I don't understand these people! Why doesn't anybody speak about truth and justice any more?" Naïve perhaps, but in life, as in music, one should never aspire for anything less than perfection.

Both Rule and Resistance lie in the domain of compromises. It is the destiny of a dissenter to remain in exile forever. In Said's own words, "The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting not fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another". What a delicious life, of Edward Said, the archetypal exile! He is forced by destiny to be at home everywhere, because there is only longing for a lost homeland.

Towards his end, Said had begun to imagine Palestinians and Jews living in harmony in their ancestral land. He wrote in a 1999 essay in *The New York Times*: "There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, two communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such". Perhaps that is a lesson that Said should be remembered for in South Asia.

—CK Lal

Contempt in the air

The relative un-importance of South Asia in the scheme of the West is to be found in numerous unexpected nooks and crannies – such as the unearthly hours in which they herd passengers into their aircrafts. Take Delhi, the most important capital of South Asia. Invariably, the flights out, whether it is Lufthansa or British Airways or Air France, are timed between midnight and three! The glitterati of the great nation – India that is Bharat – heading out for European jaunts are perplexed at this lack of consideration but apparently are in no position to do anything about it. Now how dare the airlines do this to the second-most-populous-country-in-the-world's movers and shakers, included among them some of the finest geopolitical analysts that have walked this land since the time of Mahabharata?

If you ask me, the disrespect for our civilisation is writ large in these aircraft departure and arrival timings. The rest of us in South Asia would be proud if the power brokers of New Delhi, at least, got given the time of day. Some respect would then trickle down to the rest of us as well, one would think.

Even South Asia's own best-run airline is not giving due consideration to the body clock of the New Delhi – to repeat – mover and shaker. I see here listed Sri Lankan's flight UL 192 leaving DEL (Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sun) at 2340 hrs to unload its human cargo at CMB at 3:35 AM. AM? Imagine the plight! How is the diplomat, the businessman, the seminarian, to plan his/her life under these circumstances? There is no question of sleep, having to reach the Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) airport before ten at night, which means leaving Karol Bagh at 8:30. Sleep is, of course, impossible during the three hour flight in the cramped Airbus 320. By the time you are out of Katunayake and heading down the highway towards Galle Face, the first rays of dawn are already lighting up the sky to the left.

It is clear that these Delhi arrival-departure timings are – as usual – part of a deep-rooted conspiracy to keep us down, to ensure that the great and glorious era of Chanakya and/or Akbar will not see a revival in the twenty-first century.

In Singapore, Hong Kong or Bangkok, the flights leave and arrive in the sensible hours of the morning or evening. You do not see the feverish rush you do at IGIA on either side of midnight. And, if for some reason you arrive at dawn or dusk, you will see an airport that is quiet like as if a calamity has overtaken Haryana, with only the odd flight to Thimphu or Kathmandu pulling in the passengers.

Like I said, the West is scared of our potential and hence intent on keeping us irritable. The airline timings are just one method to achieve this end, planned by terrible men/women in underground bunkers in Langley, Virginia.

The proposition runs thus:

- India is the most important country of South Asia.
- New Delhi is the most important (and how odd, the only) capital of India (Bharat).
- IGIA, serving New Delhi, is the pre-eminent international *havaiadda* of South Asia.
- The bizarre flight schedules set by respectable international airlines indicate an absence of proper esteem for the Great Indian Nation (GIN).
- Lack of respect for GIN can be regarded as a slight to all of South Asia.

Ataha (therefore), as the *rishimunis* used to say before the Aryans invaded and confused us all, we need to do something about this sorry state of affairs. We need to do something because of the incalculable harm to our self-image as people making up fully one-fifth of the planet, whose representatives in the form of New Delhi's super-successful get relegated to red-eye travel timings.

There are three things that could be done:

One, is for South Asia to emerge as such an economic powerhouse that the tables get turned on Europe. We want to see a time, within at least the lifetime of our grandchildren or by the time WTO gets going (whichever comes first), when flights depart Frankfurt at two am, arriving at IGIA at 10 am. Let the Germans suffer.

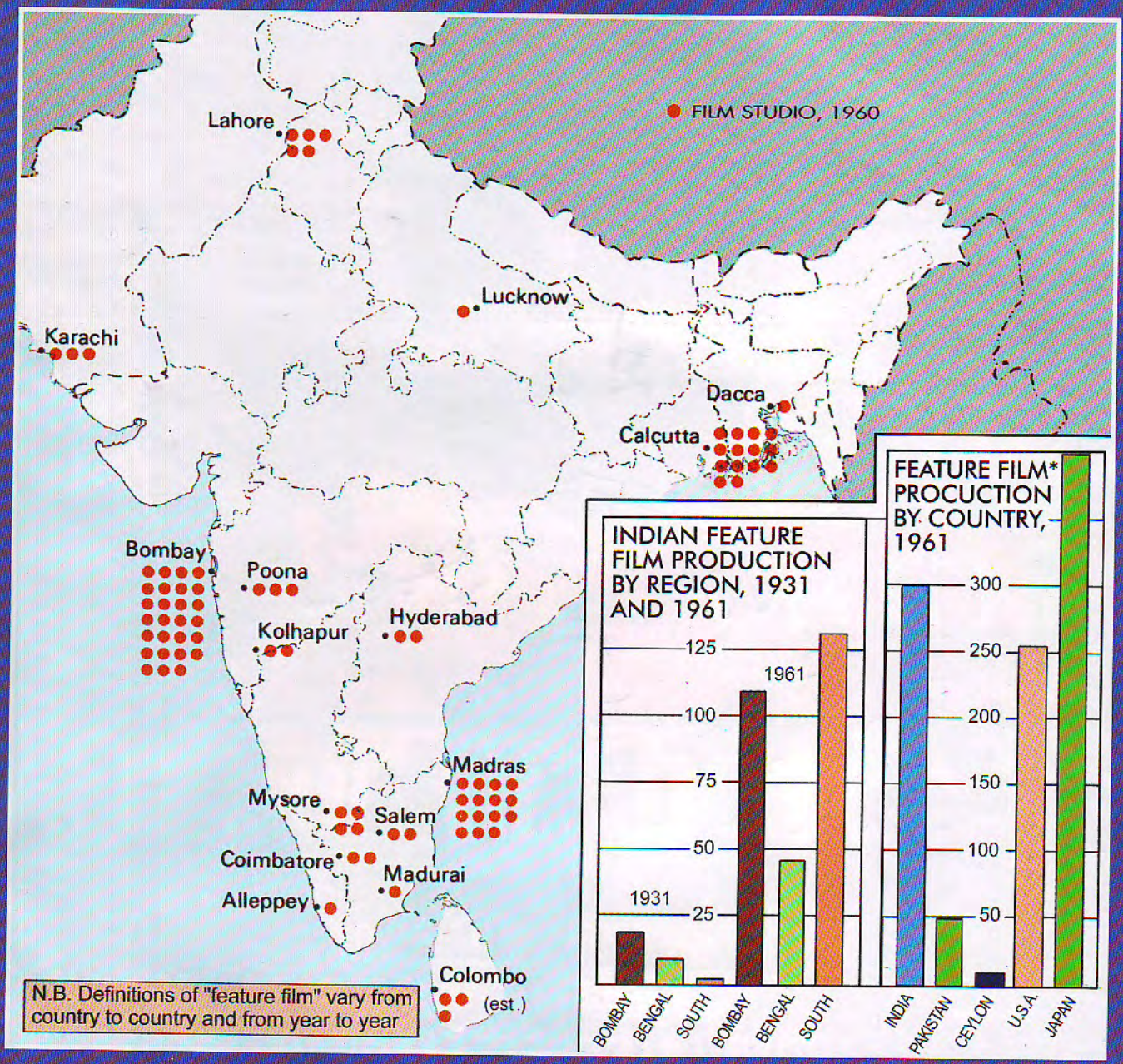
Two, is for Atalji in Dilli, feeling for the suffering masses, to flash one of his nuclear-tipped missiles so that these unreasonable airlines, fearing loss of business because of disappearance of South Asia, start planning schedules that show more respect.

Three, is to turn fatalistic. As they say when you go to complain about the lack of water at Vasant Kunj, *"Yeh aisa hi hai, kya karein?"* (It is like this only, what to do?) Let us just continue to sacrifice a night's sleep for the privilege of travelling to Europe and the rest of the West.

But, really, the best course is to stop travelling to the West until Lufthansa and its siblings begin to see things our way. Do we have it in us for this supreme sacrifice?

Kanak Mani Dixit

The Cinema Industry



MAP FROM: A HISTORICAL ATLAS OF SOUTH ASIA. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. NEW YORK. 1992.

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