January 2004

HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Women and the Maobaadi

Bangladesh BDT 80 Bhutan BTN 60 India INR 50 Nepal NPR 50 Maldives MLR 40 Pakistan PKR 80 Sri Lanka SLR 80 Elsewhere USD 4/GBP 3

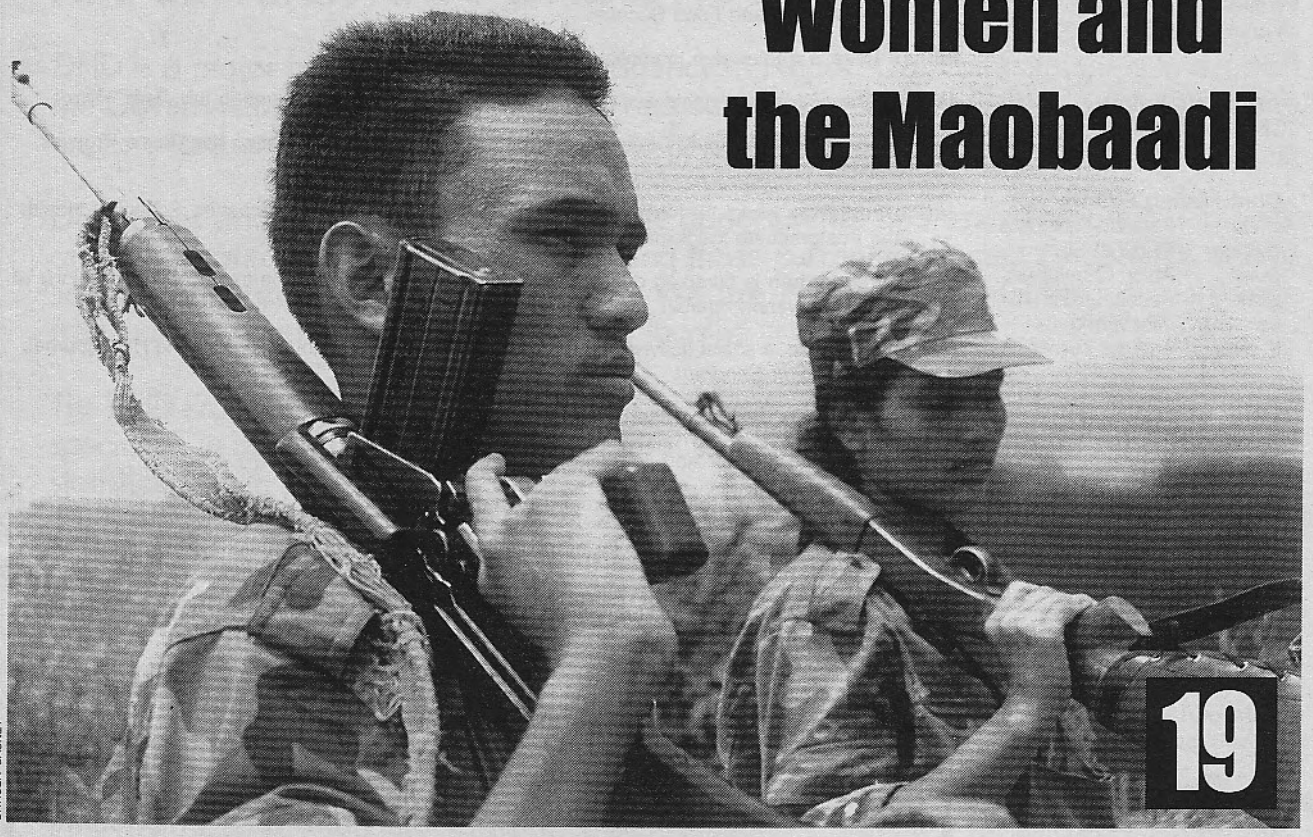
IDLE OSTENTATION

THE MORE SAARC FAILS, THE MORE GRANDIOSE ITS DESIGNS AND DESIRES: SAPTA, SAFTA, SINGLE CURRENCY, UNITED STATES OF SOUTHASIA...

HIMAL SOUTH ASIAN

Vol 17 No 1 January 2004

Women and the Maobaadi



DHRUBA BASNET

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Himal is published and distributed by
Himalmedia Pvt Ltd
GPO Box 7251, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977-1-5543333, 5523845
Fax: 5521013
Email: editors@himalmag.com
http://www.himalmag.com
ISSN 1012 9804
Library of Congress Control Number
88 912882
Printed at: Jagadamba Press, Kathmandu
Tel: +977-1-5521393, 5543017

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subscription rates

	1 year	2 years
India	INR 580	INR 1125
Nepal	NPR 540	NPR 1000
Rest of S. Asia	USD 18	USD 34
Hong Kong/ Brunei/Gulf	USD 22	USD 42
Elsewhere	USD 40	USD 75

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Maldives	Asrafee Book Shop, 1/44 Chandhanee Magu, P.O.Box. 2053, Male. *Tel: +960-32-3424*
Nepal	Himalmedia Pvt. Ltd. GPO Box: 7251, Kathmandu, *Tel: +977-1-5543333-36*
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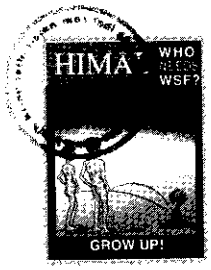


President to the rescue

HOW FAR Jehan Perera ("President+ Prime Minister = Peace", December 2003) is out of touch with the Sinhalese opinion is indicated by his statement that "the vast majority of Sinhalese people are united in desiring that the president and the prime minister, representing two different political parties, should work together to take the peace process forward". The clearest demonstration of the irrelevance of this statement is the large crowd that attended the funeral of the Venerable Gangodawila Soma, an outspoken advocate of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

Perera states that "Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is on an ascending trend". This is belied by the grassroots sentiment. To cite one instance, a new mayor was sworn in recently in the town of Kotte. Although he belongs to the ruling party and had the highest number of preferences in the last local authority elections, he was unable to mobilise a crowd for his oath-taking. Indeed, he was hard put to get people to even put his posters up.

The ruling United National Front (UNF) is widely viewed as being anti-national in its outlook. Its ministers are openly lampooned for holding citizenships of Western countries and advocating pro-US policies. The nexus of the UNF with big business and with transnational corporations is widely resented, especially in the light of many the privatisation deals which look distinctly fishy.

The UNF and Ranil Wickremasinghe are thus looked on suspiciously, especially with regard to the peace process. They are perceived as having given in to the LTTE on every issue. Only WJM Lokubandara, the minister in charge of Buddhist affairs, is thought to be acceptable by mainstream Sinhala-Buddhists.

There is also a widespread belief that the Christian minority has undue influence with the UNF. The number of its leaders who are Christian is routinely raised as an issue by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists. Thus, when the Venerable Soma expired in Russia, where he had gone to obtain a doctorate from a Christian theological college, conspiracy theories abounded. The crowds at his funeral were unprecedented for that of a Buddhist monk, and was symptomatic of the unease which is felt by the majority.

The confidence of the Muslim minority too has been shaken. It was Muslim votes that enabled the UNF to come to power at the last general election. But the UNF is widely seen to have sacrificed the Muslims to the LTTE nationally and to the USA internationally.

On the other hand, President Kumaratunga has the confidence of the broad mass of the people. She has always been consistent in trying to reach a long-lasting and just settlement, her late husband Wijaya having been the first political leader to attempt a dialogue with the LTTE. Her devolution package, it will be recalled, was opposed tooth and nail by Ranil Wickremasinghe, and his subsequent volte-face was perceived to be the result of his electoral defeat at her hands.

In this situation, no agreement reached by Ranil Wickremasinghe will be acceptable, especially not to many of the monks who were in the ranks of his supporters when he opposed devolution. Therefore, it is imperative for the president to step forward and attempt to salvage something of the peace process.

***Vinod Moonesinghe**, Rajagiriya*

Coming out of the straitjacket

I HAVE some reservations about Ramesh Parajuli's spirited response ("Judging Film South Asia 2003", December 2003) to two articles in the November 2003 issue of *Himal* by Lubna Marium and Manesh Shrestha. In particular, I would like to address myself to Parajuli's comments on the social orientation and ideological disposition of the Nepali entries to Film South Asia 2003 (FSA '03). As a participant Nepali filmmaker at this just concluded edition of the documentary festival I am somewhat at a loss to comprehend his observation that "The Nepali films clearly disappointed". I do not understand how it is possible to make so sweeping a generalisation and still expect it to be taken as a serious and considered argument. There were only three Nepali entries in the final 43 and if they did make that grade surely those who made the choice must have seen some merit in them. This is a particularly significant point since it is not as if there are country quotas and therefore the best among the worst from a country will perforce make it to the final list even if they are not up to the average standard of entries from other countries. In this sense, it would have been more fitting if the respondent had paused to consider that the organisers might have had good reason to include these films from Nepal.

As a full-time Nepali and a part-time filmmaker I am conscious of the current social and political predicament that faces the nation, and I am also fully in agreement that these issues need to be discussed threadbare in all available media, including films, and not just documentary films. But having said that, I must part company with Parajuli on the necessity of doing only films on such issues. It would appear from his comments that political and social conflict, development issues and such other fare are what documentarists must restrict themselves to in the pursuit of their craft.

Notwithstanding the appearance of a socially and politically sensitive radicalism that it sports, this in reality is a conservative perspective as it is a plea to filmmakers to stick to the beaten track. Resistance to change is understandable but it does not have to be so total as

to deny the legitimacy of every departure from a tradition that is self-limiting in its scope and technique. In Nepal this tradition has been created and reproduced by a donor driven dynamic and therefore the conventional and hitherto dominant trend in filmmaking bears all the marks of a narrowly imagined conception of the medium, its purpose and therefore its possibilities. Almost all documentaries made in Nepal by Nepalis, and even by bideshis, focus on issues that are patronised by international development agencies. The heavy hand of the funder is so evident in many of these films that it is a travesty to designate them documentaries. Aside from these development films, there are a handful made by visiting film crews from television stations with their own compulsions and pressures. In the circumstances, the perception that documentaries must confine themselves to these issues is scarcely surprising.

The thought that crossed my mind when I was cutting my film, *Bhedako Oon Jasto*—not that it does not have a *serious* angle to it—was to leave behind the conventional formula of the documentary and experiment in terms of both thematic and narrative departures. If in the process it became an entertaining film it is nobody's fault, nor does it subtract from the documentary status of the film. Folk culture may not have the heart-wrenching, melodramatic attributes of out-and-out social and developmental issues, but it is nevertheless there to be captured simply and without sentimentality; and doing that does not in any way preclude others from engaging with the themes that have become the special preserve of documentary filmmakers. My purpose was to present something new both for the already committed documentary aficionados, as well as for a potentially new audience. The idea was to take documentaries, both the making and the viewing, beyond a small and closed circle of people and issues. The attempt in fact was to try and aim for something documentary films do not often consciously do, namely reach out to a mass—be it the shepherd in Dunai, the small-holder in Dang, or the old lady in Birtamod. No doubt it does not address their livelihood issues, but a song will surely touch a chord.

Art versus politics or art versus art ?

The reason why it is necessary to take the documentary to the general public is dictated by the conventional limitations of the medium. In most developing countries, the documentary has been misused as an instrument of state propaganda disguised as a vehicle for disseminating information. It soon became a medium for critiquing that propaganda, but in doing so it picked up themes and methods that restricted its access to limited groups of people who already posses the necessary minimum understanding of the issues. To that extent, while it did serve the purpose of expanding the knowledge of those already interested in knowing, it did not do much to expand the power of non-fiction film to attract new audiences.

This raises the question of whether it is correct or not to be addressing issues which to some might seem non-issues. This begs the question of why themes have to be identified as issues or non-issues in the first place. The same criticism is never directed at the commercial feature film, because there is a tendency to associate the feature film with entertainment and the documentary with information. But once this assumption is removed, and it must be removed because there is no necessary reason to retain it, the sharp boundary between the two domains is erased. It is in any case difficult to conceptually sustain such a division between the two domains merely on the basis of past practice, because, by that logic, commercial feature films will be barred from looking at serious social issues in a suitably entertaining manner. But that is not an argument that critics of the entertaining documentary will care to make. That being the case, the logic could surely apply in the reverse, namely that it is perfectly possible for the documentary to be as entertaining as it is for the feature film to be serious.

But the unrelenting critic will still point to the pressing concerns of society as the reason why documentaries must explore issues of justice and development as a first priority before it can make forays into such luxuries as entertainment. There is a merit to the argument that documentaries must deal with such issues particularly since no other medium devotes the same degree of attention to these problems. But to say that is not to assert that the documentary must deal with nothing else, especially since there are other filmmakers who concern themselves almost exclusively with such themes. It is practically impossible to first exhaust all serious themes by way of filmic examination before entertaining themes can be legitimately taken up. There are Nepali filmmakers like Dhruba Basnet and Mohan Mainali who are recognised for their excellent treatment of such serious issues like conflict and civil strife. But probing cultural issues does not have to wait on the serious genre completing its task before the making of light non-fiction films can commence. The serious genre by definition cannot complete its task because society always throws up newer and newer problems. For that reason, the ordinary viewer cannot be expected to forego the pleasure of seeing films that are not out and out entertainers and yet are culturally informative without being demanding. The evolution of filmmaking does not need to follow a rigid chronological order dictated by a hierarchy of priorities.

There is also another compelling reason for thematic diversity in documentary films. Independent non-commercial filmmaking is only just beginning to make a mark in Nepal and, if this still nascent activity has to come into its own, there is a need to motivate and attract

new entrants into the field. The greater the range of issues that any field is permitted to deal with, the greater the number of people who can be attracted to enter it. The film is after all just a medium for expression and the particular forms of expression will be as diverse as there are people who explore the medium for all the possibilities it offers. It is in these specific respects that I differ with Parjuli's arguments.

***Kiran Krishna Shrestha**, Kathmandu*

For Art's sake

IT IS every juror's prerogative to like or dislike films. Unfortunately in her article "Judging Film South Asia" (November 2003) Lubna Marium misquotes and misrepresents me. I only hope that people like P Balan, the director of the award-winning *18th Elephant* at Film South Asia '03, will also see my version of what was meant to be an informal conversation.

18th Elephant is a film I loved the day I saw it at the International Video Festival 2003 in Kerala and I wrote to Balan about it afterwards. At FSA it was one of the awards I felt good about. The film works beautifully as an allegory on the human capacity for cruelty. When you see the cruelty that humans are capable of wreaking on defenseless animals, you also understand the cruelty that the powerful wreak on defenseless minorities.

Which brings me to my own preoccupation. It is true that I was disappointed with the awards generally because the awards single-mindedly sidelined films that dealt with the crucial malaise of the Subcontinent, namely, communal hatred and jingoistic nationalism. I am not the only one who noticed this and the charitable view is that Marium jumbled my comments with those that others made that evening.

Having been asked a direct question at the closing party of the festival, the first thing I said was that I found the chairman of the jury, Mark Tully's speech patronising. He had made a special point to tell filmmakers who made "long" documentaries to learn how to edit! The arrogance of this becomes apparent if one takes a quick glance at the long list of internationally acclaimed feature length documentaries entered at FSA '03. It would be a pity if the limited attention span of those who expect documentaries to resemble television begins to determine aesthetic standards.

I went on to my central point that films dealing with the rise of religious fundamentalism and fascism in India, like Subhradeep Chakravarty's *Godhra Tak*, Lalit Vacchani's *Men in the Tree* and Anjali and Jayashankar's *Nata*, were kept out perhaps because the jury wanted to play safe. With Marium protesting that the films I mentioned were not "artistic" we got onto a discussion of what "art" is. I said that notions of "art" are often brought in to defend existing ideologies. Art is after all subjective and there can be no clear definition of it. What was clear is that in disbursing five awards the jury left out all films (and there were plenty) that might disturb Hindu nationalists.

It may be co-incidence but if you do an internet search on "hindutva" and the name of the chairman of the jury these are some of the things that confront you:

From: "Mark Tully pulls out all stops for Hindutva", by Bishwanath Ghosh , *The Asian Age*, 27 August 1997: "The BJP has found a new advocate in Mr Mark Tully, the former BBC correspondent, who feels that Indian civilisation has a Hindu base to it and that Hindus should proclaim their identity with pride.

The party is so thrilled with one of India's famous foreigners endorsing its line that it has devoted seven pages to Mr Tully's views in a recent issue of its mouthpiece, *BJP Today*."

From: "Mark Tully's Hindutva", by Amulya Ganguli *The Hindustan Times*, 23 September 2003:
"For several years now, the BBC's Mark Tully has provided indirect support to the BJP's Hindutva cause. His contention, as reiterated in a new TV documentary, *Hindu Nation*, is that secularism is unsuitable for India. The reason: it is a doctrine which keeps religion out of public life, an attempt which is bound to fail — and has failed — in a country as "deeply religious" as India."

From: *No full stops in India* by Mark Tully:
"Imagine also what would happen if egalitarianism and its companion individualism destroyed the communities which support those who start life with no opportunities. For all that, the elite of India have become so spellbound by egalitarianism that they are unable to see any good in the only institution which does provide a sense of identity and dignity to those who are robbed from birth of the opportunity to compete on an equal footing."

"The caste system provides security and a community for millions of Indians. It gives them an identity that neither Western Science nor Western thought has yet provided, because caste is not just a matter of being a Brahmin or a Harijan: it is also a kinship system. The system provides a wider support group than a family: a group which has a social life in which all its members participate".

This is not to imply that the jury had a conscious agenda. But people inevitably bring their world-view and their politics to the table, sometimes disguised from their colleagues and sometimes even from themselves, disguised all too often, as art.

***Anand Patwardhan**, Bombay*

Sikkim and Nepal

REGARDING THE advertisement of the Sikkim government printed in *Himal*'s November 2003 issue, my

E-mail grn@wlink.com

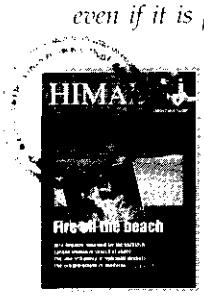
question to you is why should we Nepalis be educated or informed about the economic development of Sikkim? Are you trying to suggest that we should also become a state of India? Why is the government of Sikkim trying to publicise this in Nepali newspapers when we are not its voters? It should be very clear to you that we Nepalis are not going to tolerate any mal-intention of the Indians or RAW to Sikkimise Nepal on any pretext. We were never colonised at any time of our history and that is why we Nepalis have held our heads high. If there is a plan to merge us into India, the Indians and especially the chief minister of Sikkim should realise that we even have the capacity to unite all Nepalis living in India for a greater Nepal, ie, go back to what it was before 1816.

You the editors of the Himal should not allow money to overrule nationalism. By printing the Sikkim advertisement, you have committed a crime against this great nation of ours. Please do not repeat this mistake. If you really want to teach us about economic development, why don't you print an advertisement on Japanese economic development or even the IT development of Andhra Pradesh for that matter?

***Kathana Sharma**, Kathmandu*

Editors-

1. *That was an advertisement*
2. *Himal is a 'Southasian' and not a Nepali magazine, even if it is published from Kathmandu.*

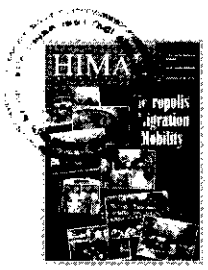


Graduation day

S ANAND (October 2003) writes, "According to Jabbar Patel, the filmmaker who made the biopic Dr Babasaheb 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".

On the contrary, James Dickson Carr, the first black student to earn a Columbia law degree, received his degree in 1896, and George Haynes, the first black student to earn a Columbia PhD, received it in 1912. Both of these achievements were in place before Ambedkar started his degree at Columbia.

Mina Kumar



Embedded reporting

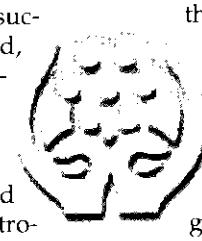
REGARDING THE article entitled "The Wars We Wage" by Chitrangada Choudhury (June 2003), I think the writer rather missed the point of my reporting from Iraq. The reason I commented on the US war reporters with their Old Glory flags, or my own lack of objectivity (given my Marine chemical suit, the fact that I was terrified, and the protection I was afforded by the US military), was to give *The Times* readers both a glimpse inside the invasion of Iraq while also letting them know explicitly just how biased my reporting would be under the circumstances. My reporting of the Iraqi troops was underdeveloped? No! I was with the Americans! It was a war! What was I supposed to do? Get out of my Humvee and start walking towards Iraqi lines in my US Marine chemical suit, notebook in hand? Embedded reporters were, by their very nature, biased. But the alternative would be simply not to take an 'embedded' position at all. My own way of dealing with it was to write as honestly as I could, from a first person perspective, about what I was seeing and doing, whilst explicitly informing the reader about the limits on my objectivity. To have simply ignored the US embedding programme and attempted to cover the war from the TV (remember that it was impossible to enter Iraq without a death-wish during the first 10 days of the war)—or, worse, rely solely on the reports coming out of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad—would have been the real abandonment of journalistic duty.

Christopher Ayres
Los Angeles Correspondent
The Times *(London)*

Such charming simplicity !

SAARC CAME into existence in 1985, at a time when there were no visionaries left among the political class of the Subcontinent. That is itself eloquent testimony to the irrelevance of the project as it was envisaged then, because when Southasia did have statesmen of vision, none of them suggested a regional arrangement of this kind. Clearly, they had enough acumen not to succumb to the delusion that such a thing would work in an acrimonious neighbourhood. The people of municipal competence who followed, rushed in to do what better men had disdained, and SAARC was born.

The beast was born dead, but feigned life. The pretence of being alive was sustained by various equally stillborn attempts to show signs of life. The most impressive of its achievements so far was SAPTA, which was unveiled in 1993 as a South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement. SAPTA stood still for so long that it resembled a mystic in an inscrutable trance. It failed comprehensively to generate a preference for each other's goods and the quantum of trade within SAARC countries remained more or less static. As the successive attempts at regional co-operation failed, more and more grandiose schemes for intensifying economic integration were proposed, culminating, at the recently concluded SAARC summit, in the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). But even before SAFTA was discussed at the summit came the quirky proposal to introduce a common currency in Southasia.



The only successful attempt at creating a currency union is the Economic and Monetary Union of the European Union, which gave rise to the Euro, whose long and carefully worked out history stands in sharp contrast to the bungled attempts to introduce regional economic co-operation in Southasia. Europe commenced its practical quest for a common currency through the Maastricht Treaty 1992, about the same time that the eminently forgettable SAPTA was let loose on Southasia. The Maastricht Treaty, which laid the timetable for the creation of the Euro brought the European Union into being, giving a more coherent form to the European Community, which itself came out of a long experiment with the creation of a common market through a customs union formed by some countries and the establishment of a European Free Trade Association by other countries.

The origin of the European Union is conventionally traced to the Treaty of Rome of 1957, which brought into existence the European Economic Community. In reality it goes back to the seemingly more humble European Coal and Steel Pact of 1951, intended to prevent war through the pooling of steel and coal resources. In other words, the countries of Europe started out with a desire to end intra-European war and in the process worked out the mechanisms for a common market and free trade zone, which converged in the European Community before creating a European Union which finally adopted a common currency in 1999. Europe took five decades and a lot of co-ordinated and negotiated effort to achieve this.

Southasia stands everything on its head and nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the proposal to initiate a currency union long before putting in place lesser forms of co-operation, like simply following the ordinary civilities of diplomatic interaction or the creation of a functioning regional forum for negotiations. Such confidence-building measures precede intermediate steps like the creation of a free trade zone or a customs union. Unlike the trajectory followed by Europe in its search for internally peaceful co-existence, some Southasians states have been hellbent on intra-regional war, and when they could find no justification to actually wage war they contrived reasons to threaten to go to war. And in the midst of all this hectic conflict and the hysteria of war and mutual recrimination the region absent-mindedly created a regional body that pretends to promote co-operation. When the promised co-operation failed to materialise, it found still more ostentatious ways to move towards its illusory goal by departing even further from the fundamentals required to achieve them. So, 11 years of failure leads to a weak arrangement like SAPTA being superseded by a weak arrangement like SAFTA, which is clearly not up to the task of promoting trade integration, because, once again, the municipal minds behind the project overlooked the most obvious fundamentals. Between SAPTA and SAFTA lay two sets of nuclear tests and a war over some barren wastes in Kargil, besides some skirmishes along the Bangla-India border and some disputed territory along the India-Nepal border, and some militarised activity in Bhutan on India's behalf. All of this is in addition to the almost permanent state of conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. But lest anyone accuse the region of not thinking big in a constructive way, the prime minister of India announced, even before SAFTA could be discussed into existence, that a common currency should be introduced in the region.

Predictably, in an excitable Subcontinent that is so easily prone to applaud its own genius, this casual statement by the Indian prime minister has been greeted with a euphoria that almost suggests that an ill-advised proposal has already become a well-designed policy. Experts and columnists have hailed it as the miraculous path to making Southasia an economic powerhouse.

Currency preconditions

Tarun Das, Director General of the Confederation of Indian Industry, articulates the typically complacent Indian corporate perspective. According to him, a common currency will cut transaction costs for domestic businesses as they start to increasingly trade with each other. Since SAPTA could not, in 11 years, manage to increase the volume of intra-regional trade above the pathetically low levels that have been historically prevalent, and since the prospects under SAFTA are not much brighter, the number of beneficiaries of a common currency on this count will be extremely limited, unless there is a dramatic improvement in the trade figures. He also goes on to add that a common currency for 1.3 billion people will make Southasia an even bigger market for foreigners to invest in.

This is the kind of hype that does well on television, but the fact of the matter is that a little over a billion of this total population already lives inside an economy with a single currency called the INR, and yet this extraordinarily large market has not been very successful in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Das also argues that companies in each of the Southasian economies will be able to raise funds from the other member countries. However, he seems to have overlooked the obvious fact that in comparison to the Indian economy, all other countries have very weak formal financial systems so that the claim of mutual benefit is more fictitious than real. Even if his point is to be conceded, his next claim that a bigger market of savings will result in lower interest rates for all borrowers, which is good for businesses everywhere, is questionable because this argument is based on the heroic assumption that the investment climate in Southasia is generally robust and higher interest rates are the only constraint. This need not always be true, since the constraint of weak demand cannot necessarily be offset by a lowering of interest rates to induce greater investments. In any case, other factors, like the level of capital controls and international ratings tend to weigh heavily with investors.

In comparison to the Indian economy, all other countries have very weak formal financial systems so that the claim of mutual benefit is more fictitious than real.

Das also proceeds to make the argument that a common currency will help tourism by removing the inconvenience of converting currency. This is not a uniformly applicable argument since if this incentive has to operate, all the other inconveniences of travel in the Subcontinent will have to be lifted. Indians travelling to Nepal or Bhutan do not face the currency conversion problem. In reverse it does not work with the same charming simplicity, but since the currency is freely convertible between these countries there really is not all that much of an impediment to tourism. The problem for the tourist is the visa restriction as much as currency conversion. For a Pakistani tourist to India, or vice versa, removing currency difficulties in fact will not really be of much help unless the absurd and infantile limited-destination visa regime is removed. It is hard to enthuse tourists to revisit on the mere promise of removing conversion problems when they have to go through the tiresome routine of reporting to the police every morning and reassuring paranoid states that they are not up to any mischief. In effect, a common currency on its own can do little to help anyone, unless all the other preconditions that go with making it successful are met.

Carried away by enthusiasm, Das suggests a timetable of implementation of four to six years. This optimism rests on the fact that Europe took only eight years to introduce the Euro. The reality is that Europe took only eight years to introduce the common currency from the date of finalising the timetable for its implementation. But finalising that timetable was preceded by 40 years of intensive efforts to attain the preconditions that facilitated the objective of a common currency. SAARC's dismal history does not inspire the confidence that it can even update its website on time, let alone introduce regional co-operation of the kind that can pave the way for a common currency.

Vast enterprise

A currency union requires fundamental conditions to be met before it can come into existence. Globally, Europe can be treated as the exception. The EU represents 6.3 percent of the world's population, 20 percent of global GDP, and over 40 percent of world exports. Southasia has 25 percent of the world's population, 2 percent of global GDP and less than 1 percent of global trade. In the circumstances, it is advisable for Southasian policy makers not to eye Europe as a model for immediate emulation. On the other hand, the East Caribbean Central Bank Area, which follows a common currency, is too small as a point of comparison with the Southasian vastness.

The other major economic blocs have not been particularly energetic about introducing a common currency. The North American Free Trade Area is by default dominated by the dollar, but that does not make it a currency union. While many of the economies, owing to the pressure of dollarisation of transactions, considered switching over to the dollar, this was not the outcome of a managed and negotiated process of creating a union. A union, after all, is an entity that benefits all its constituent members. A more equal trading arrangement is Mercosur, a Latin American regional integration mechanism, with Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay as full members, and Bolivia and Chile as associate members. Though it is the fourth largest economic region in the world, it continues to remain a customs

union and there is no indication of any move towards a common currency. Latin America seems, for the present, to be looking only at the prospect of a South American Free Trade Area. This, in all probability, could emerge as the real SAFTA.

ASEAN offers possibly the most proximate point of comparison for Southasia. Even here the news is not promising for Southasian common currency enthusiasts. ASEAN, which is among the most well integrated economic blocs and which is 18 years older than SAARC, is still at the stage of implementing the Asian Free Trade Area and the Asian Investment Area. Numerous studies on the possibility of a common currency for ASEAN, while expressing cautious optimism for the distant future, emphasise the impediments to even medium-term fruition such as GDP, growth rate, interest rate and economic-system differentials. Though some ASEAN leaders have been enthusiastic about exploring the possibility of introducing a common currency, the fact that official deliberations on the preliminary feasibility workshops conducted so far have been postponed suggests that, at this stage, pursuing the issue could be more divisive than uniting because of the stresses that will arise from surrendering sovereignty and policy flexibility in crucial areas like interest rate, exchange rate, inflation rate and fiscal deficit management.

Economic, financial and political convergence is necessary to ensure the symmetry that is required for a currency union. But such convergence is predicated on the existence of conditions that enable convergence. Currency union is a technically complicated matter that traditionally involves the concept of optimum currency areas. It prescribes the economic circumstances which make a currency union beneficial to the countries involved. Important criteria in identifying an optimum currency area include the level of flexibility in real wages, the possibility of high labour mobility, and the low incidence of asymmetric shocks, ie, all countries in the proposed union must be similarly affected by external developments, as this indicates higher prospects for integration. For instance, the manner in which the east Asian financial crisis reverberated through many of the ASEAN economies is an indication of the uniform effects of external shock and this is deemed to indicate a possibly greater capacity for currency integration.

But despite the presence of certain favourable conditions, ASEAN's difficulty lies in the high level of economic disparities within the region despite a creditable history of co-operation over 35 years. Growth rates for instance tend to vary widely. In 2000, Thailand had a 4.6 percent growth rate whereas Singapore grew by almost 10 percent in the same year. Per capita income differentials as between countries show huge disparities. Singapore's per capita income of USD 32,810 contrasts sharply with Vietnam's USD 335. In other areas too, the gaps are wide, ranging from the level of public debt, to current account balances and interest rates.

Southasian unionists

If these are the real constraints that have barred the immediate possibility of a common currency in ASEAN, the Southasian condition is even more pitiable. Product output is lopsided in India's favour, since its GDP is almost 75 percent of the combined output of the entire region and its export trade is over 60 percent of the SAARC total. Likewise, all the other differentials that characterise ASEAN are present in SAARC in magnified form. What compounds matters is that SAARC lacks the kind of complementarities in ASEAN that make it possible to talk about a currency area for the latter at some future date. Intra-SAARC trade is in the vicinity of 5 percent of the global trade of its member countries. Trade complementarities are, by contrast, much stronger in ASEAN, with intra-bloc trade amounting to over 20 percent of the region's total exports.

But even assuming that Southasian unionists were to disregard all these factors and strive for a common currency, they are likely to come up against the less technically complicated but the necessarily more difficult practical steps to set about implementing the process. These are the areas where Southasia displays high inefficiencies. For instance, it will be necessary to initiate realistic inter-governmental planning and create convergence plans within specified time frames. The complexities of the process are evident from the manner in which the EU went about the implementation of the common currency. Eligibility for entry into the union depended on meeting some fixed criteria: the budget deficit was to be held below 3 percent of GDP, the total public debt was to be kept below 60 percent of GDP, the inflation rate was to be maintained within 1.5 percent of that of the three EU countries with the lowest rate in order to stabilise prices, and long-term interest rates were to be restricted to 2 percent of the three lowest interest rates in EU.

The actual introduction of the common currency involved three stages of implementation. The first stage covered a three and a half year period from July 1990 to December 1993 during which the free movement of capital was introduced, the exchange rate mechanism was stabilised, closer co-operation between central banks was initiated and economic policies were co-ordinated. In the second stage, which extended from January 1994 to December 1998, member states were required to synchronise economic and monetary policies, the European Central Bank was established and participating countries had to fix their exchange rates. The final stage began in January 1999, when the single currency was introduced. This was a systematic process based on very high levels of co-operation.

It is difficult to visualise countries that go to war over rocky bits of terrain and which deny overflight permissions to neighbours on the slightest provocation being able to undertake such complex and synchronised multilateral measures.

SRI LANKA

THE NEED FOR LARGE HEARTS

MOST ANALYSES of the continuing Sri Lankan political deadlock focus on its disadvantages from a Colombo-centric perspective. The crashing stock market and the suspension of economic investments and foreign aid bode ill for the country's macro developmental prospects. But it is not only President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and their respective parties that stand in danger of falling into public disfavour as a result. Even the LTTE appears to be feeling the pressures of the present impasse. On the one hand, the lack of progress in the peace process means that the LTTE can utilise the opportunity to consolidate itself in the north-east, the entirety of which it has access to under the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. In the absence of peace talks with the government, and with the suspension of Norwegian facilitation for the duration of the political crisis, the LTTE will have a relatively free hand to expand its recruitment drive, and set up customs, taxation, police and judicial institutions.

On the other hand, the absence of peace talks has also blocked the creation of legally recognised institutions that the LTTE can have a stake in, and which are necessary if the LTTE is to be the agent of economic change in the region it controls. A study carried out by the Sri Lanka-based Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) has shown that people, whether in the north-east or outside, see the conflict in their lives as being primarily due to economic factors such as poverty, unemployment and landlessness. Any organisation that seeks to be close to the people has to recognise this reality. As an organisation that needs to set itself on the path to maintain its leadership role through political means, the LTTE has to be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the Tamil masses. While the two years of ceasefire has brought them immense solace, people also want their economic lives to improve as fast as possible. So far, the Tamil Tigers have been unable to show the people that it is bringing them this boon. The war-ravaged north-east remains for the most part in the same state it was at the commencement of the ceasefire.

The international community that pledged billions of rupees for the north-east, made the disbursement of their funds conditional upon progress in peace talks. They also envisaged the setting up of new joint government-LTTE institutions, such as the North East Reconstruction Fund (NERF) and the Sub Committee on Immediate Rehabilitation and Humanitarian Needs (SIHRN). However, these new mechanisms are either non-functional or are yet to be established. The inability to set up these mechanisms has sowed seeds of doubt as to the government's capacity to be a partner with the LTTE in developing the north-east.

An ear to lend ?

LTTE Discontent

In recent days, the LTTE's political leaders have been saying both publicly and privately that they are prepared to negotiate with President Kumaratunga in respect of the peace process. These statements made in different contexts in London, Kilinochchi and Colombo by top LTTE leaders would constitute a shift in the stance of the LTTE, away from a policy of restricting their dealings with the Wickremesinghe government alone. After the president's party suffered defeat at the 2001 general elections, the LTTE had made no secret of its antipathy to the president, one that she reciprocated in full measure. The seven years of government headed by Chandrika Kumaratunga saw the war with the LTTE escalate to a maximum, including an assassination attempt on her in November 1999. However, it was Kumaratunga who subsequently invited the Norwegian government to facilitate a peace process with the LTTE. However, it is also true that during the president's period of governance neither side was able to make progress on the peace process, with the war continuing to escalate.

When Prime Minister Wickremesinghe came to power in December 2001, the country and economy had reached rock bottom. His most important accomplishment, for which he deserves every credit, was to swiftly end the war and to revive the economy. However, two years into the peace

process, it appears that the LTTE is seeing the disadvantages of limiting their negotiations to the government headed by the prime minister. Undoubtedly it was the government headed by Wickremesinghe that achieved the crucial breakthrough with them that led to the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in February 2002, and that was a document requiring great political courage to sign and implement. The entry of LTTE cadres into government-controlled areas and the opening of the A9 Highway to Jaffna were radical affirmations of trust in the peace process and willingness to take risks for peace.

Two years after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement the LTTE has reasons to be discontent. The LTTE's primary justification for pulling out of the peace talks in April 2003 was the lack of implementation on promises made during the six rounds of negotiations that took place between September 2002 and March 2003. The new institutions of governance that were agreed to be set up for the interim period in the north-east have yet to be implemented. Now the political crisis that has pitted the president against the government has stalled any further possibility of establishing those institutions on the ground.

By affirming their preparedness to negotiate with the president, or with any other leader with a mandate for peace from the people, the LTTE has created a situation that could help to resolve the present political deadlock

New situation

By affirming their preparedness to negotiate with the president, or with any other leader with a mandate for peace from the people, the LTTE has created a situation that could help to resolve the present political deadlock. In effect they have eliminated the prime minister's primary justification for standing firm on the issue of the three ministries taken away from his government by the president. The prime minister's uncompromising position up until now has been that the defence ministry should be restored to his government for the peace process to commence. He has stated that the LTTE will not wish to negotiate with a government that did not fully control the armed forces. However, the new message coming from the LTTE is that they have no objection to the president wielding powers of defence, so long as she and the prime minister agree to the arrangement and to uphold the Ceasefire Agreement.

In essence, the Tamil Tiger's position is that negotiations are possible with a joint governmental and presidential team in which the president and prime minister have worked out a new cohabitation agreement. It is also significant that Kumaratunga has been repeatedly affirming her support for the Ceasefire Agreement since her takeover of the three ministries in November 2003. Already, several advantages can be seen in the sharing of power between the president and the government. One is that the Ceasefire Agreement now has bipartisan support from both the government and main opposition party. As a result, the popular acceptance of the ceasefire has registered its highest level of support ever. The possibility of expanding this bipartisan support to the decisive issue of constitutional change is too attractive to be foregone at this juncture. The president and the prime minister in particular must be large-hearted enough to work together to get the peace process back on track.

The challenge for political and civil society is to ensure that a new framework for cohabitation is worked out between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe to replace the old one. The cohabitation framework that prevailed from December 2001 to November 2003 was one in which the president did not use her legal and constitutional powers. Perhaps she was demoralised by her party's electoral rejection at the general election of 2001. Perhaps she felt she did not have the answers at that time to take the country out of the deep pit of ethnic war and economic disaster that her government had taken it to. Nevertheless, two years later, the country has changed for the better and the president appears to have regained her ambition and confidence to be at the helm of affairs. With her takeover of the three ministries, and the prime minister's inability to regain them, the old cohabitation framework is no longer applicable. Unhappy though he may be with the sudden turn of events, the prime minister and his government should accept the new reality and work together with the president to devise a new framework of cohabitation for the good of the country.

In particular, a unified approach by the president and the prime minister will ensure that the peace process can be restarted and that decisions taken at peace talks with the LTTE can be implemented with a two-thirds majority in parliament. At present, the

people are anxious about the possible dissolution of a parliament elected just two years ago, in the aftermath of the formation of the People's Alliance-Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna combine. The two leaders should realise before it is too late that the people expect them to solve problems today rather than to bitterly contest each other politically in a struggle that could otherwise extend for several years.

–Jehan Perera

PAKISTAN

A PARADE FOR THE GENERAL

FOURTEEN MONTHS after the general election, General Pervez Musharraf's Legal Framework Order (LFO) has finally become part of the constitution. What has seemed like an eternity of wrangling between the government and the opposition (inclusive of the mullahs) has finally come to an end. The agreement reached between the Pakistan Muslim League - Quaid (PML-Q) and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—the alliance of six religious parties—was announced by General Pervez Musharraf himself over national television. The general, and all the others associated with the deal, proclaimed the triumph of democracy.

Even though the opposition had been clearly disturbed by the whimsical decree which empowered Pervez Musharraf to remain president and army chief for another five years, head a military-civilian National Security Council, dissolve the National Assembly and sack prime ministers, yet to say that this development is unexpected would be naive. A final settlement on the issue had been imminent for many months, even though the MMA continues to strike a pose about the signing of the agreement against "dictatorship". It is now fairly common knowledge that the army has supported far-right religious groups in Pakistan for many years, including some of the parties which belong to the MMA alliance. It is also a well-known fact that there is still much internal tension within the army over the apparent moves of the current leadership to revoke the many privileges that have accrued to the religious right over the past two decades. Therefore, there was only ever going to be one outcome of this overplayed drama—the consummation of the long-standing relationship between the mullahs and the military.

Unbelievably, the chorus of praise for General Musharraf that emanated from the leadership of the PML-Q after the announcement of the agreement included a suggestion that the general had made the biggest sacrifice yet by any military ruler in Pakistan's history. This is quite an overstatement, to say the least. The agreement that was signed was hardly different from the originally proposed LFO. And while it is quite something that Musharraf eventually got his way on the LFO, perhaps what is more astonishing is the unprecedented fact that the army will not only dictate terms to the government but will, in fact also, dictate terms to the opposition.

The MMA, despite having only 62 seats in the lower house, is likely to be given the slot of leader of the opposition, while the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD)—mainly consisting of the PML-Nawaz and Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—will not get the coveted slot despite having 82 seats. Meanwhile, of course, Musharraf has been confirmed president by the required two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament and by the provinces (with token abstentions by MMA members). He also remains Chief of Army Staff (COAS), with even the stipulated date of retirement from that office—31 December, 2004— now being considered merely tentative.

Among other things, the intelligentsia in the country remains complicit in the shenanigans of the elite.

All in all, quite the victory for democracy. The response from the ARD has been muted, confirming the relative impotence of what are still popularly considered the two biggest parties in the country (albeit far more so in the case of the PPP than the PML-N in terms of seats won). It cannot be stressed enough that Pakistani society is acutely depoliticised. Blatant heists, such as this latest agreement, hardly create a ripple in the popular consciousness. Among other things, the intelligentsia in the country remains complicit in the shenanigans of the elite. The media has made some advance in recent times, but even so, self-censorship is common, and, in any case, the government still holds a virtual monopoly on information dissemination in the country.

There are still many voices in Pakistan, unsurprisingly many hailing from army backgrounds, that insist that democracy does not suit the polity. On the face of it, this may not be such an outrageous claim, not only for Pakistan but for any third world state that was blighted by the legacy of colonialism, in this case manifest in the system of Western parliamentary democracy. But it is now a matter of conjecture whether or not independence movements in the colonial world after the second world war should have been more revolutionary, and less content to simply takeover from the departing colonial powers. The fact is that we in Southasia did adopt a particular form of government, and the international system has since developed in such a way that alternatives have been virtually exterminated. That said, looking towards a transparent and unfettered democratic process is very much our best bet, at least for the time being.

Stressing the need for 'consensus'.

Given the fact that the elite in countries like Pakistan have typically managed to retain their privileged status, the establishment of democratic norms is key to redressing major imbalances in resource access and allocation. At the same time, there is increasing evidence in the rich countries of the world to suggest that the prevailing form of electoral democracy on show is simply reinforcing the global status quo. So, ultimately, it is not enough to establish a free and fair electoral process in Pakistan, because the minimum form of political democracy that such a process implies hardly guarantees economic democracy, which is what the people desperately need. Nonetheless, there can be little question that, for now, without the establishment of such an electoral process—one that the army cannot manipulate—prospects for further evolution are slim. It is only after such a process takes root that Pakistan can start to consider more people-oriented and organic forms of political and social organisation.

So the agreement between the mullahs and the military making the LFO the 17th amendment to the 1973 constitution is definitely a step in the wrong direction. But then the mullahs and the military have perennially taken steps in the wrong direction as far as the general public is concerned. The question remains: who will come to the fore to finally put a stop to the madness and assert the people's sovereign will? And the answer, as it has been in the past, is that it must be the people themselves who do what needs to be done. It remains a mystery why there is still debate over the prospects of the military, mullahs, or for that matter any other elite interest group in this country turning things around. None of these groups has any interest in doing so, and any change in recent times, whether in foreign policy vis a vis Afghanistan and Kashmir, or domestically in terms of the operation of sectarian outfits, has been the result of external pressures.

As the frenzy over the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad subsides, it is worth recognising that even the recent peace posturing between India and Pakistan has much to do with the United States, and it is plain for all to see how genuine "peace" initiatives taken by imperial power typically turn out. The mullah-military agreement came at a very convenient time for General Musharraf, such that he could finally parade himself as president of Pakistan without the baggage associated with a constitutional dispute over his own legitimacy. The MMA can harp all it wants on the fact that General Musharraf will not be considered legitimate until he sheds his uniform, but the fact of the matter is that it is the general who is calling the shots in this country, and ultimately the MMA is quite happy to follow his lead. While this charade continues, it is up to the rest of us to consider how to break the cycle. △

–Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

INDIA ● PAKISTAN

RHETORICAL SHIFT

WHEN INDIAN Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, left for Islamabad to attend the 12th SAARC summit, he ruled out any possibility of bilateral talks with Pakistan. There were no indications whatsoever of any intention to resume a dialogue, the need for which the absurd geopolitics of the Subcontinent has sustained precisely by interrupting it periodically for all manner of spurious reasons. But, with all the predictable unpredictability of such tiresome diplomacy, within hours of reaching Islamabad, Vajpayee reversed his stated position and declared that India is never

shy of talking and expressed readiness to resolve all pending differences with Pakistan, including those that revolve around the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. Three days of hectic talks followed that statement which resulted in a joint statement by the two countries expressing their resolve to resume talks. An event that had been staged on the sidelines of the SAARC jamboree eventually sidelined the main summit and itself became the principal draw, reducing the Southasian body to its customary insignificance as the ceremonial proxy for the distant dream of regional co-operation.

The unfolding of events at Islamabad was more or less on expected lines but it definitely raised the level curiosity as to what exactly transpired between the leadership of the two countries. Those who have watched India-Pakistan developments will not pin much hope on such joint statements as this could be just another pause in the never-ending acrimony that defines relations between the two countries. To believe that India will give Kashmir on a platter to Pakistan or that Pakistan will forfeit its claim over Jammu and Kashmir is the kind of naiveté that the fifty-year history of acrimony does not permit. In which case, what was the dramatic trigger that gave rise to the desire to resume talks that, at least for the present, do not inspire any confidence about their capacity to bury the past?

There are a few factors which may be compelling India to talk about bringing the Kashmir issue to the table earlier than later. The genesis of this can be traced to the early 1980s when the US introduced terrorism to this part of the world to evict the Soviets from Afghanistan. Even as the US came and left and then again re-entered Afghanistan the spectres of that policy continue to haunt the 'war against terror'. Given the thrust of US foreign policy in the region, there is little mileage that India can extract internationally, even if it were to join the coalition against 'terror' by harping on the unfortunate events in the valley as a special regional manifestation of a global phenomenon and in which Pakistan has a hand.

Further, India has possibly also started realising that it cannot forever continue to play the old game in Jammu and Kashmir. It may, therefore, have dawned on all but the hardcore hawks in the Indian administration that it will be more prudent to resolve the issues which lie at heart of the militancy than to take on causalities on a daily basis. The toll of permanently combating militancy may well be beginning to tell sufficiently on members of the Indian establishment to force them to consider an alternative approach that need not necessarily culminate in a resolution of the bilateral dispute.

India also had to do some drastic rethinking when it gained nothing from all its frantic and ungainly attempts to entice the US to setup base in the country after 9/11. New Delhi's calculation was that the US would help it in dismantling the 'terror' infrastructure in Pakistan, which in turn would cause the problem of Jammu and Kashmir to vanish into thin air. However, for the managers of US policy, practical geo-strategic compulsions proved to be far stronger than the allurements of all that the Indian foreign policy establishment had to offer. The US opted for the strategically more obvious choice that seemed to have escaped the Indian establishment completely. Now, even after two years of Americans presence in the region not only has there been no great change in the ground situation, India has also been forced to become defensive after its spectacular failure in weaning away US support for Pakistan.

No more time to waste.

But the one event that served as the catalyst for the Indian decision to change tracks on the Kashmir issue was the invasion of Iraq by the "coalition of the willing". The precedent set by the US in brushing aside all international objections and bulldozing its way into a sovereign country set off alarm bells in New Delhi. In a swiftly evolving international scenario, where the US as the only superpower has begun meddling in the global trouble spots, Indian policy makers had reason to seriously rethink their Pakistan policy. The realisation seems to have dawned that it is better to talk about negotiations on India's own terms than to be hamstrung by talks mandated by a narcissistic superpower out to resolve matters to its own advantage.

However, this hard thinking about the negotiated approach came about only after India considered and abandoned as unfeasible all its options to go to war with Pakistan. Even in the Kargil skirmish of 1999, India considered and then refrained

from crossing the Line of Control. However, the most defining moment arrived when New Delhi brought Operation Parakram to a close and pulled back its troops after keeping them in forward positions for more than a year, following the attack on parliament on 13 December 2001. Military experts, the very ones who had in 1987 advocated Operation Brass Tacks, cautioned the government that a military adventure would not necessarily result in an outright victory and that such a conflagration could go out of hand, particularly in the light of nuclear parity between the two countries. The net result: India was left with no choice but to back down and resume the rhetoric of resuming talks with Pakistan.

If these were the compulsions operating on India, Pakistan too was faced with exigencies that made it realise the need to break with the past and to do, if nothing else, at least diplomatic business with India. The sectarian violence in Pakistan has complicated matters for the ruling regime as it has begun to attract considerable international criticism, since Islamabad cannot be seen to be openly endorsing violence in Indian Kashmir and yet opposing it internally. The attempts on the life of the president general in December 2003 have also helped reinforce the idea that militancy in the vicinity is not conducive to the health of the state and its dignitaries. There is an inexorably self-consuming logic to the strategy of military-backed militancy. This realisation may well have induced Pakistan to eventually give a categorical commitment to India that its territory would not be used for anti-Indian activity.

Lying in the ordnance depot for the present.

Another most important commitment Pakistan made was to shelve the demand for the implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Kashmir if India was interested in resolving the issue through other means. The non-implementation of several UN resolutions, like the one on Palestine, has made Pakistan realise that dwelling at unnecessary length on a plebiscite in Kashmir is unlikely to take it anywhere. Islamabad had to recognise of late that the international community is not particularly interested in implementing UN resolutions and it is required for the conflicting parties themselves to sort out their problems. This in fact is a major concession from Pakistan as the past 50 years have seen the country emphatically asserting at various international fora that there is no alternative but for India to implement the UN resolution.

The final commitment that Pakistan made, and which was a clincher for India to reciprocate by expressing its readiness to resolve matters through talks, was to seek a solution to the Kashmir issue outside the division of its territory on religious lines. India in return made a commitment to Pakistan that it is ready to seek a solution to the problem which will be to the satisfaction of all parties concerned.

It is too early to say whether a fresh round of talks will resolve all the outstanding differences between India and Pakistan. However, both the countries have definitely made a rhetorical shift, and at least some of what they are saying is a departure from the clichés of the past. It now remains to be seen if this change in rhetoric is simply a forerunner of the clichés of the future. The question is an important one because Southasia is officially nuclear and there are no systems in place to ensure that congenitally incompetent regimes do not end up actually doing what they may only intend merely to threaten to do. △

–Syed Ali Mujtaba

NEPAL

TOOL OF TERROR

THE TERRORIST and Disruptive Activities (Control and Punishment) Act, 2002 (TADA), was Nepal's reaction to a global apprehension of terrorism since the events of 11 September 2001, and localised in Nepal through continued state of conflict between the government and the pro-republic Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-Maoists).

The comprehensive and convoluted coverage of terrorist and disruptive acts under TADA Section 3(2) targets persons who conspire, cause, compel, commit, instigate, establish, remunerate or publicise acts of terrorism, or harbour persons involved with terrorist and disruptive activities. Terrorist or disruptive activities include damage, destruction, injury, death, kidnapping and threats, and the production, distribution, storage transport,

export, import, sale, possession or installation of explosive or poisonous substances, or the assembly and training of persons for these purposes.

One of the dangers of TADA is the inclusion of disruptive activities within the broad definition of terrorist acts. This allows for the application of TADA to political acts that, whilst distinct from terrorism, are determined by the state to have a disruptive effect on the operation of the government or public order. TADA provides that acts covered in Section 3(2) will be taken to have been committed with an intention to undermine or jeopardise the sovereignty and security of Nepal, or committed in a manner to create an environment of public fear.

The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) reports the widespread use of abduction and 'disappearances' by both the government and the Maoist insurgents. The government is estimated to have been responsible for 170 insurgency-related disappearances. According to Amnesty International, this figure branches into the arrest of 9,900 Maoists (by August 2002) and the extra-judicial execution of an estimated 2,000 Maoists since November 2001. The NHRC has observed that "TADA aids and abets those who, under the guise of maintaining 'law and order' or 'security concerns', continue to violate the human rights of the citizens of Nepal".

Further, the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders reports that since the 29 August 2003 breakdown of the seven-month cease-fire between the state of Nepal and CPN-Maoist, incidents of the arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings of pro-Maoists and governmental dissidents have risen dramatically.

The following sections in TADA are of prime concern:

Section 5(a): The grant of 'special power' to authorities to arrest without warrant persons suspected of involvement in terrorist or disruptive acts, allowing for the arbitrary, capricious and prejudicial application of TADA in violation of Article 9(1) of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);

Section 5(m): The grant of 'special power' to authorities to place surveillance upon 'suspicious' persons and places, including the arrest, lock-out or blockade of the person or place, contravening Article 12(2)(d) which constitutionally guarantees freedom of movement and Article 12(1) of the ICCPR. Whilst Article 12 of the constitution allows for reasonable restrictions to be placed on freedom of movement, the restriction provided for in TADA, predicated on the existence of 'suspicion', is far from reasonable and is not in the interest of the general public;

Section 5(n): The grant of 'special power' to authorities to freeze the bank accounts and assets and confiscate the passports of any persons suspected of involvement in a terrorist or disruptive act for a 'certain period', contravening Article 17 which provides the right to property. Article 17(2) of the constitution does allow for the requisition, acquisition or encumbrance of property by the state in the public interest, and the freezing of bank accounts and assets is an anti-terrorism measure endorsed by the United Nations Counter Terrorism Committee (UNCTC). However, the use of 'suspicion' as the determinant threshold for the exercise of the power, and the unspecific designation of the suspension period are not in the public interest and are insufficient justification for the suspension of a constitutional right. This power also arguably constitutes state interference per Article 17 of the ICCPR;

The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) reports the widespread use of abduction and 'disappearances' by both the government and the Maoist insurgents.

Section 7: The grant of power to the government to declare any person, organisation, association or group 'involved' in terrorist or disruptive activities as terrorist in nature. Whilst Article 12 of the Constitution and Article 22(2) of the ICCPR allow for certain reasonable restrictions to be placed on the freedom of association, TADA is unreasonably imprecise in that it criminalises membership of associations and organisations deemed to be 'involved' in terrorism without providing an adequate explanation of the process through which involvement in terrorist or disruptive activities is determined;

Section 9 and Section 17(5): The detention of persons for periods of up to 90 days on the basis of 'a reasonable ground for believing' that the person has to be prevented from committing acts that 'could' result in a terrorist or disruptive act. Whilst Article 15(1) of the Constitution allows for the preventative detention of persons on the

Running the risk of false implication.

basis of the existence of an "immediate threat to the sovereignty, integrity or law and order situation" within Nepal, the 'reasonable grounds for belief' test is an insufficient threshold for suspension of a constitutional right and is a dangerously imprecise reflection of Article 15(1) of the constitution. Further, the arbitrary detention of a person on a preventative basis for such an extensive period clearly negates due process and retracts the ICCPR Article 14(2) provision of presumption of innocence;

Section 10(3): The imprisonment of persons for a term of five to 10 years for the harbouring or hiding of any person involved in terrorist or disruptive acts. It is an accepted principle of law that the commission of a crime requires evidence of both *mens rea* and *actus reus*: intention and action. Further clarification of Section 10(3) is therefore required, as, prima facie, it appears that the *mens rea* element to this offence has been omitted from the calculation of criminal liability. Accordingly, there is a real danger of the conviction and imprisonment of people who unknowingly house persons involved in terrorist or disruptive acts;

Section 18: The grant of control to the government of means of communication such as letters, telephones and faxes that belong to persons involved in terrorist or disruptive activities. This is a clear violation of the right to privacy outlined in Article 17 of the ICCPR. It is also contrary to the principle contained in Article 22 of the constitution, which states that "Except as provided by law...privacy...is inviolable";

Section 20: The grant of immunity to investigating authorities for any activity carried out or attempted to be carried out in good faith under TADA. The grant of immunity provides vast potential for the use of torture, contravening the right against torture and inhuman treatment [Article 14(4) of the constitution and Article 7 of the ICCPR]; the right not to be compelled to testify against oneself [Article 14(3) of the consti-tution]; the prohibition against coerced confessions [Article 14(3)(g) of the ICCPR]; and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Punish-ment or Treatment (CAT) Article 2(2) provision that "no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture";

Section 22: The grant of rewards to any person who arrests or renders assistance in the arrest of persons who play the main role in the commission of terrorist or disruptive acts. The offering of reward for the apprehension of suspects opens TADA to possible acts of corruption and abuses of authority in contravention of Article 7 of the Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials.

Acts of terrorism are a direct assault on basic human rights and the sovereignty and integrity of states, and the importance of effective legal instruments in the fight against terror must be acknowledged. However, the government must fulfill its obligations under international human rights instruments and its Article 25(1) constitutional declaration, which states that:

"The chief objective of the State [is] to promote conditions of welfare on the basis of the principles of an open society, by establishing a just system in all aspects of national life, including social, economic and political life, while at the same time protecting the lives, property and liberty of the people".

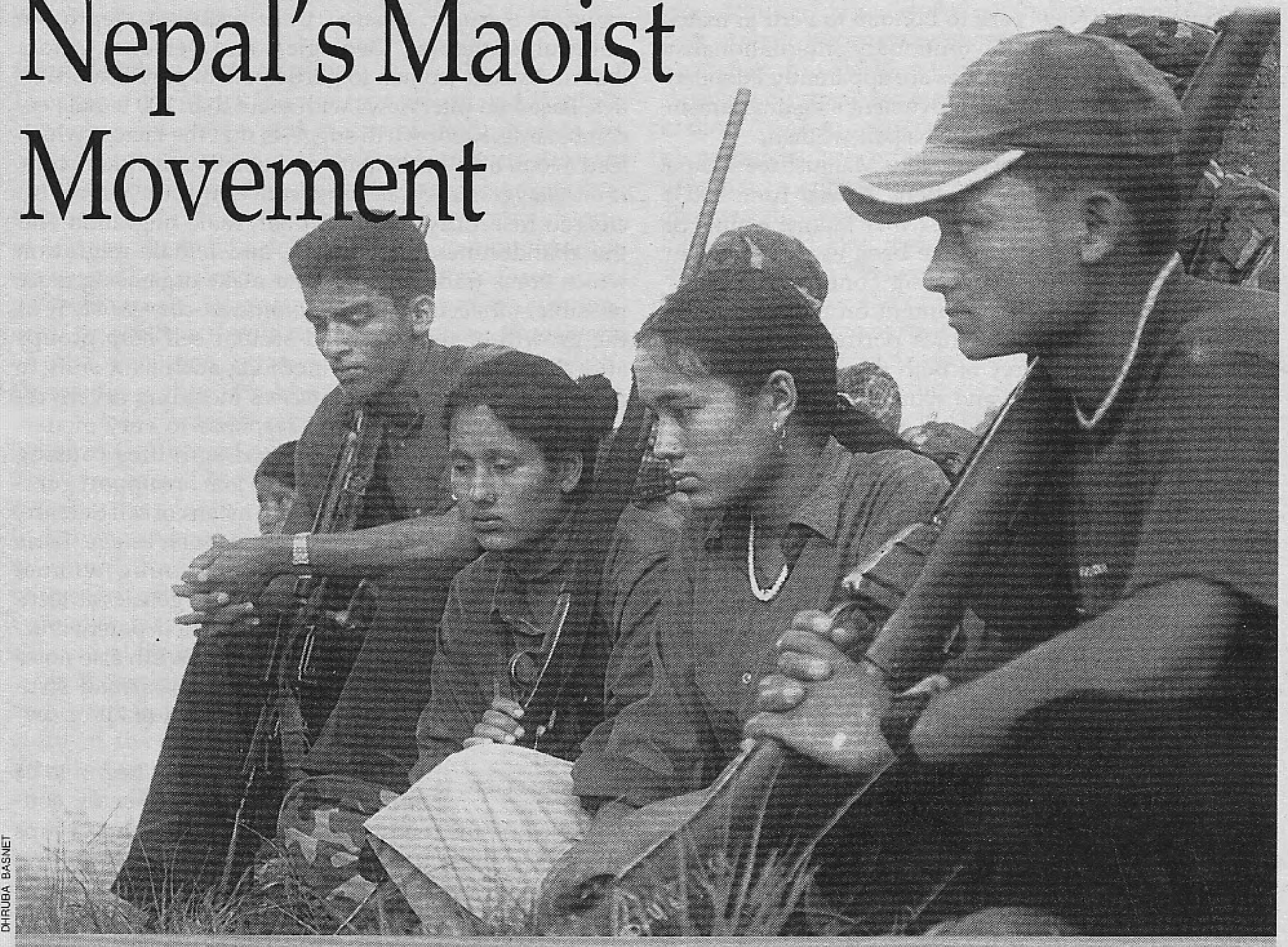
As stated by the United Nations Secretary General's statement at the 4453rd Meeting of the Security Council on Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts:

"[W]e should all be clear that there is no trade-off between effective action against terrorism and the protection of human rights. On the contrary, I believe that, in the long term, we shall find that human rights, along with democracy and social justice, are one of the best prophylactics against terrorism". △

–by arrangement with Human Rights Features

Women and the Maobaadi

Ideology and Agency in Nepal's Maoist Movement



DHRUBA BASNET

Two anthropologists examine the Maoists' claims of radical social transformation in the light of women's experiences on the ground. Based on fieldwork in several areas, they consider how the intersecting lines of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, gender and history shape individual women's political consciousness and motivations for enlisting as guerrilla cadre. Since Nepali Maoist models for women's "empowerment" must negotiate between overarching Maoist ideologies and the existing particularities of gender discrimination in Nepali society, there are noticeable gaps between rhetoric and practice. Ultimately, the fundamental changes in gender relations that the Maoists assert may not be the intentional result of their policies, but rather the largely unintended consequences of the conflict that emerge in relation to women's existing practice.

This position paper is intended to initiate debate on these issues as part of an ongoing process of documentation and analysis of the gender aspects of the Maoist conflict.

by ***Judith Pettigrew and Sara Shneiderman***

Of victimisation and agency

One of the most reported aspects of the Maoist 'people's war' in Nepal has been its high levels of female participation, with some observers estimating that up to 40 percent of all combatant and civilian political supporters are women. Striking photos of young, gun-toting guerrilla women are prominently displayed on the "official" Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) website, and distributed from New York to London to Peru in materials produced by the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM). These images are apparently intended to serve as evidence of the movement's egalitarianism and "empowering" effects for Nepali women.

However, other observers, like Manjushree Thapa in "Girls in Nepal's Maoist War" (*Himal* June 2003) have recently begun to suggest that Maoist claims of high female participation have been exaggerated. In addition, the rapidly expanding conflict 'industry' based in Kathmandu seems intent on constructing a discourse of victimisation which portrays helpless village women at the mercy of both the Maoists and the state. Providing support and rehabilitation for women affected by the conflict is clearly of utmost urgency, but that does not necessarily merit the portrayal of all such women as lacking agency.

Such contrasting narratives of agency and victimisation are nothing new, and have long been at the centre of feminist debate. As elsewhere, the reality for Nepali women lies in the specifics of lived experience all along the continuum between these two extremes. To date, no thorough ethnography of rural women's experiences in the 'people's war' exists and what follows here are tentative steps towards filling that gap, informed by the work of Nepali journalists, human rights workers and activists who have advanced a gendered perspective on the 'people's war'.

General literature on women combatants is limited, since most published work on women and war focuses on women as civilian victims. The available literature points to a lack of recognition of women's active roles during armed conflict, which frequently leads to a double victimisation during the reintegration phase following conflict. For example, families and communities may castigate woman combatants for ignoring 'feminine' duties such as chastity and motherhood during the conflict, while on the other hand, leaders responsible for designing post-conflict demobilisation and reintegration programmes do not recognise women's contribution during the guerrilla struggle and do not design gender-inclusive programmes. Such studies as have emerged from conflict areas suggest that although women are transformed by their experiences of participating in armed insurgencies, they rarely gain equality through this engagement. They also indicate that the presence of women does not make the character, culture and hierarchy of militant organisations more feminine.

Although the situation in Nepal must be considered on its own terms, useful analytical frameworks and comparative insights can be gained from research conducted in other conflict zones. Karen Kampwirth's 2002 publication, *Women and Guerilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* probes in depth the political, structural, ideological and personal factors that motivated women to participate in guerrilla activities. Based on interviews with more than 200 female ex-combatants, Kampwirth suggests that the factors which lead women to participate as guerrillas include *structural changes*, such as land concentration which increased insecurity for rural poor, male migration and the abandonment of families, and female migration which break traditional ties and make organising more possible; *ideological and organisational changes* such as the growth of religious and secular self-help groups and changes in guerrilla methods such as a shift to mass mobilisation; *political factors* including severe repression in response to very moderate oppositional activities causing many women to join or support guerrilla groups as a means of self defence; and *personal factors* such as age, since large numbers of young women joined the armed insurgencies as teenagers, following in their parents' activist footsteps. Kampwirth also notes that some women join armed struggles for a combination of all or several of these factors.

> Beyond the reports issued by human rights groups and NGOs, there has been relatively little in-depth research on the Maoist movement in Nepal

These issues have just begun to be addressed in a Nepal-specific context. Beyond the reports issued by human rights groups and NGOs, there has been relatively little in-depth research on the Maoist movement in general. Several publications have recently begun to take the Maoist movement seriously as an object of analysis. However, much of this work remains focused on large-scale party dynamics and historical issues, rather than addressing the experiences of people on the ground. During the early phases of the conflict, there was a tendency among Kathmandu-based commentators to cast rural Nepalis who participated in the Maoist movement as victims of a sort of false consciousness, whose lack of education and general 'backwardness' made them unable to understand Maoist ideology, and were therefore dismissed as less than full political agents. What is required, however, for a fuller understanding of female involvement is more detailed examination of the ideological dimensions of the movement from the perspectives of those who participate in it.

The limited existing literature on women in the war has provided some welcome exceptions to the dominant pattern of analysis, with a few important articles

focusing specifically on women's agency. However, these have tended to go to opposite extremes by either suggesting that women are fully empowered through participation in the Maoist movement, or that they do not have any less militant option to exercise their agency. Perhaps it is prudent to adopt a more nuanced approach, which acknowledges both women's multiple existing scripts for agency and the constraints within which they exercise it.

Maoist claims and critiques

Ever since Frederick Engels first articulated the link between gender roles and modes of production in his classic work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the relationship between women's liberation and class revolution has been an important aspect of Marxist ideological debate. Female communist leaders have taken pains to distance themselves from 'bourgeois feminists', arguing that the 'woman question' must be addressed within the overarching framework of class revolution rather than as a social end in itself. Operating within this historical context, Nepal's Maoists must negotiate between two hegemonic ideologies—Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought and conservative Hindu cultural norms—in defining an approach to the 'woman question' that is at once consistent with international ideological expectations and applicable to Nepal-specific social situations.

In the original list of 40 Maoist demands presented to the Nepali government at the commencement of the 'people's war', point number 19 is the only one that refers specifically to women, and this focuses on an issue specific to Nepali law: "Patriarchal exploitation and discrimination against women should be stopped. Daughters should be allowed access to paternal property". As suggested by the second sentence here, Nepali law historically prohibited women from inheriting property unless they were unmarried and over the age of 35. However, this tenet of the civil code was altered in 2001 after long battles by Kathmandu's mainstream feminist organisations, at least in theory granting equal property rights to women.

This leaves only the first sentence as a relevant plank in the Maoist platform. The reference to "patriarchal exploitation and discrimination" accurately sums up the fact that in the world's only officially Hindu state, dominant—and often state-supported—ideologies towards women are based upon conservative Hindu concepts of femininity. However, Nepal is also home to over 60 non-Hindu ethnic groups who speak Tibeto-Burman languages and together constitute a substantial proportion of the population. The official 2001 government census figures show it to be just over 20 percent, but most likely this is a gross underestimation. The Nepali scholar, Harka Gurung, for example, puts the ethnic population at 36.4 percent. It is common knowledge that gender relations among these groups vary widely from the normative Hindu image, often with more egalitarian kinship and economic structures. We will return to this point later.

Official Maoist pronouncements on gender relations have focused on overturning gendered hierarchies as part of their larger programme for radical social transformation. Li Onesto, a journalist for the *Revolutionary Worker* who made several trips with the People's Liberation Army in western Nepal from 1998 to 2000, appears particularly interested in women's issues, and presents an entirely positive view of the empowering changes the 'people's war' has brought to women's lives. In "Red Flag Flying on the Roof of the World", she writes that, "When the armed struggle started in 1996, it was like the opening of a prison gate—with thousands of women rushing forward to claim an equal place in the war". In a rather sentimental turn, she adds that this "is something that can bring tears to your eyes".

> Providing support and rehabilitation for women affected by the conflict is clearly of utmost urgency, but that does not necessarily mean such women lack agency

In 2000, Onesto interviewed the CPN(M) commander-in-chief Prachanda about changes that the 'people's war' had wrought in the Maoist "base areas" four years after the "initiation". Prachanda emphasises the transformation of gender and family relations:

"The people were not only fighting with the police or reactionary, feudal agents, but they were also breaking the feudal chains of exploitation and oppression and a whole cultural revolution was going on among the people. Questions of marriage, questions of love, questions of family, questions of relations between people. All of these things were being turned upside down and changed in the rural areas".

Onesto then presses Prachanda to speak explicitly about women's participation in the movement. He appears reluctant, but finally makes the following statement:

"... our party has tried to develop the leadership of women comrades. There have been problems in doing this, but now we are, step-by-step, working to solve this problem. Masses of women have come forward as revolutionary fighters. And we had a plan right from the beginning that the women and the men comrades should be in the same squad, the same platoon and that all things should be done in this way. We have worked to make new relations between men and women—new relations, new society, new things".

Notably, Prachanda acknowledges the difficulties in developing women as leaders within the party. He otherwise claims that the 'people's war' has been re-

sponsible for a radical shift in gender relations in society at large. However, as these are his most prominent published statements on gender issues, it is surprising that he does not offer more in-depth information or examples of Maoist successes. In fact, it seems that international Maoists such as Onesto bear greater responsibility for creating the image of an egalitarian 'people's war' in Nepal than the Nepali Maoist leadership themselves.

Comrade Parvati, the pseudonym for a writer who identifies herself as a Central Committee Member and Head of the Women's Department of CPN (M), speaks openly about the "problems" in developing women's leadership to which Prachanda alludes. Although male cadres' military careers continue developing beyond the age of 40, female cadres' careers rarely develop after the age of 25. When the People's Liberation Army expanded to the brigade-level, women started asking questions about their participation in leadership positions. In "The Question of Women's Leadership in People's War in Nepal" published in *The Worker*, she argues that female cadres experience difficulty asserting themselves, and male cadres have difficulty relinquishing "... the privileged position bestowed on them by the patriarchal structure". Continuing in the same vein, in "Women's Participation in the People's War", she observes that frequently the male leadership relegates women's issues to women rather than taking them up as central issues, neglects to implement programmes developed by the women's mass front, are unnecessarily overprotective of female cadres, and resort to traditional division of labour by monopolising "... mental work and relegating women to everyday drudgery work". Married women who show promise are discouraged from taking up positions that would take them away from their husbands. Women active in the Maoist movement frequently experience marginalisation when they have children and "... many bright aspiring communist women are at risk of being lost in oblivion, even after getting married to the comrades of their choice".

International Maoists bear greater responsibility for creating the image of an egalitarian 'people's war' in Nepal than the Nepali Maoist leadership

Despite these problems, Parvati also emphasises the party's successes regarding women. By 2002, there were several women in the Central Committee of the party, dozens at the regional level and even larger numbers at the district, area and cell levels. The People's Liberation Army boasts many women section commanders, and vice commanders as well as female-only squads and platoons and local level female cadres. Parvati also highlights the importance of the All Nepalese Women's Association (Revolutionary) (ANWA-R) in mobilising women at the community level, as well as serving as an example of effective mass organisation at the vanguard of the entire movement. With the adoption of a new form of Nepali Maoism, named "Prachanda Path", in February 2002, the question of developing women leaders gained prominence and a separate department to develop women's potential was created.

One example of women's ambiguous position within the party leadership is the story of Kausila Tamu (Gurung). In mid-2001 the Maoists set up people's governments in 21 districts, and while no woman was appointed to chair a district government, four women were appointed as vice-chairs, including Kausila Tamu in Lamjung district. Tamu had previously been a commander in a guerrilla squad, as well as a sub-regional committee member of the party. According to Parvati, Tamu had denounced and divorced her husband, who had disowned the movement after being captured. Following the death of the district chairman, she was promoted to this most senior position, but was killed while laying an ambush against the security forces in May 2002. She is best known as the author of a letter which became public in 2002, in which she told her family that because she was close to Baburam Bhattarai she had become a target from those outside his faction and was under suspicion. Following her death, comments published in the *Kathmandu Post* quote a colleague of hers as saying that she was "...fearless and a good organiser in the region [and] would not have been killed had the leadership been cautious". What is surprising is the lack of attention paid to Kausila Tamu's career both when she was alive and following her death.

A hill *'janajati'* ('peoples' nationalities') woman, Kausila Tamu was one of a very small group of women elected to the leadership of the original people's governments, yet her story has primarily been cited by the Nepali press for the light it sheds on rivalry between factions headed by the male leaders rather than for its own value as the story of one the few female leaders from hill janajati backgrounds. In contrast, the death of Rit Bahadur Khadka, who held an equivalent position in the organisation in Dolakha district, attracted enormous attention and extended eulogising from the party. While it may be possible to explain the different degrees of attention paid to these two individuals as being solely due to their factional affiliations, it remains curious that one of the few janajati women to reach a position of senior leadership has received such scant attention.

Along these lines, there is still a conspicuous absence of any women at the top. Members of Kathmandu-based feminist organisations of various political affiliations were particularly unimpressed with the lack of any women on the Maoist negotiating team that came aboveground following the ceasefire of January 2003. In an article addressed to the male Maoist leadership, women's health and reproductive rights activist Aruna Uprety draws attention to women's disillusionment

with the divergence between Maoist ideology and practice by accusing the Maoists of "...behaving no differently than our 'men-stream' political parties. We never expected our male-dominated government to involve women in the peace process, but we thought you were going to be different".

Empowering the universal Nepali woman

Uprety's complaint highlights one of the central problematics in Maoist attitudes towards women: in many ways, the underlying vision of "Nepali women" upon which Maoist claims of transformation are premised may be remarkably similar to existing dominant discourses. In her 2002 article, "The politics of 'developing Nepali women'", scholar Seira Tamang clearly shows how the stereotypical image of a "universal Hindu Nepali woman", oppressed and in need of empowerment, is the fictional product of a development discourse created by and for high-caste Hindus in Kathmandu. As Tamang explains, "The patriarchically oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu, 'Nepali woman' as a category did not pre-exist the development project. She had to be constructed by ignoring the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal". These discourses of empowerment emanating from the development establishment may have had unintended results.

> Male cadres' military careers continue developing beyond the age of 40, female cadres' careers rarely develop after the age of 25

By emphasising rural women's critical thinking skills, 'empowerment' programmes may have paved the way for them to engage with Maoist ideology as fully conscious political subjects. In this regard, the Maoist movement shares similarities with social change projects that have historically operated in Nepal. Despite their critique of both the Nepali state and foreign-funded development agendas, the Maoists themselves have arisen out of the same crucible, and in many ways have uncritically appropriated the terminology and symbolic vocabulary of the entities they claim to work against. The language of 'women's empowerment' is one such example. Its deployment seems to indicate an implicit acceptance of the notion of a universally disempowered Nepali woman. This essentialised image stands in stark contrast to the reality of multiple scripts for agency that have long been available to Nepal's ethnically and religiously diverse women. Nepal's non-Hindu and largely Tibeto-Burman language-speaking ethnic groups, who have come to be known collectively as janajati, often structure gender and other social relations very differently to those suggested by the normative Hindu image. There is also considerable diversity among the practices of Nepal's Hindu groups, which this stereotype does not acknowledge. Although the representation of hill janajati communities as entirely egalitarian is equally extreme—as scholar Mary Des Chene has pointed out, there are "many quiet forms of constraints on the 'freedom'" of janajati women as well—in many cases, they do have access to different forms of economic and cultural power than their caste-Hindu counterparts. In addition, the gendered division of labour in hill janajati communities has traditionally been more fluid, with men often performing domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning, and women engaging in heavy labour such as carrying loads for cash wages.

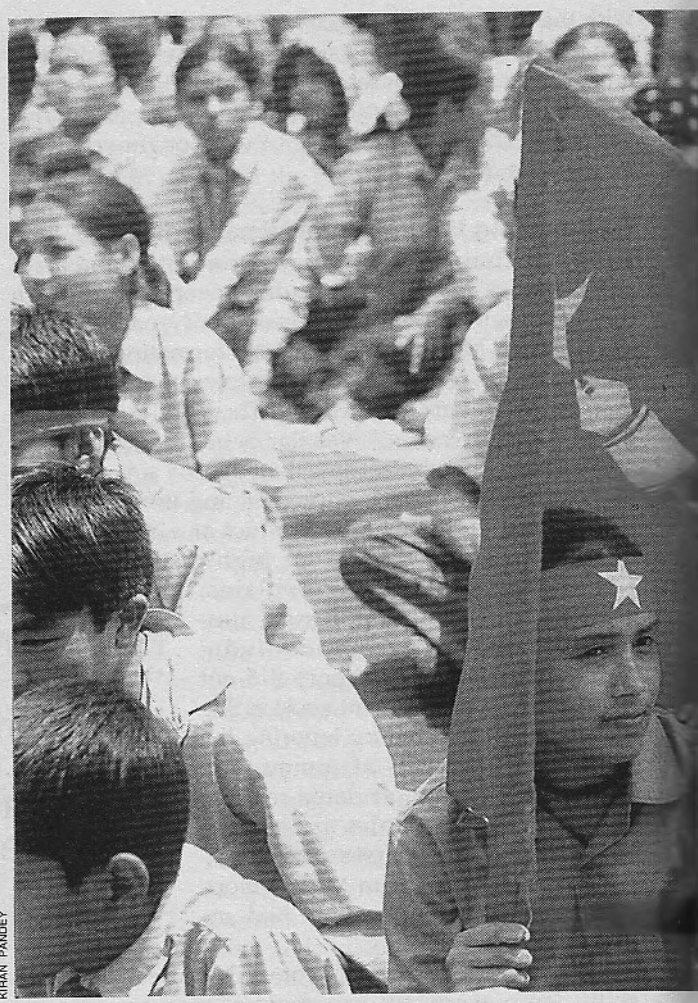
Such diversity raises important questions about the Maoist claim to have transformed social relations, as well as the commonly cited reasons for women's attraction to the Maoist movement. In a widely-circulated article, "Where There Are No Men: Women in The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal" that affirms the Maoist discourse of empowerment for women, Shobha Gautam, Amrita Banskota and Rita Manchanda claim that the majority of Maoist women are from janajati backgrounds. On the one hand, they suggest, janajati women "are culturally less oppressed than Hindu upper-caste Aryan women" and suffer from "fewer religio-cultural restrictions". Yet on the other hand, they are predisposed to join the Maoist movement because, "the tribal socialisation of women from the oppressed ethnic groups, especially their experience of communal sharing in women work groups [sic], makes them particularly responsive to collective action". Indeed, if, as the authors suggest, janajati women are already relatively empowered, then why should they be attracted to a rhetoric of transformation based on a reified notion of an oppressed "universal Nepali Hindu woman"? Conversely, if janajati women are the main female protagonists in the 'people's war', why should Gautam et al later be so concerned about what it means for "Hindu women" to take up arms? If it is indeed Hindu women who are taking up arms, why all the interpretive emphasis on janajati women?

The supposition that janajati women make up the majority of Maoist women remains unsubstantiated. In addition, the suggestion that they are more inclined to take up the Maoist cause because they have greater freedoms is contradictory, and also reminiscent of the traditional attitudes of internal colonialism emanating from the Hindu elite at the centre towards the non-Hindu groups in the periphery. Such explanations for women's participation seem to accept without question existing stereotypes of non-Hindu groups as egalitarian, 'martial races', who are essentially predisposed to taking up arms. They also do not adequately explore the motivations of the many caste-Hindu women participating in the movement.

In a similar vein, the anti-alcohol campaign of the ANWA(R) has been one of the most publicised aspects

of women's participation in Maoist-associated action. However, there has been little attempt to understand in-depth how the anti-alcohol movement has different implications for various cultural groups. In fact, it may well be the case that such strident alcohol bans alienate rather than attract, and even infringe upon the existing freedoms of women from hill janajati groups for whom alcohol consumption and exchange hold important symbolic power in cultural and religious life. The structure and achievements of the ANWA(R) as a mass organisation deserve further ethnographic attention, but from a perspective aware of the diverse meanings the organisation's campaigns may hold for women from different backgrounds.

Comrade Parvati takes a slightly more nuanced approach by suggesting that the effects of the Maoist movement have been different for women from each group, depending upon their existing relative freedoms. She writes that the revolution has assisted Hindu women "... to break the feudal patriarchal restrictive life imposed by the puritanical Hindu religion, by unleashing their repressed energy". On the other hand it has "... given meaningful lives to Tibeto-Burman and other women who are already relatively free and have greater decision-making rights, by giving them challenging work to do". She suggests that the people's war has had a particularly important impact on those from the most exploited dalit communities by "...unleashing their hatred against the state". These statements seem at odds with Maoist claims of social transformation premised upon the assumption that rural women are universally oppressed and in need of empowerment—if they already possess such agency, why must they become Maoists to find meaning? Despite these disjunctures, however, the Maoist platform is clearly compelling to many rural women, both Hindu and otherwise. The following two brief ethnographic montages demonstrate some of the contradictions that are evident in practice, which we return to analyse in the conclusion.



KIRAN PANDEY

Division of labour

Among a group of 450 Maoist combatants encountered by Pettigrew in the Nepali midhills, approximately 25-30 percent were women between 16 and 25 years old. Of the seven-member section with whom she talked in depth, two were women. While a man led, one of the senior members was a 19-year-old dalit woman who gave orders to her junior colleagues. Both the dalit woman and her younger female colleague, a 16-year-old chettri, were responsible for cleaning their own guns, maintaining their equipment, washing their clothes and participating in sentry duty. They did not help in preparing food nor in repairing uniforms, both of which jobs were carried out by men.

After the food was cooked, the four members of the section not involved in sentry duty received a plate of meat to share. Pettigrew watched as the multi-ethnic group consisting of bahun, chettri, dalit, and magar (hill ethnic) men and women abandoned the usual caste and gender conventions and hungrily ate together from the same plate.

The 16-year-old chettri woman spent much of the morning cleaning her gun. Shortly after beginning, the cork she inserted to clean the barrel became stuck. She tried several physically demanding methods to dislodge it by herself, which involved using her body in ways which would have been unacceptable for a woman within most other social contexts. After several attempts she realised that she needed someone with greater physical strength to help. Only then did she request assistance from her male colleagues. They did not seem to consider her exertions as anything out of the ordinary and paid no attention to them.

While these images match with the Maoist portrayal of politically engaged and liberated women, participating equally with men in combat-related activities, this is a partial picture. An ex-Maoist woman interviewed by Pettigrew, the widow of a senior local-level cadre, complained bitterly of the gap between ideology and practice. While she spent every day doing propaganda work aimed at educating village women about Maoist

ideals of gender equality, she did not enjoy equal relationships with her male colleagues. She complained in particular that she returned home at night to an unchanging situation in which her husband and other male relatives active in the Maoist movement expected her to take full responsibility for domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, running the house and looking after the animals. She concluded that she, "... wished to join a women's party as that is the only place where I can fight for women's rights". Tragically, weeks after this interview she was killed by the security forces as a "Maoist woman".

Some of the social shifts occurring among non-affiliated civilian women are not prescribed by Maoist ideology, but rather created by the circumstances of war. In many areas of mid- and far-western Nepal, so many men have left to join the Maoists or flee the situation, that women are left to provide for their families alone, and therefore take on roles which they would not have considered doing in 'normal' life. In many areas, women are reported to be ploughing fields, running forestry groups, and administering schools and other institutions. Gautam et al interpret such changes as "an assertion of capability" by village women, but the overwhelming emphasis on women taking over men's jobs begs the question of why non-affiliated village men are not also taking over women's jobs if there are indeed such a high number of female combatants.

Furthermore, it appears that some of these perceived changes are logical extensions of pre-existing practice rather than new departures. This may be particularly so in janajati communities, where men have long been engaged in outside activities. Although the immediate cause may now be the 'people's war' rather than Gurkha/Gorkha recruitment, the salt-grain trade, or labour migration, this is not the first time that village women have had to make do alone and take on stereotypically 'male' gendered roles. Pettigrew's research on the division of labour among the Gurung ethnic group before the conflict highlights notable flexibility. While given a list of tasks deemed to be gender-specific by both women and men, she subsequently witnessed women performing every "male reserved task" except ploughing, house construction, and the slaughter of medium to large animals. At the time of her research, she concluded that given the right circumstances women would also plough. The insurgency has now provided those circumstances, but by accident rather than design. Rather than successes of the Maoist movement, then, these shifts in practice might be seen as instances of the "unexpected dynamics and spaces of ambivalence" that anthropologist Andrew Kipnis identifies as central to the formation of putatively Maoist states.

Marriage and family

It has generally been observed that most female Maoist cadre in rural areas are very young, usually under the age of 20. This suggests that the majority of Maoist women are unmarried *at the time that they join the movement*. According to Comrade Parvati, however, they soon face internal party pressure "to get married covertly or overtly as unmarried women draw lots of suspicion from men as well as women for their unmarried status. This results in marriages against their wishes or before they are ready to get married". By focusing their recruitment efforts on unmarried women, the party may control marriage choices to a large extent, and also manipulate marriage alliances for political purposes. The leadership may view marriage as a means of controlling female cadres and making it more difficult for them to leave the party, whereas women with existing marital ties and children are seen as more likely to have conflicting allegiances. The disparate treatment of women depending on their marital status suggests that not all women are equal in Maoist eyes, and we must look closely at age and marital status, in addition to ethnicity and religion, as important factors in shaping women's experiences of the conflict.

In Shneiderman's research area, also in midhill Nepal and which has a predominantly non-Hindu ethnic population, the Maoists have actively recruited at

secondary schools since 1999, targeting both male and female students between the ages of 14-18. They also recruited married men in their 20s and 30s by paying repeated visits to their houses and exerting pressure on them to leave their families and join the Maoists, and/or to work as non-combatant political supporters within the village. However, married women—including those within the 18-30 age range who could make able-bodied fighters—were never targeted for recruitment. A 25-year old janajati married mother of two sons, who had completed her secondary education and was well-respected as a capable community member by both men and women, told Shneiderman that she was in fact offended by the visiting Maoists' treatment of her as an uneducated, traditional woman: "They only want to talk to my husband. They rarely discuss their ideological positions directly with me, even though I understand what they are saying and want to learn more. They order me around in a way my own husband and in-laws would never dare do". She confirmed that several of her peers felt similarly disillusioned that the Maoists' promises of gender equality were not only belied by their attitudes towards married women, but even provided negative role models for local men.

> The discourse of empowerment emanating from the development establishment may have had unintended results

On a practical level, conservative attitudes towards

Summary history

THE 'PEOPLE'S war' was first officially declared in February 1996, when the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) presented a 40-point list of demands to the Nepali government. The points deal largely with rectifying economic and social injustice, abolishing monarchy, and establishing a constituent assembly, and have been described by several non-partisan commentators in terms such as, "reasonable and not dissimilar in spirit to the election manifestos of mainstream parties". The Maoists went underground when these demands were not addressed.

With their original strongholds in the mid-western districts of Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot, the Maoists slowly began to establish "base areas" elsewhere in the country. Early on, repressive police responses antagonised local people and contributed to support for the Maoists. The rebels also capitalised on a widespread sense of frustration with a corrupt and unreliable state, which despite promises of enfranchisement and economic development after the advent of democracy in 1990, had provided little in the way of concrete improvement. The conflict escalated after major police operations in 1998, with frequent skirmishes between Maoists and police throughout the country. It reached a new height in November 2001, when the guerrillas withdrew from a several-month long ceasefire and initiated a series of attacks across the country including ones targeted at Royal Nepalese Army barracks in Dang in the mid-west and Salleri in the eastern district of Solu-Khumbu. This confrontation marked several departures: for the first time the Maoists had directly challenged the army (rather than just the police), and had demonstrated their now substantial strength outside of their known strongholds in the western part of the country.

In response, then prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba imposed a state of emergency on 26 November, 2001, which effectively suspended most civil rights and for the first time deployed the army to fight the Maoists. After a year of continued conflict and increasingly large numbers of deaths among Maoists, state forces and civilians, as well as a political crisis in the parliament, King Gyanendra—who had come to power after the June 2001 royal massacre in which his brother, King Birendra, was killed—appropriated executive power and put the democratic process on hold on 4 October, 2002.

January 2003 saw a second ceasefire called between the parties, and a schedule for peace talks was established as high-ranking Maoist leaders came above ground and became instant celebrities, most notably the ideologue Baburam Bhattarai. All of the negotiating parties faced the challenge of establishing political legitimacy: since there was no democratic government in place, the Maoists questioned the ability of "government" negotiators (handpicked by the king) to in fact implement any agreement reached. On their side, the government negotiators questioned the Maoist ability to maintain control over their cadres, particularly since low-level attacks continued to occur throughout the negotiation period.

Ultimately the talks broke down in late summer 2003 when both sides refused to budge from their opposing positions on the issue of a constituent assembly. On 27 August, Prachanda, the Maoist commander, unilaterally declared the ceasefire over, and Maoist/security force confrontations resumed. Human rights groups have extensively documented the human rights violations committed by both the Maoists and state forces, and the conflict has cost over 8000 lives since 1996.

married women may be reinforced by the logistical demands of the current phase of the 'people's war'. Prior to the state of emergency declared in November 2001 the Maoists maintained independent camps in forested areas and made only occasional visits to villages, but after the declaration of emergency, they were unable to sustain the camps and began to subsist almost entirely on food and lodging provided by village households. In this situation, Maoist cadres are dependent on established householders to support them, and recruiting married women in addition to men would weaken their own network of providers. The cadres' reliance on householders reinscribes traditional divisions of labour, often making the boundaries between domestic and public space much sharper than in "normal" life. Both authors interviewed village women who complained of being unable to carry on routine work outside the house while Maoists were staying with them, another way in which women's existing practice may be further circumscribed by the war.

All of this suggests strongly that despite the rhetoric of social change at the top, in practice at the grassroots, many Maoist cadres maintain traditional notions about marriage. While some women experienced these biases negatively as the imposition of a gender-based discrimination that they had otherwise rarely felt, like the young woman quoted above, other women and their families have learned to manipulate this inconsistency between Maoist ideology and practice for their own protection. Pettigrew interviewed a number of unmarried householder women who falsely told the Maoists that they were in fact married in order to secure gentler treatment in their homes by suggesting that they were under the protection of men capable of taking revenge. We have also documented a return to child marriages—a past practice largely abandoned due to state-sanctioned "development" campaigns against it—to protect younger girls from recruitment. This unintended consequence of the war provides an ironic counterpoint to the wide claims of empowerment through the equally unintended appropriation of "male" jobs by women.

The relationship between women's liberation and class revolution has been an important aspect of Marxist ideological debate

There is less information available about Maoist attitudes towards birth and childcare. The scanty existing material suggests that children remain largely the responsibility of women, and in fact often count against women in terms of their status within party hierarchies. Writing in 1998, Onesto observes that:

"...the women still have primary responsibility for taking care of the children. But this is starting to change slowly. I have met many women comrades with small children, and other people are always taking turns caring for the children—in the 'revolutionary community', everyone is considered an 'auntie' and 'uncle' to the kid. There is not yet organised collective childcare".

This statement ignores the fact that so-called "collective childcare" has always been a fact of Nepali village life, complete with the frequent use of kinship terms such as "uncle" and "auntie" to refer to any adult who does not already have another specific kinship designation. In Pettigrew's research area, collective childcare was institutionalised with the opening of a day care centre in 1999 through a local project unaffiliated with the Maoists.

It seems that not much had changed several years later, when Comrade Parvati describes the situation for party members who are also mothers as follows:

"With the birth of every child she sinks deeper into domestic slavery. In fact many women who have been active in 'people's war' in Nepal are found to complain that having babies is like being under disciplinary action, because they are cut off from the Party activities for a long period".

While an experienced Maoist section commander in the field told Pettigrew that, "if a female cadre becomes pregnant she does not have to fight and after birth also she does not have to fight, rather she can do other support activities", this ideal may not often be achieved in reality. In Pettigrew's field area, informants report seeing pregnant female Maoists amongst groups of combatants. While it is possible that they do not take part in organised attacks, the fact that they remain with the fighting force puts them in vulnerable situations. Some pregnant or post-partum women are unable to keep up with their group and other situations are arranged. Pettigrew documented the story of a village woman who was forced to hide and support for a month an unwell combatant woman who had just given birth. She has also collected several stories of Maoist women giving birth in the forest. Such babies often died despite efforts to keep them alive, or were abandoned, due to lack of food or harsh living conditions. Other Maoist women are known to have left their infants in the care of extended family members while they returned to the battlefield. This can create difficulties for the family, who may be targeted by state forces if such children become known, and the children themselves carry an unavoidable stigma.

This suggests some of the ways in which it may be difficult for Maoist women to return to "normal" life if they choose to leave the party. While Shneiderman has observed male ex-Maoists returning to their villages and resuming their responsibilities as if they had never left, women Maoists may be shunned by their families upon their return. Hisila Yami, one of the few women on the Central Committee of the party, who also happens to be married to Maoist ideologue Baburam Bhattarai, highlights this problem in a 1997 interview: "Sons will be welcomed back with open arms, but for the daughters,

can there be a return? When they become guerrillas, the women set themselves free from patriarchal bonds. How can they go back?" (as cited in Gautam et al). Yami may be correct that women, and particularly caste-Hindu women, who become party members distance themselves from expected social norms in the village, but it seems that in choosing to join the Maoists they subscribe to another set of hierarchical social relations. On one level, this choice is no different from the many others that rural women make every day. It is an option chosen consciously from a range of many possibilities, constrained by specific conditions of ethnicity, religion, economics, individual history and so forth. Yet on another level, it is an irreversible decision. Once a woman becomes known as a Maoist, even if she leaves the party, she may continue to be targeted by state forces and risks imprisonment, torture and death.

Motivations

So why do women make such dangerous choices to join, particularly janajati women, who it would appear have more to lose? Seira Tamang suggests that arenas of agency for janajati women have been circumscribed by the closely intertwined processes of state-building and development at work in Nepal since the 1950s, and that "the specific form of 'traditional Hindu patriarchy' that exists in Nepal today is actually quite 'modern', traceable via legal and developmental activities to the attempts by the male, Hindu, Panchayat elites to construct unifying national narratives with which to legitimate their rule over a heterogeneous populace". The result has been that "modernity" for younger generations of janajati women may in many respects mean a more limited set of choices than their mothers and grandmothers had in the past. Anecdotal evidence from the community in which Shneiderman worked also bears out the hypothesis that marriage practices have become more restrictive, and notions about womanhood more Hindu-influenced over the past two generations. Pettigrew's research with Gurung women shows that acquisition of Nepali language skills over the last two generations has brought women more into the sphere of Hindu influence, creating additional restrictions on their movement and increasing scrutiny of their behaviour. But in spite of widely expressed normative ideas, there continue to be multiple scripts for agency, of which becoming a Maoist is just one.

Instead of seeing janajati women's attraction to the Maoists purely as a result of a 'gender gap', it may in fact be useful to look at it as more of a 'generation gap' that motivates both young women *and* men to participate in a movement which provides a means for them to challenge the legacy of the past generation: an increasingly dysfunctional state in practical terms, but with paradoxically increasing ideological influence that constrains their lives in ways unknown by their parents or grandparents. As Pettigrew has previously argued, "Participation in the Maoist movement enables village youth to realign themselves in relation to the discourse of modernity, which up until now has entirely focused on the town". For many rural individuals who see themselves as marginal to the "good and proper life", as scholar Ernestine McHugh has described it, enjoyed by those with the money to relocate to urban areas, the Maoists' expressions of complex ideological notions in local idiom are compelling, as are other localised strategies which do not assume previous political knowledge, or even literacy. In this regard, becoming a Maoist may provide a powerful alternative national identity within a 'modern' Nepal for those who have otherwise felt excluded from such national imaginings.

Along these lines, Mandira Sharma and Dinesh Prasain suggest in "Gendered Dimensions of the People's War: Some Reflections on the Experiences of Rural Women", that the CPN(M)'s focus on local knowledge and action is one of the keys to their success. This argument signals an important interpretive shift away from trying to identify ethnicity and gender as isolated motivating factors and instead dwells on locality, which may mirror more closely Maoist recruitment strategies. In our analysis, women are likely to join the Maoists for similarly diverse reasons as men within their own communities. The notion that women and men join revolutionary movements for similar reasons is supported by the literature on female combatants in Central America. Karen Kampwirth states that in almost all cases women joined for the same reasons as men from their own community. Disparities between urban and rural standards of living, lack of opportunities and frustration with class and caste-based discrimination may be more pertinent than gender-specific grievances. This insight provides an alternative to approaches that overemphasise essentialised gender or ethnic identities as factors in women's participation, a move which obscures the actual power of Maoist ideology—and both women's and men's real attraction to it. It is important to recall that in traditional Marxist formulations, the 'woman question' is always secondary to class liberation, and many women who support the Maoist ideological platform are likely to cite class issues as their primary motivation.

> Maoist claims of social transformation are premised on the assumption that rural women are universally oppressed and in need of empowerment

Political and personal factors clearly interact in complex and individualised ways to motivate women's action. It is widely recognised that excessive violence by the security forces has prompted many to take up arms. Intimidation by the Maoists and forced recruitment are other important dynamics at play. For some

women, membership in political mass organisations has led to violent police repression, leading them in turn to join the CPN(M)'s military wing. Two female cadres interviewed by Pettigrew reported that membership in Maoist student organisations prompted their arrest, and their subsequent torture in custody led them to join the People's Liberation Army. The role of female torture in prompting women to become militants within the context of the 'people's war' needs further investigation. Literature from Latin America and elsewhere shows that torture is often gender-specific, with the torture of women systematically directed at their female sexual identity through rape and other forms of sexual harassment. Revenge can also be an important motivating factor for women whose kin have been killed by state security forces.

Conclusions

The observations in this article are preliminary. Further ethnographic work on all aspects of the situation is required, and should include research on: the diverse experiences and motivations of women at different levels and positions within the Maoist movement; party structure and gender policy; the psychological impact of militarisation on civilian women; the experience of military service for guerrilla women and the anxieties and fears of the wives and family members of the security forces. Future research can be enhanced by incorporating comparative perspectives that draw on the existing body of work on other insurgencies in Southasia as well as in other parts of the world.

> In the world's only officially Hindu state, dominant—and often state-supported—ideologies towards women are based upon conservative Hindu concepts of femininity

Overall, the emerging picture of Maoist attitudes towards gender relations is contradictory. Despite an ideological commitment to gender equality, there is a clear gap between rhetoric and practice. The positions of the male leadership on women's issues remain largely unstated, and their commitment to bettering women's positions unclear. While senior Maoist women acknowledge some successes, they remain critical of their party's record. It appears that women's liberation is subsumed by the overriding Maoist goal of class struggle, and that in their devotion to this goal, the Maoists in some ways continue to replicate hegemonic Hindu attitudes towards women. Despite claims to have transformed such institutions as marriage, there are widespread intimations that marriage is used as a means of controlling female cadres. Conversely, the lack of attention given to recruiting married women can be considered a reinscription of traditional divisions of labour, as Maoists require householder women to provide a village-based support network. While some women state that they joined the movement in search of more egalitarian gender relations, Maoist women face a complex set of struggles within a party whose understanding of their past, and commitment to their future, is incomplete and ambivalent. The 'people's war' has certainly precipitated new experiences for Nepali women of all backgrounds, whether in learning to use guns for combatant women, or negotiating the fine line of safety between state forces and the Maoists for civilian women. While such shifts cannot be claimed entirely as the intentional achievements of Maoist policy, it is clear that on the individual level of embodied practice they have introduced women to potentially transformative possibilities.

Authors' note

The authors acknowledge Sushma Joshi, Lauren Leve, Bela Malik, Anne de Sales, Manjushree Thapa and Mark Turin for their insightful comments and contributions to this article. We also thank the participants of the panel "Trajectories of Socialism in Contemporary Asia" at the 2003 American Anthropological Association conference in Chicago, USA, and at Social Science Baha in Kathmandu where earlier versions of this paper were presented.

The discussion here is based on both primary ethnographic material and published secondary sources in English. Due to time and space constraints, the present article does not incorporate Nepali language materials, but these constitute an important aspect of our ongoing research. We particularly welcome commentaries that refer to articles and reports currently unavailable in English. It has been difficult to conduct in-depth research on the conflict in rural Nepal, particularly since the state of emergency was declared in November 2001. Foreign visitors are closely monitored in Maoist-controlled areas, and the constant potential for violence between the Maoists and the state forces can make extended visits unsafe. Both authors conducted previous long-term research in rural Nepal before the insurgency escalated, and later returned to their original field sites to collect data about the conflict. Our material spans several distinct locations in western, central and eastern Nepal (we have chosen not to name specific villages or districts), and was gathered from 1999 to 2003 on a series of short field visits under constrained conditions. We also recognise that Maoist policy and practice differs depending upon the stage of struggle at each place and time. For these reasons, the localised data upon which we base our analysis is in many cases suggestive rather than definitive.

Agriculture
Towards a Grey Revolution

The message from the Government of India is becoming clear: farmers get out of agriculture and make way for the contractors.

by ***Devinder Sharma***

The green revolution is part of India's history. The grey revolution is the future. At least that is what the blueprint for agricultural reforms, authored by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, seems hell-bent on unleashing through Green Revolution II.

The agricultural reforms that are being introduced in the name of increasing food production and minimising the price risks that farmers continue to be faced with, will in fact culminate in the destruction of the productive capacity of existing farmlands and will most definitely lead to the further marginalisation of farming communities. Encouraging contract farming, future trading in agricultural commodities, land leasing, forming land-sharing companies, allotment of homestead-cum-garden plots, direct procurement of farm commodities and setting up of special purchase centres, as envisaged by the blueprint will drive a majority of the 600 million farmers out of subsistence agriculture.

Coming soon to a farm near you.

The consequent increase in migration from the rural areas into urban centres will magnify the implications of all the shocking calculations that have been computed so far. The World Bank had in 1995 estimated that the number of people migrating from the rural to the urban centres in India by the year 2010 would be equal to twice the combined population of the UK, France and Germany. With the fundamental vision of Green Revolution II unfurled, New Delhi seems determined to compound the socio-economic chaos. Migration from rural areas is sure to multiply several times in the years to come, thereby creating an unprecedented political crisis.

In a country where 80 per cent of the farmers own less than two hectares of land, and only 5 percent of farmers have more than four hectares, the biggest challenge is to ensure that agriculture can be made more attractive for these small and marginal farmers. At the same time, within the green revolution areas—primarily in the Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka—agriculture faces a severe crisis of sustainability owing to second-generation environmental effects. Intensive farming has destroyed the ability of the land to produce enough food, and the mining of ground water has pushed the water table to a precarious level. The green revolution has already turned sour. As a result, the Punjab and Haryana are fast heading towards desertification—a process that results in the inability to sustain the production levels achieved at the height of the green revolution.

Although the land holding size is diminishing, the answer does not lie in allowing private companies to move in by way of contract farming that is aimed at reconsolidating operational holdings with a view to increasing productivity. Private companies enter agricultural business with the specific objective of garnering more profits. These companies, if the global experience is any indication, bank upon still more intensive farming practices, draining the soil of nutrients and sucking ground water in a couple of years, and rendering fertile lands almost barren after four to five years of operation. The once fertile and verdant landscape will fast turn grey. Once this threshold is reached, these companies will then simply hand over the barren and unproductive land to the farmers who leased them out and move to devastate another fertile piece of land.

The replenishment of ground water resources should be an essential parameter for any meaningful agricultural reform. Unfortunately, at a time when excessive withdrawals of underground water have already become a major political issue, the cropping pattern continues to play havoc with the irrigation poten-

tial. The lessons from the other contract farming models are only too apparent. Sugarcane farmers, who follow a system of cane bonding with the mills (where the quantity of output to be purchased is determined beforehand with the mill), actually were drawing 240 cubic metres of water every year, which is five times more than what wheat and rice requires on an average. Rose cultivation that was introduced in Karnataka a few years back, required 212 inches of groundwater consumption in every hectare. Contract farming will therefore further exploit whatever remains of the ground water resources.

Legal recognition of land leasing offers no protection to farmers. Once the productive capacity of the land has been destroyed what can the farmer be expected to reap thereafter. Knowing this, the government is talking of homestead-cum-garden plots for those who lease out their lands. The objective is simple: to pacify those who question the impact of contract farming on household food security. Agriculture Minister Rajnath Singh on the other hand is not even aware of the basic objective behind his government's support for contract farming. He says that these companies will only be there for helping the farmers in marketing. What he probably does not know is that nowhere in the world are private companies involved with contract farming just to help the farmers find a marketing outlet.

Contract farming has done irreparable damage to agriculture in countries like the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Argentina and Mexico.

The contractors

Already contract farming has done irreparable damage to agriculture in countries like the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Argentina and Mexico. Punjab's and Andhra Pradesh's foray into contract farming therefore is a misadventure whose consequences will come back to haunt them in the future. It is actually accentuating the sustainability crisis on the farm front by destroying whatever remains of the farmland's productive capacity with more intensive and destructive farming systems. The resulting monoculture also destroys the agricultural biodiversity in the region thereby affecting sustainability. In simple words, contract farming is the modern version of "slash and burn" agriculture (jhum cultivation) that the tribals follow in the Northeast of India. There they practise it because of environmental constraints, whereas now private industries have embarked on this trajectory for commercial motive alone.

Other policy initiatives by the Ministry of Agriculture, such as allowing direct procurement of farm commodities, setting up of special markets for private companies to mop up the produce and to set up land share companies, are all directed at the unrestrained entry of multinational corporations into the Indian farm sector. Coupled with the introduction of genetically modified crops, and unlimited credit support for agribusiness companies, the focus is to strengthen the ability of the companies to take over and control the food chain. Significantly, the state governments have opposed the agricultural reforms on these very grounds. This response is, in a sense, similar to what happened two year ago, when the state governments had opposed the government's plan to decentralise the food procurement system, terming it an effort to dismantle the procurement structure.

Agribusiness companies are in reality hostile to farmers, the appearance of synergies between the two notwithstanding. Nowhere in the world have agribusinesses worked in tandem with farmers. Even in North America and Europe, where agriculture is supported and sustained through beneficial government policy, agribusiness companies have managed to push farmers out of agriculture. As a result, today there are only 900,000 farming families left in the United States. In the 15 countries of the European Union, the number of farmers has come down to 7 million. The underlying message is crystal clear: farmers should get out of agriculture. In India, the same prescription will lead to an unforeseen catastrophe.

The plan to have farmers collectively mobilise land resources to facilitate access to modern technology and professional management in the farm sector, a concept being floated in the name of land sharing companies, is aimed at corporate control of the farmland. In India, except for a handful of cases, farmers do not have the ability to pool land resources unless backed by a private company. In other words, land sharing is another name for contract farming. All such experiments will force farmers to shift from staple foods to cash crops like cut flowers, tomatoes, strawberries, melons and so on, which do not meet the food security needs at the macro level. At the same time, the intensive nature of cash crop cultivation, requiring more external inputs, will do more damage to the environment.

The flawed understanding of harsh ground realities leads policy makers to the misguided belief that private companies can provide the much-needed impetus for increasing food production. If private companies could actually do the job on their own, there surely would have been no need for the first green revolution, let alone a second one. If private companies really had the capacity and the inclination to provide farmers with income support and an assured market, there would have been no need to set up the Commission on Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) to work out the cost of production for farmers. Likewise, would there have been any need to establish the Food Corporation of India (FCI) to mop up the food surplus? It is a given that private trade has historically been exploiting farmers at the time of harvest by giving them low prices. Unless a change of mindset has taken place unbeknownst, pri-

vate trade cannot be expected to rescue the farming community out of a sudden and new-found magnanimity of outlook. Their motives become starkly obvious and clear in the context of the sustained lobbying to dismantle the public food procurement system of the government. Without minimum support and a guaranteed floor price, farmers abandoned to the guiles of the market and those who control it through their state-supported monopoly will be forced to enter in distress into contract with the large companies. It does not require any great capacity for prophecy or foreknowledge to predict the outcome.

The current inefficiency in the food procurement system is not the fault of farmers. The inability of the government to extend the purchase centres to areas beyond the Punjab and Haryana, is again not the fault of farmers. Instead of coming to the rescue of farmers by setting up purchase centres in other parts of the country, the government, on the grounds of market-driven efficiencies, has decided to dismantle altogether the system of procurement. Farmers are being forced to face not only the vagaries of the monsoon but also the ruthlessuess of an unfair market. Already, among those who opted out of the food procurement system and went in for cash crops are thousands upon thousands who have either chosen the drastic option of committing suicide or are resorting to the pathetic alternative of selling their body organs. For all practical purposes they only have the choice between killing themselves instantly or killing themselves in instalments. The number of people to whom the market offers only such wretched choices, while the shopping malls bulge with brand options for the consuming classes of urban India, is bound to swell in the years to come. And like the governments of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, which are planning to send teams of psychiatrists to consul and offer life-affirming advise to despairing farmers, the Ministry of Agriculture in New Delhi will do well to think in terms of setting up plant clinics throughout the country, staffed by faith healers and counsellors instead of agricultural scientists.

The Future

But even that thoughtful if pointless gesture is not on the cards. To farmers in such pitiably reduced circumstances, the ministry has contrived the sophisticated alternative of future trading. In a country where only 43 per cent of the rural households have electricity, and where the average land holding size is too low, to expect farmers to engage in future trading is no more than a clever ploy to deprive them of state support and ask them to fend for themselves. Future trading requires a level of understanding of demand, price movements, and market forecasting that is simply beyond the scope of most farmers in their current condition. As many as 60 per cent percent of the farmers are so much beyond the pale of the institutionalised support system that they are dependent on private money-lending sources to meet their credit requirement and most of them cannot identify a spurious pesticide from a genuine one. These are the kind of people the government expects to comprehend all the complicated nuances of future trading.

Like the 'farmers' who shifted to the cultivation of cut flowers to feed the export trade, we are likely to see a new breed of educated traders take over the reins. It is an unfortunate fact that a majority of those who ventured into cut flower farming were not farmers but businessmen. The National Multi-Commodity Exchange (NMCE) that has been set up in New Delhi recently, and which claims to have had a cumulative turnover of Rs 40,000 crore by November, 2003, has, so far, only 214 traders participating in its network covering 48 locations. Sadly for the ministry, farmers are conspicuously absent from future trading.

Crop diversification from staple foods to cash crops is not only an environmentally unsound practice but is also economically suicidal

Future trading or no trading, farmers by the millions in any case are gradually abandoning agriculture in search of menial jobs in urban centres. Agriculture has not only become unremunerative but also unproductive. The process of corporate control of agriculture that will accompany the socio-economic change in the demographic composition of agrarian society, will destroy the ability of the land to sustain harvests. Crop diversification from staple foods to cash crops is not only an environmentally unsound practice but is also economically suicidal. But in the brave new world of corporate remedies, empirical proof is not sufficient to dissuade the studious theoreticians who manage the globe. Perhaps that is the reason why the World Bank has so strenuously been advocating for over a decade now the transition to commercialised agrarian monocultures. And in submitting to the coercive recommendations of the World Bank, the new agricultural reforms on the anvil will push more and more farmers of India to the cities. Migration from rural to urban centres is turning into a deluge that the city cannot withstand. Complementing the socio-economic change in village demographics is the stress on urban employment capacity and the imbalance in the employment profile. Most rural immigrants end up as rickshaw pullers or daily wage labourers.

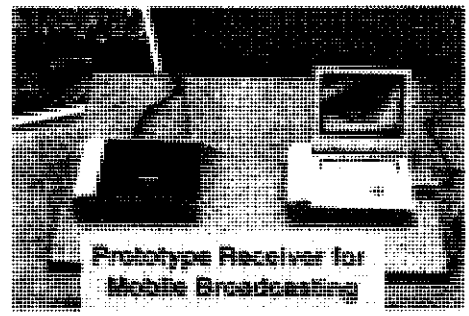
For the techno-managerial class of India, farmers have become a burden. They are to be displaced from their roots because the market savvy elite of the country finds it too irksome to deal with the burden. The petulance of the affluent is now expressing itself in the pauperisation of the impoverished.

Mocking the digital divide

by **Teresa Joseph**

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva from 10 to 12 December 2003 was the first international summit to focus on the global information and communication system. Ironically, the presence of 54 heads of government at the summit, including contingents from all the countries of Southasia, failed to attract much attention in the region's mass media. With a total of 10,808 participants at the summit and 176 countries signing the official declaration, the organisers hailed it as a historic step to bridge the digital divide. The reality, however, is more complex.

The WSIS traces its roots to 1998 when the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) resolved to take steps to place the prospect of holding such a summit on the agenda of the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination. In 2001, the UN General Assembly asked the ITU to assume leadership for the preparation of the WSIS. According to the terms of the UN General Assembly resolution, the aim of the WSIS was to bring together governments, non-governmental organisations, civil society entities, industry leaders and media representatives to shape the future of the global information society. The WSIS was officially aimed at harnessing the potential of information and communication technology (ICT) to promote the development goals of the UN General Assembly. It was to frame policies as well as practical measures to bridge the digital divide between rich and poor countries. A pre-summit press release stated that the WSIS would focus on how to close the 'digital divide' in key areas of connectivity and computerisation.



Prescription for the developing world.

The summit in Geneva was the culmination of the first leg of a two-phase process which began over two years ago, involving international conferences at the regional level as well as preparatory committee meetings at the global level. The two years of preparatory meetings concluded in November 2003, with the advanced capitalist countries and third world countries holding conflicting views on how to bridge the 'digital divide' (The second phase of WSIS is scheduled to be held in Tunis from 16 to 18 November 2005). Political wrangling threatened the success of the summit to the extent that, as a last ditch effort, an extra preparatory session was called immediately preceding the summit to salvage the situation. The major points of discord included issues of funding, internet governance, the role of communication media in society, the limits to intellectual property rights and issues relating to copyright and free software.

The question of funding was a major cause for controversy. Senegal, leading an African delegation, had suggested that the United Nations develop a "digital solidarity fund" to finance IT projects in third world countries. Other suggestions included a token contribution of one dollar from every purchase of a computer software package or network equipment to the fund, taxing international telephone calls and the commercial use of the radio frequency spectrum. The United States and other Western countries, however, opposed any suggestion of UN involvement, preferring to channel aid for such projects through existing development schemes, or by establishing an environment in which the private sector could develop the needed infrastructure—for instance through deregulation. The European Union also proposed a "digital solidarity agenda" which, however, did not include any commitment to funding.

Another contentious topic that came up for discussion was internet governance. Governance of the internet includes issues like spam (unsolicited advertisements and unwanted messages), cybernetic crimes, security, taxes, privacy issues, etc. However, the issue became reduced to the question of Domain Name Systems (DNS) and Internet Protocol Space allocation. The internet is currently managed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is formally a private non-profit California based corporation, created in response to a call by US government officials. In June 1998, the US Department of Commerce and an inter-agency task force responded to concerns about DNS with the 'Statement of Policy on the Privatisation of Internet Domain Naming System'. This called for the creation of a private non-profit corporation to take over the DNS. Soon an international group, meeting in secret, formed ICANN as a non-profit corporation with an international board of directors.

It is ICANN that manages the Internet Protocol Space allocation, domain names and root server system functions, without which the internet cannot function. It

does not, however, have control over content or security. ICANN is popular with the US and the EU owing to its free market orientation and commitment to the values of commerce and free speech, and more importantly, the fact that the US itself maintains a direct influence over ICANN's activities.

The very fact that the US is basically in control of the internet emerged to be a matter of concern with the international community, particularly in view of the lack of accountability and transparency of ICANN. There is also a perception among various countries that effective control by the US of the country code system and the generic top level domain names restricts each country's sovereign right over its own space on the internet. Consequently, there emerged a strong movement, particularly among third world countries for international control over the internet, with calls for a recognised international body to take over its management. Supporters of global governance contended that the internet should be administered by a governmental body with uniform standards for security and better access for poorer countries. Such efforts were led by China and Brazil, which called for the UN to regulate the internet, and were endorsed by Syria, Egypt, Vietnam, South Africa, Russia, India and Saudi Arabia.

Kofi Annan and Yoshio Utsumi at WSIS.

Western countries, however, opposed any such move on the grounds that this would give more power to governments and would politicise technical decisions, which could affect the free flow of information. Defending the status quo, ICANN's president, Paul Twomey, argued that the net represented a partnership between various stakeholders, of which world governments were only a single component, others being the business, engineering and technical communities.

A major obstruction to the spread of information technology and particularly computers to the third world is the high cost of basic software like the Microsoft Windows package. However, a switchover to free and open source software like Linux, which can be updated or modified by anyone, helped by a global community of programmers, would ease the financial burden in this regard. Here again, differences of opinion reflected a North-South divide, with allegations that the delegates from the United States and the European Union were spokesmen for proprietary software. However, the draft for the WSIS declaration itself saw a shift, in principle, from an outright "support" for open-source software for third world countries to merely "promoting awareness" about "different software models, and the means of their creation, including proprietary, open-source and free software".

The other controversies in the two years of conferencing prior to the summit were also resolved in last minute efforts before the WSIS. An understanding was reached on putting off decisions on issues regarding funding and internet governance. The final declaration of principles titled "Building an Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millennium", signed at Geneva stressed the importance of the private sector in the development of the internet and called on the UN Secretary General to set up a working group on internet governance, incorporating governments, the private sector and civil society to frame proposals for the governance of the internet by 2005.

As regards funding, the plan of action advocated that developing countries increase their efforts to attract private investments for ICT through the creation of conducive investment environments. A review of the adequacy of existing financial mechanisms by a task force, under the auspices of the UN Secretary General, should be complete by December 2004, and submitted to the second phase of WSIS in 2005, where the feasibility of creating a voluntary Digital Solidarity Fund is to be considered.

The official declaration is in fact seen to strongly support neo-liberal policies and with the global media system being intertwined with the neo-liberal global capitalist economy, there are allegations that talk of digital divide and knowledge dissemination is used to justify the continued use of information to protect and advance the interests of global capital. Eduardo Doryan, the Special Representative of the World Bank to the UN, addressing the WSIS delegates, stated that experiences over the past 10 years have shown that national policies fostering effective competition for inclusive access are the most powerful instruments to reduce the digital divide. He emphasised the World Bank's commitment to supporting such efforts so as to deepen and broaden reform and development pertaining to this sector. A memorandum of understanding was also signed between the World Bank and ITU. The ITU Secretary-General, Yoshio Utsumi, observed that, "These partnerships are important first steps toward achieving the goals of the summit, which aim to ensure that the benefits of ICTs are available to all, not just a privileged few".

David Gross, the US State Department's Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy and leader of the US delegation to the summit, pointed out that the US believed that developing countries needed to focus first on improving the rule of law and their commitment to free-market economics before launching into internet projects.

As critics point out, the WSIS was clearly not just about making IT available to poorer countries, but also about selling them equipment and software, privatisation of national communication industries, investment and infrastructure, and maintaining power over the internet. Allegations of the summit helping to serve

the interests of the telecommunication industry appear to be supported by the introductory paragraph of the Plan of Action, which calls for advancing the achievement of internationally agreed development goals by promoting the use of ICT based products, networks, services and applications. WSIS appears to have been an opportunity for massive corporate sales promotion to the third world. The acronym ICT4D has conventionally been used to refer to the use of information and communication technology for development, through better governance (e-governance), more transparency and easier access to information on government policies, programmes and performance, and for ensuring better social services. The ICT4D hall at the summit, however, resembled a trade show, featuring stands from various corporates demonstrating their latest technology.

Hopes that WSIS would address a wide range of information and communication issues received a major setback. The digital divide is merely a symptom of the inequality that already exists between the advanced capitalist countries and those of the third world. Building a people-centred, inclusive and development oriented information society cannot be achieved by focusing merely on providing the countries of the third world with the technical means of participating in the digital revolution. Of more significance in this limited context is the need to create the necessary conditions to facilitate the effective use of ICT. Prospects for the development of the marginalised and poorer sections of society through access to new information technologies appear remote, given the basic obstacles like access to education, electricity supply, and cost of equipment. UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in his opening address stressed that the so called 'digital divide' is actually several divides, a technological divide in infrastructure, a language divide with most content being in English, a gender divide for women in many countries, and a commercial divide where e-commerce reaches only some. In countries like India, it is not only technical rigidities, but also socio-economic distinctions of class, caste, gender, education, rural-urban differences etc, which limit communication. As the information society relies on skill and knowledge networks, with the existing inequalities there is every possibility of entrenching the gap between the different sections of society.

The so called 'digital divide' is actually several divides, a technological divide in infrastructure, a language divide, a gender divide, and a commercial divide

The Geneva phase of WSIS had in reality witnessed bland statements by political leaders on the potential of the internet and the need to expand its benefits to all. The ambitious calls to expand the benefits of IT to the poorer countries of the world did not include any specific detail as to the measures to be taken towards this end. The separate declaration issued by civil society participants reflected their disillusionment with the WSIS. Civil society participants who had been invited to work alongside governments and the private sector maintained that they had been marginalised and excluded from meetings. The last round of preparatory talks was totally closed to civil society. Ultimately civil society delegates were only able to prevent a backsliding on such issues as human rights and freedom of expression. Inclusion of references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the final documents of the WSIS had been strongly opposed by some governments. Freedom of expression, particularly, turned out to be a contentious issue with countries like China, Egypt and Vietnam being reluctant to see the right to freedom of expression enshrined in the WSIS declaration. On the other hand the United States and the European Union perceive free speech to be a fundamental principle of the information society. The final declaration, however, affirmed Article 19 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. The disillusionment of civil society groups with the process found expression in the declaration "Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs", which focuses on the themes of social justice and people-centred sustainable development, and was in effect a critique of the techno-centric vision of the official declaration.

WSIS could have been an opportunity to raise critical issues regarding the larger questions of information and communication, and the underlying causes for the digital divide, as well as issues regarding media ownership, structure, content and access. Weaker sections of society are becoming more and more marginalised, with fewer programmes covering their concerns and lesser opportunities to make their voices heard. However, official preparatory processes, as well as civil society consultations focused largely on computers and the internet, ignoring the enormous implications of mass media for society. In fact, there had even been divisions on whether or not the media itself is a stakeholder in the information society. It is also interesting to note that there were no references to the earlier struggles for a New International Information Order (NIIO) by third world countries. This had-once upon a time been a part of the broader struggle to address the global economic inequality, which was seen to have been a legacy of colonialism. This campaign, particularly within UNESCO, gradually faded out in the midst of political conflicts and controversies, and the onslaught of globalisation. As far as the third world is concerned, WSIS - Geneva seems to have been a re-enactment of those summits and conferences of the 1970s and 80s which focused on NIIO.

Ironically, the mass media in Southasia for its part, seemed oblivious to the WSIS itself, let alone the wider questions involved. ∆

A Fatal Love

by **Suketu Mehta**

To understand what happened in Kargil you have to go back half a century, to the colossal and premature sundering of the Subcontinent known as Partition. The men who killed each other over Tiger Hill and Drass and Batalik were dealing with the unfinished business of Partition. I have no personal experience of Partition; my family is Gujarati, from Calcutta and Kenya, and I have no relatives in Pakistan or Bangladesh. My own partition was at the age of 14, when I immigrated with my family to New York. I am a novelist. What I try to do is to get to the struggling human being underneath the massive foot of history. The greatest scholar of Partition was a fiction writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, a man who died in Lahore mourning his separation from a whore named Bombay. "Uper di gur gur di mung dal...", chants the madman in "Toba Tek Singh". Fiction writers and lunatics have their own truth. Our enemies are the writers of school textbooks. As the Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert said: "for anybody else, not to tell the truth can be a tactical manoeuvre. But a writer who is not telling the truth — is lying".

Anxious crowds at the time of Partition.

My family borders are not subcontinental; they are international. But Partition, like the Big Bang, has echoes that will forever permeate the universe of people I write about. In my work, in my fiction as well as in my non-fiction, I have been looking at riots, at communal conflict, in Banaras, Punjab, and especially Bombay. Most of this conflict has its roots in Partition "batwara", which in different circumstances could also have meant "sharing". It is a family quarrel, as when three brothers live side by side in the same house, walling up the rooms, always conscious of the others in the rooms beyond. Kargil is only the latest battle in that endless property dispute; the brothers have come to blows in the street. There will be more to come, before the children grow up and say to their fathers and uncles: Enough.

There are millions of Partition stories throughout the subcontinent, a body of lore that is infrequently recorded in print or on tape, and rarely passed on to the next generation. All over the map of Southasia, there is an entire generation of people who have been made poets, philosophers, and storytellers by their experiences during Partition. Any person over 55 or 60 in Delhi or Amritsar or Lahore has stories to tell of that period, even if they were not themselves dislocated then. And for those who have been displaced from their birthplaces against their will and at an early age, the impression of home is all the more vivid and sharp; it haunts their dream-lives, and their minds are the battleground between the desire to forget and the need to remember.

In the summer of '97, I travelled to the Wagah border, and then on to Lahore. It was through Wagah and the nearby town of Atari that most of the Punjabi refugees came through, crossing east to India or west to Pakistan. It was here, in a dingy tourist hotel room on the border, that two 70 year-old Sikh men, Santokh Singh and Harjeet Singh, told me what they did one afternoon 50 years ago, when their minds went mad.

One day in August 1947, Santokh Singh said, an old Sikh man in a village near Atari, out on a walk to buy milk, was murdered by some Muslims. Santokh Singh was a student then, a "leader-type", as he refers to himself. Ten Sikh men gathered to take revenge. Before they went on their expedition, they went to the gurudwara and took an oath not to kill or molest women and children. Then Santokh Singh put on his armoured vest. He took a revolver. They went to the Muslim part of the village. One member of their band grabbed a Muslim woman, but he was reminded of his oath by the others.

Santokh Singh did not tell me what happened next. "My mind went mad for one day", is all he would say. "We took revenge here, they took revenge there", he shrugged. He did not seem to be much affected now by whatever he did then. But on the day after they took their revenge, Santokh Singh's father asked him why he, a strapping 21 year-old man, looked so sad. He had been watching the Muslim women and children going over the border, people he had grown up with. "Mere jigar ke tukde jaa rahe hain", he said. "Parts of my heart are going across".

The next morning, he brought along a friend. Harjeet Singh was another of that band of ten men. He looked at a map in the lobby of the hotel. It was a large map of undivided Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Punjab.

"Even now the heart...", he started saying, and his eyes reddened, his voice thickened. He was a thin, dignified man who has done well with his wheat and rice farms. He has a daughter in the US, and a son in Toronto, and has travelled there, marvelling at the friendship between Canada and the US, the free trade over the border.

Harjeet Singh repeated, as a prelude, what Santokh Singh had stressed. "When the old man was killed, nobody could hold back. But we didn't touch any woman or child".

"There was much junoon (madness). It lasted 15 to 20 days. When we heard that injured bodies, dead bodies were coming in the trains people were going crazy. Then when the old man was killed, nobody could hold back". They got guns, swords, spears, scythes. Then they went to the Muslim village. "It lasted just a few hours. At most two people killed the old man, so we should only have looked for them". Harjeet Singh knew some of the people in the village — they were his classmates. He was looking out for them, to save them, but they were not there. The Sikhs rounded up the Muslim men, and gathered the women and children to one side."We killed one third of the people in that village. About 50 to 60 men were killed in those few hours. The women and children were put to one side but they were watching; they were screaming. In some places there was fighting, but they weren't begging for mercy — by that time everyone knew that asking for mercy was meaningless, there wasn't much being said".

Harjeet Singh was weeping profusely by now, his handkerchief going now to one eye, now to the other. It was obvious that he was saying some things for the first time; at this point, he was not even talking directly to me. Every journalist knows that this is when the really important stories come out, when the person you are interviewing stops talking to you, and is really explaining things to himself. "I don't get angry on anybody else but myself. I did not sleep all that night, I did not stop thinking about it for a single minute. That's the worst memory for me".

What happened to the survivors, I asked him.

"Then they walked to Pakistan. I've never met any one of them after that — not even my classmates, the ones who got saved".

How does a man live with having murdered his neighbours? Harjeet Singh's way of atonement has been through a constant searching out of the 'other', a series of highly emotional meetings with his former enemies. He has crossed the border no fewer than three times since then, a feat whose magnitude can be appreciated by any Indian trying to get a visa at the Pakistani embassy in Delhi. On his trips, he tries to meet his former neighbours, the Muslims from Atari whom he had a hand in driving out.

The first time Harjeet Singh went to Pakistan was 1956, and he went with his wife. An entire convoy of vehicles came to the border to receive the Atari group, 25 to 30 trucks, five to seven buses, cars. They were the Muslims who had been driven out. The group from Atari had to stay at each of their houses in turn, and nobody took money for lunch or dinner, or for petrol. But on the 1956 trip, he says, "The younger generation looked at us with a certain amount of hatred".

Harjeet Singh's wife's village was in Pakistan. When they went back, he said, "They knew I was the son-in-law of the family; they just held me and burst out crying". He met the people who had worked in the household of his wife's family. "Whatever money they had, they just emptied their pockets and gave me". He was, after all, the returning son-in-law. After all these years, he says, "my wife was still a daughter of the village".

In 1980, one of Harjeet Singh's cousins went to Pakistan, and Harjeet asked him to look up his best friend before Partition, a Muslim who was so close to him that he would eat a chicken that Harjeet had cooked, even if it was not halal. The Muslim friend received the cousin with great hospitality, and then asked him a favour. Would he bring Harjeet Singh to the border? He wanted to meet him, just once.

The cousin went back to Atari and passed on the message. Harjeet Singh went to the border at the appointed time. "All the security men said, you must be mad. You can't meet". Across the fence, Harjeet Singh, after 33 years, saw his friend, who rushed forward, only to be pushed back by the Pakistani security men far beyond the fence. Harjeet saw that his friend was straining against them, weeping. At first Harjeet turned back, but a relative who knew the soldiers intervened on his behalf. The Indian major talked to his Pakistani counterpart. So Harjeet Singh went forward with two of his youngest children beyond the fence and his friend came forward to meet him. They embraced each other; they were overwhelmed and there was no point in talking. What could be said? How does one condense the highlights of three decades? His friend was crying, but Harjeet Singh was determined not to. Harjeet Singh apologised — for not having brought all of his children to show his friend. "I said I'm sorry. My two girls are married in different villages; I did not have time to get them all here to show you".

Then the soldiers separated the two men and his friend went back into Pakistan and Harjeet Singh started walking slowly back into India. He was stopped by agents from the Intelligence Bureau, and they asked him, "Who were you talking to?" "To my brother", Harjeet Singh answered. How can that be, they demanded, he was Sikh, the man who came to meet him was Muslim. "I said that is exactly what I mean, he is my brother. He has land on that side, I have land on this side, that's why we're separated". The Intelligence men said, "Don't fool us". I said, "I have told you what I told you, I have said what I have said, he is my brother".

Again, in 1982, Harjeet Singh crossed the border. He went with his daughter to a village on the other side

where a group of Muslim brothers from Atari had settled. Some of them were wrestlers; they had gone there and become sweet-sellers and made three good houses. But now there was only one of the brothers left. Harjeet Singh and his daughter went to the old man's house for dinner, and talked with the sweet-merchant's entire family late into the night about the village. If the border were opened up tomorrow, said the old man to Harjeet Singh, his children would drive there, because they had cars. "But", said the old man, "I will still beat them because I will run so fast". In the morning when they woke up the old man said, "I am going to tell you something...", and then all his grandchildren rushed forward and interrupted him. "We are going to tell you what he was going to say. He will say I had a dream last night that I was in Atari. Uncle, every morning when he wakes up he says he has met this person in Atari, that person in Atari". This was in 1982, 35 years after the old man had left his village. At least in his waking life.

It is a common desire among those displaced by Partition to make the return crossing, to try to go home again. The Pakistani writer Intizar Husain, whom I met in Lahore, told me that for 30 years he had tried to get a visa to go back to India, particularly to the village he was born in, Dibai, near Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. Although he has been living in Lahore since 1947, most of his fiction is set in Dibai. Like the old sweet-seller from Atari, he had also been having a recurring dream. "I go there, to my home, and am wandering among the houses. Those lanes, those palaces. The terraces where we flew kites", and then he described his house for me, constructing it lovingly in the air with his hands. "The Muslim quarter began at our house. The terraces of the Hindu houses were so close that at Diwali time I would reach across, steal oil lamps from their terraces, and bring them home".

30 years later, at the invitation of a literary gathering in Delhi, Husain was able to get a visa to go back. He was in Aligarh, and then made an impulsive decision to revisit Dibai, which his visa did not allow him to do. He persuaded an Indian friend to drive him to the village. On the way, he saw the trucks all along the road, the phantom convoys of Partition. As they came into the village, he could not believe how much it had changed. There used to be a pilgrim's hostel. Where was the hostel? Where was the hospital? Everything had become a bazaar. He looked for his house, but the geography of home had changed. His companion said, "Why don't you ask someone?" "I said I have come to my own town. I am not going to ask someone else for directions". Husain got out of the car and wandered the bazaars but could not locate his birthplace, and something in him would not let him ask a stranger for guidance in the territory of his own childhood, his own dreams. At last, he got back in the car, and drove back to Aligarh. He never found his childhood home. He has never gone back.

I asked Husain why there were no museums, no memorials to that time. He responded, "It is good that the killings are not memorialised, that there are no pictures of those times". I found this curious, coming from a writer whose entire body of work deals with "those times". What tormented him, he seemed to be saying, was his generation's burden alone. What use would it be to rake up the past, to keep harping on the atrocities of Partition? If the current generation could only forget what his generation went through, then maybe they could start talking to each other.

Beware of the past: turn back to look at it and the one you love will be cast into hell, like Eurydice, or you will be turned into a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife. The past is a dangerous place, for it is where home lies.

50 years is a long time to live with trauma, and a great many of the survivors have found that the only way to maintain their mental balance is to forgive the aggressors.

I respectfully differ with Intizar Husain. I think there should be museums, memorials, a supreme subcontinental storytelling. I think that recounting the atrocities of Partition might have the opposite effect from that feared by Husain: it will inoculate us against repeating them. It is interesting to compare the experiences of Holocaust survivors with Partition survivors. The world has come around to the notion that the great crime that happened in Europe in the '40s is worthy of minute examination — a tidal wave of films, books, and television shows drive home the point, almost to exhaustion. But it barely has a notion of what was happening at the same time in Southasia. Among the Partition survivors, I have found surprisingly little bitterness against the perpetrators. 50 years is a long time to live with trauma, and a great many of the survivors have found that the only way to maintain their mental balance is to forgive the aggressors. I was struck by the fact that many of the people telling me their stories were telling them to someone outside the family for the very first time, and they were astonished that anybody would be interested.

The strongest need to tell is not that of the victims of violence; it is that of the perpetrators. What did we do to each other? Examine your hands: they are covered in blood long dried. Who made us do this? We can't just blame the conqueror. "I don't get angry on anybody else except myself", Harjeet Singh said to me in that hotel room in Wagah. It is an existential burden. Which one of us is capable of killing? What authority are we submitting to, whose orders do we obey when we kill?

Harjeet Singh did not explicitly say that he keeps travelling to Pakistan to atone for what he did. But when

he told me his story, weeping, wailing, it was evident that it was in the nature of a confessional. In drawing out such narratives, I have found strong initial resistance; but once the telling begins, it is nearly impossible to stop it. It comes out in a flood. The perpetrators were not professional murderers or rapists. They were village folk, by and large. Farmers, grocers, neighbours. In Punjab they call it the "junoon". It was a period suspended in time, separate from what came before and what came after. It was a mad time, and madness is their excuse for what they did. "Uper di gur gur di mung dal...". They have lived the past 50 years with the moral responsibility for what they did. At an individual level, these human beings who murdered other human beings are perfect fictional characters. Fiction, as Faulkner said, is about the human heart in conflict with itself.

For 50 years the telling has stopped. A whole generation did not want to talk about it to their sons and daughters; a whole generation did not want to hear about it. The telling is for the grandchildren. Now there is a generation of grandchildren in all three countries that is coming to power, and they have the luxury of forgiving, a luxury their parents did not enjoy.

But there are two competing forces in the telling: the grandparents and the governments. The governments have their own ideas of the story, and they have the power of the state to spread their version, through textbooks. School textbooks on both sides, written as always by professional liars, gloss quickly over Partition, preferring to concentrate on the struggle for independence, a much more noble chapter in the Subcontinent's history. When Partition is dealt with at all, it is portrayed as a massacre of our people by their people. The way we gained independence is something to be proud of, an example to other nations. What followed is our shared secret shame. But surely Partition, the splitting up of the Subcontinent and the mass transfer of populations, was a far more important historical event than independence from a foreign power which ruled parts of the region for less than 200 years, an eyeblink in Southasian history.

The history of Partition and the independence struggle, points out Husain, gets distorted in both countries. "I was seeing episodes of the freedom struggle on Indian television. I was surprised to see that Maulana Muhammad Ali, Shaukat Ali were completely absent. Jinnah also. Why had they disappeared?" The results of this willed amnesia are apparent in a poll of urban youth aged 18 to 25, commissioned in May 1997 by the newsmagazine *Outlook*. When asked which state was most affected by Partition, 59 per cent said Kashmir; only 39 per cent identified Punjab. When asked to identify places associated with Partition violence, the majority (53 per cent) picked Jallianwala Bagh.

So the child growing up in Lahore or Delhi or Dhaka shuttles between two tellings: what he is instructed at school, which he will have to learn by rote and regurgitate in the examinations, and what his old grandmother tells him in the last room of the house about the days of the junoon.

Who is the telling directed towards? Why is it necessary? The new generation has no sense of Partition. We have grown up, and our parents have grown up, with the reality of three separate states and most of us are satisfied with the arrangement. We do not want to merge into one colossal super-state. I ask those who want to undo Partition: have we really managed India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh so well from Delhi, Islamabad, and Dhaka, that we want to push it still further to fold everything back into one? What is needed is far greater decentralisation, not the opposite. Perhaps a future in which the various states of the Subcontinent split off into autonomous entities is not so bad, is inevitable and even desirable. Kashmir has as much right to self-government in local matters as does Karnataka or Karachi. What is possible is a common market, free movement of people across open borders, even a common currency. Everything else should be radically decentralised.

What still brings us together? Paan (betel-leaf) and music. On the Samjhauta Express between Delhi and Lahore I saw everybody carrying baskets of betel-leaf. It is among the biggest items of trade between the two countries; a Southasian bad habit. Through the three wars, through the problems over Kashmir, through cricket matches, through Thackeray and the Jamaat, people have needed to chew paan. India grows it; Pakistan chews it. People in Lahore will curse the Indian army through a mouthful of paan grown in the enemy country. As for music, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Saheb, who after 1947 shuttled restlessly back and forth between the two countries, unable to find home, put it best. He said, "If classical music had been taught in every home in India and Pakistan, there wouldn't have been a Partition".

The first time I met the enemy people, Pakistanis, was when I went to New York. We shopped together, we ate together, we dated each other and had each others' babies. A phenomenon I have been noticing lately is that of the young NRI student coming to Delhi for the Christmas holidays, and saving a week to go to Karachi or to Lahore, to attend the wedding of a college roommate. It is there, abroad, where exiles gather, that there are signs that Partition might not be irreversible. I used to shop at a store in Jackson Heights, Queens, advertising "Indo-Pak-Bangladeshi-Afghan Groceries". I know of a gang in the high schools of Flushing, comprising of juvenile delinquents of Southasian descent — Muslim, Sikh, Hindu kids fighting together, united against the Koreans, the Hispanics, the African-Americans. The cafeteria below where I used to work in Manhattan sold rice and dal to taxi drivers from all across the Subcontinent; turbaned cabbies sporting Khalistani slogans on their cabs stood next to Punjabi Hindus with VHP stickers on theirs, and ate together and talked about the mustard fields of their villages.

There are an astonishing number of Pakistanis dating Indians in Wembley and in Jackson Heights. It is almost as if the 'enemy' is deliberately sought out, wooed. These are by and large children of very conservative parents, who have raised them on a diet of patriotic hatred. So teenage rebellion travels hand in hand with repudiation of their parents' hatreds. The young people are determined to transgress the ultimate boundary with the 'other', by accepting them into their bed.

Most progressive organisations in North America take pains to call themselves "South Asian", rather than Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi. It is always when the quarrelling family leaves its house that it comes back together again. These walls, these fences we have put up on our borders: they are of recent vintage, and they are flimsy. We have watered them with our blood, and they have come up weeds.

The massacres of Partition were the first act of a great love, an illicit love, worthy of a Sufi qawaali or a Bhakti bhajan or a Bollywood blockbuster. The three-and-a-half wars we have fought since then comprise the second act. We are nearing the last act, the logical and mythic end.

We, the peoples of the Subcontinent, respect illicit love; we know that the most powerful love is the hidden love, the secret longing of the individual soul for an absent god. I have a Sindhi friend in Bombay whose father, a doctor, left Karachi only in 1965. Well after independence, he kept on his practice in Karachi. Among his clients were the women of a brothel. His wife always knew when he had treated one of them, because the notes he brought home that day would be scented. For some reason, the prostitutes preferred Hindu doctors — they thought the Hindus would not take liberties with them. They were also quite shy around the doctor; when he would go to examine them, they would unveil only the affected part; so he saw their bodies only in segments, never whole. One day one of the prostitutes, whom he had now known for a long time, asked him if he would come to her room. He was not sure what she wanted, and was hesitant, but she insisted. Come to my room, doctor, she said. And she led him inside when no-one was looking, and locked the door. Then she opened the almirah in the back of the room, and showed him her secret inside. He came closer, and saw what she was pointing at: it was a small shrine, with a statue of Lord Krishna. Lifting her veil, the prostitute told him that she prayed to Krishna every day. She was a Hindu woman who had been kidnapped during Partition, forced to convert, and then sold to this brothel. But she maintained, in the silences of her room, this illicit lover, Krishna, through all these long years. That was all the prostitute was asking of the doctor: to bear witness to her love, to the truth of her love.

Love can still be mythic in Southasia. There is a reason that Southasian writers are suddenly in vogue in the West. It is because we are a storehouse, a seed bank, of myth. Our leading exports are software, jewels, and myths. Is there any such thing as forbidden love in Paris, in New York? There, the greatest tragedy possible with love is that it can end in marriage and divorce; here, it could end in death.

I am thinking now about Kunwar Ahson and Riffat Afridi in Karachi. In Pakistan in 1998, a Pathan girl dared to love a Mohajir boy. It was because of Partition that the boy was born in Karachi, but there were other borders which could never be crossed. The girl's relatives, her tribe, went gunning for the boy; and they were prepared to kill their own daughter. The entire city went up in riots; two people were killed, dozens injured. The police arrested the boy and beat him badly in the prison. The girl was brought to court to repudiate her love; she came in her wedding dress. She addressed the judge from behind her veil; lifted her eyes and said her truth: that she loved Kunwar Ahson. She had taken him as her husband. The bloodthirsty mob bayed its sentence outside. When the boy appeared in court, the girl's relatives were waiting for him, with the compliance of the police. They riddled his body with bullets. Kunwar Ahson now lies in some hospital, paralysed for life, unable to consummate the love he nearly lost his life for (and this, too, fits within the story; for such a love should always be the love of angels, a chaste love, in which lust has no part). The girl is hidden with his parents, unable to meet her lover. Both of them are now begging the world to give them safe shelter somewhere else, for such love is dangerous in a region where love still has power.

> Through the three wars, through the problems over Kashmir, through cricket matches, through Thackeray and the Jamaat, people have needed to chew paan. India grows it; Pakistan chews it.

I find their love important, metaphorical. Against great odds — against the tyrant father of the State — we the peoples of the Subcontinent love each other. It is an adulterous love, an illicit love. When we want to live together safely, it has to be outside, in some other country, in someone else's house. It is still a land where love means something, because we are ready to die for love. We are ready to kill for love. Such is the strength of our passion for each other that we have no other way of proving this love than to die for it. Any lesser climax would be to mock the vastness, the wholeness, of this love; could it be tested, satiated, by mere exile or maiming? We are determined to die, for love; we have made a collective suicide pact. Each one of us will kill the other. We will show the whole world what love is; we will all go out in a grand gesture, all together at once, in the space of 15 minutes. This can be the only fit ending to such a great love.

actionaid asia

Vacancy Announcement

ActionAid is an international development organization with a mission to work with poor and marginalized women, men, girls and boys to eradicate poverty, injustice and inequity that cause it.

ActionAid International has work and presence in more than 40 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, Europe and USA. Working in partnership with CBOs, NGOs, social movements, people's organization and activists ActionAid engages with governments, international development organisations and private companies to ensure pro-poor policies, programmes and practice. Our poverty eradication programmes focus on equity, dignity and rights of poor and marginalized people and communities and our innovative projects, social mobilization and policy advocacy work address issues like gender inequity, livelihood, food security, education, governance, trafficking of women/children and HIV/AIDS.

In Asia, ActionAid has offices in India, Nepal, China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam and Thailand and has programme presence in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. Our Asia Regional office is located in Bangkok.

We are presently recruiting staff for the following two positions for our Asia Regional Office.

Regional Coordinator - Advocacy & Campaigns

The Regional Coordinator for Advocacy & Campaigns will be responsible for ActionAid's international campaigns on HIV/AIDs, Food Rights, and Education in Asia and will provide strategic support to ActionAid's initiatives on the issues of Peace & Security and Promoting Accountable Governance. The role will involve carrying out research and policy analysis, setting advocacy agenda, developing innovative strategies and its implementation, networking, capacity building of staff and partners, and engaging with governments, international agencies, NGOs, movements and networks, private sector and media for leveraging resources, policies and practices in the campaigns and issues above.

Candidates will have a thorough understanding of the social, economic and political issues related to HIV/AIDS, Food Rights, Education and Peace Security in Asia. They will have relevant higher education and a minimum of ten years of direct campaigning and advocacy experience in at least one of the campaign themes and active experience of campaigning and lobbying at a regional and international level.

Regional Coordinator - Partnership Development

The Regional Coordinator for Partnership Development will lead the region in a coordinated effort to generate resources both from international official funding sources as well as from Trusts and Foundations. The successful candidate will be responsible for developing and implementing strategies for resource mobilization, collaborative action, will deepen relationships with official funding sources for engagement on policy influencing beyond money and open new relationship and avenues for diversifying income. Strengthening capacity of partnership and fundraising teams based in country programmes will also be an important part of the responsibilities.

Candidates will have a higher degree in social sciences, marketing or economics and minimum of eight to ten years relevant working experience in the development sector including demonstrated success in resource mobilization with ethically tuned donors, trusts and foundations, and having a proven ability in managing effective working relationships with them, possessing an ability to design proposals and be successful at raising funds.

General notes

We are interested in self-motivated people with ability to work independently and in teams, who can work across distances and committed to working on issues of poverty and rights. They should be value driven, have excellent interpersonal, networking and communication skills. Fluency in English both written and spoken is essential and knowledge of languages spoken with the ActionAid Asian countries would be an asset. Experience of working in multicultural environments in Asia and internationally within the development sector would be highly advantageous. The jobs would involve travel of minimum 30 % within the region and to wider parts of ActionAid.

Please email your application with a recent CV and names of two referees to: ***job@actionaidasia.org*** *by 8th of February 2004. Please indicate the position title in the subject of your email application. We will only be able to respond to the short listed candidates for the selection process.*

On the edge of lunacy

British foreign aid is now targeted at countries willing to sell off their assets to big business.

SPARE A thought this bleak new year for all those who rely on charity. Open your hearts, for example, to a group of people who, though they live in London, are in such desperate need of handouts that last year they received £7.6m in foreign aid. The Adam Smith Institute, the ultra-rightwing lobby group, now receives more money from Britain's Department for International Development (DfID) than Liberia or Somalia, two of the most desperate nations on Earth.

Are the members of the Adam Smith Institute starving? Hardly. They work in plush offices in Great Smith Street, just around the corner from the Houses of Parliament. They hold lavish receptions and bring in speakers from all over the world. Big business already contributes generously to this good cause.

The solicitor Madsen Pirie and the 'afflicted'.

It gets what it pays for. The institute's purpose is to devise new means for corporations to grab the resources that belong to the public realm. Its president, Madsen Pirie, claims to have invented the word privatisation. His was the organisation that persuaded the Conservative government to sell off the railways, deregulate the buses, introduce the poll tax, cut the top rates of income tax, outsource local government services and start to part-privatise the national health service and the education system. "We pro-pose things," Pirie once boasted, "which people regard as being on the edge of lunacy. The next thing you know, they're on the edge of policy." In this spirit, his institute now calls for the privatisation of social security, the dismantling of the NHS and a shift from public to private education. It opposes government spending on everything, in other words, except the Adam Smith Institute.

So what on earth is going on? Why are swivel-eyed ideologues in London a more deserving cause than starving refugees in Somalia? To understand what is happening, we must first revise our conception of what foreign aid is for.

Aid has always been an instrument of foreign policy. During the cold war, it was used to buy the loyalties of states that might otherwise have crossed to the other side. Even today, the countries that receive the most money tend to be those that are of greatest strategic use to the donor nation, which is why the US gives more to Israel than it does to sub-Saharan Africa.

But foreign policy is also driven by commerce, and in particular by the needs of domestic exporters. Aid goes to countries that can buy our manufacturers' products. Sometimes it doesn't go to countries at all, but straight to the manufacturers. A US government website boasts that "the principal beneficiary of America's foreign assistance programs has always been the United States. Close to 80 percent of the US Agency for International Development's contracts and grants go directly to American firms."

A doctor working in Gondar hospital in Ethiopia wrote to me recently to spell out what this means. The hospital has none of the basic textbooks on tropical diseases it needs. But it does have 21 copies of an 800-page volume called Aesthetic Facial Surgery and 24 volumes of a book called Opthalmic Pathology. There is no opthalmic pathologist in training in Ethiopia. The poorest nation on Earth, un-surprisingly, has no aesthetic plastic surgeons. The US had spent $2m on medical textbooks that American publishers hadn't been able to sell at home, called them aid and dumped them in Ethiopia.

In Britain the Labour government claims to have abandoned such practices, though only because they infringe European rules on competition. But now it has found a far more effective means of helping the rich while pretending to help the poor. It is spending its money on projects that hand public goods to corporations.

It is now giving, for example, £342m to the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. This is a staggering amount of money, 15 times what it spent last year on the famine in Ethiopia. Why is Andhra Pradesh so lucky? Because its chief minister, or "chief executive" as he now likes to be known, is doing to his state what Pinochet did to Chile: handing everything that isn't nailed down, and quite a lot that is, to big business. Most of the money DfID is giving him is being used to "restructure" and "reform" the state and its utilities.

His programme will dispossess 20 million people from the land and contribute massively to poverty. DfID's own report on the biggest of the schemes it is funding in the state reveals that it suffers from "major failings", has "negative consequences on food security" and does "nothing about providing alternative income for those displaced". But it permits Andhra Pradesh to become a laboratory for the kind of mass privatisation the department is seeking to encourage all over the world.

In Zambia, DfID is spending just £700,000 on improving nutrition, but £56m on privatising the copper

mines. In Ghana, the department made its aid payments for upgrading the water system conditional on partial privatisation. Foreign aid from Britain now means giving to the rich the resources that keep the poor alive.

So there are rich pickings for organisations like the Adam Smith Institute. It is being hired by DfID as a consultancy, telling countries like South Africa how to flog off the family silver. It is hard to see how this helps the poor. The South African government's preparations for privatisation, according to a study by the Municipal Services Project, led to almost 10 million people having their water cut off, 10 million people having their electricity cut off, and over 2 million people being evicted from their homes for non-payment of bills.

DFID Department for International Development

The Adam Smith Institute, the ultra-rightwing lobby group, now receives more money from Britain's DfID than Liberia or Somalia.

What we see here, in other words, is a revival of an ancient British charitable tradition. During the Irish potato famine, the British government made famine relief available to the starving, but only if they agreed to lose their tenancies on the land. The 1847 Poor Law Extension Act cleared Ireland for the landlords. Today, the British government is helping the corporations to seize not only the land from the poor, but also the water, the utilities, the mines, the schools, the health services and anything else they might find profitable. And you and I are paying for it.

All this was pioneered by the sainted Clare Short. Short's trick was to retain her radical credentials by publicly criticising the work of other departments, while retaining her job by pursuing in her own department policies that were far more vicious and destructive than those she attacked. Blair's trick was to keep her there, to assure old Labour voters that they still had a voice in government, while ensuring that Short did precisely what his corporate backers wanted.

I never thought I would hear myself saying this, and I recognise that in doing so I may be handing ammunition to the rightwing lobby groups campaigning for a re-duction in government spending, such as, for example, the Adam Smith Institute. But if this is what foreign aid amounts to, it seems to me that there is too much of it, rather than too little. Britain's Department for International Development is beginning to do more harm than good.

George Monbiot
The Guardian

A Subcontinental free

SAFTA has been hyped following the SAARC summit, but will it only help the trader and not the people? And what of services?

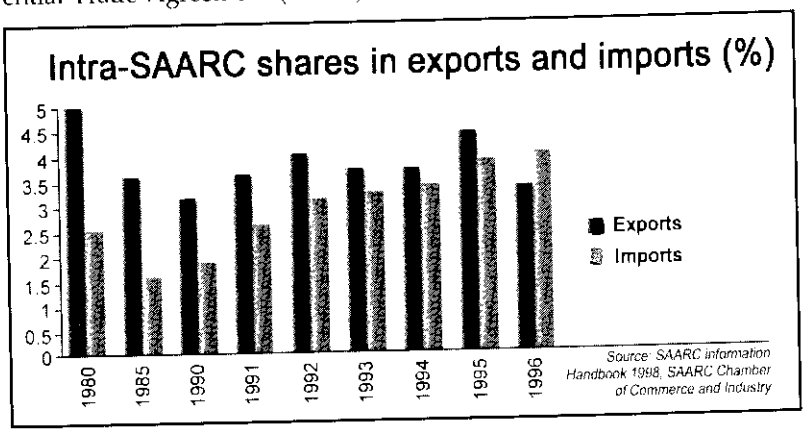
by ***Joe Thomas K***

It was unlikely for the plebeians to have missed the self-congratulatory tide which followed the January 2004 Islamabad SAARC summit. The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement signed by the foreign ministers of the seven SAARC countries was hailed as the biggest outcome of the summit and the framework for the Free Trade Area (FTA) which SAFTA envisions was projected as the remedy to alleviate the economic woes of the region. While the thaw in the relations between the two 'biggest' players in the area was a positive step, setting aside the compulsions of an upcoming election in India and the ex-gratia benefits of good neighbourly behaviour on the part of Pakistan, the agreement on trade liberalisation and intra-region free trade in goods needs to be reviewed in the face of pretentious optimism.

Globally, regional trading agreements (RTA's) have been proliferating over the second half of the 1990s, enabling many states to gain from freer trade. Depending on the level of integration, these have ranged from preferential trading agreements, free trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), customs unions such as Mercosur (a Latin American regional integration mechanism with Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay as full members, and Bolivia and Chile as associate members), to economic union such as the European Union (EU). The SAFTA agreement is a higher stage in the evolution of the earlier SAARC Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) of 1993.

Tied down as it was by various political limitations, SAPTA proved inadequate to boost intra-region trade on a commodity-wise basis. The present agreement proposes to address the current low levels of intra-SAARC trade , which hovers around the 5 percent mark, through a phasing out of barriers (primarily tariffs and quantitative restrictions) to trade in goods between member nations over a 10 year period. The operation of the draft agreement is subject to its ratification by member states by 1 January 2006.

The agreement requires the 'least developed' countries—Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives—to reduce tariff rates to the 0-5 percent target over 10 years starting from 2006. Of the 'non-least developed' countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh will get five years to implement the new tariff regime while Sri Lanka will get six years to reach the target. Such purposeful time-frames and schedules suggest a gung-ho can-do attitude that does great credit to the Southasian leadership's vision of common future, but can this vision withstand critical scrutiny? The present visualisation of a free trade arrangement in Southasia has been endorsed by many quarters, but is such confidence warranted? The hard realities on the ground do not, prima facie, inspire much faith in the possibility of a workable arrangement emerging in the near future. All the 'feel good' chatter that has come to dominate the Indian media in particular must perforce, when it has the time, contend with the fundamentals of international trade.



Trade primer

International trade is generated when each country produces that basket of goods in which it has either comparative advantage due to the abundance of certain factors of production, relative production efficiency arising from economies of scale (largely a capital-intensive phenomenon), or the presence of 'unique' natural resources. Two-factor models (which consider only labour and capital) explain how countries which are abundant in labour engage in the production

trade utopia

of labour-intensive goods for exports and import capital-intensive goods and vice versa. The complement of this is that economies which are relatively labour deficit manufacture goods amenable to capital-intensive production and import those which are labour intensive from labour surplus developing countries. While this explains the trade patterns between developing countries and their partners in the developed world, the high level of trade between developed economies is explained by the high per capita incomes in these countries which facilitate intra-industry trade, especially in hi-tech goods. The trade in these goods runs up to huge volumes because of high levels of product differentiation which fuels the demand, for example, for smaller mobile phones, bigger sports utility vehicles, or flatter televisions.

Predictably, the direction and volume of trade from the South Asian region is largely towards the capital abundant developed countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), resource rich Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC) and East European countries. The export basket for most of the SAARC member states is composed of primary goods (agriculture and allied products) or low-tech labour-intensive manufactures (textiles, garments, clothing, etc). Their exports are in bulk, which means that the component of value-added at the country level is low and hence restricts the export base since the larger and more lucrative value-added market is not available to South Asian countries. Typically, other countries tend to take advantage of this market. Likewise their imports are either intermediate goods (resource/raw material-based) like petroleum and chemicals, or capital goods (machinery/equipment-based).

For the 'contracting parties' (as SAFTA likes to refer to its members) to imagine that the engine of regional growth in South Asia will lie in the trade in goods alone is highly optimistic. With very few exceptions, where a country's advantage lies in unique geographical or resource endowments, it is highly unlikely that an upswing in intra-regional trade can result from comparative advantages when all the economies of SAFTA are still locked into a labour-surplus and capital-scarce environment. With low levels of per capita incomes in most of the member states and fewer numbers of technology driven industries, intra-industry trade based on very refined product differentiation does not seem to have a bright future either. Within the region the only exceptions to the general trend are Nepal and Bhutan whose trade figures with India run at high percentage levels, albeit of low value in terms of the region's overall trade with the rest of the world.

EXPORT COMPOSITION

SRI LANKA	NEPAL	INDIA	PAKISTAN	MALDIVES	BHUTAN	BANGLADESH
Textiles and garments, tea, leather and footwear, diamonds and other gems, coconut products, petroleum products	Carpets, clothing, leather goods, jute goods, grain	Gems and jewellery, engineering goods, clothing, chemicals, software, cotton textiles, leather iron ore	Raw cotton and textiles; rice; leather manufactures	Fish, clothing	Cardamom, gypsum, timber, handicrafts, cement, fruit, electricity (to India) precious stones, spices	Garments and knitwear, ceramic tableware, frozen fish, jute and jute goods tea, urea fertilizer, leather and leather products

IMPORT COMPOSITION

SRI LANKA	NEPAL	INDIA	PAKISTAN	MALDIVES	BHUTAN	BANGLADESH
Cotton and textiles, machinery and equipment, food and drink, consumer durables, petroleum	Petroleum products, fertilizer, machinery	Petroleum and petroleum products, machinery,iron and steel, edible oils, chemicals, fertilizers	Petroleum; machinery and transport equipment; food	Consumer goods, Petroleum products Intermediate and Capital goods	Fuel and lubricants, grain, machinery and parts vehicles, fabrics, rice	Capital goods, foodgrains, petroleum, textiles, chemicals, vegetable oils

MAJOR TRADING PARTNERS

Major Trading Partners of Nepal

EXPORTS

Value in '000 Rs.

S.N.	Countries	F.Y. 2000/01	F.Y. 2001/02
1.	India	26,030,200	28,865,200
2.	U.S.A	14,973,727	9,377,832
3.	Germany	6,178,557	4,043,218
4.	U.K	980,666	808,751
5.	Italy	675,156	566,557
6.	Japan	1,341,086	492,833
7.	France	676,031	473,472
8.	Switzerland	580,024	382,823
9.	Canada	NR	305,978
10.	Belgium	392,079	295,140
11.	Bangladesh	520,703	NR
12.	Hong Kong	NR	NR
13.	Spain	NR	NR
	Sub Total	52,348,229	45,611,804
	Other Countries*	2,897,671	2,683,984
	Grand Total	55,245,900	48,295,788

Note :- Trade with India for the F.Y 1999/2000 and 2000/01 are revised and 2001/02 is provisional.

**Including Exports to Tibet, Autonomous Region of People's Republic of China*

Major Trading Partners of Nepal

IMPORTS

Value in '000 Rs.

S.N.	Countries	F.Y. 2000/01	F.Y. 2001/02
1.	India	45,211,000	45,364,300
2.	Singapore	12,086,307	7,846,372
3.	Malaysia	3,153,903	4,818,356
4.	Saudi Arabia	4,957,819	4,572,797
5.	China	6,274,683	4,315,803
6.	Switzerland	NR	4,205,776
7.	Thailand	3,306,230	3,278,165
8.	Indonesia	NR	2,877,654
9.	U.K.	8,827,202	2,795,392
10.	U.S.A	NR	2,525,603
11.	Japan	3,305,209	NR
12.	Hongkong	5,577,528	NR
13.	U.A.E.	2,898,264	NR
14.	Kuwait	NR	NR
15.	Korea R.	NR	NR
	Sub Total	95,598,145	82,600,218
	Other Countries*	23,188,464	22,901,579
	Grand Total	118,786,609	105,501,797

**Including Imports from Tibet, Autonomous Region of People's Republic of China*

Bangladesh: Direction of Trade
(in Million US $)

Item	2001	2002
Exports, total	**5736**	**5517**
1. United States	1667	1569
2. Germany	588	582
3. United Kingdom	487	580
4. France	308	315
5. Italy	253	224
6. Netherlands	251	217
7. Belgium	180	174
8. Canada	96	64
9. Hong Kong, China	101	95
10. Japan	62	63
Imports, total	**9011**	**7968**
1. India	1195	1065
2. China, People's Republic of	772	925
3. Japan	721	573
4. Singapore	827	548
5. Hong Kong, China	452	441
6. Korea, Republic of	404	345
7. United States	265	248
8. United Kingdom	238	184
9. Australia	215	169
10. Indonesia	180	167

Maldives: Values and Shares of Exports
(in Million US $)

	Countries	1998	In%	1999	In%
	Asia	**456.57**	**52.0**	**333.20**	**44.3**
1.	Hong Kong	25.51	2.9	20.16	2.7
2.	India	1.17	0.1	2.20	0.3
3.	Indonesia	0.38	0.0	0.00	0.0
4.	Japan	126.47	14.4	24.05	3.2
5.	Malaysia	0.34	0.0	0.21	0.0
6.	Singapore	38.06	4.3	12.81	1.7
7.	Sri Lanka	151.21	17.2	145.02	19.3
8.	Thailand	112.95	12.9	128.35	17.1
9.	U.A.E.	0.48	0.1	0.39	0.1
	Oceania	**0.04**	**0.0**	**0.49**	**0.1**
10.	Australia	0.04	0.0	0.49	0.1
11.	New Zealand	0.00	0.0	0.00	0.0
	Europe	**231.69**	**26.4**	**130.64**	**17.4**
12.	European Union	231.69	26.4	130.64	17.4
13.	Norway	0.00	0.0	0.00	0.0
	America	**181.70**	**20.7**	**266.93**	**35.5**
14.	Canada	0.18	0.0	0.37	0.0
15.	United States	181.52	20.7	266.56	35.4
	Sub-total	**870.00**	**99.0**	**731.25**	**97.2**
16.	Others	8.35	1.0	21.45	2.8
	Total	**878.35**	**100.0**	**752.71**	**100.0**

India's exports to major trade partners
(In US$ million)

Countries	Year 2000-2001	2001-2002
USA	9305.12	8513.38
Hong Kong	2640.86	2366.36
UK	2298.71	2160.88
Japan	1794.48	1510.44
Germany	1907.57	1788.36
UAE	2597.52	2491.80
Belgium	1470.56	1390.63
Italy	1308.75	1206.53
Russia	889.01	798.19
Netherlands	880.09	863.88
Bangladesh	935.04	1002.8
France	1020.01	945.00
Singapore	877.11	972.31
Malaysia	608.15	773.70
Australia	405.89	418.03
Thailand	530.12	633.14
Total (Incl. others)	44560.29	43826.93

India's Imports to major trade partners
(In US$ million)

Countries	Year 2000-2001	2001-2002
USA	3015.00	3149.63
Belgium	2870.05	2763.01
UK	3167.92	2563.21
Switzerland	3160.14	2870.76
Japan	1842.19	2146.45
Germany	1759.59	2028.11
UAE	658.98	915.09
Australia	1062.76	1360.10
Singapore	1463.91	1304.09
Nigeria	63.78	87.12
Italy	723.58	704.79
Korea (Rep.)	893.76	1141.37
France	640.81	844.26
Russia	516.66	535.51
Netherlands	437.53	466.47
Total (Incl. others)	50536.46	51413.79

Source: Federal ministry of Commerce, India

Exports from Pakistan
(2000-2002 in Million US $)

Countries	2000-2001	Countries	2001-2002
USA	2240.6	USA	2257.5
Dubai	617.9	Dubai	727.4
UK	576.4	UK	659.1
Hong Kong	503.9	Germany	452.1
Germany	494.6	Hong Kong	442.2
South Korea	279.0	Saudi Arabia	330.4
France	265.2	South Korea	261.9
Netherlands	232.8	Netherlands	257.8
Italy	231.3	Italy	253.0
Japan	192.0	France	246.7
Sub-Total:	5633.7 (61.2%)	Sub-Total:	5888.1 (64.59%)
Others	3567.9 (38.7%)	Others	3235.6 (35.5%)
G-Total	9201.6 (100%)	G-Total	9123.7 (100%)

Sources of Imports in Pakistan
(2000-2002 in Million US $)

Countries	2000-2001	Countries	2001-2002
KSA	1259.25	UAE	1353.9
Kuwait	964.63	KSA	1200.7
Dubai	731.01	Kuwait	731.8
Japan	576.16	USA	687.8
USA	565.48	China	575.2
China	528.95	Japan	519.3
S. Korea	354.59	Malaysia	456.3
UK	350.22	Germany	439.6
Fujrah	348.86	UK	356.7
India	235.09	Singapore	322.5
Sub-Total:	5914.24 (55.1%)	Sub-Total:	6643.8 (64.3%)
Others	4814.68 (44.9%)	Others	3695.7 (35.7 %)
G-Total	10728.92 (100%)	G-Total	10339.5 (100%)

Even if it is suggested that investment decisions do not necessarily follow the patterns that text-book 'theories' have worked out, it would still seem doubtful that investor risk-taking will substantially increase or that outcomes from the consequences of SAFTA will be equitable. For example, it might be argued that differences in the level of unionisation of workers, the relative ease of imparting the necessary skills to labour, and wage rate differentials could lead to geographical distribution of investment to the benefit of other less industrially developed member states like Bangladesh or Pakistan in relation to India. Product-specific relocations of production units cannot be ruled-out, as in the case of a tyre-manufacturing plant shifting base to the Pakistan Punjab to service the demand in both the Pakistan market as well as the north-western sector of India since the costs of setting up manufacturing and training new workers for an essentially mechanised industry will be evened out by the long-run gains from a larger market. Even so, the number of instances of such new investments flowing into non-industrialised areas is likely to be small. To the extent that negative factors impeding investment flows into the less industrialised countries and sub-regions of Southasia override the possible positive factors that could attract investments into these countries, some degree of caution in estimating the likelihood of such 'horizontal' shifts is called for.

India the Big

A large economy like India has a large reserve army of unemployed semi-skilled and unskilled workers. It also has relatively better infrastructure (transport, communication) and far more robust financial systems in place. Given the circumstances, it is doubtful that production

Average Share of Countries in Total FDI Inflows and Total FDI stock in South, East and South East Asia: 1991 to 2001

Countries	Average share in Total FDI Inflow 1991-2001	Average share in Total FDI Inward Stock 1980-2001
Bangladesh	0.08	0.05
China	40.62	15.35
China, Hong Kong	16.87	50.96
China, Taiwan	3.03	2.49
India	2.07	0.90
Indonesia	2.68	10.23
Korea	3.98	1.97
Malaysia	8.18	0.01
Nepal	0.0001	0.00
Pakistan	0.77	0.68
Philippines	1.90	1.16
Singapore	11.82	8.49
Sri Lanka	0.25	0.24
Thailand	4.84	2.10
Vietnam	1.59	0.52
Others	1.32	4.84
Total South, East & South East Asia	**100.00**	**100.00**

Computed from UNCTAD 2003

Nepal's Inward FDI: industrial breakdown* (Millions of dollars)

Sector/Industry	Inflows	Year	Inward stock	Year
Total	**22.2**	**1998**	**116.2**	**2001**
Primary	5.4	1997	5.7	2001
Agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing	5.4	1997	5.7	2001
Secondary	1.7	1998	..	..
Tertiary	20.5	1998	110.5	2001
Construction	2.8	1998	8.3	2001
Hotels and restaurants	14.8	1998	54.1	2001
Transport, storage and communications	13.9	1998	18.7	2001
Business activities	0.9	1998	..	..
Other services	1.9	1998	29.3	2001

** Approval data.*

Pakistan: Foreign Direct Investment (Millions of dollars)

Economic Group	01-02	02-03
Power	36.4	32.8
Chemical, Pharm. & Fertilizer	17.8	92.4
Construction	12.8	17.6
Mining & Quarrying – Oil explor.	274.8	188.2
Food, Beverages & Tobacco	(5.1)	7.0
Textile	18.4	26.1
Transport and Storage & Comm. IT	35.2	114.1
Machinery other than electrical	0.1	0.4
Electronics	15.9	6.7
Electrical Machinery	10.5	10.5
Financial Business	3.5	207.5
Trade	34.2	39.1
Petro-Chemical & Refining	5.0	3.0
Tourism / Paper & Pulp	0.8	1.5
Cement / Sugar	0.5	1.3
Others	23.9	49.8
Total	484.7	798.0

Bangladesh: FDI By Major Industrial Groups (Millions of dollars)

Name of Industrial group	1990-91	1995-96
Agro based industries	1.2	40.5
Food & Allied Industries	2.0	18.5
Textile Industries	6.2	86.0
Printing & publishing	-	1.0
Tannery, leather & rubber	2.0	5.3
Chemical Industries	7.2	18.1
Glass, ceramics & other	16.0	42.0
Engineering Industries	57.7	139.7
Service Industries	-	564.5
Miscellaneous	-	-
Total	92.3	915.6

structures using these as inputs would forgo these relative advantages to set up shop in Nepal or Bangladesh merely for the sake of regional co-operation, especially when there are no other advantages to be accrued from making such move. Additionally, the high initial costs for 'horizontal' relocation are discouraged by the politico-economic systems in place in many of the member states. With the 15 January statement by the Pakistan Information and Broadcast Minister, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed that, "Nobody should expect that free trade would be held without seeking a resolution of Kashmir problem", the climate for cross-border investment flows is not set to make much headway. Besides, the region was never known for capital movements between the countries of the region in the first place. Businesses that are known for risk-taking are few and far between in these economies.

However, as mentioned earlier, this scenario does not rule out in toto the benefits to smaller countries such as, for example, Sri Lanka gaining from increased investments in the rubber-tyre manufacturing sector or a new tea blending segment emerging in Sri Lanka to the detriment of Dubai, or India's further investments in hydro-electric projects in Bhutan and Nepal with buy-back arrangements. But such developments need not necessarily be attributed to the special effects of SAFTA and the freeing of the regional trade arrangement. Such activities, to the extent that there have been any, have already been going on because they were being facilitated by the bilateral and/or free trade arrangements that already exist between India and these countries.

India: FDI approvals with inflows

(During August. 1991 to October. 2002) Amount Rs. crore (US S million)

	Rank Sector	Amount of FDI approved	Percentage of total FDI APPROVED*	Amount of FDI inflows	Percentage of total FDI inflows	Inflows as percent of appro-vals
1.	Energy					
	(i) Power	43.481 (11,855)	15.4			
	(ii) Oil refinery	33,964 (9,060)	12.0	-	-	-
	Total (i+ii)	77,445 (20,915)	27.4	7,475 (1,813)	10.4	9.7
2.	Telecommunications (Radio Paging, Cellular mobile. Basic telephone services)	56,273 (15,197)	19.9	9,300 (2,259)	12.9	16.5
3.	Electrical equipment (including Computer software & electronics)	27,853 (7,027)	9.8	10,058 (2.,488)	13.9	34.1
4.	Transportation industry	20,981 (5,512)	7.4	7,800 (1,984)	10.8	37.2
5.	Services sector (Financial & non-financial)	18,416 (4,932)	6.5	5,968 (1,573)	8.3	32.4
6.	Metallurgical industries	15,453 (4,253)	5.5	991 (252)	1.4	6.4
7.	Chemicals (other than fert)	12,852 (3,677)	4.5	4,840 (1,316)	6.7	37.7
8.	Food processing industries	9,379 (2,715)	3.3	2,884 (788)	4.0	30.8
9.	Hotel & tourism	4,902 (1,385)	1.7	546 (138)	0.8	11.1
10.	Textiles	3,466 (1,006)	1 2	1,059 (290)	1.5	30.6

** Percentage figures do not take into account the amount of FDI inflows for ADRs/GDRs/FCCB's, RBIs -NRI Schemes. acquisition of existing shares and advance pending for allotment of shares, as these are not categarise sector-wise. Source : SIA (FDI Data Cell), Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion Ministry of Commerce & industry.*

This is a factor that tends not to be considered. Any expansion of scale in such investments therefore need have nothing to do with SAFTA and the further freeing of trade arrangements.

All this is not to suggest that SAFTA will have no beneficial consequences whatsoever. The 'premium' (products unique to the region) categories, for instance, stand to gain so that more of Darjeeling Tea, Sri Lankan blend, Nepali carpets, high-quality Pakistani cotton, Bhutani handicrafts and Maldivian tuna may well make their way into each others' market. However, if the scope of the agreement pretends to be addressing regional economic growth, one would have expected the visioning exercise to be big as well. The market for 'premium' goods is limited, and fears expressed by countries like Bangladesh, of being swamped by Indian goods, could well become reality. Apart from the limited gains to a limited range of 'premium goods', cheap imports from larger partners (and the largest partner) are bound to affect industries in the relatively smaller economies. These countries are doubly constrained by the fact that higher input expenditures and inferior infrastructure might raise the costs of production and make their goods less competitive.

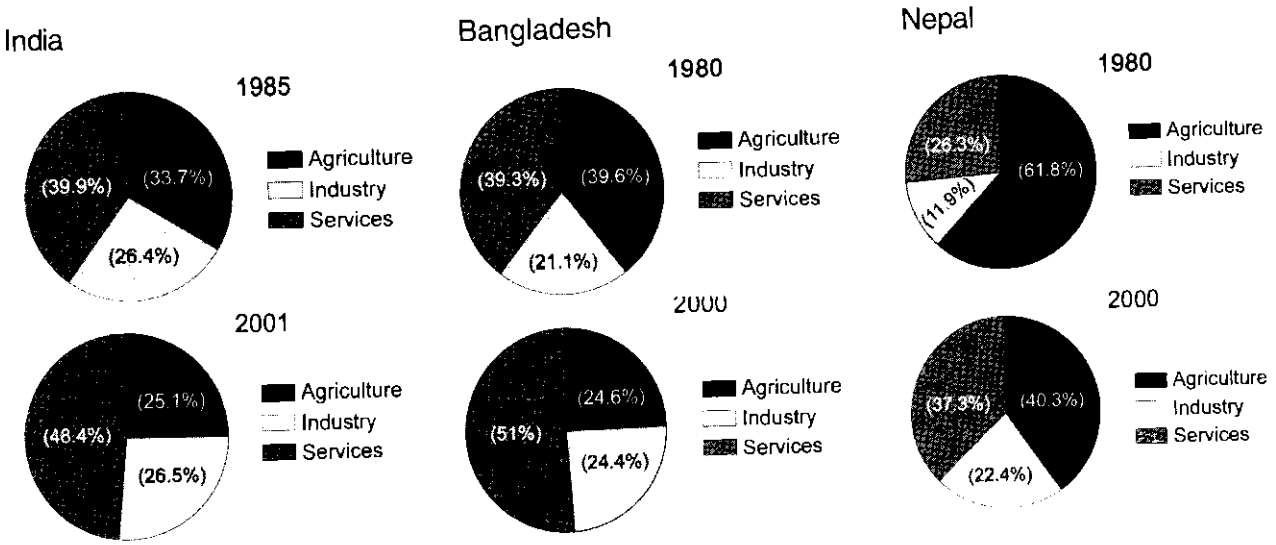
What the Chinese goods did to the footwear and toy industry in Pakistan could as well be replicated for other goods from bigger partners of Southasia. The point bears repeating that the gains can reasonably be expected to be loaded in favour of big economies. Moreover, the draft SAFTA agreement is not even categorical in addressing itself to member states about restricting the use of anti-dumping measures against the lesser developed members. Even the limited benefits to smaller country exports could be manipulated with the options for all countries to prepare a list of 'sensitive' exports and with an ambiguity that does not categorically bind member states to phase out the list. This is what the draft agreement has to say on the sensitive list:

Article 7

3. a) Contracting States may not apply the Trade Liberalization Programme... to the tariff lines included in the Sensitive Lists which shall be negotiated by the Contracting States (for LDCs and Non-LDCs) and incorporated in this Agreement as an integral part. The number of products in the Sensitive Lists shall be subject to maximum ceiling to be mutually agreed among the Contracting States with flexibility to Least Developed Contracting States to seek derogation in respect of the products of their export interest; and

b) The Sensitive List shall be reviewed after every

GDP SECTORAL BREAKDOWN



four years or earlier as may be decided by Safta Ministerial Council (SMC), established under Article 10, with a view to reducing the number of items in the Sensitive List.

Added to this are gaping holes in the definitions of basic terms and caveats that could render the entire agreement meaningless if any of the so-called 'contracting states' chooses to invoke them. There is, for instance, Article 14, which renders SAFTA redundant. Titled General Exceptions, Article 14 says,

a) Nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to prevent any Contracting State from taking action and adopting measures which it considers necessary for the protection of its national security.

Discrepancies such as these are ideal for manipulation by trade-law experts to be used to according to the whims of the contracting countries and to the possible disadvantage of the least developed.

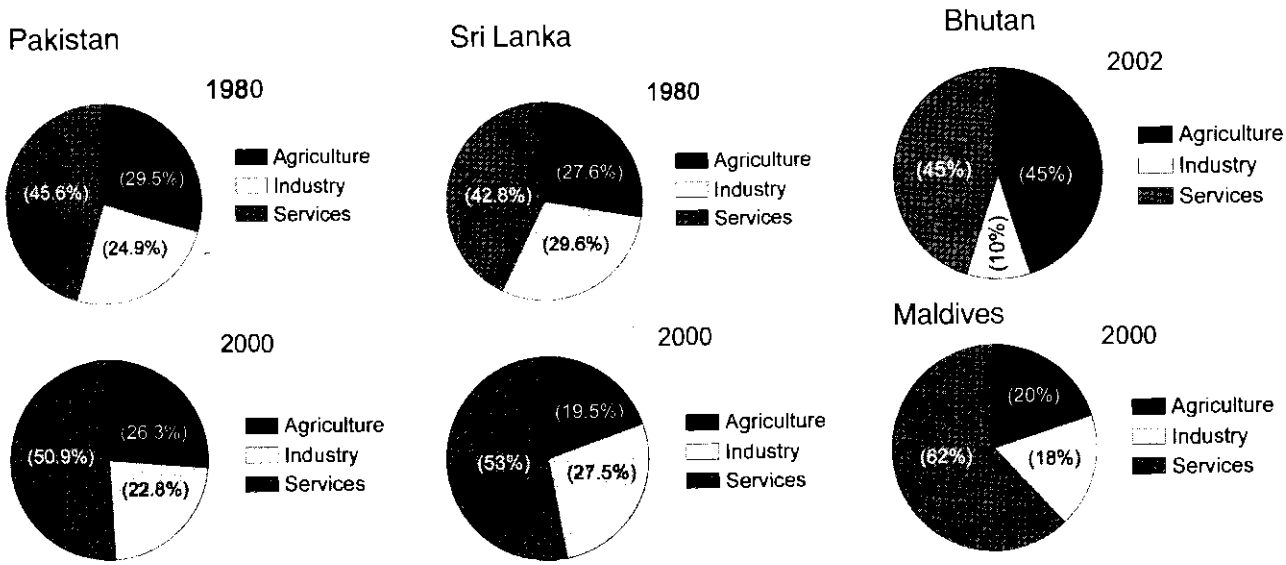
Trader lobby

It remains to be seen how the volumes and value of trade in goods, aimed at "regional development" through intra-regional trade will move once SAFTA as it is currently envisaged, is put in place. But it is clear that capturing the markets without actual physical shift in industrial production that could diversify the manufacturing base of the smaller countries—by, among other means, horizontal investments that could effect development through knowledge spillovers (expansion of the skilled labour workforce), backward (supply-side benefits) and forward linkages (high-income spurred investments)—could still be done through the trader lobby in each country, particularly in the small countries.

Typically, the trader has a keen interest in the free trade in goods and unlike the manufacturer will profit from the flooding of domestic markets with the goods from the larger economies. While this would ensure that goods make it to their destinations, how much the traders spawn backward-forward linkages to the benefit of sizeable numbers of people is anyone's guess. Trade revenues tend to eventually reach far fewer people than manufacturing revenues. Therefore, the setback to the economy from an overall decline in the manufacturing sector will not be offset by the boost to the trader lobby, because the benefits simply do not reach far enough.

The agreement in its present form also needs to be scrutinised from two other angles. First, the agreement includes only trade in goods and excludes the crucial services sector. Regional development is claimed to be the ultimate goal, and what makes the draft SAFTA agreement such a surprising document is that it chooses to overlook the existing and potential national competitive advantage that the SAARC member states have in sectors like tourism and hospitality (Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka), retailing of electricity (with Pakistan's surplus power, Nepal and Bhutan's hydel-power capacities), transmission/distribution of gas (Bangladesh), and health services (India), and so on and a host of other services which make up one-third (and growing) of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and close to 50 percent (and above) of that of the other SAARC member states. This is particularly important since the crucial issue of financing infrastructural investment has not been resolved yet It is quite possible that the task of financing infrastructure investment—should the government undertake infrastructure development or will joint-sector arrangements work themselves out for all countries to be equally attractive to investment (foreign or otherwise)—has not been settled yet.

This issue would not have been quite as daunting as it appears since services by and large are not as dependent on heavy infrastructure as manufacturing is.



The further advantage of focusing on services is that they are largely more non-competing in nature as between countries. Hence lifting of barriers to their trade may spur the engine of 'regional growth' as opposed to the possibility of uneven development arising from imbalances in the trade in goods. In this sense, the trade in services would have been a relatively safer exercise from the equity point of view. The point is not about doing one before the other but of a mix of phasing out barriers to key competitive sectors whether in goods or services. As of now SAFTA does not address lifting of barriers to trade in services.

The second angle from which the agreement needs to be examined is the presumed effects of foreign direct investment (FDI). The idea of a free trade agreement is being hyped on its prospective linkage to greater FDI inflows from outside Southasia. The *2004 Index of Economic Freedom* drawn up by the Heritage Foundation still classifies India as "mostly unfree" and with the second generation of economic reforms in most of Southasia still far from implementation, the catch-line of 'magnet of investment' should be cautiously used in the context of Southasia. The region attracts only about 2 percent of the total FDI inflows to developing countries and even that is shared largely between India (close to 75 percent), Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Even with relatively lower wages, Southasia has not seen the kind of results that planning commissions and finance departments project in terms of actual FDI inflows. Observers have pointed out that low wages are offset by many factors, including the low productivity of labour and the time and cost overruns resulting from poor infrastructure. Interestingly, the actual FDI inflows to the SAARC member states have been in energy, telecom, health, banking and tourism—which make the arguments for removing barriers to trade in services even more urgent.

The modalities of the SAFTA agreement would have to work themselves out over the next 12 years when finally the goal of an FTA would be reached. Will the goods-first model that EU and NAFTA adopted deliver for Southasia? It will be safe to say that the optimal levels will not be achieved. For the sake of promoting 'regional development' through greater trade in goods, are there mechanisms in place for improving the condition of unequal infrastructure levels of the least developed members within SAARC akin to the European Regional Development Fund (which was meant to redress regional imbalances of the least prosperous regions)? The text is conspicuously vague on this issue. It phases out lowering of barriers over a 10-year period for the least developed members and suggests a fund to compensate for loss of customs revenues arising from the reduction of tariffs. As for correcting actual regional imbalances which could then leverage their competitiveness, the text is silent on this count.

Does the agreement recognise the presently high levels of illegal labour migration which could be further accentuated towards manufacturing pockets within the bigger economies such as India? The text has nothing to say on the matter. Likewise, a host of other technicalities are left to the trade-experts to finalise, from "rules of origin" (the criterion which merits the "made in x" label on any country's export item) to "sensitive lists" to "areas for technical assistance", notwithstanding the absence of a timeframe for many modalities. As the SAFTA agreement prepares to undergo ratification by member countries over the next two years, it can only be hoped that a more informed and sustained debate in the region takes place over such issues of trade which affect close to a quarter of the world's population. Needless to say, the need to rework the finer points in the SAFTA agreement is ever more imperative. The idea is regional development, after all.

Is the largest market in the making?

The prospect of free trade in the subcontinent is expected to stamp-out illegal trade and the routing of goods through third countries leading in the long-term to benefits for all in the region.

by ***Farhan Reza***

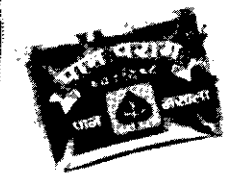
Just seven months prior to the summit meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states, a Pakistan National Assembly member, Saleem Jan Mazari, asserted at a conference at the Indian Merchants Chamber (an apex body for trade, commerce and industry in the western region of India) that, "if the three countries, namely India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, came together they would be the biggest consumer market in the world". In the light of the January 2004 SAARC summit in Islamabad, the thaw in the relations between neighbours and arch rivals India and Pakistan is expected to give a tremendous boost to bilateral trade activities. The resulting environment is projected to be cut-throat in terms of the competition between the producers of the two countries in the long run, while trade balance is expected to be in India's favour in the short to medium term.

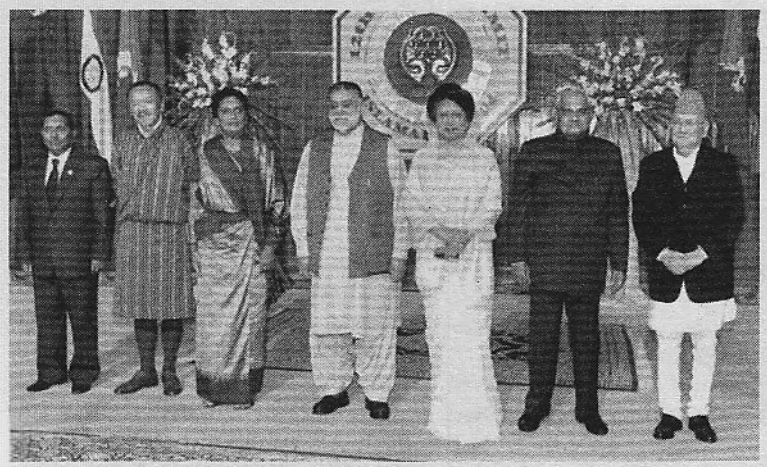
Based on the idea of a unified 'South Asian market', a businessman of Indian origin based in Singapore, AR Jumabhoy, prepared a document a month before the SAARC summit in which he claimed that India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with a total population of close to 1.5 billion people and with a fairly impressive combined GDP, can offer larger sized markets for trade and industry. The SAARC meet also endorsed the observations and finalised the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA). This treaty binds all seven nations to reduce their tariffs in phases. Many analysts and business people feel that the two main economies which can make the treaty successful are India and Pakistan. "The two countries enjoy a fairly large amount of informal trade, and also face smuggling", says Rais Ashraf Tar Mohmmad, a Pakistani commodity trader. He cites the example of a very popular tobacco based product, Pan Parag, which he says can be found at almost any pan shop in Pakistan even though it is among the banned items in the country.

Businessmen in Pakistan say that the demand and supply equations compel them to find extra-legal routes to bring in commodities which can be profitable. Like Pan Parag, many other products find their way into Pakistan via a third country.

The products are first shipped to Colombo or Dubai, a favoured conduit for traders from both countries, and are then brought to Pakistan. "Third country trade is estimated to be nearly USD 1.5 billion per annum", says Siraj Qasim Teli, president of the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Interestingly, animal trade makes up a large proportion of the smuggling. It is estimated that more than INR 200 million worth of animals (largely cattle) make it across the Indian border to Pakistan each year. The volume might be several times more than this figure due to the undocumented nature of the trade.

Ironically, in contrast to the robust illegal trade, official trade between the two nations remains nominal. According to official figures, Pakistan exported goods worth USD 70.7 million during the fiscal year 2002-03, while it spent foreign exchange worth USD 166.6 million for importing goods from India. Besides the relatively low volume of this above-ground trade, the balance clearly was in India's favour. The official list of items exported to India consists of vegetables and fruits,





The visionaries of the common market.

Pakistan's balance of trade with India (in million US$)

Year	Imports	Exports	Balance
1996-97	204.70	36.23	-168.47
1997-98	154.53	90.57	-63.98
1998-99	145.85	173.66	28.81
1999-90	127.38	53.84	-73.74
2000-01	238.33	55.41	-182.92
2001-02	186.80	49.37	-137.44

Source: *Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry*

poppy seeds, raw cotton, wool, waste wool, fine animal hair, textile yarn and fabrics, leather and leather manufactures, petroleum crude, plants for perfumes, pharmaceuticals, copper waste and scrap, articles of apparel, cloth accessories, rock salt and rice.

Commodities officially imported from India are ginger, tea, cardamom, soybean meal, carbon electrodes, iron ore, tendu (bidi) leaves, vegetable seeds, zinc, magnesia, refined lead, manganese ores and concentrates, books, betel leaves, sports goods, phthalic anhydride, tamarind, dyeing and tanning materials, cement, sewing machine, oil-cakes, residue of soybean, onion, organic chemicals and sugar-cane.

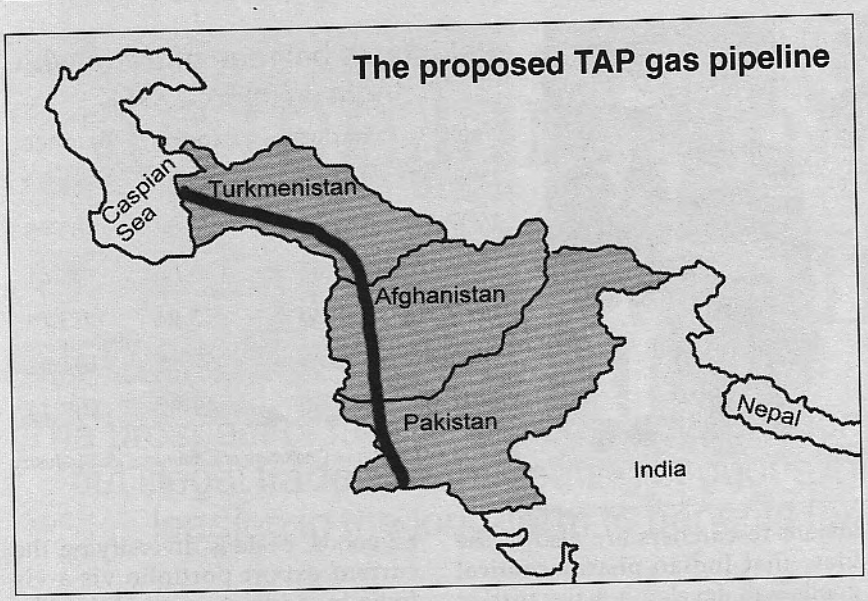
The trade balance in favour of India has prompted fears among certain members of the Pakistani business community, especially industrialists, of losing the domestic market to Indian manufactures resulting in a process of deindustrialisation. Cement manufacturers were the first to raise concerns. "The Indian cement industry will make a major dent in our business because they have an edge over their Pakistani counterparts due to differences in the tax structures of the two countries", maintains Tariq Saigol, chairman of the All Pakistan Cement Manufacturers Association. According to him, tax per tonne of cement in India is INR 500 while in Pakistan the government collects PKR 1600 for the same quantity. Pakistani researchers are also of the view that Indian pharmaceutical goods will develop a major market presence in Pakistan because drugs are priced low in India.

However, optimistic voices are not totally absent in Pakistan. Where fear prevails amongst a section of the business community about the possibility of Indian goods driving them out of business, a large number of businessmen and people in government see the opening-up of borders as a good opportunity for Pakistani goods to capture a market share in India. "The opening up of the border will provide us access to the largest market of Southasia", says Zubair Motiwala, an industrialist. Likewise, Tariq Ikram, minister of state and chairman of Pakistan's Export Promotion Bureau, feels that the country's exports to India could reach USD 3 billion after the freeing of trade from current restrictions. According to him, Pakistan could get a reasonable share in the Indian market for value-added goods, besides diversifying the current export portfolio vis-à-vis India by adding commodities like cotton, sugar and rice to the existing list. Members of the business community and researchers alike believe that the short term may see a flooding of Indian goods into the Pakistani market but in the long run Pakistani goods will be able to penetrate India, turning into a mutually beneficial situation for both countries. According to them, the trade pattern in normal times will, in all likelihood, remain in favour of Pakistan as in the 1979-1980 period when the overall trade balance was INR 940 million in Pakistan's favour. Even more recently, in 1988-89, the balance was INR 326 million rupees in favour of Pakistan.

The short term may see a flooding of Indian goods into the Pakistani market, but in the long run Pakistani goods will be able to penetrate India.

Energy Game

The interests for both countries are not just confined to exporting commodities and other goods, but also in sectors such as oil and gas. Islamabad is already working on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gas pipeline project. At a December 2003 meeting of the steering committee, comprising members from all three countries, a Asian Development Bank funded feasibility study of the USD 3.2 billion TAP project was presented, in which India was earmarked as the end-user of the gas. The project also envisaged gas storage facilities in Pakistan and the establishment of an independent security agency to take



Major items of exports to India (In million USD)

Commodity Description	1998-99	1999-00	2000-02
Vegetables and fruits	17.13	22.14	35.32
Textile yarn and fabrics	2.04	2.90	10.37
Leather and leather manufacture	0.55	0.18	0.35
Petroleum crude	5.16	4.17	-
Plants for perfume, pharmaceuticals	1.30	2.24	2.29
Rice	0.01	12.70	0.75
TOTAL	173.66	53.64	49.37

Source: *Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry*

care of the 1,700 kilometre-long gas pipeline.

India currently requires five to six billion cubic feet (Bcf) of gas per day and the demand is expected to grow. This indicates that perhaps India will need gas intake not only from Turkmenistan, but also another one from Iran that is under consideration. The tri-nation ministerial steering committee on the TAP gas pipeline project had ultimately to reject the feasibility study conducted by the project consultants because the report was prepared viewing India as the buyer, but the steering committee had not received any formal reply from the Indian side. The committee decided to go ahead with the project sans India, and the project consultant, Penspen Consulting of the United Kingdom, was directed to revise the feasibility report. The TAP project cost is estimated at USD 2.6 billion with the exclusion of India and USD 3.2 billion if the pipeline services New Delhi as well.

Pakistan is keen on acting as a gas conduit to India, for the money which it plans to charge from India for the privilege of transit. The estimated charge varies from four to six cents per cubic feet. India, on the other hand has been reluctant on political grounds, as well because of the cost factor. Some industry analysts see the present positive economic development between the two countries in SAFTA as a "levelling of the terrain" for the TAP gas pipeline. To the surprise of many in Pakistan, M Abdullah Yusuf, Member Secretary, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Resources began visits to New Delhi just a week after the conclusion of the SAARC summit to discuss Pakistan's purchase of diesel from India. Many oil sector analysts believe that Pakistan's move is aimed at softening the Indian side into progress on the gas pipeline project. Speaking to newspersons in New Delhi, Abdullah went on to add that, "Diesel imports to Pakistan from India are on our negative list, but we are willing to review this".

Pakistan, which currently imports 4.5-5 million tonnes of diesel annually, mostly from Kuwait, has initiated talks with the state-run Indian Oil Corporation which has surplus refining capacity and is keen to export diesel to Pakistan from pipelines that run close to Pakistan's border. Indian officials say diesel exports will help India utilise this surplus refining capacity, while Pakistan will benefit from the lower cost of fuel imports. Oil and gas sector observers believe that India may join in the TAP gas pipeline project, if not immediately then at least by the middle of this year, when the steering committee of the project meets again.

Many businessmen are of the view that though the new phase of SAARC, SAFTA and the India-Pakistan romance has just started, in the past good relations have soured on issues ranging from terrorism, the hawkish rhetoric in the media of both countries, to insidious speech-campaigns at multilateral fora. Indian-origin businessmen like Jumabhoy have acknowledged that political factors have tended to dominate the economic agenda in Southasia and that trade generally is often held hostage to the improvement in the relations between India and Pakistan, particularly on the resolution of the Kashmir issue. The events in the coming months, especially with elections to the lower house of parliament in India on the cards, will reveal the nature of progress made on the trade front. For now, businesses on both sides of the border are keeping their fingers crossed.

The child rights machinery

by **Suhas Chakma**

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, convening for its 35th session from 12 -30 January 2004, examined the most voluminous report in the history of the United Nations treaty bodies, the first periodic report of the government of India. The report is about 500 pages long. After the pre-sessional hearing, the government of India submitted another 62 pages by way of responses. With over half a dozen alternate NGO reports, the members of the Child Rights Committee have an uphill task if they are to effectively examine the implementation in India of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The most striking aspect of the government of India's first periodic report is that it has reportedly been written with the financial support of the UNICEF. This practice is not specific to India since UNICEF does provide financial support to hire professionals to write the periodic reports of governments all over the world.

The problem does not lie with financing per se but with what UNICEF financed. It would appear from the document that India is a model state when it comes to the rights of the child. The report maintains a stoic silence on the torture of children. It instead restricts the depiction of the violation of the right to life in India to female infanticide, presumably because it is practiced by society and the state's role is to heroically resist such obscurantist practices. And despite the Union Home Ministry providing information about internal armed conflicts in 14 out of 28 states, there is not a single reference to the effects of armed conflicts on children. The only reference in the report to armed conflict is about Punjab where the problem ended almost a decade ago!

The Delhi-based Asian Centre for Human Rights in its alternative report, "The Status of Children in India", as well as in its oral submission on 9 October 2003 before the CRC Committee, raised the ethical issue of financing a report which, despite its volume, fails so comprehensively to address the issue of child rights and the violations thereof. UNICEF's representatives stated that the organisation only facilitated dialogues between the NGOs and governments. As some UN agencies hide behind a veil of secrecy, only UNICEF officials in Delhi are aware as to whether it financed the hiring of professionals and publication of the report. Till such time as a full public disclosure is made, there is no option but to accept the official version. In the meanwhile all speculation on the exact nature of UNICEF's involvement that is bound to come up cannot do the organisation much good.

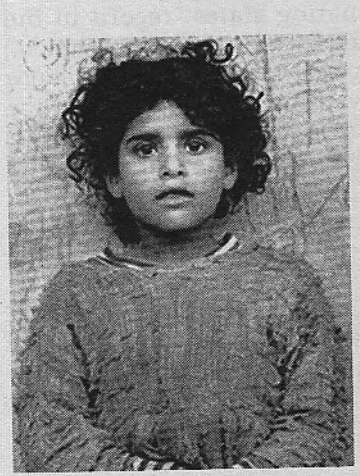
The chairman of the CRC Committee, Jacob Egbert Doek, in his oral reply on 9 October 2003 argued that the submission of a periodic report is better than "no report" at all in evaluating the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by a state party. Therefore, in his view, UNICEF should continue with the process of financially assisting governments in the writing of the periodic reports.

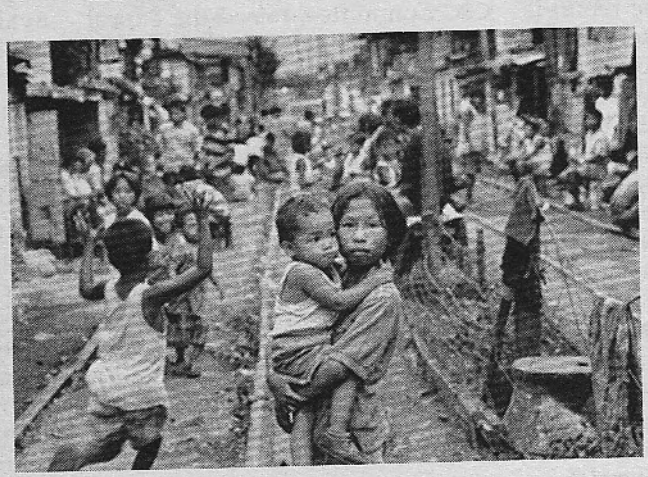
This is not a particularly satisfactory point of view, given the magnitude of the consequences, in particular the nature of the relationship between governments which renege on their commitment to implement the convention and a UN agency that is mandated to oversee the status of children the world over. UNICEF and the Committee on the Rights of the Child need to make ethical choices based on past practices with regard to the periodic reports. This is all the more important in the context of UNICEF's direct responsibility and involvement in evaluating states' record in the implementation of the convention.

Article 45 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that "in order to foster the effective implementation of the Convention and to encourage international co-operation in the field covered by the Convention, the specialised agencies, the United Nations Children's Fund, and other United Nations organs shall be entitled to be represented at the consideration of the implementation of such provisions of the present Convention as fall within the scope of their mandate. The Committee may invite the specialised agencies, the United Nations Children's Fund and other competent bodies, as it may consider appropriate to provide expert advice on the implementation of the Convention in areas falling within the scope of their respective mandates. The Committee may invite the specialised agencies, the United Nations Children's Fund, and other United Nations organs to submit reports on the implementation of the Convention in areas falling within the scope of their activities".

What has UNICEF's performance been in this regard? UNICEF primarily remains a service-providing agency, akin to the humanitarian organisations which provide assistance in non-controversial but important areas, such as the realisation of access to the highest attainable standards of health, right to education, right to food, and so

on. Fourteen years after the adoption of the CRC, UNICEF is yet to develop ways to address many of the civil and political rights issues like juvenile justice, torture, extra-judicial execution, rape and the status of children requiring special measures of protection. UNICEF does address some of these problems especially in countries which are in crisis, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia, but it is yet to develop methods to address such problems in countries like India. UNICEF rarely reports on these issues before the CRC Committee.





A Kurdish girl and a Manila slum in a UNICEF child rights campaign.

Instead, the agency seems to have developed mechanisms to work in tandem with states on matters which, though important, are incidental in their consequence compared to the job that it has been entrusted with. Specialised agencies such as UNICEF or the Secretariat of the United Nations bodies may well be required to train and increase the expertise of government officials to enable them to submit the periodic reports. However, hiring of individual professionals or professional agencies to collate information and write the periodic report subject to final approval of the government concerned is an altogether different issue. Most governments typically tend to hide behind jargon when discussing issues on which they have clearly failed to deliver in accordance with internationally accepted norms. Hiring professionals well versed in the techniques of presentation only provides a more effective cover to negligent governments, by dressing up their reports in appropriate ways and enabling them to evade international censure. To cite one instance, in the report just submitted by the government of India, some of the initiatives undertaken by NGOs have been presented as if they were bona fide government initiatives. Such claims are the more ironic, because it is a well known fact that the government actually uses repressive measures to impede the activities of dedicated NGOs working with children caught in armed conflict situations. Such deliberately misleading claims cannot but raise the ethical question of whether it is proper for UN agencies to finance or support government's that are so economical with the truth.

CRC Committee and other treaty bodies

But it is not just UNICEF that needs to examine the merits of its own actions. The Committee on the Rights of the Child needs to evaluate its own functioning before it goes through the motions of evaluating the performance of governments. The Committee can, of course, claim to be bogged down in work because of the universal ratification of the CRC, which means that an extraordinarily large number of reports are submitted to it for its consideration. But the fact of the matter is that most states default in submitting periodic reports, which itself is a sign of how ineffective it is as a monitoring body.

Most other UN treaty bodies such as the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are not as fortunate as the CRC Committee because they lack the requisite support from UN agencies. As a result many governments have not submitted their periodic reports to these committees for years. It does appear that the submission of periodic reports to the CRC Committee has more to do with UNICEF's support rather than the governments' commitment to implement the CRC or the effectiveness of the CRC Committee in ensuring the submission.

It is difficult to be rid of the suspicion, in the light of the non-submission of reports before other treaty bodies, that UNICEF's role in ensuring compliance with the CRC is to ensure adherence by states to the bureaucratic requirement that reports are submitted by providing incentives. That in the process of doing this duty it ends up compromising its credentials by pushing through reports that grossly misrepresent the status of the child does not seem to be of much concern. A part of the solution to this problem lies with the CRC itself. It must evolve suitable guidelines that will ensure that sufficient pressure is brought to bear on governments to submit their reports. The CRC Committee should also develop a General Comment on Article 45 to ensure that even if UNICEF funds the writing of periodic reports under exceptional circumstances, the true situation of children is properly reflected.

Brutalising inmates the 'Tihar way'

by **Subhash Gatade**

"We have sometimes to take tough decisions—even infringing some of our freedoms"

—Prime Minister AB Vajpayee, November 11, 2002.

Jails are supposed to be reformatory in nature. But the gap between precept and practice is nowhere as evident as in jails, especially their Indian versions, which have stood this conventional wisdom on its head. There are often tales of the impunity with which notorious criminals run their empires from the confines of the jail or 'celebrity' criminals suddenly developing chest pain and spending the period of their sentence in some super-speciality hospital. The nexus between the criminal, police and the politician, at times aided by the judiciary, is so blatant as to be completely transparent. On the other hand, ordinary prisoners get brutalised regularly with the due connivance of the police and 'senior criminals'. And now comes the news of the police force in one of the 'best' jails in India, New Delhi's elite Tihar Jail (venue of many reformist exercises by the high profile cop Kiran Bedi) behaving as if they were foot soldiers of the Hindutva brigade.

A recent letter by India's leading human rights activists to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to "probe the communal policies of the Tihar authorities" (*The Kashmir Times*, 11 January, "Victims may forget torture but not verbal abuse") has once again brought into sharp focus the malady which afflicts the custodians of law. In a written complaint to the NHRC, prominent socialist leader Surendra Mohan, on behalf of the All India Defence Committee for Syed Abdul Rehman Geelani (the Delhi University lecturer who was acquitted by the Delhi High Court in the December 2001 parliament attack case), has demanded to "institute a probe into the deplorable conditions inside Tihar jail", making a pointed reference to the alleged practice of communalism inside the jail perpetrated by prejudiced jail authorities.

It is worth noting that these leading human rights activists have based their complaint on a letter written to the All India Defence Committee chairman, the scholar Rajni Kothari, by Syed Abdul Rehman Geelani about the conditions in Tihar jail where he spent two years before his acquittal in November last year. According to the report, "The letter has pointed references to the torture meted out to jail inmates in the high-risk ward, where he was lodged, specially the Kashmiri inmates and the Muslims". According to the Defence Committee, "this discrimination against Muslim detainees in general and Kashmiris in particular is in violation of the basic tenets of International Human Rights Law". It has called upon the commission to set up a committee to visit the jail and document the problems and difficulties faced by the detenues in the 'high risk cells' and indicated that it would like to be associated with the enquiry.

A cursory glance at the letter written by Geelani to Rajni Kothari is an eye-opener for anyone who is concerned about Indian democracy and the future of secular values. The letter states:

"Throughout my time in jail I was in an area that is called the 'high-risk ward' in jail parlance. I do not know whether there is a provision for such a special category under the law. In my understanding it would be highly illegal to categorise any detainee as a high risk even before he has been convicted.

...The detainees do not have an opportunity to go outside unless someone visits them... The jail authorities can and do impose all manner of illegal punishments on the detainees and prisoners lodged in the high-risk cells. I have witnessed the beating of several prisoners. The prisoners in the high-risk cells complained that the jail authorities, on the smallest pretext, punished them. Apart from beating, jail authorities have even tortured the detainees by pushing poles up their anus, making the men drink urine and depriving them of drinking water for several days at a time.

The Kashmiri detainees are the special targets of the jail authorities. It would seem that they think they can contribute to solving the conflict by subjecting the Kashmiris to indescribable brutality. Many of these men have been undertrials for many years without even a hope of getting a trial at all. Some who have been convicted have not got a fair trial and have been falsely implicated by corrupt police officers, like I was.

In addition to the physical abuse is the verbal humiliation heaped on the detainees and prisoners in the high-risk cells. The majority of the men are Muslims and the jail authorities vent their prejudices and

hatred without any hesitation. They also instigate the convicts to follow their example and their communalism defies description. Even if their victims forget the torture, the verbal abuse cannot be wiped out of their memories...The dehumanisation of the jail authorities is best seen when they do not allow the detainees to offer Namaz on the occasion of Id..."

There is no doubt that torture of inmates on communal lines can be construed as an extension of the dehumanising behaviour of the police towards the people outside the confines of the jail. It can be argued that there has been a 'normalisation of brutality' or 'brutalisation of normality' which comes into full play in the spheres of life where the reach of the police and the life of the ordinary citizen intersects. The killing of minorities duly 'sponsored' by the Hindutva brigade in Gujarat two years ago is a reminder of police brutality, which 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, handed them over to the rioters.

Of course that was not the first instance when the police abandoned its 'neutrality' and lent its support to one of the 'warring factions'. The degeneration of the police force is palpable at every level. Social scientist Sumanta Bannerjee, writing recently in the *Economic and Political Weekly* ("Human Rights in India in the Global Context") underlined how the Indian government's skewed policies and lack of transparency in all such cases has raised the spectre of exponential growth in cases of gross human rights violations in police custody. According to him, "India has rejected the demand of accountability, not only by expressing its hostility to the International Criminal Court, but also by refusing to support the adoption of the 'Optional Protocol' to the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment". This is not surprising, because the protocol wants to "establish a system of regular visits undertaken by independent international and national bodies to places where people are deprived of their liberty, in order to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".

It is disturbing that the torture of persons in high risk cells is not an exception but a generalised phenomenon. Figures collated by the NHRC corroborate that the treatment meted out to the Tihar inmates is not an isolated instance of misdemeanour. The number of complaints with India's prime human rights body has gone up from 500 in the first year to 70,000 every year today. Significantly, of the complaints received by the commission,

The Kashmiri detainees are the special targets of the jail authorities.

over 40 percent are against the police, followed by those against jails—a reflection on the state of the penal system in the country. As far as the appeal drafted by leading human rights activists is concerned, there is as yet no indication of the reaction of the NHRC. But looking at the backlog of more than 40,000 cases with the commission which have been awaiting disposal for several years now and the government's deliberate refusal to vest the body with adequate authority and resources, rendering it a toothless and inept institution, it will be too much to expect any significant move from its side. If at all it takes cognisance of the appeal it would be more in the form of window-dressing, absolving the powers that be of any involvement in this planned discrimination against the minorities.

Some urgent steps are needed to correct the situation. As things stand today, with the increasing disregard for accountability in cases involving violations of human rights and international humanitarian laws, the task at hand may appear difficult. Apart from putting pressure through all possible channels demanding greater transparency and accountability from the powers that be, it is necessary for human rights activists to continue to intervene at all possible levels for redressal of grievances. It is also necessary to examine the social composition of the police force to establish whether it has adequate representation of different communities and sections of society in it or not. A glance at a few of the recent figures does not seem encouraging. According to Omar Khalidi, an independent scholar and author of *Khaki and the Ethnic Violence in India: Army, Police and Paramilitary Forces During Communal Riots*, "For decades there was little or no recruitment of Muslims in Delhi police, so much so that they were a mere 2.3 percent of the total force in 1991...The National Minorities Commission gives the figure of 1446 Muslims out of a total of 51,683 in its annual report, 1995-96".

Geelani's letter to Rajni Kothari has rekindled the memories of "My Years In An Indian Prison' written by the British national, Mary Taylor. Taylor who was married to an activist of the revolutionary left movement, had to languish in Indian jails for more than five years for her allegedly 'seditious activities'. Her experiences brought into sharp focus the processes of brutalisation and dehumanisation which targets, particularly, the deprived and the marginalised and also raised a lot of debate about the conditions inside Indian jails in the late '70s and early '80s.

It can only be hoped that the petition by the All India Defence Committee succeeds in focusing on the condition of detainees in the high risk cells of Tihar jail and jails elsewhere, and thus turn attention to the wider problem of how communalism leads to certain dehumanisation of the society and polity of the country.

SAARC: fish don't fly

Hold tight, each one of you
Snake-tails of your own
Country, religion, convictions
The way people hold each other
On a sinking boat.
—Noman Shauk, Dubati Nau Par

AFTER THE Islamabad *tamasha*, it is clear that SAARC is yet to grow out of the shadows of infantile rivalry between India and Pakistan. The regional grouping has failed to evolve into an independent identity. It has not come of age, despite having crossed 18, the age at which most Southasians become eligible to vote. As expected, the now-on-now-off India-Pakistan peace parley hogged the headlines. The summit that had given General Pervez an opportunity to play host to Premier Atal was pushed to the background. Before the heads of the Seven Sisters meet next in Bangladesh, SAARC runs the risk of another spell of uncertain hibernation.

After the third try, medley of SAARC leaders did agree to establish the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) by 2016, but the mechanism to achieve that seems to have been left deliberately vague. Other than that, the Islamabad meet will be remembered more for the *shervanis* that Vajpayee ordered with the tailors of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto than anything else. Trade may open doors ajar, but for a true Southasian Community to develop, some politics needs to be introduced into the frail organisation.

Apolitical outfit

SAARC was established by the heads of state and/or government of countries with autocratic leanings—back then Bangladesh and Pakistan had military rulers (Ziaur, Ziaul), Bhutan and Nepal had autocrat monarchs (the kings Birendra and Jigme), and India and Sri Lanka were led by democratic but domineering personalities (Rajiv and Premadasa). There were no surprises when the regional grouping was designed as a convivial club, a sanitised organisation sans politics.

The administrative nature of the organisation has proved a mixed blessing. It has helped the Secretariat of SAARC remain operational, though far from fully functional, even when its members have squabbled in extremis. But the secretariat cannot do much else than survive. The secretary generals and seven directors working at the gloomy headquarters of the organisation in Kathmandu lack the mandate as well as the standing to intervene in any constructive way on any issue.

Colin Powel it was who convinced Vajpayee that there was no alternative to holding talks with Pakistan, with the summit providing a good cover. Beijing had to use its leverage with Islamabad to make the ruling junta relent and allow Musharraf to respond to overtures from New Delhi. Christina Rocca has had to periodically travel to the Subcontinent to ensure that the various Southasian establishments keep talking to each other. Meanwhile, all that the secretariat of SAARC could do was wait for yet another summit to materialise.

If SAFTA is to gain momentum within the given time frame, and if any other regional programmes are to be added to the SAARC agenda, the very philosophy and structure of its secretariat has to be reformulated. From a centre of well-paid file-pushers lacking in agency, it must be transformed into a proactive institution with the ability to influence events and trends.

The vision presented by the Eminent Persons Group to the SAARC Heads of Government in 1998 was an attempt to redefine and restructure the organisation for the challenges of the new century. Frankly, it was not bold enough to address the aspirations of new generation of Southasians, but even that seemed to have been too forward-looking for our unimaginative leaders. Subsequent summits have refused to discuss the Eminent Persons' recommendations, but the need to re-invent this umbrella organisation of all Southasian states has hardly gone away.

One of the ways of beginning the process of change would be to turn the SAARC secretariat into a semi-political office with the ultimate goal of establishing a full-fledged regional Parliament, a Southasian Court of Justice, and even an Executive with trans-border authority and responsibilities. Someone has to dream it up to set the ball rolling. More than half of all Southasians are youths. They are more likely to be receptive to new ideas than the granddaddies and grand-uncles who control SAARC's secretariat from the various foreign ministries of Southasian capital cities.

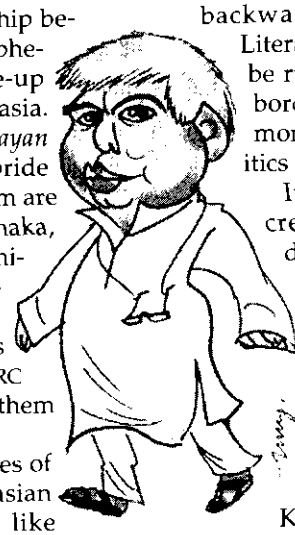
Media stars

With all due respect to Bangladesh's QAMA Rahim, the administrative character of the post of secretary-general is a hindrance to making SAARC a visible organisation. Rahim may be a competent diplomat, as was the Lankan Nihal Rodrigues before him, but there is no way he can call Chandrika Kumaratunga on the phone for a tête-à-tête. Diplomats are trained never to extend themselves beyond the decorum of "protocol, alcohol, and no-toll". The reform has to begin at the top, and it is hard-boiled politicos like Benazir Bhutto, Laloo Yadav, Sheikh Hasina, Sharad Pawar or Sher Bahadur Deuba who should be leading an assertive SAARC secretariat. They will not hesitate to throw their weight around and create enough media interest to sustain

regional agendas of the organisation.

When a phalanx of Indian politicos visited Pakistan some time ago, it was Laloo who kept the cameras tailing him wherever he went. Now suppose, if the Yadav from Bihar were to be the SAARC secretary-general, would he not follow-up the issue of the forgotten Biharis of the Dhaka camps with the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh in a completely different way? Imagine a Shekhar Suman take on the Laloo-speak calling the 'President' of Pakistan on SAB TV *"Arre Mushharraf Sahab, kuchh to Allah ka Kauf kariye, history me nam likhbaiye ..."*. Or to Begum Khalida, *"Arre Behana, hamko aapse kuchh kehna hai ..."*. The echo of laughter all over Southasia would be strong enough to force them generate a smile, and do something that their predecessors have consistently refused to do for decades.

The Track II crowd that has made the Wagah-Atari border a celebrated destination has not been able to bring about tangible change in the relationship between the two countries, but they have been phenomenally successful in establishing a line-up of names and faces familiar all over Southasia. Ayaz Amir graces the pages of *The Himalayan Times* in Kathmandu, Kuldip Nayar gets pride of place in the *Dawn* of Pakistan, both of them are carried on the pages of *The Daily Star* of Dhaka, and all of them are talked about in the seminar-circuit from Colombo to Bombay to Calcutta. Lahore's human rights volcano, Asma Jehangir is lapped up by TV cameras wherever she travels. The secretariat of SAARC can show its gratitude to them by declaring them citizens of Southasia.



There is no reason why member countries of SAARC would object to a common Southasian passport for 'eminent regional persons' like Madhuri Dixit, Ghulam Ali, MJ Akbar, in addition to all the current and previous heads of central as well as provincial governments in the region. The prospect of Narendra Modi drawing his Southasian passport with a flourish at the Karachi Immigration Office to prove that he doesn't need a visa to enter the country of a common region is too attractive not to think about. Imagine him calling SAARC Secretary-General Buddhadev Bhattacharya from his cellphone if he were to encounter any difficulty ...!

Money matters

To establish its legitimacy with the masses, SAARC needs to come down from its pedestal. Summits are great photo-ops, Track II meets are glamorous diversions for the intelligentsia, and SAFTA holds enormous promise for the emerging business classes, but how about the absolute poor who constitute nearly half of the 1.4 billion population of Southasia?

Deeply enmeshed in security and trade controversies, Southasian leaders have failed to do anything other than paying lip service to the issue of poverty so far. To tackle it, the countries need to pool their resources, and SAARC is a framework that already exists to implement the dream. A mechanism is required to create a common fund to create job opportunities. Something needs to be done, and urgently, to make children of Southasia a common responsibility of all the governments in the region. While UNICEF has had them mouth the slogans, it has not been able to generate commitment among the governments.

The idea of touching the poorest was indeed floated by the Eminent Persons Group, but it chose to limit itself to the LDCs of the region—Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Their main concern was how to make "the disadvantaged three" benefit from the regional trade. That is an important issue. But traders everywhere are quite capable of taking care of their interests, by arm-twisting their own governments if necessary. SAARC must concentrate its anti-poverty efforts on the pockets of backwardness in every country of South Asia. Literacy, health and infrastructure projects must be run from a common fund. In the same way, border regions need investments from a common fund that would be free from internal politics of either size.

Imagine a SAARC Development Fund is created where every country of the region devotes a small percentage of its national budgets. This budget is then administered by a secretary-general who is unafraid of taking bold decisions because of who he is (a politician). Part of the fund goes to create a string of ponds to conserve rain-water in the Deccan. Schools are funded in Balochistan. Health posts are built in Motihari. Mini hydroelectricity plants are financed in Kumaun. Suppose the fund also has a mechanism—institutions, funds, and authority—for dispatching immediate relief in case of a disaster anywhere in the region.

Aiming for a common rupee and building a trading block are not original ideas. The challenges before Southasia are much more complex and enormous. And fortunately, so are the opportunities. More than one-fifth of humanity, with so much in common, is in dire need of political innovations for the common good. For how long can we keep living, with the clock ticking towards mid-night, without doing something about it collectively?

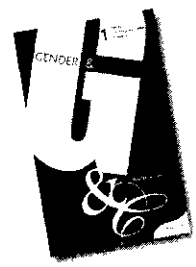
The leaky boat that we are on—Southasia—cannot be protected by the Islamic Bomb or Hindu missiles. It cannot be kept afloat by—horror of horrors—Buddhist hatred. And it cannot be saved by our heads meeting once in a while to smile and pretend that everything will ultimately turn out just right. In 1986, even SAARC was a bold idea—a huge fish that would carry the sinking boat along for a while. Now is the time to design something else that can fly. Fish don't fly.

–CK Lal

Towards a feminism of caste

In recent years, the intricate interconnections between gender and caste in Indian society has been recognised and explored by more and more academics and those involved in struggles for social change. The result has been the emergence of a vast corpus of literature of variable quality, characterised by multiple perspectives, depending on where each argument is coming from. While the corpus is large it is scattered so that a systematic overview of the research so far would be difficult to obtain. *Gender and Caste*, in a sense, addresses this problem to some extent by bringing together a collection of historical and contemporary analyses, reports, manifestos and testimonies that bear on the theme and tries to align academic inquiry with contemporary political developments. This anthology is an important addition to Kali for Women's series *Issues in Contemporary Feminism*, particularly because it seeks to exorcise the ghost of 'monolithic identity' which the Indian feminist movement has cast itself in. Issues pertaining to dalit women and their oppression look like they are being addressed, although the reality points elsewhere. It is for this reason that the volume underlines the need to address the 'caste-deficiency' in Indian feminism.

The year 1995, with The International Women's Conference in Beijing as the backdrop, was a significant moment for the feminist movement in India. The editor of the volume, Anupama Rao begins her introduction by referring to Gopal Guru's 1995 essay, "Dalit Women Talk Differently", and the discussion that sprang up around it. Women who had thought of themselves as bearing the torch of Indian feminism now found themselves challenged from a new direction. Dalit women in India were questioning whether the feminist movement in India had paid sufficient attention to the caste basis of women's oppression and whether the mainly upper-caste women's movement had any right to speak for dalit women. Guru's essay speaks with approval of the setting up of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) at that juncture. As Rao points out, this was also an attempt to place the concerns of dalit women in a transnational setting, a project which has continued with the NFDW issuing its declaration on gender and racism at the World Conference against Racism held at Durban, South Africa in 2001. This has been included as an appendix at the end of the book. The NFDW has also been vocal and assertive in insisting on the inclusion of 'caste' in official statements debated in the preparations to the World Social Forum in Bombay.



Gender and Caste
edited by Anupama Rao;
series *Issues in Contemporary Feminism*
Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2003;
Price: Rs 325

reviewed by
Wandana Sonalkar

Caste issues have become the subject of various kinds of political activity in India in recent times. These range from the identity politics of dalits and other lower castes in trade unions and other organisations, to the formation of new parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party, which seeks power through forming its own alliances and refuses to assimilate itself into coalitions led by the Congress party or those claiming secular or socialist credentials. These developments are usually traced back to the acceptance of the recommendations of the Mandal Report by the VP Singh government in 1990, which extended reservations in government posts and seats in state-run educational institutions beyond the dalit castes to a much wider section of "other backward castes". The new political associations initiated by dalit women can be seen as a part of this scenario.

The editor's choice of an ongoing new political assertion by dalit women as the central focus for this book is one of its strengths. It charges the relation between gender and caste in Indian society with an actuality in terms of linking a self-conceptualisation of their situation by dalit women with broader political concerns of democracy and representation. This guides the reading of the various texts. There is, on the one hand, a live and immediate contestation of terminology and conceptual frameworks. Pranjali Bandhu quotes Ruth Manorama characterising dalit women as being "Thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender". Her piece, as well as that of Gopal Guru, speaks of the challenge dalit women pose both to the 'mainstream' women's movement and the male-dominated dalit movement. Sharmila Rege draws a parallel between contemporary assertions and organisational initiatives by dalit women and the questions posed by black women in the feminist movement in the US. She calls for a dalit feminist standpoint as a means of revitalising the feminist agenda in India.

According to Rao, the introduction "is an attempt to illustrate how the categories of 'caste' and

'gender' have been understood by scholars embedded in diverse disciplinary configurations, and to suggest methods of reading such work as a genealogy for considering feminism's political futures". Further, she calls for "recognizing caste as a critical component of studies of political modernity".

Such readings are still comparatively rare. There is even now a degree of reluctance to incorporate these considerations into the most basic concerns of Indian feminism. In a recent set of articles in the *Economic and Political Weekly* revaluating the Indian feminist movement in the contemporary context of globalisation and aggressive Hindu majoritarianism, for example, the challenge posed by dalit women is barely mentioned in the contributions from Maithreyi Krishna Raj and Sharmila Rege. Gabriele Dietrich—who, in her article in the volume under review, looks at various readings of the relationship between dalit movements and women's movements, and ends by saying that, "the dalit movement keeps reminding us that caste cannot be wished away but needs to be faced squarely"—is, in the *EPW* article, severely critical of recent dalit attempts at political assertion. She speaks of the opportunism of political players such as Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, and refers to the participation of dalit organisations "and especially the dalit-supported NGO sector" in the anti-racism conference at Durban as "a deflection of issues". In her view, "the whole debate on whether caste is race, created more confusion than clarity". These recently published views of Indian feminism show that the challenge posed to it by dalit women is still very much a controversial issue. This book plunges into the middle of the controversy, so to speak, and emphasises a particular point of view that is not widely accepted.

In the same set of *EPW* articles on the Indian feminist movement, Shilpa Phadke quotes Mary John as stressing "the need to focus on caste and communalism as modern forms of inequality and to stop focusing solely on poverty and disadvantages as the women's movement has been doing for far too long". However, in her treatment of how the women's movement has dealt with the issue of sexual violence, there is no mention of the caste aspects of sexual violence, or how dalit women's sexuality is regarded as being 'available' for upper-caste men. Rao, in contrast, has included articles on sexual violence against dalit women that raise a number of troubling issues.

Rao starts with the beginning of political self-assertion by dalit women, which raises complex questions for political and social theory as well as for the political practice of feminism. Her selection of articles and extracts is intended to serve as a guide through this complexity, rather than an attempt to simplify it. One aspect is the need to look again at the history of political struggles. Rao represents this concern through a selection of articles and extracts evaluating the contribution of Jyotiba Phule in 19th century Maharashtra, and Ambedkar and Periyar in the 20th century. Rao admits that this selection has something of a regional bias toward south India and Maharashtra, but she justifies this by pointing out that "caste and social reform (are) articulated in very explicit ways in these regions", and that "such regional histories give pause to any attempts to generalize about either caste or gender relations across India". We are thus presented with these histories and invited to ponder on them, without any claim that they are "representative" of India as a whole.

Issues pertaining to dalit women and their oppression look like they are being addressed, though the reality points elsewhere.

Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar were all non-Brahmin political leaders who questioned the values of the upper-caste-dominated independence movement. All of them were much concerned with gender, and underlined the links between caste oppression and the oppression of women. Uma Chakravarti's essay on "Phule, Brahmanism and Brahminical Patriarchy" deals with the processes of social change in western India in the 19th century. She writes, "the upper castes (primarily, Brahminical caste groups) sought to adjust to the colonial situation and grasp the opportunities provided by it to form a professional middle class", while there was at the same time, "a contestation of such a process from the non-Brahmin castes". Phule constantly joined issue with the brahminical reformist leaders, exposing their reluctance to give up their caste privileges and their monopolistic hold over education. He also worked relentlessly against gender inequality, whether by starting a school for girls in Pune which, unlike those established much later by upper-caste social reformers of this region like DD Karve, opened its doors to dalit and shudra girls, or providing a shelter for high-caste widows and an orphanage for their illegitimate children.

There are two articles on Periyar E Ramaswamy Naicker, one by S Anandhi, which deals mainly with the self-respect movement in Tamil Nadu and Periyar's revolutionary views on marriage, and one by V Geetha, which compares Periyar's struggles against caste and gender inequality both with the politics of the Congress Party under Gandhi, and with the concerns of the women's movement in present-day India. There are also three articles on BR Ambedkar. The first is a short extract from a book in Marathi on the role played by women in the dalit liberation movement, from the years before Ambedkar assumed leadership, by Urmila Pawar and

Meenakshi Moon. The second is by Eleanor Zelliot, which traces the importance of gender issues in Ambedkar's organisational work and choice of issues for struggle, his insistence on the participation of women in the movement and his encouragement of dalit women activists, his work on the Hindu Code Bill, his choice of Buddhism as the religion he converted to, and his writings on other subjects. She concludes by saying that Ambedkar was ahead of his times in that he "pointed out the relationship between the caste system and the position of women", and that it is up to scholars to explore this issue in practice and to organise dalit women to pursue it in practice.

Pratima Pardeshi's piece (surprisingly placed in the section on "Land and Labour"), again translated from the Marathi, takes up the same issues, and calls for the development of a non-brahminical feminism based upon the ideas of Phule and Ambedkar, in which identity politics and struggles over culture play an important part. She says, "Identities are not created overnight... The crux of identity politics must be progressive. Identities are real only if they are rooted in the struggles to end the vested political, social and cultural interests". She speaks of a non-brahminical tradition of struggle, which goes back to the days of Jyotiba Phule and had figures like Shiram Janoba Kamble, who initiated a campaign against the *devadasi* tradition in late 19th century Maharashtra, and Narayan Meghaji Lokhande, who fought for the interests of dalit workers in the early years of the trade union movement in Bombay. This is the tradition within which she would want Indian feminism to go forward; so that "the programme for the liberation of women (may) be seen as an intrinsic part of the struggles against the social, religious, cultural and political exploitation of the caste system".

Uma Chakravarti also shows how Phule came into contact with, and publicly supported, the struggles of some remarkable women who challenged caste and gender orthodoxy in their time: Pandita Ramabai, a brahmin woman who made waves in the atmosphere of liberal reformism when she converted to Christianity; Tarabai Shinde, the non-brahmin author of a fiery tract on gender inequality which was largely ignored at the time but has recently become well-known; Savitribai Phule, who worked with her husband Jyotiba for the education of lower-caste girls and courageously faced social wrath; and Muktabai, a fourteen-year-old pupil in Phule's school, whose essay on the social oppression of the Mang and Mahar castes is also now justly famous.

Phule constantly joined issue with the brahminical reformist leaders, exposing their reluctance to give up their caste privileges and their monopolistic hold over education.

These texts offer a different view of social reforms and anti-colonial politics in Maharashtra and south India in the 19th and early 20th century. The next section has three pieces on dalit women's "voice" and literature. Whereas 'dalit literature' written by men has become a widely practised genre of protest writing in several Indian languages, and has been translated into English, and occasionally even earlier into French, autobiography and fiction written by dalit women is still only a trickle, and very little has been translated.

Rao therefore provides an extract from Sumitra Bhave's "Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell their Stories". One of these women describes in detail what conversion to Buddhism actually implies in the daily life and religious practices of dalit households, and talks about what it means to her. Ambedkar's own acceptance of the Buddhist faith was the culmination of decades of thought and a political act intended to allow his community to break with an oppressive and humiliating Hinduism. Since many thousands followed him in embracing Buddhism (Ambedkar himself died less than a year after the conversion), the cultural practice of the new faith has borne the contradictions of a political act in a social milieu that is still slow to change. Elsewhere, we have a dalit woman's sexual life described with frankness and humour, a theme that Rao tries to draw attention to in two, shorter, pieces as well. These are reviews of dalit women's autobiographies which also raise questions about consciousness of gender issues, the extent to which these women accept their situations or rebel against them. One of them stresses how the writer Bama's narrative, "to a great degree, does not deal with herself, but the context of dalit life in which she grew up and acquired a certain self-awareness".

The selection, though small in volume, is a cautionary statement about the need to be careful in making easy generalisations about dalit women's consciousness, their sexual freedom or their identification with their community and their politicisation. The 'voice' of dalit women is only now beginning to be heard, and we are being invited to listen to it attentively, with an ear to its nuances. But "Dalit Women Talk Differently" is, in a sense, a major theme of this book, and their different sexuality, their political awakening, their self-assertion, their experience of work and of violence, their identification with their caste and its organisations, their encounter with patriarchy within the community, are certainly its concern. Not all these find expression in this section. But the theme of violence and sexuality is explored elsewhere at length and in a nuanced fashion.

Patriarchal inquiry

In a long contribution in which she explores the conceptualisation of gender and caste from a feminist perspective, Gabriele Dietrich narrates two incidents of violence against dalit women in rural Tamil Nadu in which some redressal was sought by the dalit men on an individual and organised basis. She points out the fundamental asymmetry regarding gender and caste. Violence against dalit women is a routine occurrence and serves to reinforce the caste hierarchy, while even a speech by a dalit man expressing fantasies of rape of upper-caste women in retaliation, is seen as a heinous crime since it seeks to overturn the hierarchy. At the same time, the dalit men seeking redressal of the violation of one of 'their' women are often tempted to use abusive patriarchal language, and, indeed, they usually see the injury in patriarchal terms. Dietrich expresses anguish about the difficulty of organising any collective response to such incidents that goes beyond the patriarchal logic of the caste system.

Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran in their submission bring out the contemporary context of such incidents, as dalits in the post-independence period have gained a certain degree of upward social mobility, acquired education and improved their standard of living and mode of dress. These improvements are resented by the upper-castes, especially in rural settings. According to them, "what we witness today in the increasing violence that enforces the maintenance of 'order' in relations of caste and gender is the weakening of an absolute power that did not allow or permit the space for the articulation or even the awareness of grievance or a sense of wrong and the consequent blurring of carefully drawn lines of (caste) demarcation".

Included in the section on "Violence and Sexuality" is a thought-provoking paper by Susie Tharu. She juxtaposes two stories about widows: one by Gita Hariharan about a rebellious old brahmin woman on her deathbed, and the other about a dalit widow, narrated through the eyes of her young son. The second story is by Baburao Bagul, one of the most powerful dalit writers of fiction in Marathi. Tharu says, "The widow is a figure whose very life is marked by a specific death. She is 'vidhava'—without husband—and consequently in need not only of public protection but also of regulation, governance. Widow stories are invariably also subtly modulated historical engagements with questions of governmentality and citizenship".

Tharu's subtle reading of the two stories probes questions which have been hinted at, but not explored, in earlier accounts where dalit women are murdered, implicated, or become the subjects of various kinds of misinterpretation and exclusion, in different incidents of caste violence. The dalit woman's beauty and sexuality are, as she says, for the dalit man "not sources of joy but of anxiety and emasculation". Through the dalit woman, power is exercised over the dalit man. Tharu says of Bagul's narrative: "Yet there is in the story a new kind of movement: from the never-ceasing shuttle between the extraditions and deaths that comprise her impossible life, to a struggle to leave, and in that single act to re-notate the world". Of course this is fiction, written by a dalit writer who displays in his work an extraordinary power to portray the ravaged sexual life of dalit men and women in *our* society. Here is a feminist reader who cares to take from him what it implies for *us*; the juxtaposition of the story about the brahmin woman rules out our reading it as a dalit story only.

Ambedkar's own acceptance of the Buddhist faith was the culmination of decades of thought and a political act intended to allow his community to break with an oppressive and humiliating Hinduism.

The issues of governmentality and citizenship mentioned by Tharu are dealt with more explicitly in Rao's own contribution to this volume. She also narrates a particular incident of caste violence involving dalit women, but chooses to investigate the issue through the juridical records of the case. The incident, which took place in 1963, involved the stripping and parading of dalit women in a village following the molestation of a dalit woman labourer by an upper-caste man, and a protest by her husband which was seen as an insult to her molester's wife. As is usual in such incidents, the actual sequence of events is variously reported by observers, but Rao is interested in the judge's view of the case.

In the case, those responsible for the stripping incident were found guilty and sentenced. But Rao points out that the outrage expressed by the judge in his comments emphasises the insult to *women*, and plays down the caste-sexual dimensions of the case. There is even a suggestion that the 'real' reason for the dispute between dalits and upper-castes that forms the background of the case involves access to village water sources, which is often the occasion for violence against dalits even today. As for the law as it stood at the time of this trial, Rao draws attention to the fact that when the Indian constitution bans 'untouchability' it does not define what untouchability is, and the whole complex of caste hierarchies and practices finds no mention. She also hints that the introduction at a later date of a law banning 'atrocities' against the dalits does not really help matters either. It remains a fact that the way citizenship and citizen's rights have been written into the Indian constitution *abstracts* from the reality of caste as a social practice, and its

denial of the dalit's equal rights on a daily basis. The way in which sexual attacks on dalit women are perceived, by villagers, by the police and judiciary, in the various incidents narrated in this book provide ample evidence of this. Ambedkar made attempts to correct this lacuna when he was on the Constitutional Committee, and when he was opposed on this, he fought another unsuccessful battle for the Hindu Code Bill.

So we come back a full circle to contemporary attempts to 'bring' caste into the discourse on gender, as well as other public discourses: that of human rights, of race and the rights of ethnic minorities, and even the Marxist discourse on mode of production, as the dissenting communist party activist and theoretician Sharad Patil has tried to do. As remarked above, there is still a prevalent tendency to 'forget' about caste, which is why this book, nudging us to look at the questions relating to gender and caste in different contexts, is so welcome.

Land and labour

The last section is titled "Land and Labour". There is an interview with a dalit woman agricultural labourer with a commentary by Gail Omvedt, dated 1975; an account by Kancha Illaiah of how dalit women led a struggle for rights over common and public land against the upper-caste reddy landlords in a village in Andhra Pradesh; and two pieces by P Sainath. All of these portray dalit women workers in an *active* role, where they are, at least potentially, agents in bringing about change in their working conditions. Even the early piece by Omvedt, where the interviewer, accompanied by a dalit student activist from a labourer's family, is trying to elicit reactions from the woman that express her consciousness of gender inequality, the woman's militancy is forcefully expressed. She is aware of the difficulties in initiating any organised resistance by dalit labourers in the presence of widespread unemployment. She is somewhat dismissive when asked about specifically *caste* aspects of oppression.

One of Sainath's accounts draws attention to an area in which dalit women have been playing an increasingly active role: in village-level local government bodies where, after a constitutional amendment enacted in 1993, seats are reserved for women, and for dalit women. It also shows how they are resisted by entrenched holders of economic and political power, whose reluctance to accept a dalit woman in a position of power has specifically caste-cultural aspects. The other piece talks about what happens after the carrying of "night-soil" or human excrement in head-loads (of course, by dalit women) is legally banned.

Rao draws attention to the fact that when the Indian constitution bans 'untouchability' it does not define what untouchability is, and the whole complex of caste hierarchies and practices finds no mention.

All these are different contemporary situations and contexts in which dalit women, struggling against their work conditions, inevitably challenge the political and cultural configurations of the caste system as well as patriarchal relations and the economic order of class-based exploitation. The political self-assertion on a national level by newly-formed associations of dalit women is thus echoed by struggles in different local conditions.

The final extract is something of a manifesto for an anti-brahminical women's liberation by Pratima Pardeshi. She outlines Phule and Ambedkar's analysis of patriarchy and caste, and calls on the dalit movement to develop its own theory and strategy on the question of women. She does not, at least in this extract, directly address what she would characterise as brahminical feminism. Rao elaborates on brahminical feminism in her article as "a shorthand for referring to a highly selective understanding of women and their lives which has been unable to incorporate significant mediations (in this instance, caste) that inflect the structures of living in and through diverse patriarchies in the Indian context. If caste makes for a difference in the kind and quality of patriarchal control, it does so not only for those dalit women who are seen to bear the excesses of such caste patriarchy, but also for those feminists whose caste specificity is seen to be elided through the adoption of the term "feminist". Hence Brahminical feminism is the possibility of occupying a feminist position outside caste: *the possibility of denying caste as a problem for gender*".

Caste politics has become much more visible in India in recent years. The formation of caste-based parties, caste groups within trade unions, and now in the women's movement is largely deplored as divisive even by those on the left who have sympathy with the cause of dalits, in the face of the major perceived threats from globalisation and Hindu fascism. Rao's anthology questions these perceptions by thinking about how caste and gender together deeply inflect the reality of democracy, citizenship and nationhood. The self-assertion of the lower castes and the workings of identity politics have revealed disturbing cracks in the modernity of India's democratic institutions. Challenges to the power of dominant groups, in a complex polity with shifting regional, religious and caste equations, too often release emotions which express themselves in violence against women. Dominated groups often respond with a tightening of patriarchal control over "their" women. The self-assertion of dalit women, as yet embryonic in practical terms, has a revolutionary potential *because* their bod-

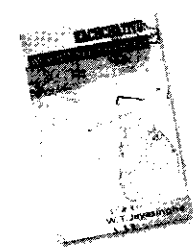
ies are marked by upper-caste patriarchal authority as available for the display of male sexual power.

The conceptual framework of *diverse patriarchies*, however, may be problematic in as much as it implies a countervailing force of *diverse feminisms*. It is unquestionably important today for upper-caste feminists to confront the inherent importance of caste for gender, and the fact that their right to speak for all women is being questioned. Rao's approach is very welcome here. But there are also dangers for dalit women's organisations who engage in a form of dalit politics that echoes the diverse male-led groups that are claiming to speak for the rights of dalits and the lower castes. One of the problems is that identity politics often adopts the language of aggressive male superiority, of "our" and "their" women. Dalit women's organisations need to struggle against becoming an adjunct of this politics. As several of the writers in this volume, notably Pardeshi, point out, lower-caste leaders of the past like Phule and Ambedkar were also sharply aware that caste politics has no edge unless it takes up the goal of gender equality. In a political environment dominated by fundamentalist Hinduism, women's issues are often sidelined as diverse dominated groups struggle to assert their cultural identity. The fact that right-wing Hindu parties have mastered the art of forming coalitions, while relentlessly pushing forward their own agenda, contributes to this. The entry of dalit women's organisations into the international level of debate, the flow of foreign funds into dalit women's NGO's, could also possibly lead to a blunting of their radicalism. But this would be no more than a repetition of what has happened to many feminist groups led by upper-caste feminists.

We can find more contemporary instances of radical action by groups in which dalit women's participation is crucial. In a political atmosphere in which many working-class organisations are passive and weak in the face of a real erosion of earnings and workers' rights, new unions of domestic workers and of urban waste gatherers have been active in many cities in Maharashtra. Dalit women are prominent in both these types of organisations. In fact if we take these two developments seriously, we would have to rethink several aspects of middle-class "lifestyle" feminism. Demanding the right to relative freedom from domestic chores is often seen as a man-woman conflict. In middle-class Indian households, in practice it means finding reliable (female) domestic help. Similarly, the contrast between clean and well-kept homes and civic squalor in Indian cities is a consequence of the "invisibility" to upper-caste eyes of those who experience the space outside the home in a radically different way. This is a matter of culture as well as of division of labour. The feminist slogan "the personal is political", in short, can attain a radicalism in this situation only if it is remembered that the person has a caste as well as a gender specificity.

This is the kind of work that should be included in women's studies courses. Women's studies centres in Indian universities are today embattled, with a right-wing central government seeking to exercise control over their curriculum and research. A book which raises many questions, avoids simple answers, and above all which tries to align academic enquiry with contemporary political developments, may well be helpful in injecting them with a new energy.

Maritime Neighbours



Kachchativu: And The Maritime Boundary Of Sri Lanka
by WT Jayasinghe
Stamford Lake Publication, Colombo, 2003

reviewed by
John Gooneratne

As WT Jayasinghe describes it, "Kachchativu is known as a parched and almost barren island, uninhabited, with no source of drinking water and covered with thorny shrubs". If this is the case, the interesting question is—what makes it so important that it becomes the central core of an entire book?

The reason is obviously because this "barren island" figured prominently in the negotiations on deciding where the maritime boundary between Sri Lanka and India was to be drawn. For Sri Lanka it was a matter of national importance that the island of Kachchativu belonged to Sri Lanka and hence should be on the Sri Lanka side of the maritime boundary.

In other parts of the globe there have been enough instances where claimant countries have gone to war over similar barren real estate. But in the case of India and Sri Lanka this matter was peacefully settled through negotiations between the leaders of the two countries. That is the first important feature that stands out in the narrative of this book.

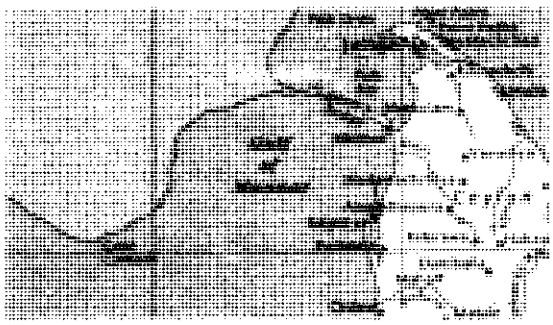
Jayasinghe is eminently qualified to examine this issue in depth as he was the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Foreign Affairs

at the time the negotiations were successfully concluded. This book provides, for the first time, an insider's account of the prolonged negotiations between Sri Lanka and India over Kachchativu, and the resulting boundary that emerged.

What comes across in a very constructive way is how an issue of national importance was handled by the two prime ministers coming from two different political parties on the Sri Lanka side. Talks over Kachchativu spanned the premierships of Dudley Senanayake and Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The cooperation and consultation that took place across party lines is something remarkable for those in whom a sense of pessimism has been induced, not just by the present political scene, but also by the political history that has preceded it for several years.

The progress made in the negotiations during the Dudley Senanayake period was built on and used during the Sirimavo Bandaranaike period. The demarcation of the maritime boundaries and the location of Kachchativu was not made a matter of political competition between UNP and the SLFP. A national issue was handled as a national issue should be, with the fullest cooperation between the government and the main opposition party.

A third feature that the book highlights is the very professional way in which the preparations for negotiations were handled on the Sri Lanka side. Whether it was on the part of the Senanayake government or the Bandaranaike government, the officials responsible for the negotiation were given specific assignments and there was nothing of, what in the Sinhala idiom is called, "the dog trying to do the donkey's work". Expert groups were formed to work out the draft texts of the agreement and the background on the substantive issue. The net result was that the bilateral negotiations were conducted in an efficient manner from the Sri Lanka side.



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All these aspects are covered in the book, especially in the two chapters titled "Dudley Senanayake-Indira Gandhi Talks (1968-1969)" and "Mrs. Sirirmavo Bandaranaike-Indira Gandhi Talks (1973-1974)."

Jayasinghe's account, in addition to giving the details of the official talks, also on occasion, offers insights into the close personal relationship that existed between Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi, which played a significant part in the successful conclusion of the Maritime Agreement. On the occasion when the talks between the officials of the two sides were locked in stalemate, Jayasinghe recounts: "I suggested to Bandaranaike that she seek a one-to-one discussion with Indira Gandhi, as the entire negotiations were now in jeopardy...". He recalls that the Indian prime minister was relaxing after her lunch when she met with Bandaranaike and Jayasinghe "in the rear verandah" of her residence. He goes on to mention, "I remember Indira Gandhi telling Mrs. Bandaranaike, almost complaining, that neither of her sons was interested in politics...".

The UN Law of the Sea negotiations, in which Sri Lanka played a prominent part, also fed into the Maritime Boundary negotiations between Sri Lanka and India. The new concepts that arose during the UN negotiations, and how they were used by the Sri Lankan and Indian negotiators find their place in the book.

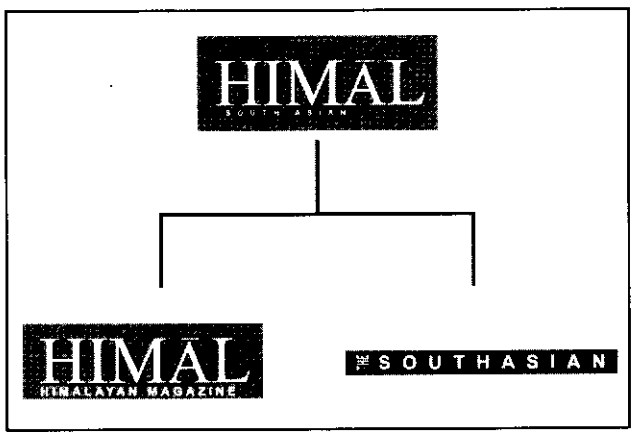
There is something in Jayasinghe's style of writing that shows very clearly that style comes naturally and fluently to him. His is an unadorned, direct approach. He gets to the essence of the book in the very first sentence: "I was prompted to write a book on Kachchativu, in order to dispel a misconception that India "gifted" or "ceded" Kachchativu to Sri Lanka through goodwill and in the interest of our bilateral relations".

Is the story of Kachchativu just a story of something that happened 30 or 40 years ago with little relevance today? Politicians of Tamil Nadu incessantly talk of the need to "get back" Kachchativu. It is all tied up with South Indian fisherman poaching in Sri Lanka's waters, and regularly being arrested by the Sri Lanka Navy. As if that is not complicating enough, Indian fishermen are now beginning to be arrested by the LTTE also. All sorts of remedies are being suggested by some Indian academics, including one that was used by the Indian side during the negotiations—for Sri Lanka to permanently lease Kachchativu to India. It is important for current decision-makers of Sri Lanka to be aware of the negotiations on Kachchativu to be able to recognise old ghosts in new shapes and forms. Jayasinghe refers to these current problems and suggests a simple solution— that those in positions of responsibility for this area seem to have missed in their wisdom. To solve current problems you do not have to tinker with the hard-won Maritime Boundary Agreement of 1974.

SOUTH ASIA TO SOUTHASIA

'Serious' magazines have a high mortality rate everywhere in the world, and so it is with some self-satisfaction that *Himal Southasian* can claim to have achieved more than fifteen years of living. It has been a struggle every step of the way, from being a Himalayan magazine from 1988 through 1996, and then as a magazine of the Subcontinent (and Sri Lanka) since then. But every step of the struggle has been invigorating, for we have been pioneering journalism all along, seeking to think beyond boundaries and edit 'regionally'. Though a small magazine, we can claim to have had a share of influence on how people conceptualise our region and the transformations that its 1.4 billion people confront.

Speaking of transformation, the magazine you hold is about to go through one, and which is what I would like to communicate to you, our reader. Rather than fold up, which is what the majority of periodicals do after years of trying, *Himal Southasian* is actually going to mutate into two publications. In March 2004, *Himal Southasian* will spawn two magazines.



Himal and *The Southasian*.

'Himal' will revert to being a Himalayan magazine, which it was before 1996. After a hiatus that is required to organise and plan, it will bring intensely meaningful journalism to the Himalaya like it did of old, covering the life and times in the 2500 km Himalayan chain—Hengduan to the Karakoram—and contiguous areas of the Indus-Ganga plains and the Tibetan highlands. *Himal* will remain a magazine published by the Himalmedia group in Kathmandu.

'The Southasian' will be the successor publication to the magazine which you hold, and it will dedicate itself with new energy to covering the Southasian region amidst the roller coaster period in which we live. Forces both terrible and promising are swaying this region, and *The Southasian* will strive to give meaning to all that is happening, seeking to chart a course that is independent of economic determinism, ideological straitjackets, and chauvinistic nationalism.

Himalayan...

...Southasian

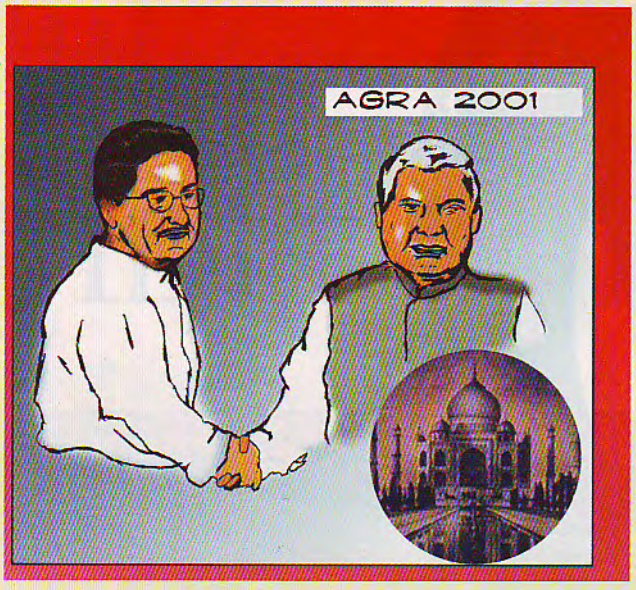
The Southasian's editors will continue to be guided by what is good for the people in the long term, rather than what is good for the establishments in each of our countries. We will strive to help define Southasia of the future in a way that is different from the SAARC organisation (though we appreciate it and understand its need), helping define an identity that is inclusive and provides unifying energy to the people of the Subcontinent and Sri Lanka.

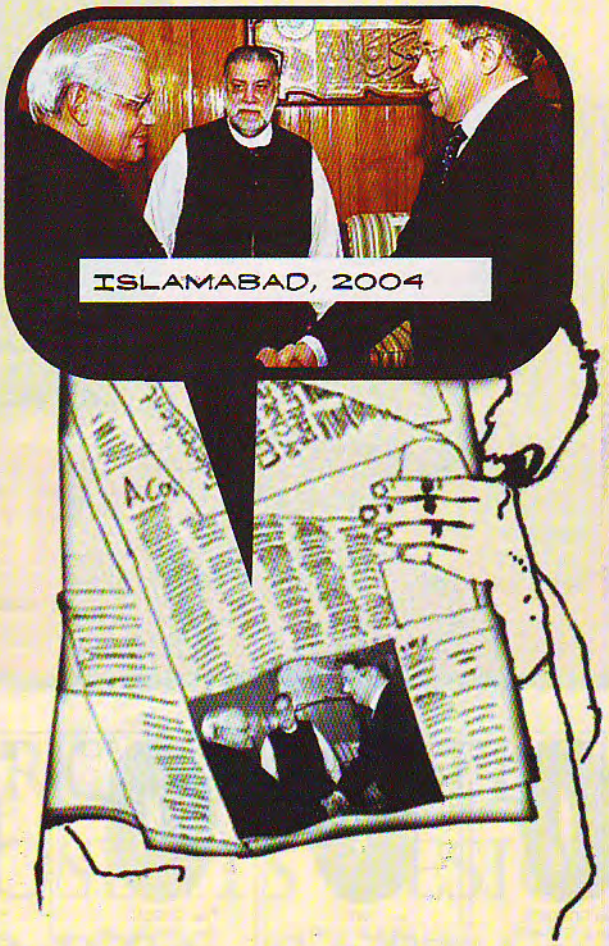
As you may have noticed in this column and elsewhere in this issue of *Himal Southasian*, the editors have decided that it no longer makes sense to spell 'South Asia' as two words. If we are to internalise this geographical signifier whose origins lie in Western media and academia—we of the region are late converts to its usage—then it is best that we give it more cohesion in the spelling. Whereas 'South Asia' is the way an outsider would see our region, 'Southasia' is how we need to see it (as long as the language is English, of course). This is one small step to move out of the identity rigidity created in the era of the nation-state for a region which is actually one vast penumbra of intermingling cultures and identities. South Asia is the region of sharply defined borders and nation states. Southasia, if you will, reflects more closely what we all are, beyond our certitudes as modern-day Indians and Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Nepalis.

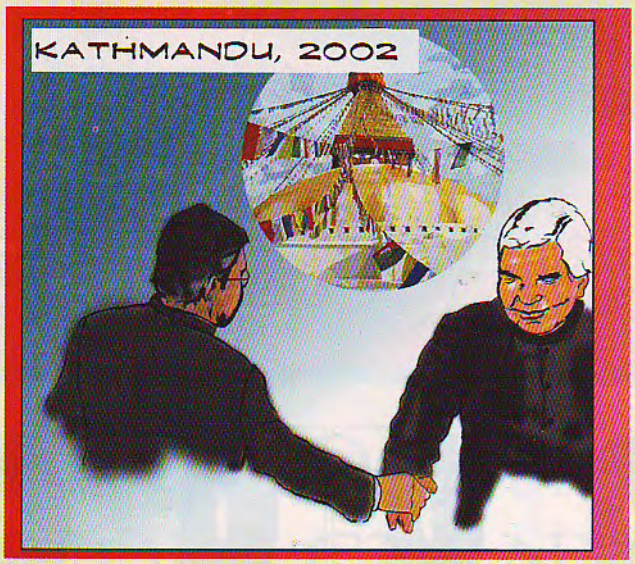
So, welcome to Southasia, dear reader. And watch out for our March issue, when we emerge as *The Southasian* and continue the traditions of *Himal Southasian*.

Kanak Mani Dixit

'BODY-LANGUAGE'... INTERPRETING DIPLOMACY THE MEDIA WAY!







MORE OF 'BODY-LANGUAGE' ANALYSES AFTER A SHORT COMMERCIAL BREAK...

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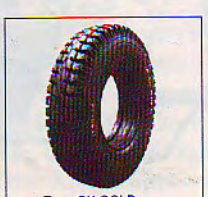

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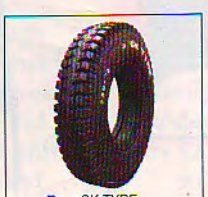

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