Jul-Aug 2005

HIMAL SOUTHASIAN

FLOODS, CONSTITUTIONS, PRIVATE AIRLINES, MUIVAH, BANGLA MAOBAAD, REVIEWS, NOORANI, MANISHA, BOMBAY BEATS, NGO-DOM, JOINT MECHANISM...

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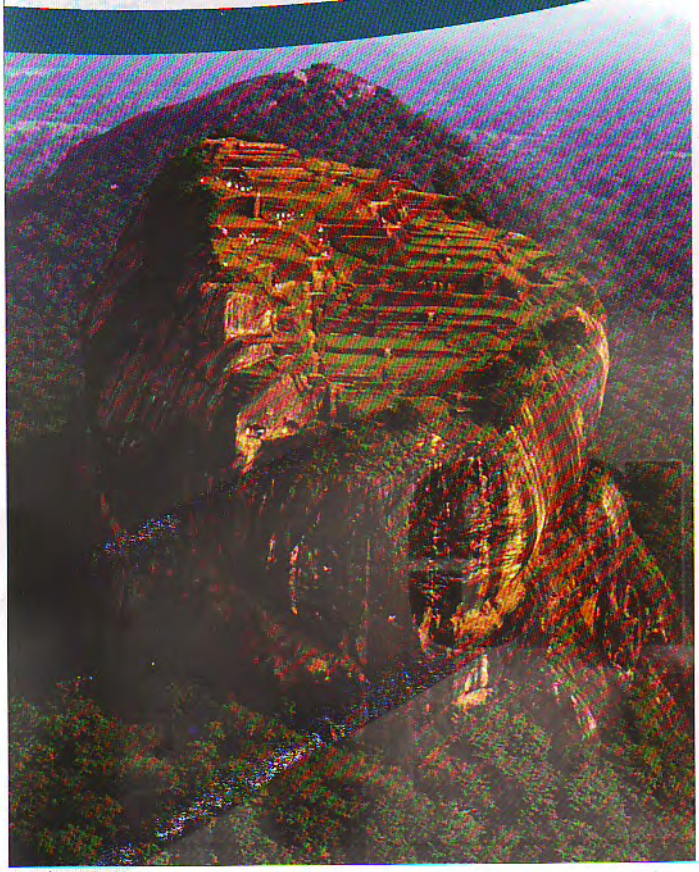

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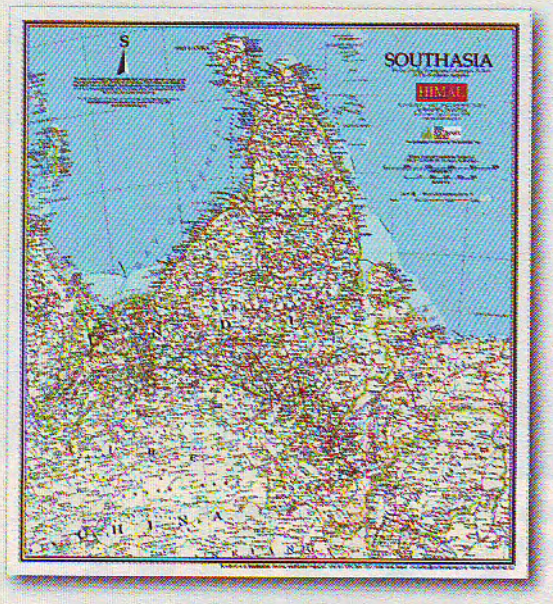

Returning to our readers after a year's hiatus, we bring you an issue which is all about building linkages – from gas pipelines to airways, cross-border media to trade regimes – and which also projects the shared democratic ideals from which some of us are moving away, and others, towards. Like Himal's south-side-up map at left, the essays and articles in the following pages challenge us to think 'out of the map'. Mostly, they ask that we consider the people.

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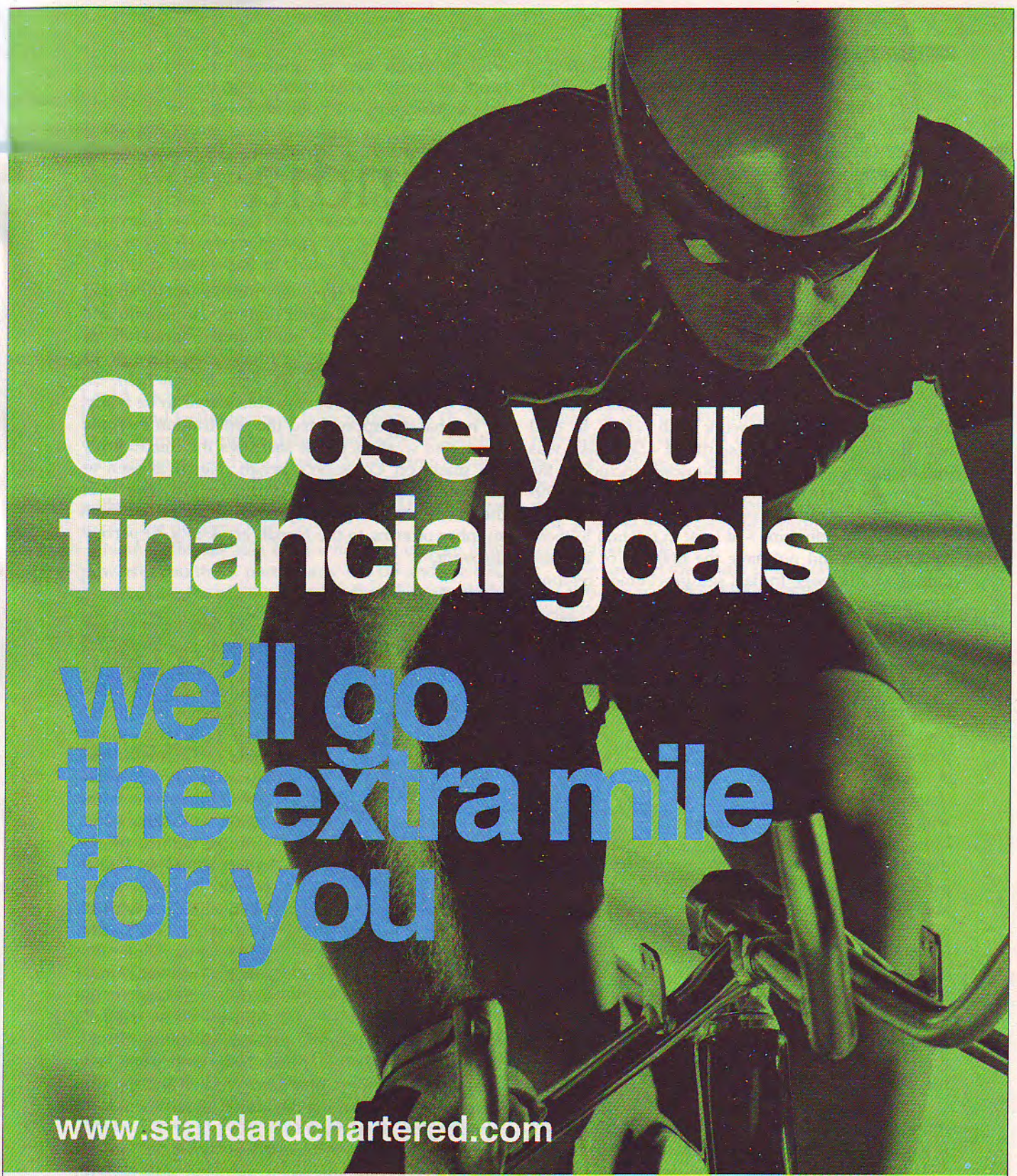

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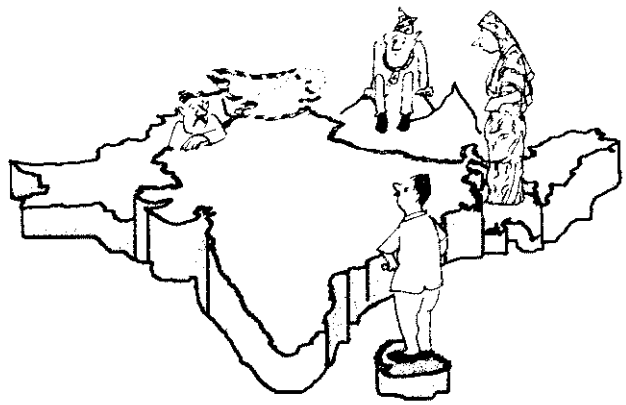
Understanding India

If there is one word that has been used endlessly to describe India's foreign policy, it is 'continuity'. For almost four decades during the Cold War, the official discourse in India centred around non-alignment while the policy, in practice, maintained a distinct pro-Soviet tilt. For an even longer period, South Block had a clear framework with which to deal with the immediate neighbourhood – Southasia was India's business and other countries, including the big powers, were expected to keep their hands off the region. It was, as a commentator once remarked, India's Monroe doctrine – at least in relation to those countries that did not have the political or military muscle to challenge India's self-proclaimed regional superpower status.

While it is true that there has rarely been a drastic and sudden overhaul in the way India conducts its external relations, discreet shifts have ocurred during critical phases which have become apparent over time. Such a process of redefinition is underway in the post 9/11 period, one which is refashioning India's relations with the global hegemon, powerful regional blocs and erstwhile rivals all at one go. It is essential for Southasia's smaller countries – Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka – who share the fact of complex and often bitter relationships with India, to understand the evolving geo-political environment, if they wish not to be left bereft of strategic options.



RAJESH KC

India's relations with each of its neighbours is multi-dimensional and has never been a strong point. It has fought four wars with Pakistan (in 1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999) and one with China (1962). It has continuous skirmishes with Bangladesh. Sri Lanka had accused it of sponsoring Tamil separatism and Nepal, despite the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship which mandates an open border and equal treatment of citizens, looks at India's every move with extraordinary scepticism.

India has her own litany of complaints. It blames Pakistan for having fomented trouble in Punjab and for instigating cross-border militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Bangladesh is considered ungrateful, for nurturing unreasonable grudges even though its independence was achieved with Indian help. Sri Lanka's acts of let-down are considered to be many, for not having appreciated the repatriation of Tamil plantation workers or the sacrifices the Indian army has made on Colombo's behalf. Nepal is seen as unappreciative of all the assistance provided over the years, including today when India is the main supplier of arms to the Nepali army at a 70 percent discount.

China card

The relationships thus, have been ones of extremes, with New Delhi's hegemonic regional aspirations met by paranoia and intense distrust of India among the smaller countries. In the mean time, two trends have been continuous: India's insistence on not allowing any other power to intervene in the region on the one hand, and the efforts of the others to off-set India's power by seeking to build alliances with its arch-rivals, Pakistan and China, on the other. This was most starkly reflected in the strategy of Nepal's King Mahendra to build a closer relationship with China. In the 1960s, when Sino-India rivalry was at its peak, the use of the 'China card' worked and the king succeeded in preventing the Indian government from opposing his royal regime.

Both these policy approaches, however, are on the verge of outliving their strategic utility. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, India realised the need to adapt to changed global realities. It identified Europe as a potential balancing power against the American tug. At the same time, it assidously began to build ties with the US, an initiative that has been reciprocated by the White House. India also emerged as the leader of the G-20, a group of developing

countries that are seeking to end discriminatory practices in the present global trade regime. It is now among the primary contenders for a permanent seat in the Security Council. Constant engagement with global powers, the adoption of market reforms and the growing recognition of India as a possible pole in the international system have all given the country newfound confidence. This confidence is most clearly reflected in its external affairs.

India is now ready to share the regional strategic space it was so possessive about till only half a decade back. It is no longer apprehensive about external powers playing a role in Southasia, as long as the scope of intervention is defined and does not alter geopolitical realties significantly. When Sri Lanka decided to make use of Norway as a peace-broker and facilitator in its talks with the LTTE, New Delhi not only supported the move but even assisted the Norwegian-led Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM). During the Kargil war with Pakistan, India willingly (even gleefully) permitted the United States to play the defusing role.

New Delhi has also been willing to engage with powerful countries, particularly the US and the UK, on resolving the political crisis in Nepal, particularly since King Gyanendra's February takeover. In the past, attempts by Nepal to get third-country arms had led to something as stringent as an economic embargo, while now India helped facilitate the supply of arms from overseas to the Royal Nepal Army.

Foes into friends

While India has re-oriented its foreign policy, the smaller nation-states of Southasia have done little to wake up to the changed strategic environment. These countries have tended to look towards Pakistan or China as countervailing powers to balance India's overwhelming presence. Even here, or perhaps especially here, great changes are underway. The India-Pakistan peace process now seems to be irreversible, and so the space available for smaller countries to gain leverage by exploiting a six decade-long acrimony is diminishing fast.

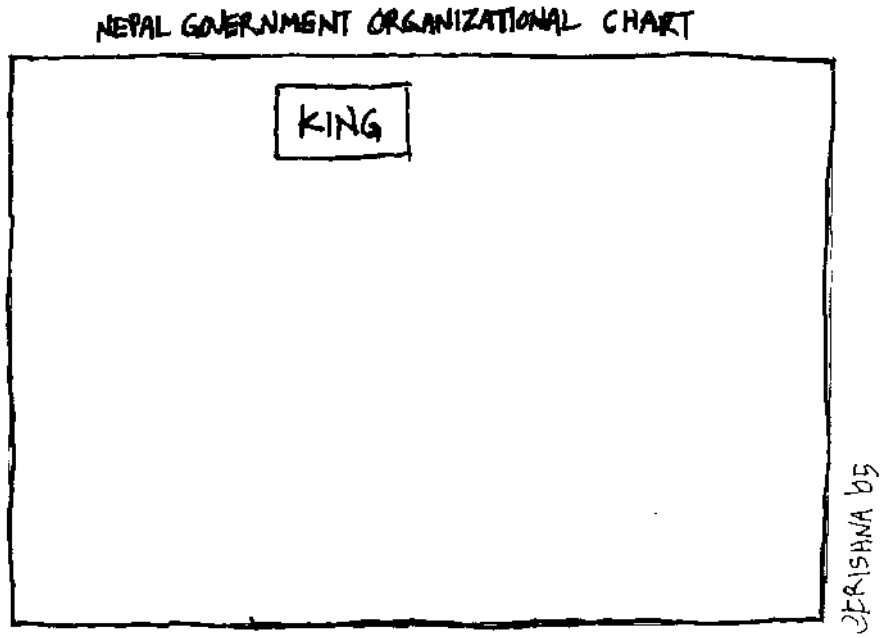
India and China are fast becoming close strategic partners and this process has gained a new thrust and momentum ever since China joined the WTO. The two countries are jointly working on a 'twin tower' policy on information technology: India will be the leader in software while China will take the top slot in hardware. As a part of growing friendship and commercial cooperation, Beijing has finally accepted Sikkim as an integral part of India and has corrected all its official maps and websites, and New Delhi is not pushing for an immediate settlement of the border disputes in Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin.

These dramatic shifts of the last few years – the importance of the United States in a unipolar world, the rapprochment with China, the détente with Pakistan – all have to be included in calculations made by Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. What is India? How to deal with it? If the neighbouring countries are smart enough, they can make India work for them. Otherwise, India will be pursuing its own goals rather ruthlessly and at the cost of the rest.

It is essential for India's neighbours to shed the paranoia that has so often characterised their attitude towards the larger country. New Delhi's actions have indeed given reason for scepticism and it would be wise for Southasia's smaller countries to remain cautious. However, what is needed is smarter diplomacy, with Colombo, Dhaka and Kathmandu engaging New Delhi as equals, instead of letting their insecurities diminish their negotiating strength. Sri Lanka is already building economic linkages with India on a mutually beneficial basis, and Bangladesh and Nepal too must take advantage of India's economic boom, and seek access to its burgeoning consumer markets and technical know-how.

There are tectonic shifts underway in the global and regional scenario. With a wary eye on what the Delhi Durbar is upto, Southasia's smaller countries would do well to join in the new Great Game.

Royal Regime change in Nepal



When King Gyanendra of Nepal conducted a military-backed coup on 1 February 2005, even those who thought it was drastic and ill advised had expected that he had 'a plan' by which he would tackle the raging Maoist insurgency. Either he was aiming to bring the Maobaadi to heel by making the Royal Nepal Army effective, or he had a secret arrangement with Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the elusive Maoist chieftain. Indeed, all would be forgiven if the king were planning for peace and were able to deliver it.

Claiming to protect democr-acy and to save the Nepali people from the Maoists, King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency, suspended civil rights, muzzled the press, block-ed telephone and cell-phone networks, and jailed hundreds of politicians and activists. He went about dismantling the many achievements of a dozen years of unfettered democracy. Seeking a purely military solution to the runaway insurgency, he simultaneously weakened the state. By coming down from the high pedestal of the monarchy to play politics, he gambled with the future of his dynasty.

Five months to the day King Gyanendra took over, it is clear that he had no plan. The main purpose behind the royal coup seems to have been to expand royal powers beyond those provided by the 1990 Constitution of Nepal. And it is the people of Nepal who have lost the most in this royal move, with the successes of political pluralism achieved since 1990 negated and the possibilities of social and economic progress through a fully democratic – if at times anarchic – system denied. Kathmandu Valley's population of a million plus is coddled, but the countryside is in shambles and human security in the hills, plains and valleys at an all time low in the wake of the king's pustch.

It was after the half-takeover of 4 October 2002, when the King started appointing prime ministers at will, that the Maoists spread from their mid-western nerve centre across the tarai plains and to the hills all over. In this interim, they went from having a presence in less than 15 districts to more than 70 of the country's 75 districts. After the 1 February royal coup, when King Gyanendra also took over as chairman of the Council of Ministers, the public has been without anyone whom they might call their representatives. This translates into deep distress across the land, an anguish clearly not appreciated by the palace in Kathmandu as revealed in numerous cases of neglect over the past five months.

Feudalising state

Nowhere else in Southasia today is there countrywide turmoil as there is in Nepal. Nowhere such public disregard for rule of law, in which a regime may maul an existing constitution, and every self-aggrandising whim of the palace may be implemented through fiat and ordinances. "Maathi baata" - orders from above has once again become a blanket explanation for all action and inaction on the part of the army, the police or the bureaucracy. The palace is seeking a return to the Panchayat era of kingly rule, or as much of it as it can revive amidst the chaos and confusion.

In no country of Southasia are senior most mainstream politicians in jail, except in Nepal: a former prime minister, a former deputy prime minister and speaker of the House, ministers, human rights activists - none of them the radical extremists King Gyanendra seeks to destroy. But for Nepal's king, no other head of state and government travels to open-invitation international fora to castigate his own country's democratic experiment. No other Southasian foreign ministry calls ambassadors of friendly democratic countries with such consistency to upbraid them for interference in internal affairs when they speak up for multiparty democracy, or the rule of law.

If it is possible to take a country back 30 years in time, King Gyanendra is doing it in Nepal. While officially the chairman of the cabinet, the king has left matters of state in the hands of two vice-chairmen, elderly gentlemen whose last connection to government dates back to the depths of the Panchayat era in the 1970s. One of them, in fact, had spent a quarter of a century in Colombo and Bangalore as a Jehovah's Witness proselytiser before being called back to be the supercilious face of the regime. As for the king's other ministers, they are to the last of them implausible individuals, nobodies brought to do the palace's bidding.

Dynasty

King Gyanendra ascended the throne of Nepal in June 2001, aged 56, without prior experience in statecraft. He was an unknown quantity in a country that had just been through its first decade of democratic experimentation. But in his public utterances and interviews, the new king declared his intention to be a more proactive monarch than his murdered elder bother. The late Birendra's retiring personality had suited the job description of a constitutional monarch post-1990, even though he had ruled absolutely for 18 years starting 1972. The pronouncements of his successor brother increasingly exposed the latter as ambitious and arrogant, and a non-believer in pluralism and rule by people's representatives.

In King Gyanendra's Nepal today, the economy is in nosedive. The daily death count from political violence is higher than before February 2005 and even higher than before October 2002. The value of human lives and human rights is lower than ever as Maoists become even more brutal and the army is kept out of the range of reporting by district journalists, who have been cowed down by threats and intimidations made on the basis of notices from the king's Ministry of Information and Communication.

The king did Nepal's military a disservice by utilising the soldiers to implement his coup. In a country where the army has been a ceremonial force throughout its modern history, the king's action has locked in a process of militarisation that can only retard social, economic and political evolution. While its current political duties have dimmed the professionalism of the RNA and jeopardised the UN peacekeeping assignments it prizes, the real danger comes from the fact that army officers have become the de facto administrators of their respective regions and districts. At no point in history have the majors and colonels wielded so much power, and the urgency of a return to democratic rule by parliament is fuelled by the danger that this represents.

The 26 million people of Nepal do not deserve this atavistic return to autocratic rule at a time when they should have been fine-tuning their system of governance to make it more inclusive and corrective of myriad historical ills and discriminations. Since blaming all of history becomes meaningless, it must be conceded that the ills of today's Nepal hark back to the 30 years of the autocratic Panchayat system put in place in 1960 by the royal father, Mahendra. Indeed, the best argument against an active monarchy is the fact that Nepal has already had tried three full decades of autocratic kingship. The miscalculation of son Gyanendra on 1 February was to think that the country's demography, media, communications, mass awareness and middle class structures had not changed in the intervening years. This miscalculation now threatens the longevity of the dynasty.

The Shah dynasty provides a continuous thread that reaches back to the founding of Nepal in the mid-18th century by King Gyanendra's tenth ancestor Prith-vinarayan. The past 15 years of pluralism, however, have confirmed that monarchy is no longer an indispensable adhesive for unity, and is therefore not essential for the survival of the nation state. It can now merely serve as a useful national symbol and a culturally potent instrument to promote social and economic progress, provided the person who wears the crown appreciates the definition of 'constitutio-nal monarchy'. In the modern context, and given the spoilsport attitude

of all kings of the modern era towards democratic politics – Tribhuvan, Mahendra, Bire-ndra and now Gyanendra – a 'constitutional monarch' must be defined as one who is ceremonial and without 'residual' powers.

Lethal assistance

The palace was clearly taken aback by the intern-ational reaction to the royal takeover, and in particular the responses of India, the US and the UK – countries crucial in providing military support to fight the rebels. Their condemnation was swift and uncompromising, demanding an immediate return to democratic rule and constitutional monarchy. The massive support being pro-vided to the RNA to battle the Maoists was halted. The king had miscalculated, expecting the Nepali 'war on terror' to provide the cushioning for his takeover.

Lately, the Kathmandu regime has taken to 'threatening' the international community with the certainty of a Maoist takeover if military support re-mains withheld. Truth be told, the flow of arms assistance at this stage is needed to provide political legitimacy to the new dispensation. The talk of a Maoist takeover is uncouth scaremongering, and seems to have convinced no one but the American ambassador in Kathmandu, who likes to talk ominously about a rebel takeover, with khukuri knives no less. It is important to call the royal bluff, for the fact is that the rebels are not capable of defeating the RNA in conventional warfare, which is what would be required to take over the state. While they do have the run of the countryside because of the nature of Himalayan topo-graphy, the Maoists do not hold any territory, nor any of Nepal's 75 district headquarters.

The Maoists began their insurgency nearly ten years ago against a functioning democracy. In the interim, they have managed to weaken the state geopolitically, pushing back the social and economic development of a needy population, and dragging the army out of the barracks. While it is true that the Maoists are homegrown and that they propose a class war rather than a more destablising insurgency based on identity-led divisions, they are nevertheless a lawless entity trying to force-fit a discredited ideology into the Nepali hinterland. It is important to bring this misguided insurgency to an end, and to try and convert the brutal interregnum into an opportunity for catharsis. This can only be done with the participation of the political parties and their country-wide networks and grassroots linkages. In going it alone and trying to crush the rebels by force of arms, King Gyanendra has antagonised the very parties that stand for rule of law and that have challenged the Maoists longer than he or the army have. Today, the army generals who had predicted a lightning victory over the rebels might be re-evaluating their

MIN BAJRACHARYA

Kathmandu does not look beyond the valley rim

long-standing animosities towards the politicians. The army's anti-insurgency battle would have gained both legitimacy and effectiveness if the 'supreme commander-in-chief' had decided to cooperate with the politicians than throw them into jail.

It is not as if the Royal Nepal Army has been fighting an effective war. Brought reluctantly unto the field in late 2001, the soldiers were unprepared when confronted with a wildfire ins-urgency in possibly the most rebel-friendly terrain in the world. Deficiencies in training, logistics, motivation and leadership have come to light in the RNA's inability to go on the offensive against the elusive enemy. High levels of extra-judicial killings and disappearances have cast a pall over the army's record, as has a willingness to lob mortar shells out of helicopters to get at insurgents on populated hillsides.

A mechanism is required to inject 'politics' back into the veins of the body politic, and tragedy of the moment is that the person who holds the power of the state is so vehemently disagreeable to the idea. The way of autocrats is to grab a lot of power and then make token gestures of redressal, such as King Gyanendra's peculiar pronouncement of hold-ing municipal elections at an undetermined date. It is unlikely that such tactics will be acceptable to the

people of Nepal, who have tasted freedom for a full dozen years, and half of whom were born after 1990 and know not the Panchayat era of *hukumi sashan*, or rule by diktat.

King Gyanendra in his takeover proclamation said he would set things right in three years and return the country to the people thereafter. It is certain that this will not deliver the return to 'total democracy' that the political parties and civil society are clam-ouring for. The ideal path to such a return is a general election to confirm people's representation, but an election is impossible today because of the Maoists in the bush and an autocratic regime at the centre.

Things are extremely fluid in Nepal as we write these lines. King Gyanendra has rejected outright the united demand of the political parties for a reinstatement of the Third Parliament, disbanded in May 2002. Such restitution, indeed, would in one stroke resuscitate democracy, provide a political challenge to the Maobaadi, make way for a negotiated road to peace, give the beleagured people back their representation, and place the monarchy safely back into its defined ceremonial/constitutional role. Since King Gyanendra has publicly stated his unwillingness to go along, and in keeping at bay the very political forces that wish to work with him, he has succeeded in releasing the forces of radicalism in the mainstream of Nepali polity. Something has to give in Nepal over the coming months of the monsoon, given that the royal coup of 1 February is confirmed as a failed venture.

Editors' notice

HIMAL is back! (Forgive us our earnestness)

Himal Southasian, started in 1989 as a periodical of the Himalaya, converted to a Southasian magazine in 1996. At a ceremony in New Delhi to mark the transition, we were done the honours by the late Nikhil Chakraborty of *Mainstream*, an exemplary Southasian for his humanity and empathy of spirit. Himal halted publication temporarily in May 2004 because the economics of publishing a regional review magazine was not keeping pace with the ideas we were pioneering.

'Southasia' as one word

Himal's editorial stylebook favours 'Southasia' as one word. As a magazine seeking to restore some of the historical unity of our common living space – without wishing any violence on the existing nation-states – we believe that the aloof geographical term 'South Asia' needs to be injected with something more. 'Southasia' does the trick for us, albeit the word is limited to the English language discourse. Himal's editors will be using 'Southasia' in all our copy, except where context requires retention of the traditional spelling. We also respect the wishes of contributors who prefer to stay with 'South Asia,' which is why readers may occasionally see both spellings in use in Himal's pages.

We believe in the excitement of 'serious' journalism, in which a liberal spirit that seeks harmony and camaraderie is supported by a sense of practicality informed by social science learning and ground-based research. We seek to be independent and extra-nationalist in our approach to looking at issues and trends. We believe in being irreverent about others, particularly those with political and economic power, while not taking ourselves too seriously either. On occasion, however, please excuse us our earnestness.

The possibilities of evolving a regional journalism of Southasia have brightened over the last year, spurred by the India-Pakistan rapproachment in these otherwise unsettled times. We used the past year of Himal's closure to gain a better understanding of the needs of editing, management and marketing. We have done our homework, consolidated our vision and work plan, and are ready to present our readers across Southasia and overseas once again with a magazine that thinks deep and writes smart. Have we managed to do it? You hold our reintroductory July-August 2005 issue in your hands.

A bimonthly periodicity, we feel, allows us the time to prepare the kind of articles we would like to offer our readers. This frequency also sits comfortably with the fact of being a review magazine rather than a newsmagazine. *(Subscription information in* ***page 4****).*

We have done our introspective overhaul. Please join us once again in our journey to Southasia

Pakistan

Jinnah: The fractured image

Jinnah has been 'converted' by Pakistan till he can no longer be recognised. Faking Jinnah has meant a lesser Pakistan.

The Founder of Pakistan, Father of the Nation, the Great Leader, Quaid-e-Azam Muh-ammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) is today the sentinel of Pakistan's Islamic ideology. His portraits are everywhere, from Parliament to the smallest police station, showing him in sherwani and his trademark cap, his features set in an expression of ideological censure.

Jinnah has been harnessed to a version of Islamic ideology that was not his own. In order to maintain Jinnah in this ideological posture, the Pakistani state has had to modify many known details of the man's life. Such as his beliefs, his family relationships, his eating habits, his religiosity, his attitude towards Partition and towards India, and his views on minority rights.

In India, Jinnah has been reviled as a malevolent, humour-less, politically ambitious man who wrecked the dream of a united, secular India. Authors like H M Seervai have tried to put the record straight, but Jinnah-bashing continues in India, which has had an impact on how the larger world views the Quaid. Gandhi was Jinnah's contemporary rival but it was young Nehru who was responsible for demonising him.

Unlike what the average Pakistani has been led to believe, Jinnah never thought that India and Pakistan would be hostile neighbours. The fact that three institutions in India – including the Aligarh Muslim University – were named beneficiaries in Jinnah's will clearly goes against the state-sponsored version of his life. Jinnah could have changed his will anytime after he made it in 1929, more so after 1947, but he did not. It is a different matter that none of the three institutions in the end received money from the Jinnah Trust which looks after the Quaid's estate, funds which were instead diverted to Pakistani institutions.

Perhaps the most drastic redrafting of Jinnah's worldview has been in how he saw the minorities, for Jinnah's vision of Indo-Pakistani relations itself was based on bilateral regard for the minorities in each country. However, particularly within Pakistan, it was not a vision anyone cared much for. Jinnah's colleagues in the Muslim League were not willing to treat non-Muslims equally, especially not the Hindus of East Pakistan who formed one-fourth of the population there.

Jinnah has had to be transformed because Pakistan has set its face against his legacy. As author Akbar S Ahmed says, "his behaviour reflected Anglo-Indian sociology," but he was also a Muslim. The tendency has been to emphasise the Quaid's Muslim identity by juxtaposing it with the 'Hindu-ness' of the Congress as Pakistani historians saw it.

When the Sindh-born Lal Krishna Advani of the Bharatiya Janata Party, on a visit to Karachi, termed Muhammad Ali Jinnah's speech to Pakistan's Constitutent Assembly "a classic exposition of a secular state," it made Southasians go back to their history books. Besides causing a political avalanche within his party and among his supporters, Advani's remarks threw up a host of questions about the period leading up to the events of 1947 and the political actors of the time. Was Partition inevitable? Did the Quaid-e-Azam envisage a secular Pakistan? Has the country lived up to the ideals of its founder? Back in February 1998, Himal Southasian had explored these ideas in a special issue on Jinnah, with a lead article by Lahore-based commentator Khaled Ahmed. Here we print extracts to inform the current debate.

What Jinnah and Allama Iqbal had in mind was a modern Islamic state, the 'modern' referring to a secular state where all religions would coexist. Contest with India, and the need at all times to 'separate' Pakistan's identity from India's, caused the Muslim League politicians to firm up the Islamic attributes of Pakistan till their prescription broke away from Jinnah's vision. The new identity, which Gen Zia-ul Haq called "tashakhus," inducted into the task of law-making the very Islamic clergy which had condemned Jinnah for visualising a separate state.

Today, the break from Jinnah has plunged Pakistan into sectarian chaos. Jinnah's vision of a modern state would have saved Pakistan from international isolation and made it easy for the world to deal with it. This isolation has complicated Pakistan's relations with India. Getting rid of Jinnah's legacy has been Pakistan's greatest tragedy, the consequences of which are being felt as the country hurtles downward in ideological chaos.

MALDIVES

Heady days in Male

A letter written recently to the editor of an independent Maldivian news portal identified a minor crisis in the country's rapidly changing political climate: the lack of terminology with which to describe those changes in the local language, Dhivehi. The writer lamented that journalists and political activists were turning to Arabic for words as simple as 'protest'.

Indeed, the political climate in the Indian Ocean atoll is unrecognisable from even a month ago. On 5 June, the ban on political parties was lifted, and political entities are now able to register themselves for the first time since 1953. Energy suppressed over decades of autocratic rule has suddenly found a legal outlet, leading to heady days in the Maldives. Reformists are forcing open the political space, allowed by the introduction of parties, to exercise their rights to assemble and express freely. As parties hold meetings and rallies, sign on members, and pose open challenges to the government, the climate of intimidation and oppression seems defused. Many are sceptical of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's motives in instituting these reforms, but it is clear that whatever be his intentions, a watershed has been reached in Maldivian political history.

The first party to submit forms for registra-tion in Male was the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). This group had been denied registration in 2001 and after a series of threats and arbitrary detentions, had been forced into functioning in exile starting November 2003. Its members are now busy discussing the details of the formation of the party and will be announcing their leadership this month. The MDP is believed by now to have 30,000 signed members, a number that constitutes one tenth of the country's population.

Gayoom has started his own party. The Dhivehi Raiyithunge Party (DRP) - or the Maldivian People's Party - is now in the final stages of registration and claims 25,000 members. The DRP has been accused of using state machinery to coerce people into signing membership forms. Beyond this, a storm of controversy erupted in mid-June, when it was pointed out that according to the rules released earlier in the month, "army personnel" and "police personnel" were barred from joining political parties. Under the 1998 Constitution, Gayoom is the head of both the Maldivian army and the police force. Other parties in the process of registration are the Maldives Labour Party, the Islamic Democratic Party and the Adhaalaath Party (Justice Party).

Cusp of transformation

Given the climate of euphoric dissent in Maldives over the past few weeks, it would be hard to believe that the atoll continues to be ruled by the man who banned, threatened, detained and exiled his political opponents for 27 long years. The walls of autocracy seem to be crumbling, but there is much that must change before a true multiparty democracy can be achieved. The 1998 Constitution devotes a majority of its articles to the powers and immunities of the president. It grants Gayoom, as president, control of both Parliament and the judiciary. The 31-point reform proposal submitted by Gayoom to the People's Special Majlis - the body formed in January with the mandate of amending the constitution - does remove the judiciary from direct presidential control but further strengthens the president's powers to "appoint and dismiss" the prime minister, the chief justice, the commissioner of elections, the auditor general, the attorney general, envoys of the state and atoll chiefs, and to appoint and dissolve the entire council of ministers.

It is understandable that the president's proposed reforms are viewed with scepticism by many. One of the items proposes that the constitution guarantee freedom of expression, but that it be restricted in the case of calls for "...vandalism, and other similar militant acts." The vagueness of this clause keeps a door open for the sort of repressive tactics the Gayoom government has long used to silence criticism of its decisions and actions. The Asian Centre for Human Rights, a watchdog body based in New Delhi, says that Gayoom's proposals, in themselves, constitute an interference with the Special Majlis' mandate as they are prescriptive and do not provide the Majlis with the opportunity to address the inadequacies of the 1998 Constitution.

And then there are the complaints with regard to the Special Majlis itself. Essentially a constituent assembly, it is made up of the Parliament's 42 elected and eight appointed members, another 42 elected politicians, and all the members of the president's appointed cabinet. There were reports of irregularities during the parliamentary elections in January, and some reformist candidates could not campaign because they were taken in beforehand. Nevertheless, 18 seats went to pro-democracy candidates who had been endorsed by the MDP in December, and this was hailed by many as a victory for the democratic movement.

The Maldives does seem to be at the cusp of transformation, but it is important that the democratic movement be wary of tokenism on the part of the government. The fight for civil liberties, in particular, will be a difficult one, given the dreadful human rights record of the government in power. In recent record, people arrested during the democratic protests of 12-

13 August 2004 were kept in unhygienic conditions in cells measuring six feet by eight and beaten severely. There have been deaths in police custody, the latest being the case in early March of Muaviath Mahmood, whose body showed signs of torture. People have been imprisoned for terms ranging from 15 years to life, for publishing magazines or putting up websites critical of the government. They are still serving their sentences, and their pictures continue to be flashed on opposition websites. In refusing to release them, the government fails to reassure the opposition of its sincerity.

Free? Press?

A further impediment to the creation of a democratic environment is the lack of a free press. The electronic media is operated by the state, and the opposition is not allowed airtime. The three major newspapers – *Aafathis*, *Haveeru* and *Miadhu* – are owned by cabinet ministers and the brother-in-law of the president. The only independent publication is the weekly magazine called *Adduvas*, which continues to suffer censorship. Recently, a cartoon of the president had to be removed from its front page because of pressure from the authorities.

Despite all this, things are clearly set to change in the Maldives. In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster of late December, Gayoom's request for USD 1.3 billion in foreign aid for long-term relief work was met with resistance, such was the attitude towards his autocratic ways. Activists called on potential donors not to give a penny in aid that was not tied to democratic reform. It is believed that the release of pro-democracy demonstrators in November was largely due to the pressure from the European Union and Western governments. Many detainees were released from prison but with travel restrictions.

Gayoom seems to want to introduce multi-party democracy to the Maldives on his own terms. Unless there is constructive dialogue with the opposition and a mutually agreed path towards amendment or replacement of the 1998 Constitution, the friction between the government and the opposition could escalate dangerously. The government should announce a date for elections. Even better, it should resign and put in place a more independent caretaker government agreeable to the opposition that would lead the process of constitutional reform and oversee the first democratic elections.

As things stand, Gayoom's government is not showing the leadership required to resolve the outstanding issues with regard to the reform it has promised, and this reinforces the opposition's scepticism about its intentions. Since the advent of democracy is inevitable – indeed, the process has already begun – the government should finally allow itself to be a part of, and not an obstacle to, the movement for change in the atoll.

The mechanics of peace

by | **Jehan Perera**

Standing tall.

The joint mechanism on tsunami reconstruction in northeastern Sri Lanka embodies a spirit of federalism that could be the building block for the peace that everyone now wants.

Not reckless.

Belying doubts expressed by her detractors, President Chandrika Kumaratunga has stood by her pledge to work with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for tsunami recovery in the northeast of Sri Lanka. A 'joint mechanism' envisages co-ordination betw-een the government and the rebel outfit for the distribution of aid and relief material in areas where the LTTE is strong, besides proposing a decentralised system of decision-making on the matter of rehabilitation.

President Kumaratunga appears to be taking personal responsibility for the joint me-chanism by signing an agreement before presenting it to Parliament. This is both a victory for her as well as an achievement for those who have actively supported constructive engagement with the rebel outfit. What is remarkable is that this was done without recourse to extra-legal methods of silencing the opposition, an option exercised by some previous leaders of government, not to mention the LTTE.

Despite the clear advantages of the joint mechanism, the president came under tremendous pressure not to co-operate with the LTTE. Two abortive fasts unto death by prominent Buddhist monks ended without Kumaratunga shifting from her position. With the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the junior partner in the ruling coalition, threatening to withdraw support if the joint mechanism was approved, the very survival of her government was put at stake. However, despite the political risk, Kumaratunga decided to work with the LTTE for post-tsunami relief. While this has led to the JVP withdrawing support, the government continues be in power as the main opposition party has decided not to use the issue as a political lever for one-upmanship and partisan gains.

Miscalculating JVP

Espousing an ideology that is a unique blend of Marxism and Sinhalese nationalism, the JVP had notched up considerable electoral success in the general elections of 2004. Formerly a militant outfit, the party came to occupy an important place in the government and was even able to increase its popularity. There were signs that the party might moderate its extreme stance on certain issues after attaining a position of responsibility. Its formal acceptance of the reality of globalisation was one such positive feature. However, the trend towards moderation was never unanimously supported within the party, and the decision to pull out of government clearly reveals that the hardliners have the upper hand.

On the issue of the joint mechanism, the JVP argued that an agreement would pave the way for a separate Tamil state headed by the LTTE, on the basis of the Montevideo Convention of 1933. Had the JVP been less hamstrung by adherence to such outdated dogma and more aware of present international trends, they may have noticed that the convention is itself an ambiguous document. It does not enable separatist movements to form their own countries by pointing to the existence of joint mechanisms.

The JVP leadership would also have done well to realise their grave strategic errors in the contest with the president over the joint mechanism. The party got stuck in its own rhetoric when Kumaratunga refused to comply with its deadline to abandon the proposal, and was compelled to leave the government even before the deal with the LTTE was actually signed. The JVP thus lost an opportunity to use the influence it commanded to negotiate changes in the joint mechanism prior to its signing.

The unfortunate reality is that the JVP's political wisdom and maturity has not grown apace with its increased voter base. They have failed to understand that federalism is about preserving the unity of the country and democratic accountability, as much as it is about sharing of powers between the centre and the regions. By refusing to accept the possibility of constructive engagement with the LTTE, the JVP has actually eroded its own political gains of the last few years. Opinion-makers must try to wean the party away from its dependence on the outdated and destructive ideology of Sinhalese ulta-nationalism. The JVP, for its part, must seek to understand that the joint mechanism, with its federal features, is a positive step that could eventually help bring the country under a system of shared democratic governance.

Remarkable advance

President Kumaratunga's ability to withstand the challenge posed by death fasts, protest marches and a pullout by her alliance's second largest party was strengthened by the overwhelming desire for peace among common Sri Lankans; the mature, issue-based support of the United National Pary (UNP), the main opposition party; and not least, a change in the attitude of the LTTE itself.

The government received a boost after the UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe made it clear that he would not utilize his party machinery to oppose the joint mechanism for partisan political gains. For several years now, Wickremesinghe has been following a principled approach to the ethnic conflict by not ind-ulging in reckless oppositional politics. He has consistently refrained from attacking or attempting to discredit his political opponents by resorting to chauvinistic nationalism. This principled position, coupled with a pragmatic assessment of the present political situation, has helped create bipartisan support for the joint mechanism and the peace process.

The opposition also seems to have realised that it would be unwise to topple the government at this time. No party today can cobble together a stable majority in Parliament due to political rivalries and irreconcilable differences between possible coalition partners on the joint mechanism. It therefore makes sense to permit Kumaratunga in her position as the powerful 'executive president' to take the lead in addressing the issue without reference to the numbers, or lack thereof, in Parliament.

The marked shift in the attitude of the LTTE is also another significant development in the evolving political equation. A comparison of the joint mechanism provisions with those of the Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) proposed by the LTTE reveals a major shift in the stance of the rebel outfit. The LTTE claims to have become flexible because the joint mechanism deals with humanitarian issues arising out of the December tsunami tragedy. Nevertheless, the LTTE's willingness to adopt a step-by-step approach to power-sharing rather than a maximalist solution is a remarkable development that must be appreciated.

Crafting the consensus

The agreement on the joint mechanism is expected to give a push to the larger peace process. Had Kumaratunga caved in to the pressure, the ultra-nationalists and extremists of various hues could have come to occupy the centre-stage of Sri Lankan politics, projecting themselves as representatives of the majority will. The government - LTTE understanding, on the other hand, could be the nucleus of a new system of joint governance that appeals both to ethnic minorities and the majority community.

The joint mechanism agreement is a well-crafted document that includes many safeguards and incorporates checks and balances. The one-year term, the two-kilometer limit, minority veto and international monitoring provisions leave little room for dangerous abuse of the system. Instead, the proposal provides an opportunity to forge bonds of trust and partnership between the main stakeholders, which are the Colombo government, the LTTE leadership, the Muslim parties, as well as the other political parties and civil society at the district level.

Work done in the six months after the tsunami struck has clearly revealed the close linkages between the ethnic conflict, issues of good governance, and economic development. Despite large sums of donor assistance, the state structures have been unable to provide adequately for the speedy recovery of people's livelihoods. This can be attributed to the absence of effective decentralisation to enable affected communities to take the initiative in the recovery. The failure to decentralise, in turn, stems from the ethnic conflict and the reluctance to devolve powers to the northeast. The joint mechanism is a measure that provides a way out, by giving the affected population direct access to resources and by building institutional capacity to assist them.

With the setting up of the joint mechanism, Sri Lanka will be taking the first steps towards a bottom-up system of governance. The agreement provides for decisions on projects to be undertaken at the district level rather than at the central level. At the district level, the decision-makers will not be the distant elites and bureaucrats but rather local government officials, social workers, politicians, and of course, the LTTE. Under this mechanism, local needs and realities would be better understood and taken into account.

The working of the joint mechanism will serve as a litmus test for the LTTE's sincerity to operate within the larger polity in the future. The indications thus far are that the rebel leadership is willing to go in this direction. But even while lauding the positive spirit of the LTTE, it will be important in the larger context not to forget the role of the JVP in reconciliation. While the joint mechanism will come through despite the opposition of the JVP, ushering in peace will require working with the JVP. The party might not want to go along with the spirit of federalism, but the fact is that it will remain a major political actor in Sri Lanka in the days to come. Indeed, the JVP has the ability to derail the peace process by creating dissensions within Parliament as well as by mobilizing supporters on the streets. Meanwhile, those who wish for peace, development and democracy in Sri Lanka must find ways to engage simultaneously with LTTE and the JVP, and to encourage a dialogue between them. Howsoever remote that possibility may seem at the moment.

The nearly secret Maobadi War

Red radicals of Bangladesh have been at it for five decades, but more than a law and order issue their presence points to a systemic failure of the state.

Shiraj Shikder, the late Bangladeshi naxal

by | **Afsan Chowdhury**

The man who stood before the television cameras in bare feet and handcuffs was described as a top leader of a Maoist terrorist group. He had already been sentenced in absentia for the murder of a politician from the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) party. Now in the mainstream, JSD too had once warred against the state. The arrested man belonged to the Purbo-Bangla Communist Party (PBCP), one of the oldest armed Maoist clusters in the country reaching back to times of East Bengal. On camera, he explained without much emotion that in a country where 90 percent of the people had nothing and ten percent had everything, his group's activities were justified. Media, political figures, the widow of the politician he was accused of killing, and the general public all hailed his capture.

The next day, newspapers reported the captured man's death. The authorities said that his supporters had engaged the police in a shootout while the latter was on a hunt for his arms cache and that the man was killed in the crossfire. His corpse made it on television the next night.

The number of such "crossfire" deaths has reached nearly 300 in the last six months and many if not most of the victims have been members of underground Maoist parties. They are dub-bed chorompanthi (extremist) or shontrashi (terrorist) and these terms are muddled together in the public mind. The campaign afoot seems to be part of an official pacification effort that various successive governments have implemented against the Maoists, who proliferate in the rural areas, especially in several south-western districts bordering India. There is little protest from within Bangladesh when it comes to the Maoist deaths, though human rights groups and several Western governments have condemned the "crossfire" killings as extra-judicial. "It's even possible that criminals are killed and then dubbed 'chorompanthi shontrashi' because people seem to be more willing to tolerate actions against them," says Prof Abrar Chowdhury of Dhaka University.

Maoists have no base among the middle class or support in the media, whose members have been their targets at the regional level. People living in areas where the Maoists operate tell of extortion rackets, killings, smuggling and other unlawful activities. Though Bangladesh is reported to be a

den of armed Islamic insurgents, it is the Maoists who kill or are killed every day. Disorganized, with no power base, almost pre-ideological, and armed with crude weapons, they seem simply to be hitting out at all institutions and systems within reach. Yet in spite of their high casualties, they have no difficulty in finding recruits to fight and to die. As they have done for the past 35 years.

Where do they come from?

The radical rebel tradition in the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta began soon after the British conquest of Bangladesh/Ben-gal. The colonial administration produced clerks and school-teachers, but with the babus came the bombers, the rebels of the disaffected middle class. Terrorism became synonymous with patriotism. Neither hanging nor exile to the Andaman Islands 1200 km to the south of the Sundarban coast could get these agitators to simmer down. Songs extolling anti-British militant acts are still popular in Bengal, and even today it isn't Gandhi the pacifist but Subhas Chandra Bose the warrior who captures the romantic-patriotic imagination of the Bengalis.

While ambivalent about its ideals, the British too were appreciative of communism's opposition to violence at an indivi-dual level. But in the end "patriotic violence" was simply replaced by violence of the ideological variety, as peasant rebellions in Telengana in Andhra and Tebhagha in the Rajshahi division of Bangladesh displayed.

The Communist Party was banned in newborn Pakistan, but the peasant movements continued. It was never a stigma to be a communist in East Pakistan and, indeed, the leftist ideology added a significant element to the persona of the 'idealistic youth'. When the Soviet and the Chinese communist parties parted ways at the international level in 1962, the pro-Peking factions -- Maoists -- mostly went underground and focused on peasant uprisings, or "anti-feudalism". The Naxal movement, with its belief in revolutionary terrorism, entered Bangladesh from India. It had its origins in the area of Naxalbari, very close to the Bangladesh border near Siliguri. But the rise of the Awami League as a centrist nationalist option swept others away and the marginalisation of the Left began. For most people, the main enemy was Pakistan and not the feudal landlord as the communists would have it, and the Naxal movement never found a place in the mainstream.

The Left played a major role in the movement in 1969 to oust the military-backed Pakistani President Gen Ayub Khan. This movement laid the foundation for the 1971 war, but the Left did not emerge as major players then. The 1971 liberation war found most Maoists caught in the middle: The popular war was being led by the Awami League and supported by the Indo-Soviet alliance, the Maoists' archenemy. China, the Maoists' ideological mother country, was backing Pakistan's murderous agenda. Clashes between armed Awami League supporters and various Maoist factions were common at that time. After the birth of Bangladesh, the Maoist groups went underground and their activities became limited to remote districts in the form of warlordism.

The Left as a whole saw better days in the early 1970s. It was then that leftist members of the Awami League formed the JSD, which leaned towards Maoist dogma even though most Maoist parties called them "Indian agents". The JSD soon became the largest-ever leftist group in Bangladesh's history, but after a coup attempt in 1975 failed, its armed cadre was wiped out in a harsh military campaign. The older

Maoists in the party ranks mostly joined Gen Zia-ur Rahman's political front so as to support the enemy of their enemy, the pro-Soviet Awami League. The decline of the Left had begun in earnest.

Shiraj Shikder, the most charismatic leader the Left had to offer, had established the independent Maoist cluster called the Shorbohara Party in 1970. It was the strength of the Shorbohara Party that caused Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then Bangladesh's first prime minister, to unleash repressive action to control the Maoists. Shikder was caught and killed in 1973, according to police sources, as he tried to flee on an armed cache-finding mission. Before long, very few old guard Maoists were left. They were killed in

'encounters', died in internecine clashes, or went 'respectable'. By the early 1980s, the middle class Leftist movement had come to an end.

While the Maoists disappeared from the cities and campuses, they never faded far from the villages. There, there never was peace.

Old Maoists, New Maoists

Are today's Maoists motivated by ideology? Khaliqullah of Jessore District does not doubt that he has the answer. He says, "These Maobaadis are not of the earlier kind. They have no education, learning or ideology. They are just simple robbers who use Maobaad." Khaliqullah belongs to a family that has traditionally engaged in inter-district trade, and is considered wealthy by rural standards. His views are also understandable in that his family was forced to flee Jessore for the safety of Dhaka after refusing to pay extortion money demanded by the Maoists.

The earlier Maobaadi was a communist idealist, driven by a vision of "justice and class struggle". The present Maobaadi is more of an armed rebel who has emerged from among the rural poor and is without the middle class exposure to ideology. He has no stake in the system because the national politics that sustains the establishment has nothing to offer him. The problem of the rural poor lies in economics and the politics that prevails in the country has not yet come up with an answer to the crisis of extreme rural poverty. Dhaka policymakers seek to explain Maoist violence as a law and order issue, but its staying power indicates deeper roots in endemic poverty.

Middle class commentators cite the Maoists' criminal links in order to denigrate them. Research shows, however, that crime is often viewed as a form of livelihood. Their lack of ideology is one reason why today's rebels do not fit into the traditional imagination of the last generation of Maoists. One such old-school Maoist was Abdul Huq of PBCP, who graduated as a top student from Kolkata University and who never even accepted Bangladesh but was nevertheless admired by many in the Bangladeshi middle class and whose passing was mourned in Dhaka.

Another would be Mufakkar Chowdhury, killed in Dhaka last December in another "crossfire" incident. The Prothom Alo daily reported that the 65-year old had been warned of the raid and that when it came, he had remarked, "A communist is not afraid of death". Allegedly instructed by the guru of the Naxalite movement, Charu Mazumdar himself, to introduce his brand of violent Maoism to East Pakistan in the late 1960s, Chowdhury had never been caught. Before his death, he was reportedly working to unite the various Maoist factions in Bangladesh.

When the police raided Mufakkar Chowdhury's house, they had found hundreds of books. The Maoists of today are not book readers who spout theoretical arguments. Maoism to them is a dogma of violent resistance, protest and the ultimate rejection of the status quo in every form. The enemies they confront include the police and anyone who has money, but they also often include each other. Today, the middle class is absent from the Maoist rank and file; it is filled entirely by the rural proletariat. Maoism has thus become the political recourse of the disengaged, angry rural poor of Bangladesh. It is not part of any 'national liberation struggle'. The 'us versus them' mentality of Maobaadi gangs does not allow them to engage with the rest of the world.

Violent end

Extremist Islamic activists with links to the Al-Qaeda organisation have been termed by many international commentators as the major threat confronting Bangladesh today. Many within the country, including the main opposition, the Awami League, share this view. Indeed, there have been a number of bomb attacks recently that have made international headlines. These include a grenade attack on 21 May 2004 that left the UK High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury injured while killing three others. The most recent high profile victim was Shah A M S Kibria, ex-Finance Minister, leader of the Awami League and before that, a senior functionary of the United Nations, who died in a bomb blast during a party rally on 27 January 2005. While Sheikh Hasina was wounded in an attack on top Awami League leaders on 21 August 2004, the leader of the party's women's wing was killed along with several others.

There have also been isolated cases of bombings of cinema halls and circus tents in district towns, and many argue that these point to bombers of the Islamist variety, who target secular sources of entertainment such as rural melas and circuses where there are dancing shows. Whatever be their identity, their weapons of choice are sophisticated. A few individuals have been charged, but most cases are still being investigated.

These types of grenade attacks on political gatherings or cinema halls do not occur every day, and they are the ones that attract the headlines. But encounters with Maoists are almost a daily affair in the country today, with no other political organisation incurring such a high number of casualties in almost a decade. It is obvious that the authorities take the Maoists seriously enough to chase them in remote areas, and that there is a

take-no-prisoners policy in place. The public apathy with regard to these deaths in the rural regions is therefore a matter of interest. "Media does report on encounters with Maoists because they have killed a number of journalists, but there is some narcotic dysfunction about such reports. They don't arouse much interest," says Enayetullah Khan, Chief Editor of the United News of Bangladesh (UNB) news agency in Dhaka.

In the neighbouring city of Khulna, where shrimp cultivation and smuggling have led to a volatile mix of money and violence, many Maoists are reportedly on hire. But they also have their own agenda and in order to enhance their clout, maintain an active hit list of those to be eliminated, many of them journalists. This is the main reason why the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York City considers Bangladesh – and Khulna in particular – one of the most dangerous places in the world for mediapersons.

Proximity to the border with India allows the Maoists a refuge when hunted by the police, another reason why this place seems to be the favoured haunt of the extremists. Several Bangladeshi Maoist leaders have also died in India – either felled by the Indian security forces or killed in internecine fights across the border.

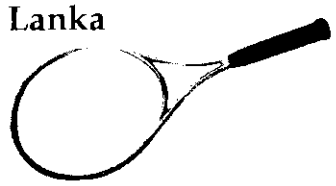
The common enemy

There is no record of how many Maoist groups there are in Bangladesh, but the main ones are the Purbo-Bangla Communist party (Marxist-Leninist), the Biplobi Communist Party Jonojuddho, the Gono Mukti Fouj – plus their many splinters and factions. The Shorbohara Party and the Gono Bahini have several shards still left, but they are all collectively known as Shorbohara – the proletariat – and almost all newspaper readers see them as rural criminals.

Authorities have sought to stamp out the Maoists since 1972 and their actions, including extra-judicial killings, are not contested vociferously by anyone. All major parties have tacitly condoned the authorities' action when it comes to dealing with the Maoists, so they are certainly a common enemy. But the fact is that these groups of rural poor, armed with their crude weapons, have survived all attempts at suppression, including mass amnesty offers, arrests and killings. Their leadership largely comes from the ranks of the rural poor itself. They flourish in the border regions and in remote areas of the delta. For a country without an official insurgency afoot, they have drawn the attention of the state and its armed agencies as a serious and continuous threat. Says Khan of UNB, "What they have missing is a cause."

Who killed Siva?

Political disquiet and the fervour of revolution in Sri Lanka



by | **Kunda Dixit**

I had arrived in Sri Lanka in 1987 to help set up the regional bureau of the news agency, Inter Press Service. The favourite watering hole for my colleague Richard de Zoysa and me was Beach Wadia, which had not yet become the fashionably gentrified seafood restaurant for Colombo's chic category that it is today.

One evening in May 1988, Richard brought along his friend Sivaraman Dharmeratnam and we sat on the sand gazing out at the Arabian Sea waves crashing on an offshore shipwreck and talking about the Tamil liberation struggle. I was taking tennis lessons then, and was trying to buy a good racket. Siva sad he had a pair he could sell. The very next day, I bought two Slazengers from Siva for 50 dollars. We joked, wondering if Siva had passed the money on for the purchase of a six pack of 71mm mortar rounds.

Siva was taken from his home on the night of 28 May this year and killed soon after, his body found near the Sri Lankan Parliament outside Colombo. My old dog-eared Colombo address book is full of names of people who are now dead. Siva was just the latest. Richard himself was killed by a suspected anti-JVP death squad in 1989.

Sivaram, 46, was a Sri Lankan Tamil who was different from other militant contemporaries still alive today. For one thing, he came from a family of landed gentry. His grandfather was a member of the State Council from Batticaloa during British times. Siva dropped out of university in Kandy in 1982. After being rescued by a Sinhalese friend during the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1983, he joined the People's Liberation Organiation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), one of the numerous militant groups fighting for Tamil independence. Siva was the Marxist conscience in PLOTE, but eventually fell out with its leader Uma Maheswaran over the group's involvement in an anti-Gayoom coup in the Maldives in 1988.

What most friends in Colombo admired about Siva was his sharp intellect, his passion for bringing about social and political change and, despite his Tamil nationalism which he wore on his sleeve, a commitment to peace and justice in the island he cherished. "He was accessible and accommodative," says ex-JVP activist Sunanda Deshapriya. "He could sit down and have a drink even with a Sinhala extremist."

It was his friendship with Richard de Zoysa that got Siva interested in journalism and, briefly, he wrote analytical pieces for Inter Press Service and a popular column in The Island under the pseudonym, Taraki. In recent years, Siva was the moving force behind TamilNet, the Tamil news portal that was considered by many to be sympathetic to the Tigers. Siva had himself often been critical of the Tigers, but saw them as the only credible bulwark against the chauvinist-influenced mainstream politics in Colombo.

"He was of that fine generation of Tamil youth that refused to shirk its responsibilities," recalls another contemporary, journalist Qadri Ismail. "He was by any standard, brilliant." Dayan Jaya-tilleke, another maverick Sri Lankan politician and writer wrote in an obituary: "No unarmed man deserves to be killed. Those who do (so kill) are cowards. Sivaram was unarmed and therefore whoever killed Sivaram...was a coward."

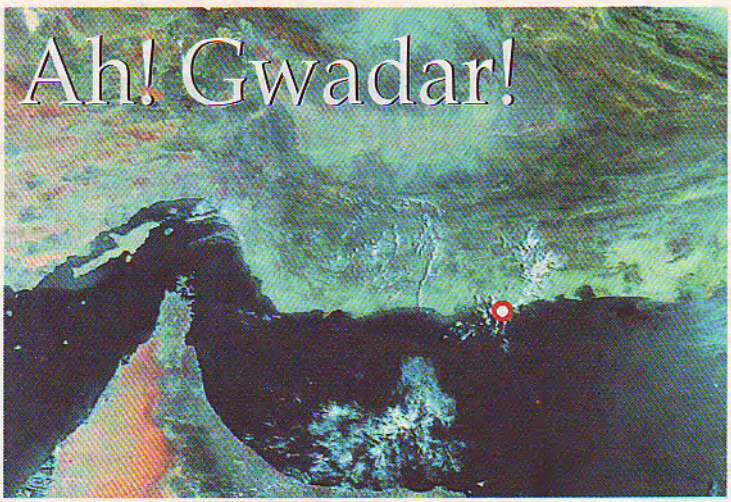
Shedding of blood

Extremists are threatened more by the freedom of those who stand for non-violence and reconciliation than enemies with whom they share the belief in resolving conflict through the shedding of blood. As in other countries in conflict, this makes it difficult to identify the true assassin because the fanatics can always blame each other. Siva had made many enemies with his militant past, his politics and his writings. Chauvinists and ultra-nationalists of all types hated him equally. Who killed Siva? Was it the Tigers' splinter group in the east led by Karuna? Was it the JVP? Was it the ultra-nationalists in the military retaliating for the Tiger's killings of its intelligence officers? Was it the Tigers?

Siva wrote the following lines a few days before he was killed: "Sri Lanka forces' excesses in the east in the name of Karuna gang are on the rise. People of the north and east remain without economic growth or jobs. Scars of the war remain. Thousands of people who have lost their homes, land and whole villages to the Sri Lanka armed forces still live in desperation. The neglect of Tamil language continues. Many ills likes this can be listed. The Tsunami has caused great damage in addition to these difficulties. But there is no solution in sight for any of these. These, however, haven't created much political disquiet amongst our people. They have not protested in anger that solutions have not been forthcoming. They have the fervour for liberation yet it is not to the extent that they will mass together for political reasons."

Back in Kathmandu I looked for the old Slazengers that Siva sold me 17 years ago. Only one of them remains, the handle are frayed and the strings tattered.

Ah! Gwadar!



by | **M Ismail Khan**

Gwadàr is a name to keep in mind for those who do not already know it. Situated in Balochistan-by-the-sea, it consists of humble fishing villages about to be transformed into a real estate gold coast. It all began when Pakistan's rich and famous started buying property in the peninsula which juts out into the Arabian sea, and when China put down USD 250 million to build the Gwadar Sea Port.

Entire swaths of barren land, sand dunes and craggy hills on both sides of the newly built Makran Coastal Highway that snakes in all the way west from Karachi have been sold out, occupied or allotted. Money has been changing hands and many peasants are suddenly millionaires, while the middlemen have become billionaires. Today, villagers move about with their goats in brand new pickups. One hears stories about unexpected stacks of notes being stuffed into jute bags in adobe houses, and livestock munching away at some of the cash. Never in their wildest dreams would the Gwadarians have imagined that their barren coastline might eclipse real estate values in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

But questions have begun to crop up about the validity of the entire exercise. Does the acerage being picked up actually belong to the sellers and developers, most of the latter from Karachi and central Punjab? At the time of independence, Gwadar was not even a part of Pakistan. The region was ruled by Muscat's royal family and it was only in 1958 that it was sold to Pakistan for a sum of 90 million rupees. The government of Pakistan ought therefore to be the rightful owner of the real estate. This also seems to have been the belief of a bench of Balochistan High Court when a property case was brought before it.

Strategically located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, and right next to the oil- and gas-rich Iranian border, Gwadar presents tremendous opportunities as a future hub of trade and commerce for the growing economies of West, South and East Asia and the land-locked Central Asian Republics. That is why the Chinese have built the port.

It is certain that Gwadar port will develop, but will the coast? And will the local fisherfolk and tribes people benefit when the boom finally arrives, whether in fact they do or do not own the land?

So much for soft borders

by | **Anonymous**

... Just put down the phone after having spoken to a very polite 'Khan Sahib' at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi (dialled 2611 0601).

R: Aslam aleikum! Aap kya tourist visa dena band kar diye hain?
K: Wo to dono hukumat faisla karenge phir . . .

R: Main nahi samjhi. Itne log cricket dekhne gayen-aayen. Wo kis visa pe then?
K: Wo sirf usi time ke liye special visa tha. Dono mulk ka ye faisla tha.

R: To ab aap kis log ko visa de rahen hain?
K: Sirf 'blood relations' ko.

R: Main to wahan ki kisika 'blood relations' nahi hoon. Par mera shauhar wahan hai. Mujhe aap visa nahi denge?
K: Aap ka shaadi kab hui thi?
R: 2002.
K: Aap ko to hak banta hai jane. ka. Aapko hum kyun rokenge?

R: Kya aap business visa de rahen hain?
K: Han. Par uske liye Home Ministry se permission lena padta hai.

R: Badi meherbani ji. Achha main kin se bat kar rahi hoon?
K: Main Khan hoon.
R: Khuda Hafiz Khan Sahib.
K: Allah Hafiz ji.

So that's that!

NO TOURIST VISAS BEING GRANTED TO INDIANS.
AND ACCORDING TO KHAN SAHIB, INDIA IS NOT GRANTING TOURIST VISAS TO PAKISTANIS.

SOFT BORDERS?

SOFT FOR WHOM?

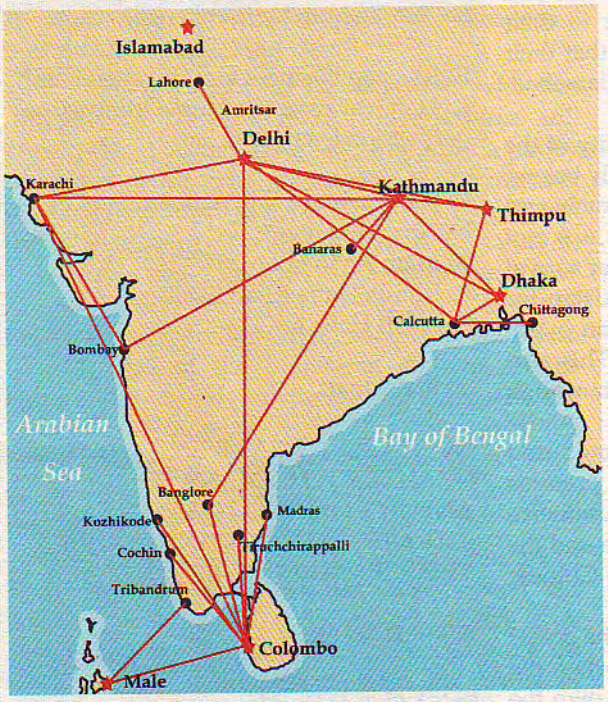
Air travel takes FLIGHT

Southasia is becoming smaller as more people fly to more destinations, within the region's countries and across their borders. As people-to-people contact increases in volume and variety, the region is being realised in new and novel ways.

by | **Himali Dixit**

From Chitral to Chittagong, Southasians are flying in greater numbers than ever before. At a time when aviation fuel prices have hit the roof, they are taking advantage of airfares that continue to drop. In India, no-frills budget airlines are drawing passengers away from the Indian Railways. And across borders, private airlines are bringing new dynamism to routes sectors once monopolised by state-run carriers.

The airways of Southasia are unrecognisable from what they were just a few years ago. And the current buzz of flight activity is only the beginning, for there are scores of cities waiting to be linked, and millions of the middle class who would fly if only a well-connected airline would land at their local airstrips. Indeed, there is still much to be done even in the linking of the region's capitals: The best way to get from Kathmandu to Colombo is via Bangkok or New Delhi, and no one can get to Islamabad/Rawalpindi without a stopover in Lahore, Karachi or Doha. But as liberalisation of the cross-border and domestic sectors is spurred on by a crucially important Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation bent on opening up the skies, it seems that the Subcontinent is set to become smaller and smaller still.



Existing cross-border air network of Southasia.

Budget travel boom

It is in India, the aviation sector's biggest domestic market, that the impact of liberalization is most apparent. First, there is the number of airlines. A decade ago, passengers arriving at the domestic terminal of Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport would see nothing but Indian Airlines' red-tailed Airbuses and their hand-me-down first-generation Boeing 737s in the non-descript livery of Alliance Air. Today, the tarmac is a garden of colours with Jet Airways' yellow sun, Air Sahara's green and saffron stripes, and Air Deccan's open palms.

Then, there is the number of passengers. The volume of travelers to pass through Indian airports quadrupled between 1981 and 2003 from 11 million to 44 million. The growth during the second half of this period can be attributed entirely to private airlines. Smaller carriers such as Jagsons have been in operation for decades and there have been companies such as East West Airlines and Modiluft that had higher ambitions but failed to take off. The real change came in the late 1990s, when Jet Airways and Air Sahara, with smart management and late-model Boeing 737s, were able to pose a challenge to the Indian Airlines monopoly. It is not so much that the two carved themselves out a share of the market, but they managed to expand the market itself. Jet and Sahara were joined in 2003 by Air Deccan, and the three carriers now share between them 61 percent of India's domestic air traffic.

With Deccan came the dawn of budget air travel in India. The airline, whose chief executive G R Gopinath calls it "the Udipi hotel in the airline industry" in a reference to its economy and efficiency, has been competing with the Indian Railways for custom, targeting passengers who travel both air conditioned I and II class. It is clear that budget airlines are drawing customers who would never have flown before: Air Deccan claims that about 40 percent of its passengers are first-timers. With market studies showing that the middle class boom is going to lead to demand for more seats and more destinations in years to come, business houses are lining up to register new airlines. Indian companies were among the biggest spenders at the recent Paris Air Show, where they put down orders between them for a total of USD 13 billion on 150 new aircraft, all of which are intended for low-cost carriers. One of the buyers was beer baron Vijay Mallya's Kingfisher Airlines, launched in May with the aim of being a budget airliner with frills.

Mark Winders, CEO of Royal Airways, the company that owns the new carrier SpiceJet, claims that his airline's target is not the passengers of Jet or Sahara, but what he calls the "real market," i.e. high-end train travelers, who constitute a massive volume of potential low-end air travelers. Deccan for its part has ordered 30 Airbus-320s worth USD 1.8 billion and is getting another 30 ATR 72-500s to connect numerous smaller airports. Gopinath does not worry about a slump because the growth of air traffic, he says, "is on an irreversible path."

The changed economics of air travel within India has already led to the opening of air corridors to smaller cities and towns. Many of these are now connected by direct air routes, thereby saving the passenger a mandatory trip to the nearest metropolis. A trip from Belgaum to Hubli within Maharashtra, for instance, now takes half an hour, and in Madhya Pradesh one can reach from Jabalpur to Bhopal in 50 minutes. With trunk routes approaching saturation and locked up by Jet, Sahara and Indian Airlines, newer carriers such as the Banglore-based budget airline AirOne are joining Deccan in connecting the smaller cities. Across India, distances are shrinking as we speak.

Aviation infrastructure will be hard pressed to keep pace with this continuing boom in air travel. Recent moves to lease certain key Indian airports to private companies should mean that infrastructure will be less of a check on the industry's growth. As things stand, however, India's radar surveillance and anti-collision systems are antiquated. This, when Indian skies already include some of the most crowded airspace in the world. The Calcutta-Delhi corridor in particular is busy all night long with heavy overhead traffic between East Asia and Europe – this was already the case in the mid-1990s (see Himal, April 1996) and airways are now more congested than ever before. Some dramatic midair collisions in the recent past prove how bad things can get, and India will have to act fast to keep its skies safe in the face of the liberalisation-led boom.

Nepal's Cosmic

To get a glimpse of the ferment in the airways of Southasia beyond India, one can fly to Nepal for a look. More people are flying for less in Nepal as they are in India. North of the border, though, the increase in number of airlines, seat over-supply and resultant fare wars are not the only reasons for this change. In this insurgency-torn country, as frequent bandhs and highway firefights make travel by bus unreliable and insecure, Nepalis who can afford it are choosing to travel between the capital and major towns by air. In the past, tourism was what sustained Nepal's incredible number of private airlines. Today, domestic travelers sustain the airlines, filing into the cabins of Buddha Air's first-hand Beechcraft 1900Ds or onto the ageing Twin Otters, Dorniers and Saabs of the other airlines.

The most dramatic change in Nepal's aviation sector, however, came with Cosmic Air's purchase last year of its first 110-seater Fokker 100 jet. Cosmic now has a fleet of four of the aircraft and is siphoning off passengers from airlines with smaller aircraft on three domestic routes: Kathmandu to Biratnagar, Bhairahawa and Nepalganj. The airline has also taken the plunge and started traveling to cross-border destinations. The inefficiency and stagnation of the national flag carrier, Royal Nepal Airlines, which has but two Boeing 757 jets, has meant that Cosmic is well-placed to take advantage of bilateral air service agreements between Nepal and its neighbours.

Cosmic is already flying from Kathmandu to Delhi and back two times a day and is increasing its Kathmandu-Dhaka service – started in November 2004 – from three to five flights a week. By providing the cheapest fares, this no-frills airline has created a niche for itself in a short period. The Kathmandu-Delhi airfare, which had remained artificially high for decades during the Royal Nepal-Indian Airlines monopoly, have fallen dramatically. Start-up Cosmic claims to have captured 45 percent of the traffic between the two capitals.

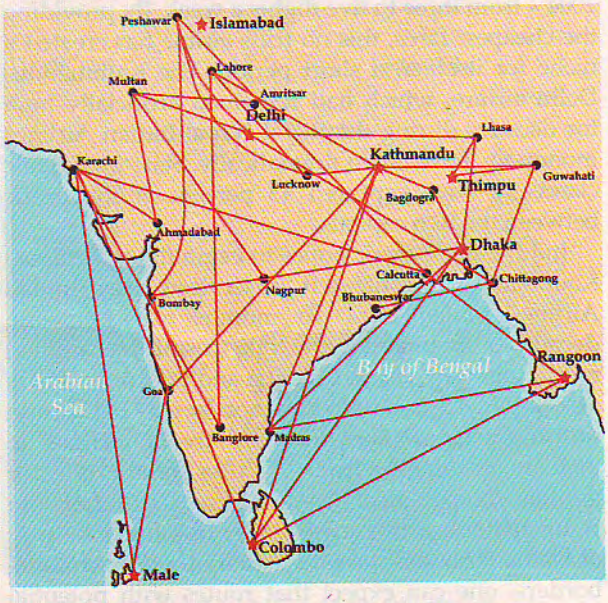
In July, the Cosmic hopes to begin flying Benaras-Kathmandu, a route left unserviced after Indian Airlines pulled out two months ago following decades of maintaining the link. Cosmic has applied for permission to fly to Calcutta and Lucknow, and is also hoping to make it to Rangoon by way of Calcutta utilising what are known as 'fifth freedom rights' to pick up passengers from Calcutta for the onward journey. Nepal also has unutilised fifth freedom rights that allow its carriers to fly to Karachi by way of Delhi. Now that private airlines are now crossing borders, one can expect that routes with potential will not be left unexplored for much longer.

Air traffic as a CBM

Aside from the lowered airfares and the near-exponential growth in passenger volume, the fact of over-the-border flights has been the most significant change in the aviation sector of the region. While the ultra-sensitive India-Pakistan air corridors (between Delhi, Karachi, Lahore and Bombay) are still reserved for the flag carriers of the two countries, travel between India and the other Southasian countries has been thrown open to private carriers only over the past year. With their dynamism and spurred by profit motive, the private airlines are expected to have the Southasian skies roaring with traffic as they seek out viable routes.

The geopolitical benefits of an active Southasia-wide air network are not hard to appreciate. The more air routes connect the regional capitals and metropolises, the more contact between the people of the often antagonistic countries. The catalytic function of air travel will lead to increased trade and development of common interests that can only help defuse regional tensions. The development of air corridors between Southasian capitals is in this sense a great confidence-building measure.

While the state-run national flag carriers continue to make cross-border flights between regional metropolises, Sahara and Jet join them today in flying very successful runs between Madras and Colombo and between Delhi and Dhaka. The two airlines have suspended flights on the Delhi-Kathmandu sector due to Sahara's loss of pilots to new Indian carriers and Jet's disagreements with the Civil Aviation Authority of India, and the stiff competition that Cosmic Air provided on that route to both. However, spokesmen for both Jet and Sahara have said that the carriers will resume flights over the course of the 2005 monsoon.



Southasian air corridors we would like to see.

Even as they seek to dig their heels deeper into the Southasian market, Jet and Sahara and looking outwards. They are already flying to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and London and India's open skies policy will soon allow them to fly to anywhere in the world, with the exception of West Asia. This is the only sector that the Ministry of Civil Aviation in New Delhi is keeping off limits for some years still, as a protective measure in favour of Indian Airlines and Air India, for whom the West Asian routes provide substantial profits *(see interview with Indian Civil Aviation Secretary Ajay Prasad)*.

And more cross-border flights

Southasian civil aviation's most unhappy episode has to have been the closing of Indian airspace to all Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flights in the aftermath of the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament. Not only were all flights between India and Pakistan suspended, but PIA flights to other Southasian destinations were affected as well, as virtually every regional route requires flight over Indian airspace. Reciprocal flight bans by Pakistan also hit Air India and Indian Airlines very badly, as the carriers were made to take half hour-long detours over the Arabian Sea on all flights out west. Flights between Pakistan and India resumed in December 2003, with the Indian authorities chastened by the effects of their intemperate action.

Within Pakistan, PIA has been spearheading massive price wars in the hopes of re-establishing its command over the domestic market, at one point setting fares in the Karachi-Lahore sector at one half those offered by the private airline Shaheen Air. State-owned PIA faces competition on both domestic and international fronts by all-jet private airlines. Air Shaheen and Aero Asia, another Pakistani private sector carrier, are making use of bilateral air service agreements with other countries in order to fly to internationally. Though the two have West Asian destinations covered from Muscat to Kuwait City, they do not as yet fly to anywhere east of the Sindh-Punjab border.

Given the current thaw in relations between India and Pakistan, private airlines can be expected to be flying the open skies between the two countries in the near future. When this happens, perhaps we can hope to see Punjab better connected within itself than ever before, with flights operating from Lahore to Jalandar or from Patiala to Multan. Beyond this, the increased economic contact that more air routes would provide would further the possibilities of a lasting peace between the Subcontinent's most cantankerous neighbours.

In Sri Lanka, the most successful of Southasia's national flag carriers, Air Lanka, was partially privatized in 1998. It now goes by the name of SriLankan Airlines; the majority of its shares are held

Interview

"No more overflight bans."

Ajay Prasad, India's Secretary of Civil Aviation, on open skies and trends within India and links to the rest of Southasia.

Does your open skies policy include Southasia?
In fact our first decision on Indian private carriers flying internationally was to open up the SAARC countries. As a result Jet and Sahara started flying to Kathmandu and Colombo. We are now gradually opening up to the Asean countries and the West.

Are you satisfied with the SAARC connections?
To some extent. Pakistan is still not connected by private airlines. The expansion of the Southasian network has been between single destinations, i.e. Kathmandu, Delhi and Dhaka. Traffic will have to determine how others may be connected, for example Pokhara in Nepal or Chittagong in Bangladesh.

How about the national flag carriers?
The impulse came from the private sector but Indian Airlines has stood up well to the competition. Air India is planning Dhaka flights, and there will be more flights to the Maldives. There is no reason why the private private airlines must fly the tried and tested routes. There is no point in doing what Air India has done all these years.

Have the other states responded to India's open sky policy?
Not to the same extent as yet, but we are looking forward to more open regimes. Every country responds vis-à-vis its own dynamics, and the pace of India's openness is dictated by our own assessment of the situation. There is a lot of potential for expansion of air travel with Pakistan. With Nepal, we are ready with a fairly comprehensive package including new air corridors. We have unilaterally given the rights to fly to many, many destinations.

Why such magnaminity towards Colombo?
We had decided originally to provide the freedoms to the Asean countries, and Sri Lanka then asked for the same facility. It is a fact that Sri Lanka is taking passengers from India for onward journeys, such as to the Gulf. Of course this creates some problems for Indian carriers, but you have to fight it out in the market. Even at some cost to our carriers, the opportunity has to be created for easy travel so that civil aviation can contribute to the growth of the economy.

What about airfare regulation?
We are not looking at any regulatory mechanism on pricing. Earlier, fare schedules that required government approval, but that has been done away with completely. We have the right to intervene if there is predatory pricing, but we propose not to do so unless compelled.

What are the trends in Indian air travel?
Our traffic grew by 13 percent between 2003 and 2004. The following fiscal year, it grew by 24 percent, and we have seen a similar trend this year. The fares are dropping with liberalization, and travel has become affordable. Today, air conditioned first class costs more than going by air, and the airlines are even targeting passengers who take air-conditioned second class.

Can civil aviation promote confidence building?
You cannot over-emphasise the importance of civil aviation for confidence building among nations. Flying across borders naturally promotes contact between people and helps deepen relationships as common cultural values are allowed to come to the fore. I would like to see more of this to happen, which is why we must provide more access to the neighbours of India.

What about the overflight ban?
Personally, I would never like to see such bans again. It caused inconvenience to our own carriers and fliers, it created difficulties for others and it restricted openness. There were compulsions, and we have now moved on. Today, there is a thaw, and we even fly to Kabul over Pakistani territory.

by the Sri Lankan government and a key portion is owned by Dubai's Emirates Airlines. The Sri Lankan government announced in May that it would allow two private sector carriers to fly alongside SriLankan Airlines on international routes. The contenders for these slots include current domestic operators Aero Lanka (formerly Serendib Air), Lion Air and Expo Aviation as well as India's Deccan Air. A spokesman for Expo Aviation has said recently that the airline would like to begin its international operations by targeting Maldives and the South Indian market, including Madras, Trivandrum and Trichy.

Druk Air, the national flag carrier of Bhutan, remains the only airline in Southasia to make use of fifth freedom rights. It uses these to increase its passenger volume when its flies its Paro-Calcutta-Bangkok route and its Paro-Kathmandu-Delhi route, the first leg of which is perhaps the best mountain flight of the eastern Himalaya, flying within 50 km of four of the world's five highest mountains. Druk has recently acquired two new Airbus A319s as part of a fleet renewal programme.

Jet and Sahara, the large private airliners of India, have started big in their roles as international carriers, with massive investment, advertising budgets and late-model aircraft types. Operators such as Nepal's Cosmic and Dhaka-based GMG Airlines are small carriers that have taken on flying beyond domestic routes as a challenge and are hoping to grow in the process.

GMG is Bangladesh's only private carrier. Named for the initials of its founder's father, GMG's golden deer insignia – a reference to a Bengali saying and a song by Rabindranath Tagore – is already plying cross-border routes that connect Dhaka and Chittagong with Calcutta. In flying the latter route, GMG has provided a service that flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines has failed to provide in its three decades in the air. GMG has announced that it is seeking to increase its flights to Calcutta and to expand its operations to New Delhi, Bombay and Madras. Meanwhile, it will soon begin flights on the Dhaka-Colombo sector, where it will replace Biman as the designated carrier of Bangladesh. GMG is also expected to join Biman and Cosmic in linking Dhaka and Kathmandu.

What the private airlines such as GMG have been able to do is to create markets where none seemed to exist. Cosmic, for example, has managed to attract Bangladeshi tourists who would otherwise not have thought to travel to Kathmandu, just 50 minutes away, on holiday. When GMG starts flying between Dhaka and Colombo, it will surely surprise with the new passenger market that it is able to tap. Likewise, it is thought that there would be enough seats to sustain routes such as Lucknow-Kathmandu and Dhaka-Guwahati. The best proof of Southasia's readiness for new routes is in the many cities in India currently being connected to Colombo: Bangalore, Delhi, Trivandrum, Madras and Cochin.

Possibilities abound. Infrastructure in smaller airports is a problem at the moment, but both passengers and the industry would benefit, for instance, if carriers were allowed to fly from Delhi to Biratnagar or Bhairahawa in the Nepal plains, which would also serve passengers in eastern Uttar Pradesh and northern Bihar respectively. People seeking to get to eastern Nepal from Delhi already make use of the domestic airport in Bagdogra, near Siliguri. At some time in the future, when other Southasian countries share open borders of the sort that Nepal and India enjoy, small towns in other regions as well may benefit from the accessibility of airports on either side of their borders.

The ultimate success of Southasian aviation will be in the linking of smaller metros across the region's national boundaries - when flights ply routes from Multan and Hyderabad (Sindh) to Jaipur, Amritsar, Ahmedabad or Indore. It can be expected that as the aviation industry continues to expand, there will be a proliferation of such smaller routes. In India and Nepal, the saturation of trunk routes by the larger domestic carriers is already pushing the smaller airlines on to sectors that connect smaller towns. In a similar fashion, as regional trunk routes become saturated with multiple airlines from either side competing for custom, we should see an increase in the variety of cross-border contact between the people of Southasia's countries. Beyond making the subcontinent's regions smaller within themselves, the move away from capital-centric travel will mean more interaction between regions whose relationships have been overshadowed by state-centric thinking.

More point-to-point routes between smaller destinations will also be required in order to decrease congestion along main air corridors. And if the Ministries of Defense and Civil Aviation in India were to open up new air corridors along which passenger aircraft would be permitted to fly, planes flying to Delhi would not have to stack for long over Uttar Pradesh before they are allowed to land.

Problems, and more possibilities

For cross-border traffic to enter new routes sectors, air service agreements between the region's governments would have to be revised. The seat quotas allowed by the current bilateral agreements - for instance, 6000 per week to carriers from either side in the case of Nepal and India, and 4800 per week in the case of India and Pakistan - do not provide airlines with enough seats per week even to service trunk routes between major cities. Cosmic Air, for instance, uses 14 of its permitted 20 flights per week to India in flying to Delhi alone. The current air service agreements also only allow flights to specific destinations in host countries and hence do not allow for the flexibility in routing that private airlines today seek.

National flag carriers have long flown between the region's cities, but they have other priorites - illustrated, for instance, in Biman Bangladesh's prestige flights to European capitals - and even Southasia's capitals are very poorly linked today. The most egregious failure is the failure to link Delhi to Rawalpindi/Islamabad, and the lack of flights between Dhaka and Colombo, and Kathmandu and Colombo are also significant. Domestic private airlines are beginning to correct these failings, but what is required is also a conscious attempt by the governments to work to develop these capital linkages.

Clearly, air travel in Southasia is on a high roll. Trends unimaginable just a few years ago are today accepted as commonplace. The high volume of passengers who are flying, the low airfares in spite of high fuel prices, the opening up of new air routes, and the cross-border linkages by private airlines, are all harbingers of even more changes in the future. One such development could be the development of a trans-nationally owned Southasian airline whose sole purpose would be the linking of the Southasian cities across borders - and the idea may not sound that incredible a few more years down the line.

But the most important development would be the increase of cross-border connections. Once airport infrastructure is improved and once pressure from the private sector brings the region's governments to further open their skies, there will be little to keep the aviation sector from developing a vast and dense network of routes across Southasian frontiers. There may be concrete walls and barbed-wire fencing on the ground, but air travellers flying across regional countries by the tens of thousands, and then hundreds of thousands, would slowly undo the psychological divide between the region's countries. Once this happens, Southasia will have gone from being a bunch of countries to being a region in truth.

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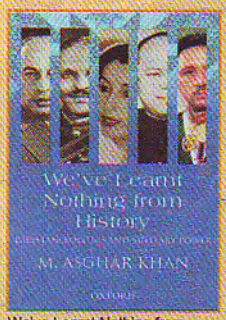

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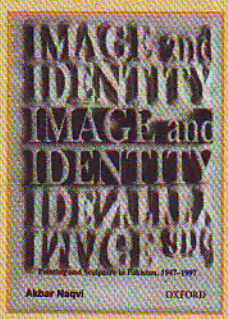

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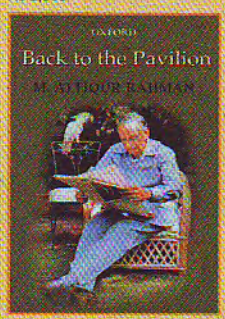

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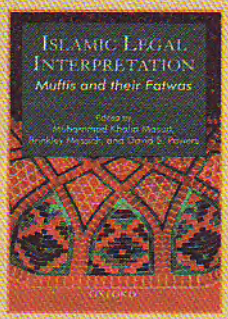

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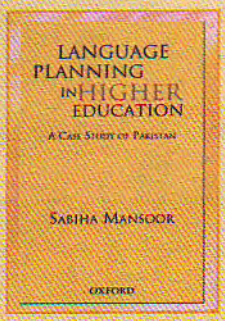

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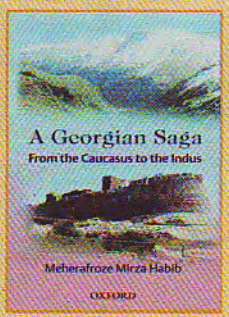

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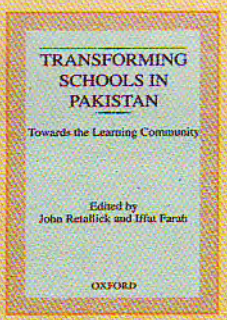

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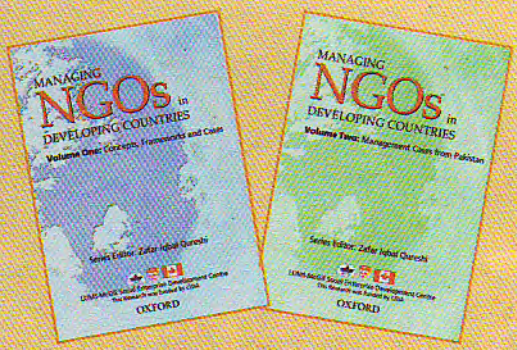

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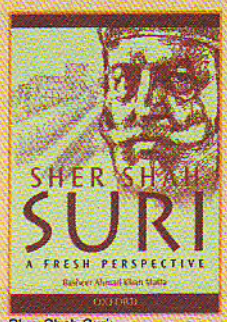

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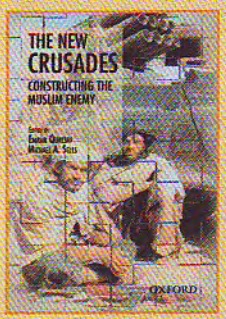

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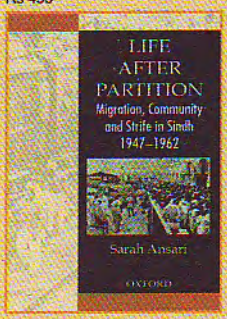

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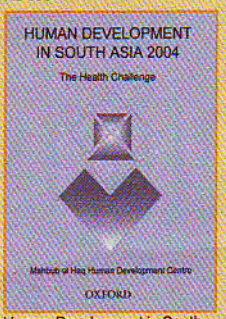

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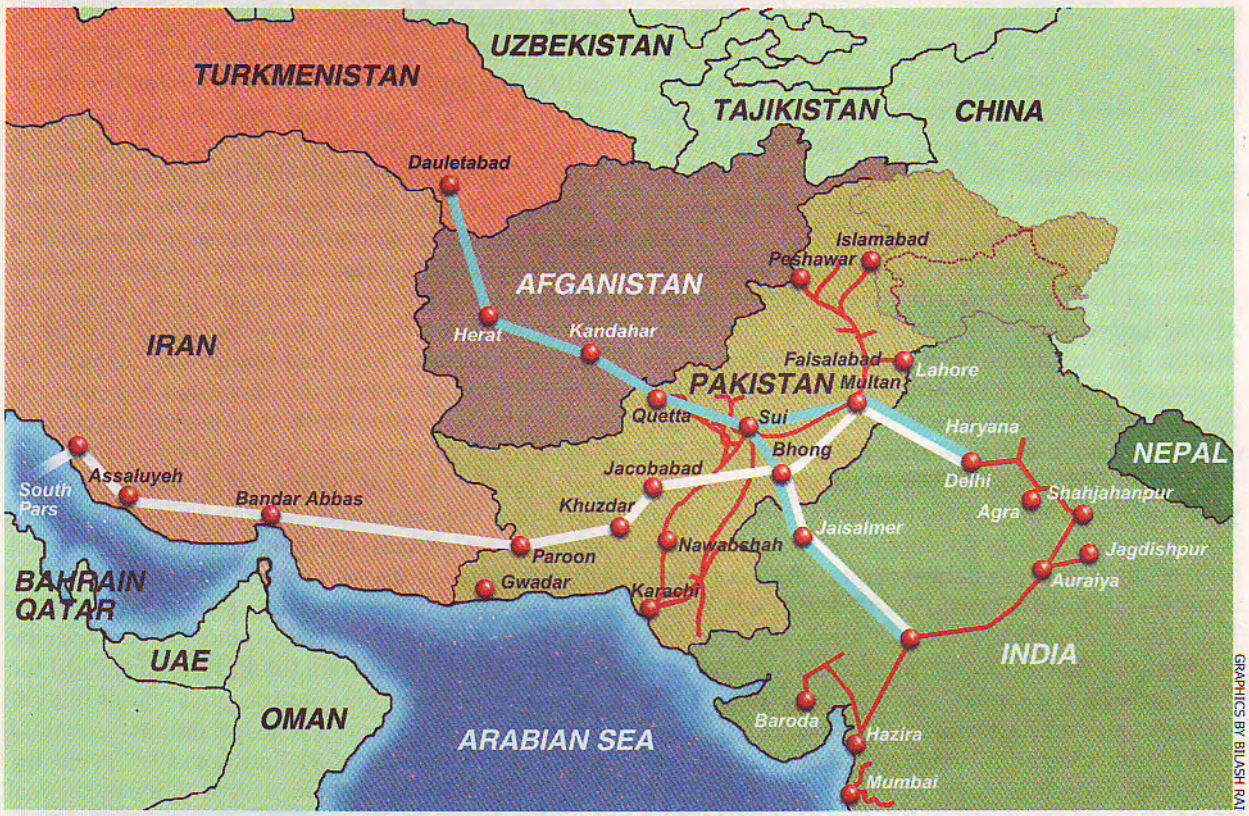


Existing domestic networks and proposed international gaslines.

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

Offshore Iran, in an area of the Persian Gulf known as South Pars, lies a resource that could redirect the course of history in Southasia, 3000 km to the east. The resource is natural gas – essentially methane – and its import has become necessary in order to feed the demand for energy in faraway India. And so a gas pipeline is proposed that will traverse the Makran coast that Alexander walked during his last, ill-fated campaign, traverse the Balochistan-Sindh desert to Multan, and cross the Indus River to arrive finally in Rajasthan – to quench the thirst for energy of the Southasian economic behemoth. Along the way, the gasline would also top up the energy needs of Pakistan, whose own known reserves are expected to run out in a dozen years.

Till only a couple of years ago, this was a pie-in-the-sky project to all but a few visionaries – there is no other word to describe them – who understood how a long pipe carrying gas could also serve as the mother of all confidence-building measures. For the passage of natural gas through Pakistan to India, its price set at a fair level by Tehran and its uninterrupted flow guaranteed by Islamabad, will change the geopolitical landscape of the Subcontinent. In one stroke, the joint stakeholding of an economic resource will defuse the five and a half decade long India-Pakistan hostility. Many tightly-wound bilateral problems, including the matter of Kashmir, will suddenly become manageable.

Will peace in our times be achieved because methane from Iran is allowed to enter India via Pakistan? Is it as simple as that? It is beginning to look as if it is.

Indeed, the geopolitics of Southasia will be transformed the moment the New Delhi housewife is able to turn on the tap for cheap natural gas piped directly into her kitchen, finally rid of the cumbersome red cylinders of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) that have been her burden for decades. Even more significantly, natural gas via pipeline will provide Indian industry with a massive boost in sectors ranging from petrochemicals to fertilisers; electric power production will increase dramatically and a myriad of new commercial uses will be supported. Once Pakistan begins to receive transit fees that could run to USD 600 million yearly and Islamabad is asked to give international undertakings not to turn off the tap in any circumstance, a threshold will have been crossed in India-Pakistan relations.

For long, hard-headed state-centric analysts in Delhi and Islamabad regarded the pipeline proposal as one prepared by and for romantics who floated outside the perimeter of reality. Perceptions began to change when the Federal Cabinet in Islamabad approved the concept of a gasline to India and President Gen Pervez Musharraf announced that he would allow unconditional passage of Iranian gas. The immediate reaction across the border was skepticism fuelled by the inertia of the intelligence and foreign policy establishments. Horrors! How could Pakistan be entrusted with a resource whose blockage would devastate a dependent Indian economy? What if Islamabad turned off the tap? "This project is a lemon," announced a New Delhi heavyweight to his colleagues.

What sustained this undercurrent of attention was a diligent reflective exercise, underway since 1995, to study the economic feasibility of transporting Iranian gas to India with an eye to the peace dividend to be collected. Very few people outside of a close-knit circle even knew of the Balusa Group, a 'track two' effort that had been laying the ground for new thinking. Rounded up by a brother-sister émigré twosome born in India, brought up in Pakistan and naturalized in the United States - one an energy specialist and the other a senior foreign policy player in Washington DC - the group had been engaged in the study of India-Pakistan relations, with special attention to natural gas linkages, for nearly a decade.

Like everything else, the gasline proposal has had to ride the ups and downs of the turbulent India-Pakistan relationship. For a long time, progress was "out of phase," as one analyst put it, with India turning a stiff upper lip when Pakistan was willing to go ahead with the pipeline and vice versa. But such was the unshakeable economic logic behind the idea that it defied the unremitting bilateral setbacks. The realignment of regional geopolitics following the 9/11 attacks in the United States unexpectedly threw up possibilities to jump start the peace process, and the real breakthrough came in Islamabad on the sidelines of the Twelfth SAARC Summit, when Gen Musharraf gave Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee an undertaking not to permit any territory under Pakistan's control "to be used to support terrorism in any manner." This commitment paved the way for an inter-governmental 'composite dialogue' on a range of issues, and along the way the 'track two' pipeline project suddenly became kosher and was made part of the official 'track one' process.

Not that the gasline was a new concept. As far back as 1989, the head of the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI), R K Pachauri, had brought Iran's former Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Shams Ardekani to New Delhi to deliver a paper on the subject. Pachauri recalls, "At that time, policy makers and others thought of it as nothing more than a pipe dream. But what you need are rational thinkers and policymakers who can identify win-win opportunities." Somewhat before the India-Pakistan thaw of the last couple of years, the Balusa Group had predicted, "Major shifts in political relationships do sometimes take place at baffling speed and in totally unexpected directions." This is indeed what has happened. The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline is now within grasp, and with it the hope that the continuous inferno of India-Pakistan relations may finally be smothered under a blanket of methane.

Interestingly, it was the prolonged military standoff of 2002 that Rawalpindi-based 'activist-general' Mahmud Durrani thinks has "convinced the leader-ship of both the countries that war of high or low intensity is no more a practical option." A Balusa member from the start, Gen Durrani says, "While the Indian and Pakistani people, in spite of the occasional hysteria, have always wanted to live in peace, this is the first time that I see a change in the thinking of the establishments of our two countries. Understanding of the cost of conflict and benefits of peace is finally sinking in, which is why our pipeline proposal is no more a pipe dream."

Iran, which has the largest natural gas reserves in the world after Russia but exports only to Turkey, is keen to open up markets eastwards in Pakistan and India. But even the Iranians are quick to emphasise the importance of the gasline to Southasian peace-building. Tehran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said in Delhi in early February, "We are convinced that the Iran-India pipeline through Pakistan will benefit all three countries and substantially improve the political and economic relations between India and Pakistan." Pakistan's Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, has no doubts on that score: "I have always said that if we create mutual linkages and mutual dependencies, that helps the overall political framework."

The optimist's timeline Pipeline gas is attractive because of its competitive price and stable and long-term supply. The extended multinational gaslines in

Interview

"Enmeshed economies will bring us together."

Mani Shankar Aiyar, India's Member of Parliament and Minster of Petroleum and Natural Gas, was interviewed in his office at Shastri Bhawan, New Delhi.

Himal: You are acting as if time were running out in your search for energy.

Mani Shankar Aiyar: For energy security India must maximize domestic production of oil and gas, but our energy needs are so great that we need to look elsewhere as well. Hence, the importance of pipeline diplomacy. In India, we need energy so as to sustain high rate of growth in order to really get rid of poverty. Energy security is therefore at the core of both economic growth and national security. And we do not become more secure by avoiding Pakistan and denying ourselves access to something that we need.

What about the obvious American distaste for the whole project?

We have not been refuted when we have said that India has civilisational linkages with Iran, or that this project is very important for our economy. The pipeline is on track, though I am not pretending that it will be smooth. The real US position will emerge when we have a concrete agreement on our hands. An expression of anxiety at this stage does not mean that the pipeline is in jeopardy.

How can a gas pipeline be a confidence building measure?

The pipelines from Iran and Myanmar would merge India's economic interests with those of Pakistan and Bangladesh, which would be the transit countries. Sending ships with LNG on the high seas to Haldia or Gujarat may satisfy our energy needs, but there would be no peace implications.

Are already looking beyond to a Southasian energy grid?

The future lies in all the countries of the region being brought together, while respecting the political independence and sovereignty of each. Our historical truth is that we were one economy that was broken up. So we must work for integration after the past decades of disintegration. We need enmeshed economies and people's interaction across the frontiers. Without exaggerating the importance of the pipeline project as a peacebuilding exercise, I have no doubt it will make a major contribution.

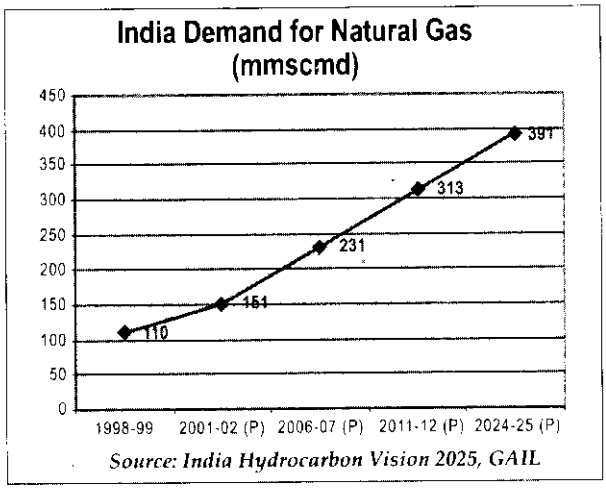
operation, such as those from Siberia to Germany and from Algeria to France, have already proven the technical, economic and geopolitical viability of such projects. Pakistan has had decades of experience with its own domestic natural gas network, which branches out to all regions from the gas fields of Balochistan and Sindh. Natural gas is the fuel of choice of the twenty-first century: it is cheaper and cleaner than most alternatives and it is found within easy reach in the outlying regions of Southasia, from Burma to Turkmenistan and Iran.

Both the Indian and Pakistani economies are expected to grow at more than six percent yearly for the next decade. Their hunger for energy is already acute and their own proven gas reserves are quite modest in relation to projected demand. India presently requires 120 million standard cubic meters per day (mmscmd) of natural gas, which is over one-and-half times the supply of 70 mmscmd. The demand is expected to go up to 250 mmscmd by 2010, and rise to 400 mmscmd by 2015. An overland pipeline being 30 percent cheaper than transporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) by tanker ships, it is obvious why the Iranian gas fields look so tantalizing to the Indian energy planner.

It was only a few years ago that, in an environment that stands in sharp contrast to the Indo-Pak bonhomie of today, the gasline idea was stalled simply because New Delhi did not want Islamabad to benefit from the transit fee. And there were some in Pakistan who did not want India to prosper through easy access to Iranian gas. This dog-in-manger mindset also stalled progress through the introduction of conditions: New Delhi wanted road transport access to Afghanistan as quid pro quo and also demanded the Most Favoured Nation status from Pakistan; like-wise, Islamabad was quick to link the pipeline with progress on the ubiquitous problem of Kashmir.

In the improved atmosphere of today, with political will evident on both sides, the issues have been separated and the Iranian pipeline stands alone and on its own merits. Most importantly,

the pipeline's chaperones in New Delhi's Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas have managed to convince the political front rank that the project must be seen solely as a project for energy security, vital for the economy's growth. Things are so close to a breakthrough that India's Petroleum Secretary S C Tripathi told reporters that if the negotiations between Islamabad, New Delhi and Tehran went smoothly, ground could be broken within two years and the natural gas could actually begin to flow by October-December 2009.



Source: India Hydrocarbon Vision 2025, GAIL

Even discounting such an optimistic scenario, the peace-building potential of the gasline is already beginning to kick in as the three countries start to discuss the modalities of the project. The vital need for natural gas imports is already informing rhetoric in New Delhi and Islamabad and playing a part in modulating positions. This trend will continue as the construction of the pipeline proceeds and the facts of an intertwined Indian and Pakistani economy are, literally, created on the ground. And so, the scene is set for a USD 5 billion project that would place a pipe of 56 inches diameter and 2700 km length to carry gas under pressure from the offshore South Pars gas field to Delhi and Gujarat, carrying 3.2 billion cubic feet of gas a day. The matter is no longer one of 'if', but 'when'.

Bhai-bhai bonhomie

It is the coincidence of leaderships in Islamabad and New Delhi that has delivered a permutation capable of propelling the gasline project. Pakistan is ruled by a general president who is largely unencumbered by political obligations and who sees the achievement of peace with India as a crowning glory that could wipe away the stain of autocracy. The presence of international banker-turned-prime minister Shaukat Aziz enhances Gen Musharraf's understanding that beyond bhai-bhai bonhomie, sustainable peace must be built by means of permanent economic linkages with India.

On the side of democratic India, the economist Manmohan Singh was catapulted to the helm of affairs when Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi unexpectedly declined the prime minister's chair in May 2004. The architect of India's economic liberalisation as finance minister under Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao in the early 1990s, Singh instinctively understood the value of the gasline for India's expanding economic base. Being a non-political animal, incongruously akin to the general across the border, it was easy for Singh to follow his professional instincts rather than be bogged down by the heavy weight of geo-strategic cautionary counseling.

Manmohan Singh's choice for the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas in the Union Cabinet has been key to the rapid developments on the gasline front over the last year. Mani Shankar Aiyar was a foreign service officer from the Tamil south, a friend of Rajiv Gandhi who emerged as a staunch loyalist of his widow Sonia. The loquacious Aiyar, actually born in Lahore in 1941, considers his three year stint as India's consul general in Karachi as a defining period of his life and was an unabashed advocate of bilateral contact even during the worst days of Pakistan-bashing in India. Aiyar's confidence also comes from the fact that he is an elected Member of Parliament rather than a nominated elder of the Upper House. Even his critics grant Aiyar his flamboyance and mental capacity.

When the United Progressive Alliance coalition government was being formed following the rout of the BJP in May 2004, Aiyar first took on the post of Minister for Panchayati Raj, local government being an area of personal interest. Manmohan Singh had also promised him a more 'heavy' ministry, while Aiyar was given 'temporary charge' of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. For some reason, no one has told him to move on and, typically 'Mani Shankar', Aiyar lost no time in pushing the idea of the gasline. It was a stroke of good fortune that, together with Jaswant Singh of the BJP, Aiyar had been a participant in the Balusa conclaves and the two had even made a joint report to South Block in 1996 on the merits of the Iranian gasline concept *(see interview)*.

Aiyar raided his former employer, the Ministry of External Affairs, and brought over a respected diplomat named Talmiz Ahmad to his own ministry on secondment to serve as Additional Secretary (Overseas). Ahmed was to organize and pacify while Aiyar led the charge. With Indian industry firmly on his side for the bonanza that Iranian gas represents, Aiyar's challenge was to get Manmohan Singh's ear and to keep at bay the security analysts whose livelihoods depend on stoking the embers of bilateral tension. Soon after he took office, he provided the cabinet with a note on energy security, arguing for pipeline imports. On 9 February 2005, the

cabinet gave him formal clearance to conduct what Aiyar calls "conversations without commitment" with Burma, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Iran.

Another coincidence is the matter of Aiyar's rapport with Pakistani Foreign Minister Khursid Mahmud Kasuri: "a friendship which goes back to 7 pm, 8 October 1961, Trinity Hall in Cambridge", says Aiyar with his trademark flair and memory for detail. When Kasuri was in Delhi on 5-6 September 2004 to review the status of the composite dialogue with Natwar Singh, he and his wife came over to Aiyar's house for dinner. There, the college-mates worked out a formulation that was incorporated into the joint statement issued by the two foreign ministers at the end of Kasuri's Delhi visit. It was during that conversation that the term 'hydrocarbon cooperation' entered the bilateral dialogue. A few weeks later, in New York, Manmohan Singh and Pervez Musharraf issued a statement which said that "a gas pipeline via Pakistan to India . . . could contribute to the welfare and prosperity of the people of both countries."

Being a pushy sort of person, all-powerful Sonia's confidante, and willing to dare the system, Aiyar immediately made it a cause to promote not only the Iranian pipeline but a veritable Southasian gas grid. Before anyone could tell what was happening, he was proposing the extension of the Iranian gasline all the way east past the Ganga and Brahmaputra plains to Yunnan to supply southern China. He visited Burma and Bangladesh and convinced his counterparts to cooperate on the building of a pipeline to bring offshore Arakan gas to eastern India.

Aiyar's trump card as far as the nay-sayers are concerned is the energy projections, which juxtapose an exponentially expanding Indian economy with the fact of limited or uncertain domestic reserves. His simple question is, "How are we supposed to fill in for the shortfall of energy?" Aiyar likes to say that the twenty first century is going to be the century of natural gas, just as the previous two were those of petroleum and coal respectively. He wants India to be firmly a part of the natural gas century.

Notable advance was achieved on the pipeline front after Aiyar visits Pakistan and Iran in early June. In Islamabad, discussions were held with Pakistan's Minister of Petroleum and Natural Resources, Amanullah Khan Jadoon, where the brass tacks of the gasline were discussed, including transit fees, security guarantees and continuity of flow. After a stopover in Baku in Azerbaijan to attend the 12th International Caspian Oil and Gas Pipeline Conference, Aiyar arrived in Tehran to sign an agreement to buy LNG and to discuss the pricing of the piped gas on offer. From both capitals, Aiyar brought back understandings to proceed with the planning of the gasline.

India-Pakistan Gas

Pakistan 'understands' natural gas as a resource somewhat better than India does. It is decades ahead of the rest of the region in its extraction and exploitation of the resource – in pipeline infrastructure, in transportation, and in industrial, commercial and residential use. Whereas everywhere else in the Subcontinent stand-alone industrial generators run on diesel, in Pakistan natural gas is the fuel of choice. Homemakers in Pakistan have never seen the ungainly steel LPG canisters that must be lugged to and from kitchens in the rest of Southasia outside of Bangladesh.

Pakistan got its head start with the discovery of a gas field in Sui of Balochistan in 1951, which even today supplies 45 percent of the country's distributed gas. The first pipeline, which went down to Karachi along the Indus, was built in 1955. By the late 1960s, two companies, Sui Southern and Sui Northern, were providing service through a countrywide network of pipelines that extended from Peshawar to Lahore to Multan. Bangladesh had a somewhat later start in gas exploitation (Mani Shankar Aiyar: "The country is floating on a lake of natural gas!"), but neighbouring India has barely begun to wake up to the possibilities of this fuel.

The fact that Pakistan is the Southasian path-breaker in natural gas is clear from a comparison of pipeline networks. Altogether, Pakistan has 7900 km of gas pipelines, whereas the much larger India has no more than 4000 km of unconnected lines. What goes for a grid in India is confined to one 1700 km pipeline that connects Hazira in Gujarat with Delhi and Haryana. The energy mix in the two countries is also worth contrasting: in India it is 54 percent coal, 32 percent oil, nine percent natural gas and three percent hydropower. Pakistan presents an entirely different picture, with 45 percent reliance on oil, 41 percent on natural gas and nine percent hydro.

Sui Southern and Sui Northern are considered efficient parastatals fully capable of involving themselves in the Iranian gasline project from the Pakistan side. The main producers of gas in India are the Oil India Limited (OIL), which operates in Assam and Rajasthan, and the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), which works on the offshore fields of the Arabian Sea. The Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) was established in 1984 to handle infrastructure and marketing of gas and runs today's modest network. It is expected to be the main entity that will distribute the Iranian gas from the point at which it enters Rajasthan. It is expected that the gasline will bifurcate to feed the Gujarat and Delhi regions.

Says TERI's Pachauri, "In India, the biggest impact of piped gas at reasonable price on a large scale would be seen on power generation and the production of fertilizers and petrochemicals. Extensive distribution

for residential use would probably not happen right away. On power generation, India has plans to add capacity of about 10,000 megawatts every year and natural gas would be the fuel of choice."

TAP on tap

While Iran is the favoured source by which to fulfil India's current and projected energy thirst, it does not provide the only available. There have been extensive negotiations and several memoranda of understanding signed, for example, with Qatar or Oman. But the route under the Arabian Sea is considered impractical because of cost and unproven t technology. The most obvious alternative to the Iranian gasline is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) project. The three governments have been in consultation on the matter since 1999, and a detailed feasibility study has been carried out on a line that would transport gas from the Dauletabad reserves of Turkmenistan all the way to Multan.

The TAP line, as proposed by a UK company hired by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), would have a pipeline of 56 inches diameter running a distance of 1680 km, with capacity of 3.2 billion cubic feet per day. The cost of construction would be 3.3 billion USD. Says the ADB report to the three countries, "Based on the projected gas demand in Pakistan, the TAP project is feasible and has high potential."

TAP is also known as the "old Unocal project". During the time of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the multinational company Unocal succeeded in persuading the mullahs to consider the project. Unocal put together a consortium in 1999 and opened offices in Pakistan and India, signing agreements also with vehement opponents of the Taliban in Afghanistan's north. In 1999, as opposition to the Taliban grew in the West and investors were made nervous by the extended Afghan civil war, Unocal withdrew from the project.

Says Gen Durrani in Rawalpindi, "If the GDP growth of India is to be sustained you will need more than one pipeline. Geographically, TAP is the easiest, down through western Afghanistan and Pakistan. Politically, the Iranian pipeline is the simplest, because there is no turbulent Afghanistan in between, and you are also dealing with one less country. My own suggestion would be to first go for the Iranian pipeline, and then for TAP, and after that the Qatar pipeline which will have to come undersea and then through Balochistan."

Mother of all CBMs

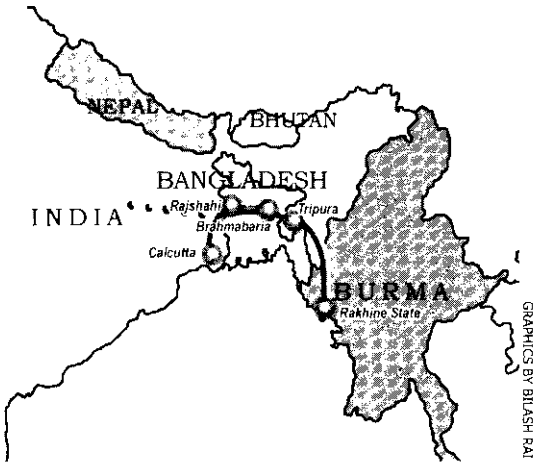
The maturity that has suddenly come to mark the India-Pakistan relationship is hard to comprehend given the acrimony of the past. But while confidence-building efforts are welcome, feel-good measures that merely emphasize the bhai-bhai nature of the India-Pakistan interface will not be enough to stabilise the relationship. Goodwill and atmospherics can evaporate all too quickly in the aftermath of an accident or untoward incident, leaving behind bitterness and added distrust. To make an amicable relationship stable, it is essential to have free movement of people across the India-Pakistan border with safeguards only to prevent mass migration. At the same time, it is urgent to begin the process of establishing economic facts on the ground that will cement the newfound amity. The Iranian gasline, or alternatively the TAP line extended to India, would provide such a binding element, a cushion to help the two government overcome the political ups and downs that are bound to occur.

Much of the animosity towards Pakistan within India is concentrated in the northern states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab and Delhi, which were most affected by the demographic shifts and the violence of Partition. These northern Indian states are the ones that would benefit directly from the gasline from across the Thar Desert. It is hard to underestimate the impact of the gasline project as a confidence-building measure, or CBM. The immediate benefit of piping gas from Pakistan into India would be to lock the two economies into an embrace after decades of separation, closed borders and the absence of economic reciprocity.

There is, intriguingly, no dearth analysts who sing the praise of the pipeline idea, and these include the hard-headed ones. Amitabh Mattoo is a political scientist who serves on the Advisory Board of India's National Security Council and was recently appointed Vice Chancellor of Jammu University. He says, "If you believe that the India-Pakistan conflict is structural, then the only way to defuse it is to build a relationship of economic dependence. Looking to the future, the gas pipeline can be seen as almost the equivalent of the European Steel and Coal Community, which served as the basis for the European Community. The best confidence-building measures are those where you build economic stakeholders, which the pipeline will do. It will achieve in a year what SAARC could not do in a decade or more. In addition, there will be a multiplier effect across the region as a whole if India and Pakistan come together."

C Raja Mohan, an expert on strategic affairs presently at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, has been following the pipeline project for more than a decade and is convinced that its newfound respectability is based on sound logic. He says, "This is a transformatory project, and it will fundamentally change the nature of interaction in the Subcontinent. It will break the wall of suspicion by promoting economic interlinkages, which will begin to take hold once large corporations like Reliance get active across the border. A frontier of conflict will be converted into a frontier of contact."

Energy in the East



Not satisfied with its explorations westwards, India is also looking to the east in its quest for energy security. In January 2005, plans for a pipeline carrying natural gas from the fields of Burma to India through Bangladesh were approved, in principle, by the energy ministers of the three countries. The gasline has been termed a 'win-win-win' opportunity for all concerned, with Burma gaining access to new markets, Bangladesh earning transit fees and India quenching its ever-increasing thirst for energy.

While Burma is estimated to have abundant natural gas reserves, India is already facing a massive shortfall in supply (see graph on page 32). The gas in question would be transported from the offshore Shwe fields in the Arakhan province of Burma. The route of the pipeline, to be decided on the principle of "ensuring adequate access, maximum security and optimal economic utilization", would most likely pass through the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura, entering Bangladesh at Brahmanbaria and crossing over into West Bengal through the Rajshahi border.

An interesting aspect of the trilateral ministerial agreement is that Bangladesh and India are allowed to use the pipeline to "inject and siphon off their own natural gas." This means that India would be able to feed gas from its Tripura gas fields into the pipeline and then extract it once the pipeline reaches West Bengal. And Bangladesh could use the gasline to transport gas from the eastern Sylhet region, where its reserves lie, to its west.

The project's benefits to Bangladesh include about USD 125 million a year in transit fees. Dhaka is also assured of supply of Burmese gas should its own reserves begin to run out. The Burma gasline gains additional significance against the backdrop of Dhaka's reluctance to export its own natural gas to India, a reticence ascribed to both doubts about the size of its reserves and the dynamics of Bangladeshi politics, which make exports to India problematic. The Burma pipeline could help relax such attitudes in Dhaka in the future.

The January agreement, meanwhile, has hit a patch of bad weather, with a set of conditions set by Bangladesh on India. As part of a *quid pro quo*, Dhaka wants Delhi to provide it with transit facilities for import of hydroelectricity from Nepal and Bhutan, as well as measures to reduce the trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also demanded access to a corridor through India for trade with Nepal and Bhutan. With India refusing to include bilateral issues in a tripartite agreement, the signing of a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) in April was deferred. The political risk involved in signing an agreement with India on the eve of an election may be weighing heavy on the minds of the ruling dispensation in Dhaka.

There is also opposition to the gasline from Burmese pro-democracy activists and some international groups. They argue that the deal, pushed by Bangladesh and India as Southasian democracies, would simply strengthen and legitimise the authoritarian regime in Rangoon. With the recent 'realist' tilt in New Delhi towards the Burmese ruling junta, and given the country's energy needs, it is unlikely that India for one will be swayed by the opposition. If this situation holds, if Dhaka relents and if an understanding does get formalised this year, officials estimate that Burmese gas could be flowing to Calcutta industries and households within five years. *by Prashant Jha*

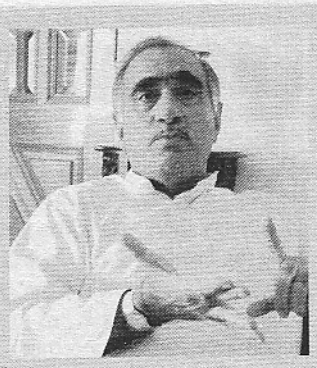
Mahendra P Lama and Rasul Bakhsh Rais, scholars from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad respectively, have no doubt that "gas pipelines for a common future" is an idea whose time has come. Together, they have written that "such a grid would generate a chain of stakeholders at the level of policymakers, institutions, consumers and beneficiaries, with forward and backward linkages. This could be one of the single biggest confidence-building measures between the two countries, and would create positive and permanent vested interests in South Asia."

The 'forward and backward linkages' of the Iranian pipeline will reach into the deepest nooks and crannies of the two economies. Beyond the industrial, commercial and household-level advantages, the gasline will also serve as a powerful symbol of cooperation and interdependence. Gen Durrani says of the prospects: "The peace dividend will begin to flow the moment you sign the document. There will be newfound confidence as you move into detailed studies, construction, the to-and-fro between officials, and so on."

The economic dividend that India and Pakistan will reap from cheap and reliable Iranian methane will create stakeholders for peace in the economic sectors of both the countries. The involvement of industries large and small will lead to a vested interest in geopolitical stability between India and Pakistan. Take the example of Reliance Industries, India's

Interview

"The issue is fundamentally settled."



Mahmud Durrani, retired Major General of the Pakistan Army, was interviewed in his home by the 18-hole Rawalpindi Golf Course.

Himal: How did a general get into lobbying for natural gas pipelines?

Mahmud Durrani: Shirin Tahir-Kheli is really the mother hen of all this. I was still in service when I told her of wanting to retire and devote my life to promoting India-Pakistan peace. Within two years, she and her brother Toufiq had organised a group of Pakistanis and Indians to discuss energy cooperation. I attended the first meeting with the backing of the Pakistan military and the government. There was a feeling that we needed peace. There was even an ex-RAW chief in our group.

Do you feel vindicated?

Now that the pipeline project seems within grasp, the members of the Balusa Group feel redeemed. What we had thought of as close to a dream is now close to reality. The idea is do-able, it is economically feasible, and we are excited.

Were you always convinced about the project's feasibility?

In seeking to learn all there was to learn about natural gas pipelines, I met with a representative of Reliance Industries at the Indian International Centre in New Delhi. They were already into gas, and felt that the pipeline would work. This added to my confidence.

Were you not wary of meeting up with big businesses such as Reliance?

I got over that kind of timidity long ago. One must respect the private sector as a partner, and I had no problem meeting with the Reliance people. For a peacenik, industry can be a very strong partner.

Are there those in Pakistan who will reject the project?

Only the narrow-minded extremists. The project will move ahead on its own merits sooner than later, and the gas will help develop stakeholders across the border.

Are we expecting too much from one pipeline?

The pipeline is not a magic wand that will resolve all problems at one wave, but please understand that exporting gas is completely different from exporting sugar or potatoes. Simply put, a gas pipeline cannot be shut off, therefore it can provide more stability than other kinds of cross-border exchange.

Are you worried about the troubles in Balochistan affecting the pipeline?

There is disaffection in Balochistan, but this does not provide the motivation to blow up a transit pipeline from Iran. Nevertheless, adequate security arrangements will have to be there. A lifeline for Indian industry cannot be made insecure.

Are you sure it will happen?

I think the pipeline will happen, not as a romantic but as a realist. India needs the gas and Pakistan needs the gas. They have in the broader sense agreed to cooperate on this. The issue is fundamentally settled.

petrochemical giant, which is expected to make heavy use of the natural gas that comes through the pipeline. It would be in the company's interest, once the pipeline is in place, to have bilateral tensions low so that its coffers remain full. The same would hold true for all other industrial and commercial players.

The pipeline even has the power to restrain the two countries on the issue of Kashmir, the key yardstick by which any proposed India-Pakistan CBM must be measured. Write Lama and Rais, "The pipeline may ultimately de-prioritise the Kashmir issue from the agenda of the political economy of India-Pakistan relations." In New Delhi, TERI's Pachauri has no doubts on that score: "If India gets large quantities of gas at a reasonable price and Pakistan benefits from the economies of scale and transit fees, Kashmir and other bilateral problems would be seen to be ridiculously trivial. If cricket matches and bus services between the two countries can demolish so many prejudices, surely the cementing of such a large-scale economic relationship would create unprecedented goodwill on both sides. There is a potential for radically altering mindsets."

But can the hawks and ultra-nationalists on both sides still gather enough energy to sabotage the gasline proposal? Fakir Ayazuddin, a Karachi

businessman and commentator, thinks that the momentum that has been generated will carry the project past such obstacles. He says, "De-escalation will begin the moment the pipeline deal is signed, and the hawks will be sidelined. At that point, the cynics and opportunists who work overtime to poison bilateral initiatives will have no possibility of open opposition. There is too much good in the proposal."

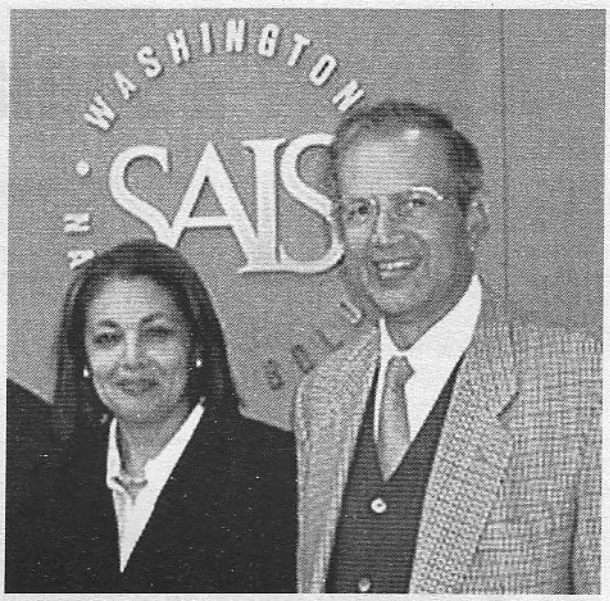
Balusa

Toufiq Siddiqi is an environmentalist and energy expert based in Hawaii. Shirin Tahir-Kheli is a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University, currently Senior Advisor to Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice on United Nations Reform, who served on the US National Security Council from 2003-2005. Born in Hyderabad (Deccan) before Partition, the siblings spent part of their childhood in Pakistan, after which they became Southasian émigrés in the US. In the early 1990s, Siddiqi became interested in the energy requirements of the Subcontinent, while sister Tahir-Kheli maintained her interest in the region even as she rose up the career ladder in Washington DC.

With support from the United Nations Development Programme and the Rockefeller Foundation, the brother-sister duo brought together a group of Indian and Pakistani generals, politicians, bureaucrats and others to discuss ways to bring sense and direction to the India-Pakistan relationship. It was this loose gathering that came to be known as the Balusa Group, named after two adjacent villages in Pakistani Punjab. (The group, labelled "a five star track two effort" by one critic for the high profile of its members, includes a few irreverent individuals who enjoy such mischief as making the claim that "Balusa evidently means peace in an ancient Indian language".)

The group brought together by Tahir-Kheli and Siddiqi first met in Singapore, which was followed by gatherings in Bellagio (Italy), Muscat (Oman), Udaipur, Rawalpindi and elsewhere. The latest was a discussion on Kashmir held in Chandigarh in February 2005. A leading figure in the Balusa Group is Mahmud Durrani. While a serving general, he had announced to Tahir-Kheli in 1994 his intention to devote his imminent retirement to helping achieve an India-Pakistan rapprochement. With the support of some progressive-minded top brass in the Pakistani military, Gen Durrani became active in the Balusa conclaves. A firm advocate of economic linkages to concretise peace initiatives, he believes the group has been "way ahead of the curve" on the gasline proposal. (see interview).

Recalling the beginnings of the Balusa initiative, Siddiqi says, "Shirin and I have had a continuous interest in promoting sustainable development in the Subcontinent, and here was a concept that would represent a win-win economic situation for the key adversaries, while also serving as a CBM. I knew many of the energy and environment experts in both countries, whereas Shirin knew many of the policymakers. We understood that given the magnitude of energy requirements, the natural gas pipeline offered the greatest potential."



The Balusa siblings

Yankee veto

The idea has never been this close to becoming a reality, but a number of things could still go wrong. Most significantly, the building of the gasline depends on the absence of accidents along the way that could derail the larger peace effort – a massive militant attack, an assassination or any other event with potential to fuel nationalist reaction and tie the hands of even the most clear-headed president or prime minister. Other, less dramatic obstacles could emerge as well: Iran could ask for too high a price for its natural gas, or Islamabad could put an unrealistic tag on the transit.

Militancy along the proposed pipeline(s) is a source of worry for planners. The dangers for TAP would be in the continuing troubles in western Afghanistan, while the Iranian pipeline project is threatened by brewing discontent in Balochistan, through whose territory it would run for 750 km. The source of possible trouble are Baloch militias unhappy with the price their province is receiving for Sui gas. The militias have been setting off explosions along Pakistan's domestic pipeline network. Experts in Islamabad, however, discount the level of the threat to the Iranian line, which would have no connection to the source of Baloch discontent. They say that Pakistan as the transit state would have to provide ironclad guarantees against disruption, and that a dedicated patrolling force (perhaps the

A Nepal-Bangladesh win-win

by | **Rajendra Dahal**

Just a decade ago, the roof racks of passenger buses arriving in any one of Nepal's cities and towns would be piled high with firewood. All through the tracts of jungle along the highways, stacks of firewood would be on sale. However, no firewood is entering the cities of Nepal today. What is it that has marginalised firewood?

The answer is cooking fuel. Earlier, the only fuel was firewood. Then there was the shift to kerosene three decades ago, and after that, the rapid spread of liquid petroleum gas (LPG) canisters. Now, the red coloured LPG cylinders have become so popular that they are even carried on porter-back and mule-back to remote mountain villages.

Today, the forests of the mountains and jungles of the plains are regenerating in large parts, as is evident not only along the highways but also along the Kathmandu Valley rim. While Nepal's successful implementation of community forestry has been given the credit for this sudden greening, the role of reduced firewood demand around the population centers must be acknowledged. In the absence of alternative fuel, the efforts of local forest user groups alone would not have been enough.

Even though scientifically un-proven and a matter of conjecture, there is a common perception that a lot of the monsoon flooding and siltation, including in Bangladesh, is caused by the loss of tree cover in the central Himalaya. With kerosene and LPG already making such a difference to Nepal's forests, one can visualise the situation if natural gas were to arrive from Bangladesh by pipeline. Available for much cheaper than today's LPG canisters, natural gas would accelerate the shift away from firewood, which would further reduce deforestation.

The gasline to feed Nepal would reach out from the north Bengal town of Bogra, cross 40 kilometers of India's Chicken's Neck and arrive at the Nepali border town of Chandragadhi across the Mechi River. Chandragadhi could be the main depot, from where, pending a pipeline to Kathmandu and elsewhere, tanker trucks could distribute natural gas around the country.

Indian and American multinationals have been pressurising the Dhaka to export natural gas from its Sylhet reserves to India. The official reason cited for Dhaka's reluctance is its insecurity about the size of the national gas reserves. Because the volume of Nepali demand would be relatively low, Bangladesh should not be worried about excessive depletion of its reserves. Besides helping green the Nepali hillsides and – as the suggestion goes – help reduce flooding, Bangladesh would also be helping the population and economy of a fellow SAARC member.

The project could also be a harbinger to greater cooperation in the field of energy resources, with Nepal subsequently exporting its own hydropower to electricity-deficient Bangladesh. A gasline and electricity linkage between the two countries would also serve as an important element in the larger Southasian energy grid that Indian Energy Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, among others, is proposing.

The logic and benefit of a Nepal-Bangladesh link are obvious and if serious efforts are made by the two sides, sources say that India is unlikely to create obstacles in use of its territory for transit. The tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, Burma and India of January this year, approving, in principle, the export of Burmese gas to India via Bangladesh territory also augurs well for increased flexibility among all governments of the region when it comes to grids and pipelines. Additionally, if Bangladesh is unable to export its own gas to Nepal, it would now be possible for the latter to get access to the Burmese gas.

There will come a time when, with natural gas changing the energy scenario, Nepali villagers will stop entering the forests for firewood. The mountain forests will turn even more verdant. As Bangladesh exports gas to Nepal, Nepal will stop exporting silt to Bangladesh.

Pakistan Army on contract) and high technology remote monitoring would largely take care of the problem.

The greatest worry by far with regard to the future of the pipeline proposal, however, is not the Afghan or Baloch tribesmen but the Government of the United States of America. Currently engaged in a jousting match with Tehran with regard to the latter's nuclear ambitions, the Americans have made it clear that they eye the possible deal between the Southasians and Iran with distaste. At a press conference on 16 March during her first trip to New Delhi after taking office as Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice conceded that Southasia had growing energy needs. But then she added, "I think that our views concerning Iran are very well known by this time. We have communicated to the Indian government our concerns about the gas pipeline cooperation between Iran and India." The State Department once again growled, through a spokesman, when India's Aiyar visited Pakistan and Tehran in early June to push the gasline project.

The fact is that the sanctions America slapped against Iran in 1984 following the extended hostage crisis that brought down the Carter Administration are still in place and prohibit American companies from working with Tehran. In addition, there is the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, which provides penalties even for third-country companies that work with Iran. If they decided not to look the other way, the Americans are in a position to lean heavily on a very US-dependent Gen Pervez Musharraf and nudge the gasline proposal towards the cliff.

Rice's statement sent shock waves through government and industry in India and Pakistan, but the official Southasian response has been marked by a show of bravado, one that could well dissipate if the screws were to be tightened. Standing by Rice's side at the press conference, Indian Foreign Minister K Natwar Singh said, "We have no problems of any kind with Iran." Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar likes to emphasise the civilisational ties India has with Iran and the importance of Iranian gas for eradicating poverty in Southasia as a whole. Across in Pakistan, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has said that Pakistan will make a decision on the project based on the national interest and nothing else, while petroleum minister Jadoon says Pakistan needs natural gas and will look at all options of supply, including Iran.

It is possible, however, that the Americans will not go all the way in opposing the project. One New Delhi bureaucrat who is crossing his fingers likes to point out that Rice did not actually raise the matter of the Iranian pipeline in her bilateral talks with South Block, and what she said was only in response to a question from the press. Indeed, the US may not want to be seen as coming out against a project that would contribute directly to lasting India-Pakistan peace. Or a project that would help uplift the economy of all of Southasia, the most depressed populous region in the world. Would Washington DC be willing to put a spanner in the works of a project that practically has a halo around it?

How far will the Americans go? Mani Shankar Aiyar says we will not know until the project-related agreements are signed. On the whole, the expectation is that the US will compartmentalize its attitude and animosities towards Iran so that they do not affect the Iranian gasline to Southasia. As Siddiqi has written, "Were India and Pakistan to come to a satisfactory deal and to jointly confront US policy on a project which could change the face of South Asia, Washington would indeed have to take a long hard look." The Karachi commentator Fakir Ayazuddin is sitting back confident that the Indian umbrella will provide adequate protection to the gasline: "It is easier for the Americans to slap Pakistan than to anger India. The Indian lobby in Washington DC will work to ensure that America doesn't stop the pipeline."

Land of Southasia

On the basis of the rapprochement already achieved between Islamabad and New Delhi, Aiyar's successful trip to Islamabad and Tehran in early June, and the unlikelihood of a US filibuster, it is a near certainty that the Iranian gas pipeline will come into being, confounding critics and promoters alike. The gasline is exactly the interdependence-creating project needed to protect the bilateral relationship from being buffeted by accidents, aberrations and opportunistic ultra-nationalisms on both sides. The economic merits of the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline are clear to anyone who can prepare the most basic economic model and forecasts.

It bears remembering that Southasia is a region where the nuclear sabres were rattling just half a decade ago, with talk of atomic annihilation. There is no densely populated, poverty-stricken, fractious region in the world more in need of a confidence-building measure. It is a fair development that governments who were glaring at each other across the barbed wire frontier are today talking of building an umbilical gasline which would tie their two economies together.

For Toufiq Siddiqi of the Balusa Group, the argument for the project is simple: "The demand for natural gas is expected to almost double in India and Pakistan over the next decade. This cannot be met through domestic production. The two countries would need to import from neighbouring regions. It is in the interest of India and Pakistan to import natural gas via a common pipeline."

When simple arguments win the day, we will have turned the leaf to the future. The land of Southasia is poised at the start of a new beginning; this much one can say without being accused of romanticism.

NEW MEDIA TRAINING WORKSHOP

August 15-19, 2005, Kathmandu

New media technologies are rapidly changing the face of journalism, changing traditional professional paradigms of news making and news dissemination. The online is no longer seen as a competitive medium or even as an adjunct to the mainstream but a complimentary one. The World Wide Web is the site where print and broadcast converge and open up innumerable possibilities- which are both affordable as well as implementable.

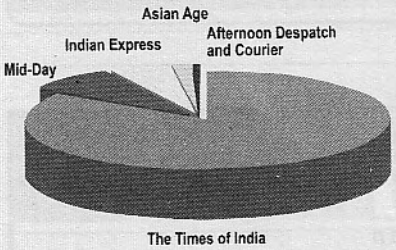
Panos South Asia (PSA) <www.panossouthasia.org> is organising a 5-day South Asian regional 'Online Journalism and Web Publishing Training Workshop' for media practitioners in South Asia, from **15 -19 August, 2005 at its Media Centre in Kathmandu, Nepal.** This training workshop has been devised to provide an understanding of new media formats for text, audio, and video materials. The focus will be on the general issues of online publishing and distribution, such as copyright and newly emerging roles in the field of online journalism. The programme will demystify the technologies and make them accessible. On the practical side, participants will learn how to develop web multimedia content, beginning with text-based material, then moving onto integration of audio and video material. The outcome of the training will be a full-fledged mock multimedia portal, with interactive features.

Publishers, editors and journalists from print and broadcast media from South Asian countries may apply by **15 July 2005 to Kishor Pradhan by e-mail at kishor@panossouthasia.org.** PSA will cover all related costs of participation, including travel, for selected participants from the region. Applications should contain a resume and a 300 word piece stating how the workshop will enable you or your organization to use new media technologies for effectively. **PSA will respond only to selected applicants by 27 July, 2005.**

Media outbreak

by | **Akash Banerjee**

Call it the back to basics revolution if you will, but in this so-called age of the internet and cable television, India is witnessing a strange phenomenon. Defying international trends, the Indian newspaper industry is actually witnessing a healthy growth rate. Slow penetration and the cost factor have ensured that electronic media continue to play second fiddle to print. With industry eager to tap into the booming consumer market through print advertisements, Indian newspapers are engaged in a fierce contest to grab a part of the advertising pie. The epicentre of this raging media battle is presently the financial and entertainment capital of Bombay.



Bombay's ad pie

The Times of India (TOI) has enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the city, with daily sales of more than half a million copies. Distant runner-up *Mid-Day*, an afternoon tabloid, manages a circulation figure of one-third of that. Given that it was the only major Indian metro that lacked a "second newspaper culture," and given the large influx of English-reading migrants into the city, Bombay was ideally placed for a media outbreak.

The biggest challenge to the dominance of the *TOI* will come from the soon to be launched *Daily News and Analysis*, or *DNA*. The unusually named daily is backed by established companies in print and television like *Dainik Bhaskar* and Zee. *DNA* has a pre-launch kitty of INR 600 million and a war chest of INR 6 billion to combat the *Times* for the next four to five years. The paper's confidence seems to come from the fact that it is headed by former *Times* marketing chief Pradeep Guha, widely acknowledged as having scripted that paper's phenomenal marketing success across India. Guha now aims to unseat his old employer from its cozy Bombay nest.

Still a month and a half from its launch, *DNA* has already taken over the cityscape with a high intensity pre-launch campaign that includes over 500 billboards. "It is for the first time that the *Times* is facing the heat," says *DNA* marketing director Suresh Balakrishnan. But *TOI*, veteran of many a battle, is not taking the challenge lying down. It recently launched *Mumbai Mirror*, a tabloid aimed at deflecting competition and moving ad rates south, to hurt upstarts like *DNA*.

Actually, *DNA* is just one of the many newspapers seeking to storm the Times citadel. Its main competitor elsewhere in India, *Hindustan Times (HT)* launches its Bombay edition on the first of July. With *TOI* having seriously eroded *HT's* domination in Delhi of late, the latter now intends to return the favour in Bombay. *The Indian Express*, too, plans a massive INR 2.5 billion infusion into its Bombay operations, which includes an upgrade of its marketing department. Finally, *The Telegraph* of Calcutta has plans to enter Bombay.

It is a battle of epic proportions that will be played out over the next few months in Bombay as half a dozen newspapers woo readers and capture parts of the INR 815 crore annual print ad pie.

This impending war, of course, spells goods news for the English newspaper reader. From a daily diet of a single newspaper, he will now graduate to having an entire buffet to choose from. Prices too will fall – from the four rupees that a *Times of India* copy costs today, to one or two rupees, which is the price being promised by new players. As for journalists, Bombay has sucked up every available editor, reporter, sub-editor and sub-reporter. For a profession in which salaries have always been much below those in the services industry, it's a sudden take-off. On average, salaries have increased 30 to 40 percent, and some papers are even doubling pay packages to retain employees.

As for who will win this media war of Bombay, some experts believe that there might be no big losers at all. *TOI's* efforts to overtake *HT* in Delhi resulted in the entire market growing between 1996 and 2004, and the same could happen in Mumbai. Girish Agarwal, director of *Dainik Bhaskar*, believes that there is great scope for expansion. "Some seven lakh copies of English newspapers are sold in Mumbai, less than half of Delhi's 15 lakh. Obviously the potential is huge," he says. Says *DNA's* Guha, "There is a market, there are advertisers ready to explore new avenues, and there are readers." He is confident that his paper will help expand the pie and not only eat into the existing one.

Mid-Day's chief financial officer Manajit Ghosal is understandably not ga-ga over the new entrants' prospects. He believes that they will have to rack up circulations of at least two hundred thousand copies a year to gain a foothold in Bombay, and this may not be an easy task for all. For the moment though, there is an electric air of anticipation in Bombay as readers look forward to greater choice, better quality and cheaper rates.

VACANCY ANNOUNCEMENT

ActionAid is an international social development organization with a mission to work with poor and excluded people to eradicate poverty and injustice.

We have been evolving and learning from our experience in over 40 countries across Asia, Africa, Americas and Europe since 1972. Our work focuses on equity, dignity and rights of poor and marginalized people and communities on the core themes of Women's Rights, Education, Food Rights, Human Security in Conflict and Emergencies, HIV/Aids and Governance. In Asia we have offices in India, Nepal, China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia and programmes presence in Laos and Myanmar. Our Asia regional office is located in Bangkok.

We are presently seeking competent and committed persons for the roles of Asia Communications Coordinator and Asia Women's Rights Coordinator to support and coordinate our work in the given areas in the Asia region.

Asia Communications Coordinator

The Asia Communications Coordinator will provide advice, resources and capacity building support; facilitate links between communications staff across the organization and with the external media. She/He will have responsibility for publications development; communications and media relations, developing a media strategy to strengthen our campaign work along with the concerned persons and provide media related training when required.

The desired person will have a working experience of 10 years in the media and related fields at a senior level both in Asia and internationally, hands on knowledge and insight on development communications, all aspects of organizational communications and running successful campaigns. Any experience of having worked on the core six thematic issues mentioned above will be an advantage. She/He will also posses a professional qualification in journalism.

Closing date for receiving applications is 7th July 2005

Asia Women's Rights Coordinator

The selected person will support the delivery of ActionAid International's Women's Rights goals from the region by leading, coordinating and supporting regional women's rights policy advocacy and campaign work, linking with women's movements, feminist organizations and other social justice networks and movements against poverty and gender inequality. She/ He will also assume specific responsibility for linking the governance and the women's rights thematic teams.

The person we seek will have a minimum of 5 years working experience in a similar post at a senior level along with appropriate educational and professional qualification. She/He will be a women's rights activist and political strategist with excellent analytical and writing skills with updated and in-depth knowledge of current debates and thinking along with a successful track record of effective policy and campaign work in the field of women's rights and development. She/ He will have strong relationships with women's movements, civil society and peoples' movements, networks and alliances for the promotion and protection of the rights of women and girls.

Closing date for receiving applications is 12th July 2005

General Notes

We are interested in self-motivated persons able to work independently across countries and regions and committed to working on issues of poverty and rights. They should have excellent interpersonal, networking and communication skills and willingness to travel (30% to 50 %) within the framework of their responsibilities in Asia and globally. Fluency in English (written and spoken) is essential and knowledge of Asian languages spoken in the countries where ActionAid works would be an asset. An experience and sensitivity in working in multicultural environments and knowledge of politics, economic situation and social processes of the region and skills in facilitation and influencing are highly desirable.

The post is offered for two to three years initially on international terms and conditions and will be located in any of Action Aid's country programmes in Asia.

Please email your application with your recent CV and names of two referees to **job@actionaidasia.org** by the dates mentioned above indicating the job title in the subject of your email application. We will be able to respond to the shortlisted candidates only. More information is available on **www.actionaid.org/asia**

The principle of the thing: Nepal's king and the rule of law

Nepal's 1990 Constitution, wounded by the royal action of 1 February, must be revived and Parliament restored. The country must be saved from both the constitutional waywardness of a Pakistan and the legislative faint-heartedness of a United States of America.

by | **Aziz Huq**

On 1 February 2005, Nepal's King Gyanendra dismissed the government led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. He justified this decision by invoking Deuba's failure to hold elections and his inability to tackle a Maoist uprising nearing its tenth anniversary. Even as the king's televised announcement came to a close, security forces seized and imprisoned leaders of the Deuba government, key political party figures and human-rights activists. The king subsequently constituted a solidly royalist ten-member Council of Ministers under his own chairmanship and imposed a state of emergency. Sweeping restrictions on the press followed, with army officers appearing in Kathmandu's editorial rooms to vet copy. In addition to the right to free expression and publication, rights to peaceable assembly, information and privacy and the right against arbitrary detention were suspended.

The state of emergency was formally lifted on 29 April. Nevertheless, notable political leaders and human-rights activists remain under arrest, decrees curbing freedom of the press are still in place, and peaceful political protest remains disallowed. Some activists are still in exile, leery of returning to Kathmandu. Most importantly, significant changes have been brought about in the structure of government and there is large-scale use of ordinances to move matters forward in the absence of Parliament and an elected government. The king's 29 April announcement, in short, has had no internal effect, suggesting that it was intended solely for international consumption, as part of an effort to mend the palace's credentials. For all practical purposes, then, Nepal remains in the state of emergency announced on 1 February. Any serious discussion of political possibilities for Nepal's short-term future, therefore, must treat the state of emergency as de facto in force.

The emergency has done greatest damage in the country-side. Relative quiet in Kathmandu contrasts with an ominous silence from outside the valley. There, the conflict between the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and the Maoist insurgency has intensified. Without the restraints imposed by an active human rights community and an alert press - as both sectors remain shackled and unable to fulfill their functions - the combatants now fight free of compunction. In the meantime, the government has been culpable of supporting lynch mobs that carry out attacks on alleged Maoists, reminding one of the move to create village militias a year ago, which was thought to have been abandoned after the public outcry against it. The Maoists continue to inflict brutal and sadistic punishments on those who refuse to acquiesce to their control, and have of late also been guilty of attacks on public transport that have killed scores.

It is thus Nepal's rural populace that suffers the direct consequences of a state of emergency and its chilling effect on speech: a deepening militarization of a conflict that is unlikely to be settled by arms alone.

The king's imposition of a state of emergency, with and then without a formal imprimatur, lacks constitutional sanction. It marks a rupturing of an already-frayed constitutional order. Nepal's 1990 Constitution does not envisage the imposition of a state of emergency without parliamentary approval. King Gyanendra did precisely that on 1 February. Article 115, which outlines the procedure for imposing emergencies, was violated in three key respects. First, Article 115 requires post hoc ratification by the House of Representatives. No Parliament has met since the May 2002 dissolution of the House of Representatives, a move Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba certainly made with the royal palace's blessing. Second, the right to habeas corpus, which is constitutionally guaranteed even in times of emergency, has been continuously violated. Third, changes in fundamental structures of government, and the creation of a Council of Ministers chaired by the king himself, are neither anticipated nor permitted. Article 115 thus cannot justify the king's 1 February decision.

The putative authority for the king's acts instead rests on a lone ambiguous phrase in Article 127 of the 1990 Constitution. This allows the king to issue necessary orders to remove "any difficulty" arising in implementation of the Constitution. Article 127, however, stipulates that any such order be "laid before" Parliament. Evidently, there has been no such ratification. Nor can the coup be said to implement the Constitution. The king has denied a gamut of basic rights and radically restructured political authority outside the Constitution's bounds. Such changes run starkly against the letter and spirit of the document he claims to defend.

The state of emergency is merely the culmination of growing contradictions between Nepal's Parliament and the palace since the adoption of 1990 Constitution. That document reconciled only uneasily a long history of royal power with the new democracy. Throughout the 1990s, the palace pushed against democratic control, particularly over the RNA and the appointments of officials to key posts. Since October 2002, when King Gyanendra dismissed the elected government led by Prime Minister Deuba by invoking Article 127, the palace had increasingly asserted power with barely any pretense of democracy, the monarch appointing and dismissing three prime ministers in quick succession. The royal takeover, hence, signals not a new direction in Nepali politics but the entrenchment of an extra-constitutional position. Far from a radical shift, the current state of undeclared emergency is merely the visible and manifest sign of a longstanding desire on the part of King Gyanendra to wield power as he sees fit. The questions presented by the continuing state of constitutional crisis revolve around how deeply the king intends to transform Nepal's political infrastructure, and whether he will allow any vestige of democracy to remain.

Coups and metastasis

A constitution is a set of ground rules binding both elected and unelected branches of government. The document embodies a manifest precommitment by all future governments to a set of higher governing principles and basic rights. It bars transitory majorities and factions from entrenching themselves. It is also a promissory note to all citizens, especially members of vulnerable communities, that their fundamental rights will be respected.

A state of emergency, jus-tified on grounds of a threat to constitutional principles, is a mecha-nism that allows tem-porary circumvention of such commitments. When ordinary processes of government are too cumbersome to respond to a threat such as an uprising with sufficient alacrity, a state of emergency facilitates expeditious response. The declaration of a state of emergency thus should be conservative in the best sense of the word: it is a vehicle to safeguard the elementary lineaments of the constitutional order. The ancient Roman constitution, for example, allowed the Roman Senate to appoint a dictator for up to six months. The dictator could authorize a suspension of rights and legal process in order to deal with a threat of invasion or insurrection. According to one account, the measure of dictatorship was used 95 times over 300 years, but without destabilizing the senatorial model of governance.

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The risk inherent in states of emergency is that, rather than being used to conservative ends, they become means for changing the political order. Hard-won liberties may be eroded. Checks on executive power may slip into oblivion. Minorities may be stigmatized and harmed. New executive powers may be authorized, and a transient leader may entrench himself in the seat of power. The successful Roman model contained important internal restrictions against this risk. There was a separation between the body that imposed the emergency (the Senate), and the person who exercised emergency powers (the dictator). Like Cincinnatus called from his plow, the dictator was archetypically a person of impeccable public reputation with no aspiration to future public office. The Roman model also provided a framework that made the trajectory of an emergency predictable: The constitutional fabric specified in advance the powers of the dictator, the limits of these powers, and how long the emergency would last.

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The present situation in Nepal lies at quite another pole. Here, it is the king who has imposed the state of emergency (and continued with it, even if not in nomenclature) and, as the chairman of the Council of Ministers, wields the powers thereby created. Unlike the Roman Cincinnatus, the king is not without aspirations to continued power, for himself and for his family. In fact, the 1 February royal takeover seems to have been carried out in order to continue on the throne with enhanced authority. The incentive to amend the structures of government is not lacking either. Indeed, subsequent actions by the king, such as the creation, with dubious intention, of a Royal Commission on Corruption Control, and a slew of measures taken under the umbrella of ordinances, in the absence of a law-making Parliament, indicate a palace bent on changing the form of Nepali government.

The present state of de facto emergency, then, is open to transf-ormative, as well as conservative, ends. The king, broadly speaking, has two ways of achieving structural change in the present context while retaining a notional democratic framework. These options are illustrated by the experience of Pakistan and the United States. In Pakistan, change has been imposed externally on constitutions by means of army coups and judicial ratification. The United States has suffered from a creeping metastasis of emergency powers, initially contained within narrow legislation. Pakistan's experience shows how an arrangement introduced by a coup can be putatively transformed into a 'legitimate' government. The United States' history shows that while a legislature is an essential bulwark against executive over-reach, it is a requirement that a legislature be jealous of its prerogatives and actively resist presidential domination. In both cases, the consolidation of power in the executive branch has meant the weakening of the legislature and the courts. Ultimately, the greatest losers have been the people.

Pakistani revolutionary legality

On four occasions during its half century-long history, Pakistan's efforts towards democracy have been stymied by the suspension of elected democratic bodies. In 1954, Governor General Ghulam Muhammad dissolved the Constituent Assembly even while it was drafting the nation's first constitution. This constitution, approved in 1956, lasted only two years: on the morning of 8 October 1958, General Ayub Khan, abetted by President Iskander Mirza, staged another coup. Ayub's successor, General Yahya Khan, attempted the creation of a façade of democracy and held national elections in 1970. His refusal to recognise the electoral triumph of East Pakistan's Awami League led directly to the horrors of the 1971 war.

Shamed into retreat after the debacle, the military remained in the barracks during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's seven years in office. On the night of 4 July 1977, however, Gen Zia-ul Haq seized the reins of power for the army yet again. The dictator's mysterious death in a plane crash opened a window to another rough decade of fractious democracy, with the Muslim League and the People's Party now in presidential robes and now in defendants' shackles as they bounced between elected office and the criminal dock, where both parties' leaders faced corruption charges. This democratic interlude ended in October 1999, when Gen Pervez Musharraf removed Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif.

Time and again, emergency rule has been legitimised and consolidated through judicial ratification of extra-constitutional action, followed by constitutional amendment. Pakistan's existing organs of democracy have thus participated in the creation of ruptures in the rule of law. The pattern was set during the conflict between the Constituent Assembly and Governor General Mohammad in the 1950s. Confronted with the Assembly's attempt to strip him of the power to dismiss ministers, the Governor General dissolved the Assembly on 25 October 1954 and declared an emergency. The Sindh High Court upheld a challenge to the closure of the Assembly, but Pakistan's Supreme Court, led by a close ally of the Governor General, Chief Justice Muhammad Munir, subsequently rejected that challenge. The Court first curbed dramatically the Constituent Assembly's powers and then invented from whole cloth the legal doctrine of 'state necessity.' This unprecedented doctrine amounted to a rupture in the constitutional fabric that allowed the executive to take whatever extra-constitutional action it saw fit. The Supreme Court's ruling created an open-ended escape hatch for impatient executives.

To justify Ayub's coup, Chief Justice Munir conjured the doctrine of 'revolutionary legality'. Under the doctrine, courts must endorse a coup that "satisfies the test of efficacy and becomes a basic law-creating fact." Such a formulation clearly implied that might was right. Although 'state necessity' and 'revolutionary legality' had a similar effect in practice, the former at least preserved the fiction that the constitution remained in existence. By contrast, the new doctrine allowed the executive to bypass the constitutional order, giving rise to questions about whether a constitution was worthwhile in the first place. Only after Yahya's fall from grace, subsequent to the 1971 war, did the Supreme Court back away from these shameful doctrines for a period of time.

State necessity, however, was invoked again to vindicate the usurpations by both General Zia and General Musharraf.

In its decisions ratifying Zia's and Musharraf's coups, the Supreme Court took the surprising additional step of allowing the military ruler not only to pass necessary laws, but also to make constitutional amendments. Neither Zia nor Musharraf was shy about exercising this extraordinary authority. For example, Musharraf's 12 August 2002 Legal Framework Order purported to make changes to 29 articles of the 1973 Constitution. While mandating changes to political parties' rights and the structure of the legislature, the Legal Framework Order also stated: "If there is any necessity for any further amendment of the Constitution or any difficulty arises in giving effect to any of the provisions of this Order, the Chief Executive may make such provisions and pass or promulgate such orders for amending the Constitution or for removing any difficulty as he may deem fit." The parallel to Article 127 of Nepal's 1990 Constitution, at least as interpreted by the Narayanhiti Royal Palace in Kathmandu, is clear.

Pakistan's Supreme Court made token efforts to limit the period of emergency rule by generals Zia and Musharraf. In 1977, the Court invoked and relied on Zia's promise that elections would be held as soon as possible. But no polls were held until February 1985, and the court did nothing in the interim to hold Zia to his word. The Supreme Court has been similarly ineffective in restraining Musharraf. Ratifying the October 1999 coup, the court cautioned Musharraf that he had only three years before he would be required to hold general elections. Yet, in April 2002, the general announced a referendum on whether he could hold the office of President for five years. The court rejected legal challenges to the referendum, even though it violated the spirit, if not the letter, of its own ratification of the October 1999 coup.

Pakistan and Nepal have telling similarities that make the Pakistani experience difficult to ignore for those concerned about Nepal's future as a democratic state. First, as in Nepal where king has justified his coup as a necessity in order to tackle the raging Maobadi rebellion, interruptions of democracy in Pakistan are justified in terms of security, stability, and the national interest. Internal unrest, in Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province, and an external enemy in the form of India loom large in the Pakistani army's public justifications for the abrogation of democracy. Indeed, the Pakistani Army, through quiet support for sectarian and jihadi groups, has created a situation of simmering, low-level crisis, in which some threat is always available as justification for unilateral, anti-democratic action.

In Nepal, rather than the RNA, it has been the palace that is bent on highlighting and exaggerating the threats to the nation state in order to justify King Gyanendra's intervention in democratic politics. Furthermore, there have been unconfirmed allegations that Kathmandu's palace nurtured the infant Maoist rebellion, perceptively recognizing a lever to destabilize the 1990 democratic dispensation. Whether or not these rumors are true, they do provide some insight into the dynamics of recent Nepali politics: the palace has found in the Maoists an ideal foil for its anti-democratic aspirations. Even as the Maoist threat was allowed to escalate out of all manageable proportion, the palace used the rebels successfully to augment its own power considerably.

Second, the Pakistani army has extended its influence by seizing control of commercial activities and resources. The army has a well-documented, substantial stake in the nation's economy through ownership of large amounts of prime real estate and commercial enterprises and services. The RNA is a novice in this field. It has a welfare fund from UN peacekeeping earnings and runs a few commercial enterprises such as petrol pumps, but the attractions of the Pakistani model are clear. In 2004, it announced its intention to open a military bank. It also appears that the RNA is keen to enter the development sphere, which would be a further dangerous precedent. The deeper the RNA's stake in commerce and development, the harder Nepal's transition back to accountable democracy will be.

Third, the absence of democratic institutions in Pakistan has allo-wed a dramatic shift of political power towards the army. In Nepal, such a shift has already taken place in the districts, where the captain, major or colonel is the de facto ruler whose writ runs through the hierarchy in the civilian administration, the police force and government services. The politicians are thus already far sidelined, and if the trend continues, a shift of overt authority from the palace to the barracks cannot be ruled out. For the first time ever, the RNA is deployed countrywide and enjoys a semi-administrative status. At some point, the RNA may find it more effective to exercise direct rule, relegating the king to a merely symbolic role – so many formerly unthinkable departures have taken place in Nepal in the last couple of years that this cannot be ruled out. Advocates for democracy ought to emphasise this possibility in their campaign for the restoration of democratic institutions, including the Parliament and the office of prime minister. The fact is that without a prime minister in place, the king is far more vulnerable to an army putsch and the present incumbent may be unwise to believe that historical loyalties to the dynasty will be enough to keep military ambitions at bay.

Finally, Pakistan's military rulers have relied on crucial external support in their efforts to buy off, eliminate or marginalize opposition. Zia's coup preceded the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which made Pakistan an invaluable United States ally

and conduit for arms. Afghanistan, like Kashmir, also provided a forum and a release for radical groups that otherwise might have disrupted the state. Two years into Musharraf's troubled regime, the United States again sought Pakistan's aid in Afghanistan following the events of 11 September 2001. American aid to Pakistan has not been limited to the military sector. Pakistan has also benefited from favourable trade facilities from the United States. Multilateral institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank, have been notably more generous toward Pakistan since its re-energized alliance with the United States. External relations, in short, have been an important prop against the return to democracy in Pakistan.

In Kathmandu, King Gyan-endra's regime is deeply reliant on external aid for the whole spectrum of state activity, from budgetary support to military assistance and development activity. Despite broadly hostile international reactions to the 1 February coup, the international community's support for the democracy movement cannot be taken for granted. The fact is that Pakistan has shown open support and China would seem to be willing to go along with the royal dispensation. Western democracies, for their part, have been ambivalent, repeatedly asking the opposition political parties to believe in the king's words, and in recent months, the United States ambassador in Kathmandu has been making supportive noises of February's royal move. While the Indian foreign office has indicated its distaste for the coup, a combination of players from the Indian military to erstwhile Indian royalty seem to want to support the king, either due to an exaggerated fear of a Maoist victory or to traditional sympathies towards a remaining Southasian monarchy. As time passes, it seems likely that strategic and geopolitical necessities will shore up international support for the palace, especially in the medium term.

Internal crisis, a powerful military and external support helped set the stage for overt constitutional manipulation in Pakistan. All these elements exist today in Nepal as well

In summary, internal crisis, a powerful military and external support helped set the stage for overt constitutional manipulation in Pakistan. All these elements exist today in Nepal as well. Strikingly, manipulation by the army in Pakistan was accomplished with the open acquiescence of the courts, which fashioned constitutional loopholes to allow fundamental transformation of the state. The Nepali judiciary has never been a bright spot in the nation's governance, and has singularly failed to enforce limits on the emergency powers granted by Article 115. A recent address by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Nepal, given to a gathering of fellow judges in Australia, does not provide much reassurance. The history of Pakistan's weak constitutionalism must be seen as a warning bell for the future of democracy in Nepal.

Legislative delegation and silence

Body blows to the constitutional framework achieved by coups are not the only means by which a state of emergency can be exploited. The rule of law can almost as easily be eroded from within. Without changing the constitutional framework, legislation can open fissures through which unchecked executive power can be projected. King Gyanendra has already shown some inclination to this mode of change. New, post-coup laws, for instance, include an anti-corruption ordinance clearly targeted at independent-minded politicians. An ordinance has also been proposed that would impose further restrictions on the press, and sleight of hand can be seen in the reconstitution of the National Human Rights Commission and in the creation of new administrative positions throughout the country. Although the experience of the United States does not have immediate parallels with the present situation in Nepal, it does illustrate some of the risks inherent in legislative acquiescence to emergency powers.

The United States has the world's oldest written constitution with an exquisitely wrought system of checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. Since 1791, it has contained a Bill of Rights that protects freedom of speech, religious liberties, and various rights against governmental interference in the lives of the citizenry. Since February 1803, the Supreme Court of the United States has asserted, largely undisputed, the right to enforce those constitutional limits against the executive as well as the legislature through judicial review. The US Constitution grants no emergency powers. The sole provision applicable in times of "Rebellion or Invasion," with the sanction of Congress, envisages the unavailability of habeas corpus writs, which are used to challenge detention. Against the backdrop of such a relatively successful constitutional order, however, the past fifty years have witnessed a surprising corrosion of checks on executive power, sanctioned from within by the Congress.

This past century's international conflicts brought dramatic shifts in the traditional balance of power between the three branches of the United States government. Faced with threats posed by Japan, Germany and later the Soviet bloc, the American executive branch sought broader powers, particularly in the arena of foreign affairs. In 1936, the Supreme Court commented that the President was "the sole organ of foreign affairs." This comment, which gets only scant traction from the text of the Constitution, proved a warrant for more

than 50 years of consolidation of presidential power and an excuse for legislative deference. Indeed, the extraordinary claims of plenary executive authority made after the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington DC to ignore the Geneva Convention, and to violate well-established federal and international law on torture, flow directly from that judicial comment. These aggressive assertions of presidential power, which openly flout elementary norms of human rights, are antithetical to the structure and purpose of the US Constitution. They are tenable only because of continuous presidential over-reach in the area of foreign affairs after World War II.

Since 1950, the US Congress has routinely passed laws on domestic policy matters that have been enforced by the executive in a predictable, public manner. Indeed, most public attention has focused on the mundane details of such legislation and the concomitant executive execution. Parallel to this steady, boring diet of law-making, however, Congress has enacted a series of acts granting the president sweeping emergency powers. Largely out of public sight, the executive has thus accrued an alarming body of emergency powers, mostly for use in the foreign affairs realm.

The trend began after World War II. In April 1950, the president's National Security Council issued a comprehensive statement of military and political strategy called Paper 68. This envisaged "an indefinite period of tension and danger" with the Soviet Union. Eight months later, President Harry Truman endorsed the analysis contained in Paper 68 and declared a state of emergency in response to the escalating confrontation in Korea. That national emergency remained in place for almost twenty-five years. Thus, even as the normal legislative process carried on, a continuous emergency, largely unnoticed by either Congress or the public, enabled a variety of extraordinary presidential actions. This included President John F Kennedy's embargo against Cuba in 1962.

Although emergency powers mostly concerned matters of foreign affairs, President Richard M Nixon also invoked these powers during a postal service strike and in a balance of payments crisis in the early 1970s. Foreign affairs matters also impinged directly on domestic civil rights. For example, the 1950 Internal Security Act authorised a person's detention if the government had "reasonable ground" to believe he "probably" would commit or conspire to commit acts of espionage or sabotage. Such powers anticipated by half a century the mass detentions of Muslims and Southasians in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks.

Legislative states of emergency thus weakened the constitutional framework of law-making by joint action of the Congress and the President. They allowed the executive instead to act without direct congressional sanction. Rather than opposing this dramatic and unprecedented rise of executive power, the legislature continued through the 1970s to enact statutes that delegated greater and greater authority to the executive. By the 70s, Professor Jules Lobel of the University of Pittsburgh had counted 470 acts of Congress authorizing emergency powers; none of the emergencies declared under these acts had been terminated before 1976.

Efforts in the same decade to curtail presidential power, such as the 1973 War Powers Resolution and the 1976 National Emergencies Act, came too late and were too weak. Thus, the provision of the War Powers Resolution that required the President to report the deployment of troops after 60 days has been flouted in the case of Southeast Asia, Iran, Lebanon, several Central American states, Grenada, Libya, and the Persian Gulf. Congress simply failed to enforce its own will and this acquiescence further weakened its authority. The National Emergencies Act terminated all extant emergencies, but did nothing to organise the massive grants of authority that the executive had accumulated. Despite the Act, the president still uses emergency powers regularly to block foreign assets and to bar travel of US citizens to certain countries. Consultation and reporting procedures in the Act regarding the use of emergency powers have been largely diluted or ignored: Congress simply fails to meet to consider whether an emergency declaration should continue in force. Indeed, the US Constitution is functioning and vigorous. Yet, it also has 'law-free zones' within the framework of governing laws. These anomalies in the constitutional order are the fruit of an internal erosion of the rule of law, aided by 50 years of legislative delegation and silence.

What is the lesson of the United States experience as far as Nepal is concerned? As the major political parties have recently recognised, the restoration of the Third Parliament, dissolved in May 2002, is a vital starting point for recreation of democratic rule in Nepal. Without a sitting House of Representatives, scant progress towards democracy is possible. Nevertheless, restoration of legislative supremacy is no all-encompassing panacea. A legislature subservient to the palace, or merely fearful for its own physical safety, is no check against the dangers of the state of emergency. The weakness of successive governments and prime ministers since the restoration of democracy in 1990 when it came to challenging the palace in several spheres must also be seen as the failure of the Nepali Parliament and parliamentarians. Much of this inability to stand up to the palace may have to do with internal wrangling within and between parties, but surely a lot also has to do with an unwillingness to confront the king.

A restored parliament must have the ability to reject any pressures from the palace; without such freedom, the state of emergency could be continued in another form, silent and insidious. Moreover, legislators must understand the value and purpose of the rule of law. Restoration of parliament must be accompanied by discussions of how civil and political rights can be protected. International pressure, particularly monitoring by the **UN**, may be critical in this regard. In short, advocates for Nepali democracy must attend as much to the conditions under which democratic institutions are restored as to the fact of restoration itself. The weakening of Congress and the uninterrupted growth in the powers of the presidency in the United States serves as a warning of the dangers that lie ahead.

The Location of sovereignty

In taking power on 1 February without constitutional warrant, King Gyanendra purported to accept and to protect the normal constitutional order, while at the same time standing outside and violating that order. That the king saw a need to abrogate parts of the 1990 Constitution shows that he recognizes the continuing existence of that legal regime. But no constitutional or legislative rule allows him to stand outside the rules or to change them. The king thus sought to benefit from being seen as the protector of the Constitution, while ignoring and discarding its most fundamental elements. Even though the formal state of emergency has ended, this tension between the norms observed in practice and the norms celebrated in theory persists.

The king's position is not merely paradoxical and hypocritical: it is typical of rulers who are attempting to seize control in the face of a persisting constitutional order. In the formulation of the German legal theorist Carl Schmitt, "Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception." The 'great disorder' of the Maoist revolt has enabled the palace to carve out a new exception, and thereby to create the 'violent order' of a new, royal constitutional dispensation. The royal takeover was and is a gateway, then, to a new constitutional order. The palace can either refashion that order in its totality, as Pakistan's generals have done, or erode it quietly from within, as has been happening in the United States. The palace is most likely to seek a way to consolidate a patina of rule of law while maintaining the seething disorder of emergency within. After all, democracy, even if only skin deep, is the sine qua non of legitimacy in the post-Cold War world and of George W Bush's second term in office.

This risk is also an opportunity. Nepal's political parties have floundered during the years of democracy under the weight of corruption and inept leadership. Judicial independence remains only an aspiration. The present crisis demands a blostering of the rule of law, as embodied in the 1990 Constitution, against frontal assault of the kind seen in Pakistan. But it also requires the slower, more assiduous ground-work of building truly democratic parties, an engaged civil society, and accountable institutions. It is with these structural changes that the quiet erosion of the legislature's powers that is so starkly visible in the American experience, can be prevented in Nepal. The international community has the job of supporting the citizens of Nepal in this process of transformation.

Advocates for democracy must take advantage of the Kathmandu palace's notional commitment to democratic rule, and continue to insist on the restoration of Parliament and other democratic institutions, such as local government in villages and districts, whose establishment was an example of Nepal's successful parliamentary exercise between 1990 and 2002. Advocates are also aided by the fact that King Gyanendra's arguments in favour of direct rule are exceptionally weak, and fundamentally in tension with the 1990 Constitution. Nor does the king have strategic considerations on his side: the seizure of all executive power has opened him up to tremendous public criticism. As the RNA increases it power, there may come a time when some officers decide that he is superfluous. While an all-out military coup against the monarch may not be feasible in the immediate term, a very unstable situation could be created with a dissatisfied military amidst the vulnerable geopolitical situation of Nepal, over-shadowed by an all-powerful and nervous India. Looking beyond the medium term, it would seem to be in the palace's narrow interest to restore democratic institutions as a counterweight to all the other forces it may have unleashed on 1 February.

Yet it is not enough to insist on the formal institutions of democracy alone, although they are an essential part of the way ahead. Once in place, a legislature must not only function, but its members must be free of coercion and influence, must be able to shift power back from unelected institutions to representative bodies as envisaged by the Constitution, and must remain committed to achieving that goal. The challenge facing Nepal involves the creation of a culture of democracy. Only once this culture is embedded in functioning and representative institutions will Nepal start back on the trek towards the democratic self-government envisaged in the 1990 Constitution but so long delayed.

A constitutional order in Thimphu

by | **Prashant Jha**

For a country emerging from protectorate status during colonial times, and struggling to emerge from under the shadow of India in the modern era, what Bhutan had lacked was a constitution that set its polity under the rule of law, rather than the benevolence of its ruler. While the current Druk gyalpo, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, is widely acknowledged as a modernizing force, the lack of codification of the very institution of state has always made Bhutan vulnerable to the vagaries of internal and external evolution.

The release of a draft constitution on 26 March 2005 therefore marks an important political milestone. The document, prepared by a 39-member committee over the past three years, is to be discussed in the Tshongdu (National Assembly), in local bodies, and among common citizens, before being put up for approval in a referendum. The concise constitution envisages a "democratic constitutional monarchy" in Bhutan. Declaring Bhutan to be a sovereign kingdom with sovereign power vested in the people, the draft delineates the role of monarchy, stipulates fundamental rights and duties, provides for a two-party parliamentary system and outlines provisions concerning citizenship.

The constitution has been drafted at the initiative of King Jigme, who has emphasised that with the country enjoying peace, stability and security, this this was the best time for transition to a democracy. The constitutional initiative also comes at a time when forces of modernisation are making swift inroads in Bhutanese society. While the draft constitution seeks to establish a liberal political order in Bhutan, there is scepticism about provisions that do not conform to democratic norms. Furthermore, the manner in which the constitution will be implemented under Bhutanese social conditions, as well as how it will be interpreted and upheld by the Supreme Court, are matters of concern.

A country battered by accusations of feudocratic rule and a depopulation exercise sees the release of a draft constitution as an opportunity to build a future as a 'modern' nation-state.

Towards a new polity

Some commentators see the constitution as the logical culmination of the process of devolution of power underway in Bhutan, initiated with the formation of the dzongkhag (district) development committees and the gewog (village) development committees and with the transfer of decision-making powers for five-year development plans to the local level. Officially, the king transferred his executive powers to the Cabinet in 1998. "There is a genuine wish to increase the levels of political participation among the more progressive quarters of the elite," says Michael Hutt, a Bhutan scholar and Professor of Nepali and Himalayan studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

The constitution may also be intended to pre-empt external pressure and anticipate internal demands of change. Says Hutt, "Bhutan wants to show the international community that it is not averse to democratic processes. There is also fear of unleashing forces that will undermine the political elite and loosen its grip on power." These forces include education, travel and awareness of the outside world, and the arrival of various forms of media like cable television and the internet over which the government can exercise little or no control. "Bhutanese people now have a glimpse of alternative ways of life and even political systems, which makes a steady move towards participative democracy essential for long-term stability," asserts Richard Whitecross, another Bhutan scholar and an anthropologist at the University of Edinburgh.

There has been an increase in the level of unemployed and under-employed young, educated Bhutanese whose ambitions are frustrated by the slow development of the private sector and the lack of positions in the government. The constitution, with the space it provides for political representation, could be designed as a safety valve to prevent such youth from becoming overly disaffected.

Not least, the need for a constitution must have become urgent after the worldwide notoriety the 'Shangri-La kingdom' received fifteen years ago and continuously since for having evicted a hundred thousand Lhotshampa ('southerner') Nepali-speaking citizens. These refugees, whose ranks have now swelled to 120,000, continue to live in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, and their leaders argue that the principal motivation for the constitutional exercise is to complicate the repatriation of refugees and deprive them of citizenship rights. Rakesh Chhetri, a Bhutanese refugee and Kathmandu-based analyst, says, "The draft is solely aimed at maintaining status quo." Praveen Kumar, a researcher at New Delhi's Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), for his part, believes that with the draft constitution, King Jigme is trying to pre-empt the impact of a radicalized refugee element, influenced by the Maoist rebels of Nepal.

A 'constitutional' monarchy

Article 2 of the draft constitution declares the king to be "the Head of State and the symbol of unity of the kingdom and people of Bhutan". The throne is to pass by hereditary succession either to the crown prince or to the crown princess, though the son takes precedence over the daughter. Allowing the princess to inherit the throne is a welcome departure from the traditional patriarchal orientation of the institution of monarchy, a feature that goes beyond merely Bhutan. A unique provision sets 65 as the retirement age for the monarch.

In provisions made even more significant by recent developments in neighbouring Nepal, the draft stipulates that the king shall proclaim an emergency only on the written advice of the prime minister. Additional safeguards require that the proclamation be submitted to parliament for approval and that the constitution not be amended during the period of emergency. The draft also provides for the "abdication" of the king for reasons of willful violation of the constitution or for being subject to permanent mental disability. Such a move requires three-fourths of all members of parliament to support a resolution, which then has to be approved by a simple majority in a country-wide referendum. This provision, however, is not new and was first enacted by the third gyalpo, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, in 1969.

While the principle that Bhutanese people would be the ultimate arbiters of a monarch's fate has been welcomed, even initiating the process of abdication is expected to be almost impossible as citizens are prohibited from speaking against the king. Teknath Rizal, the well-known refugee leader and one-time Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, dismisses the provision as meaningless. "Remember that parties in the National Assembly would be run by close confidantes of the king and that as per the new constitution as well as existing law, people have to pledge allegiance to *tsa-wa-sum*, the king, country and people." The policy of *tsa-wa-sum* has earlier been used by the ruling elite of Bhutan as a rallying cry to raise nationalist sentiments and suppress dissenting voices, particularly among the Lhotshampa.

There are clauses that leave space for an assertive monarchy. Article 2 declares the king to be the upholder of *Chhoe-sid*, i.e. religion and politics. The king is to "protect and uphold the constitution in the best interests and welfare of the people" - this is the kind of wording that is currently being interpreted in its widest possible meaning by King Gyanendra of Nepal. The Druk gyalpo is not answerable in a court of law for his actions. While most officials are to be appointed by the monarch "on the recommendation" of a specified constitutional body, the king gets to appoint the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who has been given a wide range of powers, "in consultation" with the National Judicial Commission. When these provisions are coupled with the fact that the king would remain the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and the militia, doubts creep in about whether an elected government could wield ultimate control.

Additionally, Article 20 of the draft constitution requires the executive to be responsible to the legislature as well as to the gyalpo. While some argue

that an elected government has to be answerable only to the people and not to the king, others believe that this clause may not be undemocratic. "The role of the King, as the representative of the kingdom and part of the state has to be acknowledged. If this clause is read in conjunction with the fact that sovereign power is vested in the people, it does not necessarily go against the principles of a democracy," says Whitecross.

The role played by the monarch in the new constitutional order would perhaps depend not so much on the letter of the constitution as on the way its implementation evolves in practice. The functioning of the Supreme Court and the National Assembly and the manner in which Bhutanese people adapt to the new system will determine whether the monarch works within constitutional parameters. As one analyst noted, "If people accept the constitution as yet another reform introduced but neither understood nor wanted, then a monarch could potentially reassert him/herself."

Democratising politics

The draft constitution envisages a two-party parliamentary democracy with separation of powers between the legislature, executive and judiciary and a set of fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens. The Parliament, as per Article 10 of the draft document, is to consist of the king, the National Assembly and the National Council. The prime minister is to be a natural-born citizen.

Article 15 stipulates that a party with membership based on region, sex, language, religion or social origin would not be recognised. While all registered parties are allowed to contest a primary round of elections, the two parties that garner the highest number of votes would then be eligible to participate in general elections for the National Assembly. The leader of the winning party is to be appointed prime minister by the king, with no person allowed to hold the office for more than two terms. A system of public campaign financing is also envisaged where payment would be made out of a Public Election Fund to registered parties by the Election Commission in a "non-discriminatory manner".

While the introduction of a democratic system that provides for regular elections has been widely welcomed, specific features of the proposal have come under criticism. Political activists allege that allowing only two parties in a diverse, multi-ethnic country such as Bhutan could be a way to suppress popular aspirations. The minority voice, left out of the political process after the preliminary polls, would not have any platform to express itself, potentially leading to discontent.

It is expected that the existing political parties, which have been voicing dissent and operating in exile, would be excluded from elections because of their largely 'ethnic' membership. While advocates of the draft document claim that such parties sow communal discord and obstruct national integration, the clause is seen as a move to keep the Lhotshampa from asserting their rights. Political scientists have argued that parties based on "ethnicity, regionalism and language" in fact provide a non-violent democratic outlet to groups which have been discriminated against on these very grounds. Says one scholar, "If these restrictions are put in place, what will parties talk about, disagree on or fight about?"

Would the constitution, with its scheme of electoral democracy, overhaul Bhutanese politics? Michael Hutt is sceptical. "The constitution would probably produce a government where Drukpa traditionalists and Drukpa modernisers face each other, with the modernisers forming the government and the traditionalists the opposition." This would not be too different from the current set-up where an "ostensibly progressive" king and council of ministers have the largely conservative Tshongdu to argue with. However, while there might not be a radical change immediately, credit must be given to King Jigme and his advisors for having taken the risk with an initiative that is open-ended in terms of which way the polity evolves.

Political activists allege that allowing only two parties in a diverse, multi-ethnic country such as Bhutan could be a way to suppress popular aspirations

Arguing that democracy should be seen as an evolving process that takes into account local considerations, Praveen Kumar of IDSA says, "It is too early to expect the draft to conform to the parameters of modern democracies. Implantation of external values in alien societies without testing their applicability to the local population will not help in the long run. This explains the continued existence of traditional authority in the proposed political set-up in Bhutan."

Exclusionary formula

It was the citizenship act of 1985 that triggered the forced eviction of the Lhotshampa from southern Bhutan. The act allowed citizenship by registration only to those individuals, and their descendants, who were permanently domiciled in Bhutan on or before 31 December 1958, and whose name was registered in the census documents. Rules for naturalised citizenship required applicants to be able to, among other things, speak, read, and write in Dzongkha as well as to have a good knowledge of the culture, customs, traditions and history of Bhutan. The act, coupled with the increasingly exclusionary policies of the government, led to protests that precipitated a harsh and repressive crackdown by the royal regime, culminating in the Lhotshampa exodus, which took place mostly between 1989 and 1992.

Article 6 of the proposed constitution largely reiterates the provisions of the 1985 act and is expected to provide little relief for refugees in

the camps in eastern Nepal. While citizenship by registration continues to require domicile in Bhutan before December 1958, naturalised citizenship is possible if a person has resided in Bhutan for fifteen years; has no criminal record; has not spoken against the king, country and people; can speak and write Dzongkha; and is familiar with Bhutan's culture and traditions. A visibly angry Chhetri says, "It would be impossible to return home. The government refuses to recognise us as citizens by birth. The registration process imposes the almost impossible task of producing documentary evidence of our presence in Bhutan in 1958 and the conditions required for naturalised citizenship are designed to exclude us."

The census held recently in Bhutan does not include the names of refugees. With the possibility of elections once the constitution is adopted, their names will be left out of electoral rolls as well, putting a further question mark on their citizenship. "It is a strategy to abandon us by excluding our names from all official rolls," says Chhetri. The provision debarring a person who is under foreign protection and is married to a non-Bhutanese from holding constitutional offices could also be used against the Lhotshampa community.

Similarly, the right to own property, guaranteed as a fundamental right, could have serious implications for refugees. Article 7 states that a person shall not be deprived of property by acquisition or requisition, except for public purposes and in accordance with law. Additionally, Clause 9 of the same article prohibits property owners from selling or transferring land to a person who is not a citizen of Bhutan. This is expected to lend constitutional sanction to the property rights of the northerners who have been granted large tracts of land in southern Bhutan, often originally the property of Lhotshampa refugees. The right, some believe, reveals the intention of the royal government not to repatriate the refugees at all and possibly grant alternative, inferior land to those who do manage to return. The process of reallocation of land at present is seen as a move aimed at preventing or diluting a sense of community among the southern Bhutanese, thus blocking them from emerging as a political force.

The unresolved issue of refugees is inextricably tied to the kind of society that is being envisioned for Bhutan

The unresolved issue of refugees is inextricably tied to the kind of society that is being envisioned for Bhutan – whether it will be an open, inclusive society where groups are allowed to preserve their cultural autonomy or whether the evolution will be towards an exclusive structure where the entire population is expected to conform to uniform standards, as encapsulated in the slogan 'one nation, one people' and the *tsa-wa-sum* formula. It is likely that the proposed constitution will do little to encourage respect for diversity or to reassure the minorities in Bhutan.

Activists like Chhetri are up in arms against the declaration of Dzongkha as the national language, terming this as an instance of 'cultural imperialism'. Mark Turin, an anthropologist based at the University of Cambridge who works on Himalayan languages and cultures, says, "It is regrettable that the constitution is silent on the many other languages spoken in the nation both as a mother tongue or lingua franca, such as Sharchop and Nepali." While Article 4 does require the state to "preserve, protect and promote" the linguistic heritage of the country, Turin believes that without an explicit statement on the value and official status of minority languages, it remains unclear how the promotion would play out in education and administration.

The declaration in the constitution of Buddhism as the "spiritual heritage" of the country has been seen as a clever formulation that protects the constitution from the charge of promoting a state theocracy. But what the provision does, in effect, is make Bhutan a 'Buddhist nation', though it would presumably incorporate all the sects that do operate within the society of northern Bhutan, from the Sarchop community of the east to the dominant Ngalongs of the west. Some analysts believe that by officially recognising a specific identity, the draft document privileges one group over others. A sympathetic analyst, however says, "Religion and politics have been intertwined in Bhutan since the 17th century and are so in the public imagination. The constitution draft cannot make a sudden departure from this heritage."

Working a constitution

The proposed document, prepared by the drafting committee after studying the constitutions of almost 50 countries, is now out for wider public discussion. It will be adopted if approved by a simple majority of the people in a referendum, expected to be held later this year. Although there is doubt about the possibility of critical feedback in the absence of an independent intelligentsia in the capital Thimphu and elsewhere, and the complete absence of any kind of dissidence within the country, the proposed draft is nevertheless expected to undergo several changes during the process of ratification. Whitecross says, "The debate in the National Assembly will be a key part of the process as it will not only scrutinise the document but develop general public awareness about its meaning."

The introduction of the constitutional draft has been welcomed across the board, with even refugee leaders like Chhetri appreciating the introduction of fundamental rights and a multi-party system in principle. However, it is the implementation of the provisions that remains a matter of speculation and, in some quarters, apprehension.

The low levels of literacy and political awareness

in Bhutan, particularly among rural women, might pose obstacles in enforcing constitutional provisions uniformly across the country. The deeply hierarchical structure of Bhutanese society is also bound to limit criticism of the government as well as the willingness of people to develop political parties that oppose social superiors. A drive to educate people and to make them aware of the equal right to participate in political processes is considered essential if the constitution is to work in letter and in spirit. The manner in which an independent media develops in Bhutan and the role played by the Supreme Court will both be important in upholding constitutional provisions.

The formal ratification of the constitution could serve as a wedge in the door of Druk Yul's transformation, or it could open the floodgates for sudden change in a society that appears calm on the surface. The potential of snowballing democratization made possible by the new constitution cannot be ruled out. While there are restrictions and other underlying mechanisms of control present in the draft which would favour the ruling Ngalong-centric Thimphu establishment, the guarantee of fundamental rights and political representation to citizens is bound to provide hitherto excluded sections of society access to newer avenues.

While acknowledging the risk taken by the King Jigme and the establishment by bowing to the inevitable need for a written constitution enshrining the basic tenets of a modern nation-state, it must be said that the biggest drawback of the draft constitution in circulation is the way it wishes away the Lhotshampa community, and in particular the refugees who are Bhutanese citizens. Howsoever clairvoyant and forward-looking the document may otherwise be, its legitimacy at birth will be seriously compromised and the democratic beginnings of Bhutan will be considered flawed for having ignored a seventh of the country's citizenry. Among some, there is still a hope that this grievous lacuna that permeates the draft document will be addressed in the consultation process that is underway in the hills and valleys of Druk Yul. After that, it is all in the implementation.

The formal ratification of the constitution could serve as a wedge in the door of Druk Yul's transformation, or it could open the floodgates for sudden change

The Lhotshampa and Indian abandonment

by | **A C Sinha**

The Royal Government of Bhutan **(RGoB)** formally unveiled the draft of its constitution on 26 March 2005 with public ceremonies across the country. The Calcutta Statesman enthusiastically enumerated the 'important Indian contribution' in terms of counsel, expertise, material and personnel that went into formulating the document. It gleefully informed readers that while the king of Nepal had usurped democracy, the Druk gyalpo (monarch) was gracious enough to grant his country its first constitution.

The newspaper's congratulatory report reflected the tone and tenor of the Indian reaction to the Bhutanese move: quite willing to look the other way while the constitutional draft, in the words of refugee leader Thinley Penjore, "bypassed the refugee issue altogether". Singing Bhutan's praise is not a habit perfected only by the Indian media. It is in the tradition of the Indian state's attitude towards Thimphu, notwithstanding the massive abuse of human rights committed by the latter, the evidence for which is abundant in eight refugee camps in eastern Nepal. These camps host more than a hundred thousand Lhotshampa, Nepali-speaking 'southerners', citizens of Bhutan and victims of an infamous exercise in mass eviction carried out more than a decade ago.

Benign detachment

The Indian reaction to the exodus of the Lhotsampa and their 15-year wait to return to their country has been enigmatic, evasive and callous to say the least. This willing disregard is even more significant because the Government of India, as per a 1949 bilateral treaty, advises the Bhutan government in its foreign relations. Bhutan could never ignore Indian intervention on the refugee issue, but New Delhi has chosen to remain silent, disregarding persistent pleas made at its doorstep.

By refusing to take up the issue of the Lhotshampa refugees, India is willingly contravening its own well-known international stand on the issue of human rights. It is left to scholars to try and explain the enigma of India's silence on the Lhotshampa's eviction from Bhutan, and a little bit of history does provide an explanation beyond the demands of realpolitik, which is where retired foreign office bureaucrats place the cause.

Soon after Independence, the new rulers of India showed consideration for Bhutan by extending it protection under the Indo-Bhutanese Treaty of 1949, increasing the annual cash grant to Thimphu, and ceding to it some 32 square miles of territory claimed by the Himalayan state. Over the years, the political movements inside Bhutan, primarily led by those who came to be called the Lhotshampa, were discouraged by India. Activists who sought refuge in Indian territory were asked to desist. Before 1947, the Wangchuk dynasty had been resolutely against Indian freedom fighters. Thereafter, the kings have always wooed successive Indian prime ministers, starting with Jawaharlal Nehru himself, who arrived in Bhutan on horseback in 1958. Likewise, Bhutan's English-educated elite has made it a point, as a primary foreign policy strategy, to maintain an excellent rapport with Indian diplomats, policy makers, and the elites of the academia and the media, even if at the exclusion of Western 'suitors'.

When pressed, Indian prime ministers and bureaucrats have consistently refused to mediate between Nepal and Bhutan on the issue of the Lhotshampa refugees sheltered by the former since 1990. The tortuous negotiations, marked by a singular Bhutanese ability to delay and procrastinate, would have yielded a resolution long ago and given respite to more than a hundred thousand refugees, but for the distance New Delhi has maintained from the process.

Rather ingenuously, New Delhi maintains that the refugee issue is a bilateral one between Nepal and Bhutan, a stand that undermines some basic humanitarian principles as well as India's obvious duty to right a massive wrong under the 1949 treaty. Besides, the refugees from the southern hills of Bhutan first entered India, only moving on to Nepal

when they found themselves unwelcome in northern Bengal. This would assign some responsibility not only to New Delhi but also to Calcutta.

The official Indian attitude is clear in the quasi-official state-ments of some of its functionaries. Former foreign secretary Jagat Mehta, writing in 2004, at first waxes eloquent about Bhutan's democratic development and 'environmental husbanding'. He then goes to say, "The pressure is on India to mediate the problem of rehabilitating expelled Nepalese of Bhutan. The whole problem of spill-over ethnicity in the sub-continent is a vast and complex subject, but perhaps we should continue with benign detachment."

Another retired foreign sec-retary, known for his reliance on realpolitik and for having fashioned much of India's Bhutan policy, was more blunt about the matter. Said J N Dixit about the refugees, "One lakh persons do not matter to the Government of India."

Sources of support

Many reasons have been offered to explain India's benign detachment, including the importance of cheap electricity from Bhutan's hydropower plants built with Indian grant assistance, the need for a stable kingdom in the sensitive Himalayan rim, and the support Bhutan invariably provides India in international fora where that extra vote has often been of some assistance. But there are other equally significant factors in the background that also need to be considered.

North Bengal and the Assam Duars lie within the social world of the Lhotshampa and have been a natural outlet to them geographically, socially and economically. This region, highly politicised because of ethnic solidarity movements such as those of Gorkhaland and Koch, is also where the Lhotshampa have been exposed to active politics. In a nutshell, this is an active, thriving, interesting, educative region, a welcome relief to the Lhotshampa from the regimented Drukpa world of Bhutan where a close watch is kept on every Lhotshampa act or omission.

Unfortunately, North Bengal and the Duars, where there is at least an understanding of the challenges faced by the Lhotshampa within Bhutan, exist at the margins of Indian politics. Likewise, the natural allies of the Lhotshampa, the Nepalmul (Indians of Nepali origin), do not figure anywhere in the Indian political scene. Added to this is the fact that the states of Assam and West Bengal are not favourably disposed towards the Nepalmul, and hence are naturally distanced from their linguistic relations, the Lhotshampa. The issue of alleged migration from Nepal to Assam and of the Gorkhaland Movement in West Bengal were bound to have serious and negative impact on issues close to the Lhotshampa. Even though Assam and West Bengal would have the closest understanding of the depopulation exercise underway in the hills of Bhutan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is obvious that they chose to remain silent and not put any pressure on New Delhi. The fact that there are not even a handful of Nepali-speaking members in the Indian Parliament also explains why the refugee has never had a profile and why Indian foreign policy remains the way is.

While the interests of the Lhotshampa may well have been sacrificed by New Delhi on the altar of realpolitik, it is worth considering the questions that history will ask of the Indian state. Let us speculate on the effect of this unstated policy on India: What will be its impact on Nepal's response to Indian diplomacy, given that the Indian state has deliberately opted to back Bhutan at the cost of Nepal? What happens to the oft-repeated mantra of special relations between Kathmandu and New Delhi? How is the Indian state going to deal with the discontent among those of its citizens who are Nepali-speakers, and who are witness to the unfairness being meted out on their linguistic cousins by New Delhi's policy?

Today, the Drukpa regime in Thimphu is determined to demonise the Lhotshampa as the villains of all their problems. It is busy demolishing all vestiges of the Nepali-speakers' presence in Bhutan. The Lhotsampa are not recognised as a separate community as in the past, and they have no representation in the council of ministers, the royal advisory council or the constituent assembly. In the Drukpa scheme of things, there is no scope for the continuity of the distinct Nepali-speaking Lhotshampa heritage.

In Thimphu, there is a loathing of the Lhotshampa that is visible even today. So, they want a written constitution? Okay, we shall write it without their participation so that they, the Lhotshampa, will not figure in our polity. So, they want us to consult with the people? Our gyalpo will go to every district and block and meet with the heads of households, and we will concede to all important demands of the people, but we shall deal firmly with the ngolops (anti-nationals). They want an inclusive constitution? It will be so, only they will not figure anywhere in it.

Today, as Bhutan goes thr-ough the exercise of adopting an exclusionary constitution, the Lhotshampa in the refugee camps, who represent a seventh of the country's population, have never been more neglected. Look at their fate. They survive on dole from the United Nations High Commssion for Refugees, which is being progressively reduced as per the agency's policy. Nepal, the host country, is in the midst of the worst phase of its modern history and is hardly able to focus on the refugees. The Lhotshampa have been left to themselves, without anyone to provide empathy or a helping hand. If only the Indian state were to turn a humanitarian leaf, it would make all the difference to one of the most dejected population segments of the Subcontinent.

Melancholy of May

by | **C K Lal**

The dust must have risen from the cremation ground of grandmother in May
A loan must have been incurred in May/ bullocks bought
May must have made them pledge as mortgage
The banyan tree in the fields
Abode of birds
I get very sad in May

-Prabhat in Jharati Dhool

The rabi crop has been harvested. The season to plant kharif is yet to begin. Eyes wait anxiously for the monsoon – a dry spell means the death of dreams, just as floods from heavy rainfall can wash away plans for the son's higher education, the daughter's overdue wedding, the mother's long awaited treatment in the city hospital, or the longing to buy a silver necklace or a new bicycle for oneself if there is something left to spare.

May is the month of extreme anxiety in much of Southasia. The poignant sadness of poet Prabhat uses images from Ganga plains, but the melancholy elsewhere in the vast hinterland of Southasia is no different in May. In a month when well-off parents from metropolitan centres fly out to USA to attend graduation ceremonies of their offspring, there is nail-biting suspense among the middle-class – what does the future hold for the multitude of school dropouts?

Talking is the time-tested way to overcome anxiety. So rural Southasians used to talk even more, and louder, in the month of May. Under the mango tree near the village pond in the Hindi heartland, along the banks of backwaters in peninsular India, in the shade of the banyan tree along *bharia* trails in the hills and mountains, near the community well in the Deccan, and under the stars in the vicinity of the Thar, Southasians have talked for centuries to lessen their restlessness at this time of year.

But today they talk less and less. These days they listen – sometimes in groups, but mostly alone in their reverie with the idols of the small screen. Like elsewhere in the world, television has transformed our communication patterns like no other invention in human history. In the empires of competing channels, people are not even 'clients' any more; whether in the city tenement or the village haveli, they are but consuming objects to be mobilised for yet more consumption.

Purity of means

Angst and anxiety abound everywhere in Southasia, but rays of hope remain as elusive as ever as May gives way to June and a delayed monsoon in the north. According to the images flashed by world media, as handmaiden of the neocons, the war on terror is succeeding. But Osama bin Laden has neither been smoked out nor captured 'dead or alive'. Afghanistan remains an US colony administered by its chosen nominees. Hamid Karzai may claim to be elected, but his writ does not run even within the ruins of Kabul. Not for nothing is it said that colonialism dehumanises colonisers and the colonised alike, and so Afghan inmates are tormented in makeshift prisons by guards driven to cruelty by boredom.

The wounds inflicted upon the Afghans by the Russians, the Taliban, and the Americans will all heal, but the scars will remain to haunt human civilisation in the centuries to come. One might even try and restore the massive Buddhas of Bamiyan, but how do you keep the scarred landscape of Tora Bora from tormenting generations of Afghans. When Karzai went to Washington at the end of May to beg for a measure of control on the movement of armed forces, he was firmly put in his place by his sponsors. Now some 16,700 US troops will remain stationed in Afghanistan for an indefinite period ostensibly at the invitation of an "elected leader" of that country.

With a wink from Washington, the strongman-in-charge in Islamabad continues to run his country like a medieval fiefdom. General Musharraf has not learnt any lesson from the debacle of religious extremism on his Western front. While mouthing platitudes to 'enlightened moderation' in public, the military and the mullahs of Pakistan regularly act in concert to let Islamic fundamentalism grow unchecked. Ironically, the continuing expansion of religious extremism is used as an excuse by the American patrons to continue support for their man in Islamabad. Things don't get more incongruous than that.

A little to the east, in New Delhi, premier Manmohan Singh celebrated the completion of an year in office with very little fanfare in May. According to his own admission, Manmohan has been barely a 60 percent prime minister at a time when even a 100 percent head of government would have been too little to dismantle the saffron edifice erected by Bhartiya Janata Party's years in power. Communalisation of Indian society has reached such a stage that bomb blasts rocked its capital on something as flimsy as the name of a Hindi movie. It beats logic why the Indian intelligentsia take exception to riots caused by the desecration of the Holy Koran; Hindu holy-men tend to take to the streets for much milder offences and self-appointed guardians of Sikhism spot misdemeanour in innocent and imaginary portrayals on the screen.

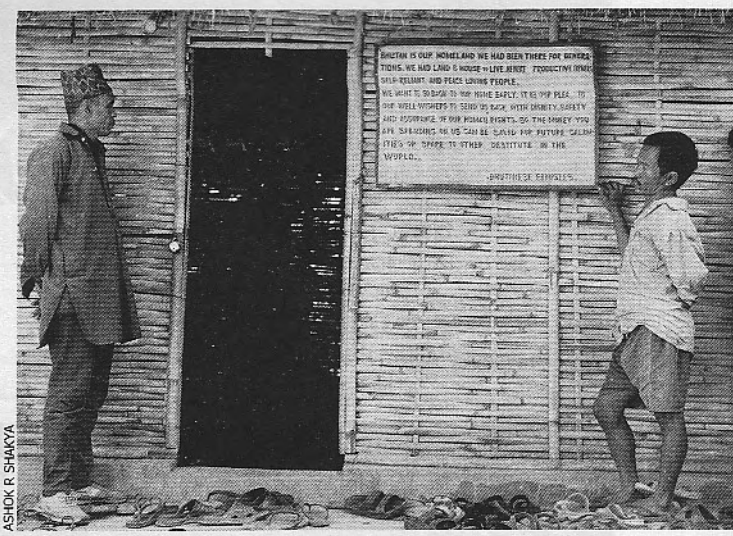
The drama enacted in Bihar was even more disgraceful. Apparently on the instigation of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the Vidhan Sabha that had remained in suspended animation from the day it was formed was suddenly dissolved, foreclosing all possibilities of a popular government for quite a while. The manner in which this deed was done and president's rule introduced - in stealth and hurry, getting the dissolution order approved from the president's hotel suite in Moscow—doesn't do any credit to the democratic claims of the ruling coalition in New Delhi. Granted that the step has succeeded in stalling a communal coalition from emerging in Bihar, M K Gandhi did have a point in stressing the importance of purity of means. The short-term gains for secular forces may shore up the electoral fortunes of Hindutva elements in future elections.

Meanwhile, the opportunistic intelligentsia of the Padma delta has meekly surrendered itself to the oligarchs that run the affairs of their state. In the name of fighting extremism, the paramilitary forces of Bangladesh perpetrate excesses that go largely unreported in the Dhaka press in the name of "national interest". It is amazing that a country as culturally secure as Bangladesh needs to keep fanning the fears of Indian hegemony in order to exert its separate identity.

In the Island of Serendipity, dreams of peaceful cohabitation between the four religious communities of the land remain as distant as ever. Unity of purpose between the LTTE and the government machinery to rebuild areas devastated by the tsunami has begun to unravel. Fortunately, the truce between the two antagonists still holds despite repeated attempts at sabotage by disgruntled elements on both sides. Unless tangible progress is made in the creation of sustainable and just peace, the risk of unpredictable violence will persist.

On the margins

It was in May of 2003 that the Burmese junta detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who turned 60 on 19 June this year, with very little fanfare from the politically conscious of the world. The fact is that, as in the case of the Dalai Lama or the Bhutanese refugees, the western powers make a show of



ASHOK R SHAKYA

Lhotshampa, not of Bhutan, but Jhapa

empathy but the real need for change lies closer to home. Not only appeals, but even sanctions from the West seem to have failed to have an impact upon the Rangoon junta. Unless China and India take joint initiatives to persuade Rangoon, chances of restoration of civilian regime in Burma will remain bleak. India, at least, would like to move closer to the junta, as it eyes the natural gas fields off the Arakhan coast. The more the Indian economy needs the gas, the bleaker the chances of Aung San getting support from New Delhi's realpolitikos. There comes a point at which internal efforts are insufficient to dislodge a determined authoritarian regime and outside intervention becomes necessary. Burma seemed to have reached that stage long ago, but no intervention has appeared on the horizon and it will be a long time before the military regime begins to crumble from within.

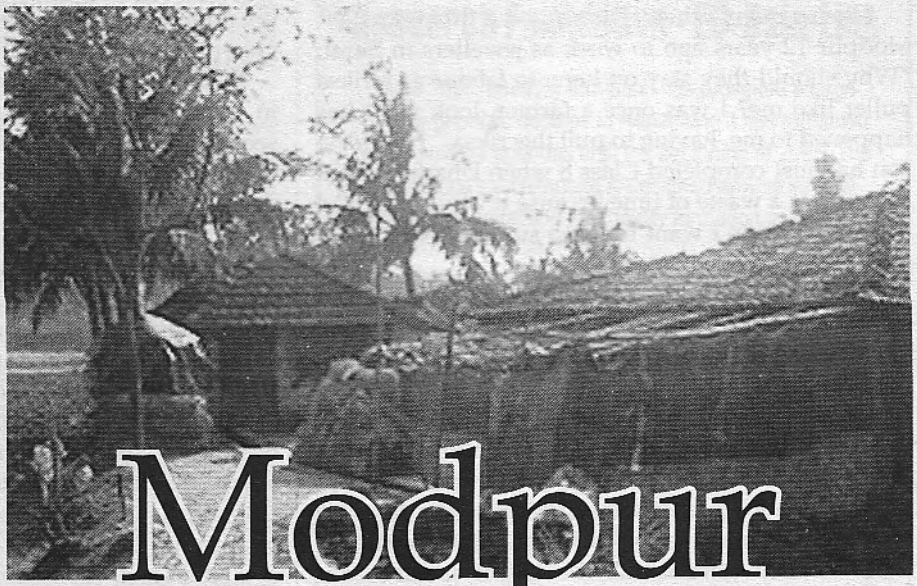
Democracy in Nepal, however, isn't yet beyond redemption. King Gyanendra's courtiers continue to

loudly proclaim that there has to be "peace and development" before democracy, but his 'subjects' do not have faith in the regime's capacity of delivering either – not in a hundred days as promised by the king to the the American ambassador, and not in three years as proclaimed by the king on 1 February. Indeed, peace and development will not arrive unless governance is handed over to the democratic forces as represented by the political parties, which are today working according to a common programme of peaceful challenge to the royal takeover. The progress of the parties' challenge to the royal palace will depend upon the attitude of the ostrich-like middle-class of Kathmandu Valley, which prefers to believe what the palace propagandists say rather than what stares them in the face.

Aung San

Aung San would understand: Tibetan civilisation is on the verge of becoming a footnote in the history books as the Han demographic and economic muscle strangles this ancient land. Meanwhile, multi-plicities of forces struggling for the freedom of Tibet are keeping themselves busy without doing anything substantial. Dharamshala's government in exile is more marginalised than ever before, willing to bask in the glow of overseas adulation while quite unwilling to take risks with China. The Dalai Lama's advisors would do well to understand the implications of the fact that Sino-Indian trade has nearly doubled from USD 7.5 billion in 2003 to USD 13.5 billion in 2004. The lights of Potala Palace will fade away even from memory if the Dalai Lama does not decide on a return to the valley of the Kyu Chu.

Bhutan, the kingdom propagating the concept of Gross National Happiness, has placed that unsc-ientific, feel-good concept into its draft constitution. The hundred thousand-plus citizens that King Jigme Singye Wangchuk evicted from the hills of Druk Yul are spending their fifteenth summer in the sweltering plains of Nepal's Jhapa and Morang. The monsoon rains, when they arrive, will provide some respite, but then it will be humid beyond words in the camps of Timai, Goldhap, Beld angi, Sanischare and Khudunabari. King Jigme may want to check the thermometer outside His Majesty's patio: when it is 17 degrees in Thimphu, it is 42 degrees in the shade where his subject-refugees live. Still wanting to return, Your Majesty. And wanting to be singing in the rain.



Modpur

by | **Rajashri Dasgupta**

As a child, my grandmother's gold necklace had fascinated me. My fingers would trace its delicately moulded design and feel the intricate lattice work. My imagination fired with a sense of adventure from voracious reading, I would ask her from which hidden cave or niche had this glittering ornament been retrieved. It was a gift from her mother, she would answer with nostalgia, made by skilful artisans from "the village of Modpur across the river Ganga".

Over the years I came to learn that Modpur, a small town in West Bengal, is well-known for its extremely skilled goldsmiths. The clientele of these artisans include not only Bengali women such as my grandmother who prefer gold ornaments, but even celebrities and film stars across the country who value jewellery made by the "Modpur boys". It was only recently that I got the opportunity to meet the heroes of my childhood on a visit to the Modpur administrative block in Howrah District, separated from Calcutta, as my grandmother had reported, by the Ganga.

What I found in Modpur is that there is hardly a household where a son, brother, father, uncle or son-in-law is not 'missing'. In search of better work opportunities and more money, goldsmiths and gem-setters have migrated to faraway cities like Bombay, Hyderabad and, most importantly, Surat, a thriving industrial town in Gujarat famed for its diamonds, jewellery and textiles. Some have even sought their fortunes in Dubai and the United Arab Emirates.

Traditionally, the goldsmiths of Modpur were a small community with the male members handing down the skills to the new generation. When demand for their skills in the export-oriented production centres of western India first sprung up, small groups of artisans made the shift to Surat and Bombay. As their skills became more prized, the trickle turned into a flood. Today, even agricultural workers are abandoning their land to become goldsmiths and migrate.

Two factors stand out in the phenomena of migration from Modpur. Firstly, it is largely the migration of single males. Secondly, the migrants leave home as young adults, barely out of their adolescence. The obsession with making money has drawn young boys away from their studies, with Modpur's schools now losing the bulk of their male students by Class 8. Laments one school headmaster, Ashwini Adak, "Once the boys turn 12, it's difficult to retain them. Their nimble fingers are best trained to be skilful goldsmiths. It is the lure of quick money..."

If the schools and soccer fields of Modpur are bereft of young boys, the village's fertile fields lie uncultivated, a phenomenon unheard of in highly populated West Bengal. Equally bizarre are the garishly coloured concrete buildings mushrooming

in the midst of paddy fields, overshadowing the older mud huts. "These two-storied palaces belong to goldsmiths, local boys who now work in different cities and visit home occasionally," says riksa puller Bharat Dhara as he pedals down the village road. "The huts belong to people who never left Modpur."

Like so many others, Dhara's own three sons left Modpur 12 years ago to work as jewellers in Surat. "Why should they stay on here, to labour as a riksa puller like me? I was once a farmer, look what has happened to me, having to pull this riksa." His eldest son had just completed Class 8 when Dhara felt that school was a waste of time because it would not lead to a job. "I didn't want them to suffer, so I let them go."

Migrant goldsmiths such as Dhara's sons are hailed as the new heroes of Modpur, men who seek their fortunes in distant places and return prosperous. It is the money from the earnings of these jewellers that has triggered developments in villages and in Modpur town itself. Homes now sport television sets and music systems, fancy clocks and crockery. Locals can recognize the destination of the migrant from the appearance of their houses. If the structure is formidably ornamental, the owner is assuredly working in Dubai. Almost as ostentatious, would be the houses of goldsmiths in Bombay or Ahmedabad.

Highway havoc

What has prompted goldsmiths of Modpur, whose skills were prized by Bengali clientele such as my grandmother, to migrate on such a massive scale as to leave the area empty of males? Why were traditional agricultural families suddenly willing to abandon their fields?

For the last two decades, Modpur and its surrounding region have been witnessing an unprecedented upheaval associated with the industrialisation and urbanisation of a sedate agrarian economy. Proximity with Calcutta has had a great impact on Modpur. The urban pressures of the large metropolis have pushed people out, westward across the Ganga. According to the Block Development Officer Krishnendu Basak, Modpur is becoming "more a business than an agricultural community."

The construction of the National and State Highway 6 (NH6) that cuts Howrah District close to Modpur has also triggered a flurry of economic activity. Frenetic developments are taking place along the highway, with acres of industrial estates and residential blocks sprouting up on the farmland. Under the circumstances, farmers either hold on to the land for speculation or sell out to factories and residential high-rise complexes. "The price of land in my village has gone up at least 20 times in the last few years," said Prasanta Mallick, a village elder.

The rapid pace of real estate development coupled with the rise in price of agricultural inputs such as seed and fertiliser has made agriculture an increasingly unviable option for the locals. At the same time, they do not have the skills and wherewithal to take advantage of the modernisation sweeping their own home ground. Agricultural labourers find themselves unemployed, and the craft of setting gems or making gold ornaments suddenly looks attractive.

Meanwhile, there is mental stress for the generation in transition, which is groomed for agriculture but sees the logic in the shift to working with gold. Farmer Mallick says he is depressed with the chain of events. "I have tried to keep my farm going, but there have been continuous losses. Why should I farm at such a loss if I cannot recover my investment or feed my family?" Mallick has now allowed his 13 year-old son to train to be a goldsmith in Bombay.

With agricultural families turning to the gold trade, the traditional goldsmiths who have remained behind in Modpur find the labour market saturated. But the fact is that not many stay back in Modpur when the bright lights of Surat, Bombay and Dubai call. These places offer not only better work opportunities, but loans to be had, prompt payment of all dues and – all importantly – more lucrative pay. If Calcutta shop owners offer Modpur gemsetters 50 paisa to set a stone, the rate is Rs 2 in Surat. It is this difference that makes young boys and men leave Modpur in droves, to take the trains from Howrah Station headed west.

Death toll

The ornate pink and purple residences with formidable iron gates stand grotesquely among clusters of shabby huts and acres of fallow land. These images provide a chilling contrast and represent the existential dilemma of Modpur today. On the one hand, the migration of the goldsmiths has led to employment, development of the region, riches and hope among families and the larger community and families. On the other, it has also inflicted death, disease, poverty, and immense suffering. If men have left villages as young boys to chase better opportunities, the migration has also left in its wake separated families and discontinued traditions. In short, broken lives.

The challenges the migrants themselves face are not insignificant. It is not migration per se but the work conditions they migrate to that make them more vulnerable to high- risk behaviour. They work for long periods away from home and family, coping with homesickness and loneliness, trying to adjust to a new working environment and culture, and controlling their emotional and sexual needs. If there is one tragedy that encapsulates the many challenges and dislocations suffered by the people of Modpur, it is the visitation of HIV-AIDS.

Many migrant goldsmiths have contracted the

HIV virus and have returned home to die of AIDS, some after infecting their wives and unborn children. This year, the husband of 23 year-old Tulu (name changed) died of AIDS after having infected her as well as their three-year old daughter. A few years ago, her father and brother had died of the same cause. All were migrant goldsmiths in Surat. It was three years ago that Rani, 22, lost her husband Balu to AIDS and five months later, her eight-year-old child too succumbed to the infection. "I want to live," says Rani who is on anti-retroviral drugs to improve her declining immunity. "I am so young, I did not even know about the disease until my husband and daughter died."

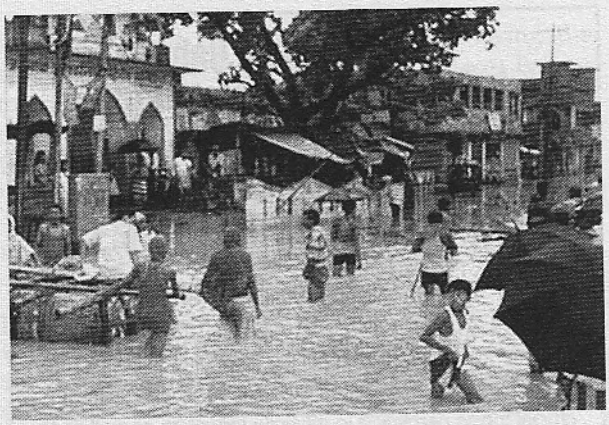
Headmaster Ghosh is a sad man today. Not only have his students left school to become jewellers, he has lost many of them to the disease. "There is hardly any one in Modpur who has not lost a family member or does not know someone who is sick with HIV virus or is dead with AIDS," he says. The spread of HIV and AIDS in the local population is grave enough for local AIDS activists to label the Modpur area a high-risk zone. The local network of HIV-positive people has 180 members, most of whom are widows of migrant goldsmiths. Says gram pradhan Subir Chatterji, "We have development in Modpur, but we now also have HIV and AIDS."

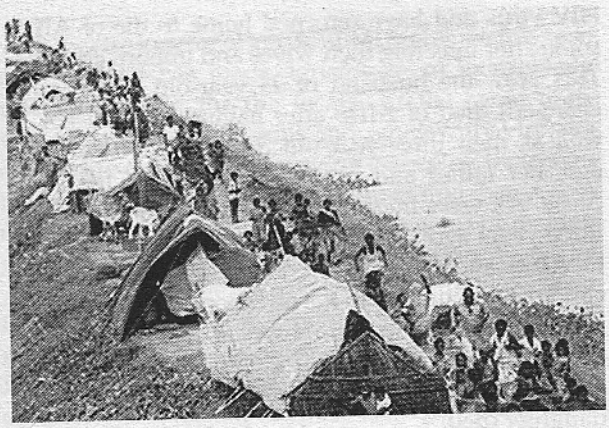
The social cost

The rapid development in the communities of Modpur and the surrounding region has been accompanied by certain social costs. What is weakening - and at times disappearing altogether - with the breakdown of the rural economy, lack of employment and migration, are old family and social values and community ties. While there is now greater freedom and mobility for individuals, there are related problems of alienation and cultural tension. Farmers ruefully admit that their sons 'look down' on working the land; and girls refuse to marry men who 'work and get dirty'. Says riska puller Dhara, "My sons claim they are bored when they visit the village. One of them even dresses like a girl with long hair and floral-printed shirts."

As societies confront modernisation and development all over India and Southasia, in a hundred thousand communities, social breakdown is in progress. Social controls and values are weakening and individuals and communities find themselves exposed, left to fend for themselves without guidance, empathy or a helping hand. Modpur, in the throes of social transition, is just the reflection of one community undergoing the stress of change. The district and its historical legacy that produced my grandmother's beautiful gold necklace is today a society at once 'successful' and 'off course'.

Writer's note: ***Modpur*** *is a real place, only its name has been changed.*





The flood
that was, the flood to come

by | **Dinesh Kumar Mishra**

"Machhli khao!" This was the advice of Lalu Prasad Yadav, the Indian Minister of Railways and, as the head of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (**RJD**), Bihar's boss. "Let them eat fish," he told the people, as the whole of north Bihar was reeling under the floods of 2004. The reaction of the flood victims of Bihar to his suggestion was silence.

Floods are an annual event in Bihar, and some years they are worse than others. As the floods begin to peak in late July or August, they bring with them a by-now predictable routine of governmental statements, accusations and recriminations. As the monsoon brings its deluge, this year too, there will be highly charged reportage on the breaching of embankments along the state's rivers, once again the demand for a high dam on the Kosi River deep within Nepali territory, and repetition of the charge that Nepal has 'released' waters to flood Bihar. Once again, Patna will make shrill demands for disaster relief from the central government, there will be allegations of inadequate relief provided, others will accuse the Bihar government of misuse of flood relief, and so on.

The recriminations will stop as soon as the flood waters recede by end August or early September. Nepal will be forgotten, as will be the embankments. Everyone will await the next flood season, when the cycle begins all over again. As we enter July, there is also the added political confusion in Bihar this year, linked to the non-formation of government after the Bihar Assembly elections of February 2005. The call for fresh polls in the state has further added to the uncertainities and as the flood season draws nigh, the blame game among the politicians and government departments is likely to be played at a higher pitch.

To be better prepared for this year's Bihar floods, it is best to analyse the response of previous years, and in particular, the experience of 2004. It is very important for the sake of the millions who will be affected in North Bihar that we begin to learn from our experience of floods and not merely be led through the annual charade of flood-related acrimony.

Living in peace

Urbanisation, changing popul-ation patterns, the development of infrastructure and the rapid spread of media all have changed the way in which the floods impact us and how they are reported. The recriminations and improper response can be explained by the lack of understanding of floods. Floods are a natural phenomenon in north Bihar, for this is where the great tributaries of the Ganga originating in the Nepali hills enter the plain, gorged with the monsoon precipitation. The greatest of the rivers is of course the Kosi, called the 'river of sorrow' by the British, which with its seven sub-tributaries covers the entire eastern half of Nepal and even reaches deep into Tibet. While the snow- and rain-fed Kosi waters the eastern half of Bihar, the western half of the state is fed by the sub-Himalayan rivers of Kamala and Bagmati, the latter with headwaters in Kathmandu Valley.

Certain basic aspects of hydrology need to be understood. Himalayan rivers naturally carry a heavy silt load, which has little or nothing to do with deforestation in the hills as has been claimed.

The fertility of the Ganga and Brahmaputra plains is, in fact, the result of this annual watering and deposition of silt. Historically, the plains people had learnt to live with the floods as representing a troublesome phenomenon for a couple of months. The rivers were allowed to spread their waters over the vast flatlands, which moderated the intensity of the floods. There were inconveniences, but society was never fatally affected. The river was allowed to perform its duty of land-building with its silt, and the fertility and moisture content of the soil was optimised. Life was good in the Ganga plains, and the floods helped make it so, which is why we have such a high population density here.

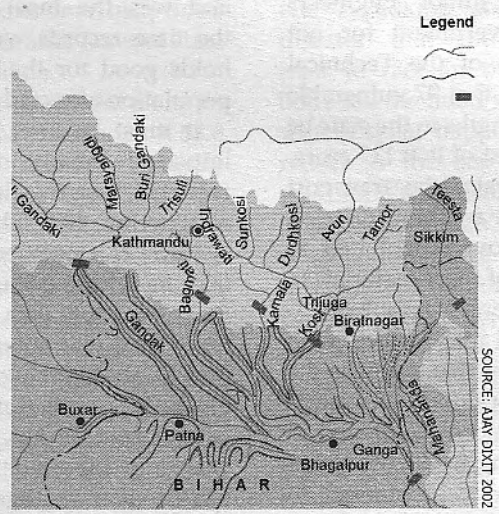
This was the path of least resistance to nature that our ancestors chose, and they also adapted their traditional housing and cropping patterns to the floods. Vedavyas, in the Mahabharata, had cautioned people to "Do all good things during the day to get a good sleep in the night and make all the preparations during eight months to live in peace during the rainy season."

It was only in modern times that we had to devise means to 'tame' the rivers, that too with technology devised in the past century for countries of the North which do not have the same sedimentation rates of our Himalayan rivers. Starting in British times, the technocratic solution has been to put up dams to hold back the river waters, or to straitjacket the rivers within embankments. This is how the maintenance of the embankments of the various rivers of Bihar has become an annual ritual before the flood season. In reality, what this has done is locked the silt within the embankments rather than let it spread its fertility over the land. This also raises the bed of the river within the embankments, pointing to future catastrophes when breaches occur. Besides the fear of their collapse, the levees have also obstructed drainage. Ironically, the very structures which are meant to protect the people from excess water during the monsoon create waterlogging during the rest of the year.

As far as Nepal is concerned, every year it gets a battering from the Bihar politicians who need to play up someone else's fault for the floods even though it may be a natural phenomenon more drastic in some years than others. And so there is finger-pointing at Nepal having opened the floodgates of its reservoirs, when in fact there are no reservoirs in Nepal which can be emptied on Bihar. There are two barrages close to the Indian border, one on the Kosi and the other on the Gandak, which feed irrigation canals that serve Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Both these barrages are managed by Bihar's Water Resources Department. There is hope that the proposed high dam on the Kosi will impound enough water to keep the floods from peaking in eastern Bihar, but there are also serious questions with regard to the very concept of a high dam.

A sizeable catchment area that is the source of Bihar's floods is actually located below the proposed dam site

Besides the technical challenges of constructing a high dam in a highly seismic zone, issues that are pending relate to the naturally massive sedimentation of the Kosi and what this would do to the pondage, the matter of inundation of a large part of eastern Nepal's populated hinterland, the loss of fertility in the plains due to absent sedimentation. An alternative means to distribute the flood flow in the plains is a matter that has never been brought up for serious discussion. Doubts have also been raised as to the very raison d'etre of the high dam, for experts say that a sizeable catchment area that is the source of Bihar's floods is actually located below the proposed dam site. All in all, say the sceptics, it would be wiser for Bihar to face the floods locally. The plains people have centuries of experience living with the late monsoon inundation; if their wisdom and the expertise of the engineer were to be combined for the common good, we could make the floods bearable in the years to come. Essentially, what this means is replacing 'flood resistant houses' with 'flood tolerant houses', and the 'flood resistant crops' with 'flood tolerant crops'.



The Kosi catchment, barrages and embankments

The 2004 ritual

As the floods picked up steam in July 2004, as expected, three central ministers in New Delhi – Jay Prakash Narayan, Tasleemuddin and Priya Ranjan Das Munshi – made pronouncements about the imminence of the high dam on the Kosi. Bihar's own Minister of the Water Resources Department (WRD) announced that all the necessary repairs at 274 vulnerable points on the embankments would be completed in time and everything was fine on the flood front. He, too, reposed his faith in the proposed dam in Nepal, where he said construction would start soon. But the fact was there was no flood on the Kosi last year.

As the ministers were becoming overwrought about the Kosi, the flash floods were occurring in the Bagmati basin to the west. On 7 June 2005, altogether 50 persons were washed away by the Bagmati in Sheohar and Sitamarhi districts, and the blame was predictably passed on to Nepal for releasing the water. The Indian Army was called in on 22 June to take care of the rescue and relief operations, while in Patna, on the floor of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council, it was a free for all with charges, counter-charges, walkouts and demands for resignations. In other words, the annual ritual had begun. Demand for emergency assistance, charges of corruption and mismanagement of relief operations, shortage of boats, inaccessibility, and accusations of mass breaching of embankments became the order of the day.

Amidst the furore and the mud-slinging, the WRD minister blamed the engineers for dereliction of duty. The Association of Junior Engineers retaliated by blaming the government for not following the recommendation of the Technical Advisory Committee on Floods, that 97 vulnerable points along the embankment lengths in the state be strengthened or repaired at a cost of INR 117 crore. Meanwhile, amidst incessant rain, the transport and communication lines to the northern districts were down, and the Indian government had to request Nepal to allow passage of relief materials to Sitamarhi, Sheohar, Darbhanga and Madhubani.

Ten helicopters were pressed into service, with the Air Force claiming on 23 July that this was the largest such deployment ever for flood relief in the country. But 13 helicopters had been deployed in the flood relief in 1987, according to Bihar's Relief Administration. Helicopters add glamour to tackling flood, but one must ask how useful is it to air-drop rations. *The Times of India* reported on 2 August 2004 that relief material worth less than INR 10 million had been air-dropped at a cost of a "whopping" INR 80 million. Of the estimated five million marooned by the rising waters only 400 were rescued by choppers, said the newspaper. According to another source, INR 200 million crore had been spent to airdrop INR 20 million worth of foodstuff.

As for the airdropped rations, they consisted of sattu (roasted horse gram powder) packed by a certain 'Agrasen Sattu Factory, Hazaribagh, Bihar'. Hazaribagh lies today in the state of Jharkhand that was carved out of Bihar in 2000. One may conclude, therefore, that the food packets were at least four years old, packaged when Hazaribagh was still in Bihar. The quality of match-boxes and the candles distributed were of equally poor standard. The government distributed only 600,000 polythene sheets as relief, but that could hardly have been enough for the more than three million people who required some sort of cover during the deluge. That the relief operations of 2004 cost the exchequer INR 560 million in total indicates a full-fledged scam that cries out to be uncovered.

The number 49.9

The state authorities tend to play fast and loose with the data in order to exaggerate or minimise issues according to their advanatge. For example, the WRD consoled itself that there had been only 55 breaches along the 3430 km of its embankments in 2004, compared to 300 breaches during the earlier devastation of 1987. But the WRD's own reports indicate that there were a total of 105 breaches back in 1987. In the hope of upping disaster relief from a friendly government at the centre, the Patna ministers were hellbent on proving that the 2004 flood was the worst-ever in the living memory. But data shows that 1987 far outpaced 2004 (see table) and was the most devastating inundation since the time records were kept. This record for 1987 holds good for the area affected, crops damaged, population affe-cted and lives lost.

It must be kept in mind that the 2004 waters impacted mainly north Bihar. The government reported that the flood-affected area had touched a figure of 49.9 lakh hectares, which is patently absurd. The northern plains have an area of 53.8 lakh ha with a population of 52 million. A cursory look at the loss data would suggest that if 49.9 lakh ha of land was submerged, no less than 50 million people should have been affected by the floods, given the population density of north Bihar at 880 persons per sq km, while the affected population was only reported to be 21.2 million. The region has 21 districts together with one sub-division of the Bhagalpur district, Naugachhia. Two districts of north Bihar, namely Siwan (2.2 lakh ha) and Saran (2.6 lakh ha) were not hit. Subtracting these two districts, we are left with 48.9 lakh ha. What this means is that the flood area as described by the Disaster Management Department was more than the actual area of the concerned districts. All the other Patna government offices involved, including the Water Resources Department and Department of Statistics, merely repeated the given figure, not bothering to deal with the discrepancy.

It was only after an article noting the faulty mathematics was published in Patna's *Dainik Hindustan* on 26 August 2004 that the figure for the flood-affected suddenly dropped down to 23.5 lakh ha. Meanwhile, the memorandum submitted by the state to the team from the central government contained the same fantastic 49.9 ha figure. A central team which visited the state starting 13 September did not locate the discrepancy, and the same was true for the Prime Minister's Office in New Delhi.

Flood Loss Data For Worst Floods in Bihar

Year	District Affected	Villages Affected	Population Affected	Area Affected (In Lakh ha)	Crop Area Affected (In Lakh ha)	Value of Crops (Rs. in Crores)	Houses Damaged	Value of Houses (Rs. in Crores)	Loss of Public Properties (Rs. in Crores)	Human Lives Lost	Cattle Lost	Total Loss (Rs. in Crores)
1954	na	8119	76.1	24.6	15.96	na	1,79,451	na	na	63	1944	50
1974	18	na	163.9	31.82	17.51	266.78	5,16,353	54.58	79.63	80	288	354.59
1987	30	24,518	286.62	47.5	25.7	676.81	17,.4,999	257.89	372.71	1399	5302	1212.39
2004	20	9360	212.51	23.49	13.95	418.6	8,97,427	739.49	1057.69	801	2673	2216.*

To cap it all, the report of the Task Force, published on 21 December, contains the same 49.9 figure, even though the team was made up of six persons with the rank of chief engineer, from Bihar alone. If this mistake regarding basic flood data were deliberate, it smacks of conspiracy. If it were a slip, then it exposes the casual manner in which flood emergencies are handled by layer after layer of state and central government institutions.

Bihar today has 3430 km of embankment along its rivers. The floodprone area in the state today is 68.8 lakh ha. Whereas in 1952, when there was virtually no flood-control infrastructure in the state, the vulnerable area was limited to 25 lakh ha. It is clear that the floodprone area is on the rise even as we build more and more embankments and invest in other forms of flood control. The Bihar government recently received a grant of INR 3.6 billion to raise and strengthen the embankments of the Kamala and Bagmati, but experience shows that this is a waste of money. Building and strengthening embankments will merely lead to the rising of the riverbeds within, due to constricted flow and sedimentation; they also lead to ever-more waterlogging. Planners and politicians also tend to forget that a large number of people in Bihar live within the embankments, and their lives are endangered when the levees are made sturdier and taller.

Monsoon mantra

The absence of an elected popular government in Bihar, where politics has been in limbo since the Assembly elections of February 2005, is expected to make this year's flood season a difficult one for the people, particularly if the rain gods decide to unleash another deluge like last year's. The WRD has identified 280 schemes to be taken up to prevent breaches in the embankments. As is customary, all works on the Kosi embankments have to be completed before March every year, and all other maintenance and repair works are to be completed by the end of May. This year, with files shuttling between the various sections of the Department of Water Resources, things have been tardy. It is quite likely that there will be breaches in the embankments that are directly linked to the political confusion in Patna.

As the politicians fight and the bureaucrats dither, a new monsoon season is upon us. No one is talking about the impending manmade disaster that the people of Bihar are destined to face in the coming months. Will some body tell the flood victims when they face the rising waters what happened to the report of the task force that was appointed last year after Manmohan Singh's visit and what actions have been taken to safeguard the interest of the people? Will somebody also tell the people of Kusheswar Asthan, Chandauli, Khagaria, Darbhanga, Danapur, Jhanjharpur, Runnisaipur, and Kataunjha that enough food grains have been stored at respective places and it will not have to be transported from Patna this time? Will the people living on the embankments not be threatened with evacuation in the name of raising and strengthening of the embankments? Will the victims of erosion of the banks of the river all along the state get recognition that the Government is aware of their problems and adequate steps will be taken to reduce their sufferings?

As the politicians fight and the bureaucrats dither, a new monsoon season is upon us

More questions: Will somebody ask the politicians, both at the centre and the state, why they stopped chanting the Kosi high dam mantra after the floods abated last year? Will someone tell the people of Bihar why the high dam on the Kosi has not been built despite years of 'fruitful negotiations' with Nepal? And will someone tell the people of Bihar that if the construction of the high dam is absurd, why nothing is being done to help the people face the floods locally? Just as we do not talk about the floods and ask these questions in the dry season, we are not left with any option than to face them silently in the rainy season.

SOUTH ASIA MIGRATION RESOURCE NETWORK

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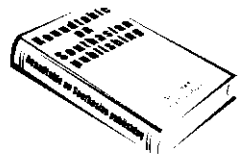
19-28 November 2005 Rajendrapur, Bangladesh

The South Asia Migration Resource Network (SAMReN) invites development practitioners, young academics and professionals, government functionaries and practitioners from labour and human rights organisations to take part in a Residential Training Workshop on Migration, Globalisation, Security and Development.

The Workshop seeks to enhance understanding of migration processes in South Asian and international frameworks and to equip participants in the methods of research and management of migration. It will examine the dynamics of migration in the contexts of globalisation, security and development and will highlight recent issues that concern the international migration regime, the impact of globalisation on migration, and the pressures on sending and receiving countries.

To apply, please download an application form from the SAMReN website at Applications are due on **15 August 2005.** Applications and enquiries may be sent to **Dr Tasneem Siddiqui**.



Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing

April 2006 Kathmandu

Himal is hosting a Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing in Kathmandu in April 2006. The two and a half-day event will be attended by senior Southasian English language publishers, educators, social scientists, policy makers, journalists and representatives of international and regional organisations with an interest in what Southasians read.

The event is being organised with the understanding that Southasia's reading culture and publishing industry have not expanded in consonance with the dramatic rise in English language literacy in the region nor with the rapid consumerisation of the market. The conference will take place over two and a half days and will discuss themes as diverse as the changing priorities of large publishing houses, the paradox of expanding markets and declining print runs, Southasian markets for Southasian writing in English, country profiles of publishers and publics, the cross-border availability of titles, and the organisational economics of large and small publishers.

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A general critique of the Indian NGO

The activist streak is missing in today's non-governmental organisations, and so they 'serve a function' rather than challenge the system.

by | **Pandurang Hegde**

The last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of non-governmental organisations in the development sector of India. Largely autonomous in their functioning, there is great diversity in the aims and approaches of these organisations. They address issues as varied as rural development, gender relations and child rights, work in remote regions and urban slums and engage in direct welfare delivery as well as advocacy. In terms of size and resources, NGOs range from two-person offices to large networks that employ thousands of staff members, with a turnover that would shock workers at the governmental block development office.

The importance of NGOs as development partners has been recognised by governments as well as international donor agencies. Altogether, NGOs today employ the largest number of people across rural and urban India. For example, while the central government employs 3.3 million people, the NGO sector employs 6.1 million people, 2.7 million in paid positions and 3.4 million as volunteers. Over time, the NGOs have come to fill in the void created by the disastrous effects of globalisation and rallied to provide minimum services to the affected population, be it in urban slums or neglected rural regions.

That said, one should not turn a blind eye to the serious limitations inherent in these organisations. While NGOs have undoubtedly played a positive role in our transitional society, an examination of their performance reveals that they have not addressed the root causes of social problems. Their aim has been to ensure the smooth functioning of the system without upsetting the existing balance of power in society. The rich and powerful remain entrenched in their positions, with NGOs concentrating on fighting the symptoms of poverty rather than the disease of structural exploitation. For their part, international donors are happier providing the voluntary organizations palliatives on areas such as gender, HIV-AIDS prevention and child rights rather than supporting programmes that will challenge and overhaul the exploitative structures that lead to so many of society's ills.

Many NGOs have rushed to deliver services to weaker segments of the population, ranging from running *balwadi* nursery schools to maintaining hostels for tribal students. What they do not realise is that they are assisting the government authorities in shirking their responsibilities in the wake of globalisation. In rushing to fill the breach, the non-governmental sector actually becomes complicit with politicians and bureaucracy. As government agencies now begin to engage in auctioning programmes to the lowest bidder, ignoring the quality of work, NGOs meekly succumb to the process and get co-opted by the very system they set out to challenge. Indeed, these NGOs are now appearing ever more comfortable with a discourse that has been designed by the national and international elites, which only mouth concern for the poor and the marginalised.

The mirage of development

There is a disturbing trend of transplanting successful development models from one place to everywhere, without taking into account socio-cultural and area-specific realities. The aping of a single model of rural development all over a country as diverse as India is likely to end in failure. Take the example of Anna Hazare's watershed development work in Ralegaon Siddhi in the Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra state, widely recognised as a success. This was then taken as a uniform model of rural development, with the Maharashtra government allocating funds for developing one village unit in each district of the

state on the Ralegaon Siddhi model. Predictably, the scheme was a failure in most areas.

The present trend in development work is to focus on economic development in rural areas through self-help groups. While this is a novel method to organise the weaker sections, NGOs, funding agencies as well as the government have negated the very purpose by making the formation of self-help groups their primary objective. This is part of a larger problem with other rural development models, which fail to address the basic causes of poverty in society. The self-help groups in fact are not empowering at all. Instead, they entrench the rural folk in a market-driven consumer society and an economy driven by globalisation. By emphasising the role of self-help groups as a one-size-fits-all vehicle for community empowerment, the NGOs are only creating a mirage of social development.

Generational change

To understand NGOs, one must analyse the changing social context in which they function. Many NGOs were established in the 1970s by idealistic university 'dropouts' much influenced by socialist principles. These pioneers of the voluntary movement of India were motivated by a sense of service and a need to challenge social inequity. Things began to change in the late 1980s, when the leadership transferred from the idealists to the professionals. Today, it is professionals, including trained social workers and managers, who run the more 'effective' NGOs like any other business. While professionalism has introduced organisational efficiency, what has been lost is the idealism and commitment to social change that motivated the first generation.

In recent years, the steady commercialisation of the NGO sector has received a further boost as a whole range of new actors, from young professionals to retired bureaucrats, set up NGOs in the hope of getting a slice of the international funding pie. Needless to say, being a sector that only reflects the values of the rest of society, corruption and greed has crept in among NGOs as well. Not enough is being done to expose and oust the corrupt who are involved in development.

There is also a definite middle class bias evident among NGOs, which can be attributed to the social and educational background of most who lead these organisations. Financial security is a priority with today's development professional, and innovation and risk-taking therefore to be found at a premium. Because these functionaries prefer not to upset their relationships with politicians and government officials, there is little possibility of their organisations challenging the establishment at whatever layer of society. Thus, the NGOs of today are reduced to meek, submissive organisations that rarely threaten powerful interests.

While the stated aim of most NGOs is 'empowerment' of weaker communities, the very structure of these organisations prevents them from becoming a vehicle for bringing a share of power to the poor and marginalised. Is it any surprise, then, that attempts by such organisations to engineer a people's movement inevitably end in failure? A popular movement has to take into account popular aspirations, and it has to throw up its own leaders. A popular movement can never emerge from neatly designed plans of NGOs with their specific target groups. Additionally, unlike popular struggles, which are based on making demands on the state and government, NGO-led 'movements' do not like to antagonise the establishment. They are organisations ready-made for co-option by vested interests.

NGOs in India, by and large, do not have it within their vision or power to transform existing exploitative social structures. In treading the narrow path of 'development' as defined by the national establishment and international agencies, they have turned their backs on the people they profess to serve. For this reason, the NGOs of today face a real danger of losing their identity.

This article is appearing simultaneously in Himal and in Ekak Matra, the Bangla language journal published from Calcutta.

E par Bangla, O par Bangla, no thank you

If media is to help Bangladesh and India understand each other, then media on either side should first begin to understand Bangladesh and India.

by | **Dipankar Sinha**

It is self-evident that Bangladesh and India, which share the longest border in all of Southasia – 4053 km – ought to get along, but that is far from the present status of the bilateral relationship, which is at a low ebb. That it is important that the media in its age-old and new-fangled forms try and restore a balance to this relationship, too, is self-evident.

Fortunately, notwithstanding its limitations and constraints, the media enjoys a good deal of credibility in the minds of the ordinary people on both sides. People tend to believe what is communicated by print media and television. The reach, power and apparent credibility of media have all increased with the proliferation of electronic media, and in particular since the advent of cable/satellite channels. As a result, media has evolved as a key actor in international relations.

Indian media reaches Bangla-desh in two layers: those of the national English/Hindi media and the regional Bangla media. In the 1970s, both played an active and direct role in publicising East Bengal's war of independence, thereby creating a unique instance of foreign media becoming a key actor in a neighbour's struggle for freedom. While the government radio and national press in India might have backed the struggle out of strategic considerations, the Bangla broadcast and print media went out of its way to lend overwhelming support. Thus, Pranabesh Sen, an employee of the Calcutta station of All India Radio, would openly declare in his popular program *Sambad Parikrama*, that he was part of East Bengal's struggle as "a soldier armed with words." Much of this support could be ascribed to pan-Bengali feelings that touched Bangla media persons on the other side of the border.

There has been a rapid descent in this kind of involvement from the heights of the coverage of 1971. Today, Bangladesh is a marginal entity as far as the mainstream media in India is concerned. The dominant representation of the eastern neighbour is that of a kind of wasteland marked by utter poverty and religious fundamentalism, a den of anti-Indian militants from India's Northeast and an official sponsor of 'infiltration'. The familiar images are those of people neck-deep in flood waters, processions demanding the death of writer Taslima Nasreen, and the burning of the Indian tri-colour. While these images of course are not fictional, it is the choice of the press and television to highlight them that carries a certain impression of Bangladesh to the Indian masses. Interestingly, there is no difference between the government channel, Doordarshan, and the private satellite channels in terms of the stereotypes they present of the Bangladeshi character.

When it comes to the Indian Bangla news media, there is a growing trend here too of trea-ting Bangladesh as 'wasteland', but this is combined with inte-nse representation of a pan-Bengali sentiment, particularly on occasions such that of Rabindranath Tagore's birthday. In promoting this pan-Bengali emotion, the Indian Bangla news media continues to play on the *E par Bangla, O par Bangla* theme ("this side of Bengal, that side of Bengal"), highlighting the commonalities within the community that was worst hit by the great divide of 1947. The reference is to an 'imagined community' based on affinity of language and culture rather than religion. But contrary to the expectations of some, this attempt at projecting similarity

There is a need for an accelerated change in mindset that will help us to go beyond the stereotypical, mythical and frenzied representations

backfires, because it threatens to dilute the status of hard-earned Bangladeshi national identity.

Ekushey

India, as a large power, looms much larger in the vision of the Bangladeshi media. For the same reason, India also emerges victim to Bangladeshi politics, which in turn generates media bias. Indeed, the coverage of India by some sections of the mainstream press seems to be marked by an anxiety syndrome that obviously has its origins in the economic and political asymmetry of the bilateral relationship.

Compared to its counterparts in India, including West Bengal, the Bangladeshi media is much more under the thrall of the political parties, i.e. the Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and, increasingly, the Jamat-e-Islami Party. The main bone of contention seems to be the controversial issue of 'Bengali vs. Bangladeshi' identity, with editorial writers feeling the need to clamour ever-louder in favour of the latter rather than the former. This ultra-nationalist posture would deny the West Bengali a share in the pride of the Ekushey movement of East Bengal for supremacy of Bangla over Urdu, and similarly it would deny the Indian Army its active role in the 1971 Bangladeshi war of independence.

It is against this backdrop of unremitting suspicion that bilateral issues have to be dis-cussed, such as the cost-benefit analysis of the supply of Bangla-deshi natural gas to India. Other items receiving periodic attention, as news and editorials as well as on television discussions, are bilateral trade, the transit facility sought by India to access its Northeast, the adverse impact of the diversion of Ganga waters by the Farakka Barrage, and so on. The Chittagong Hill Tracts no longer make much news, but the issue that seems to have overtaken all others at present is the River Linking Project proposed by the previous Bharatiya Janata Party government in New Delhi, and the impact that this would have on the national economy and environment of Bangladesh.

Salaam Walaikum

The negative representation of the other country in Bangladesh and India is intensified by the fact that there is little cross-pollination of ideas between the two countries in the form of a flow of books, magazines, journals and newspapers. There are some little magazines that enjoy a limited cross-border readership, and literary magazines such as *Desh* or *Ekak Matra* have a bi-national, intellectual clientele, but it falls to the mainstream media to pick up the challenge of removing stereotypes. But the fact remains that the copy and programming of the mainstream media on either side is long on stereotypes sprinkled with token items meant to highlight 'good official ties'.

Some change for the better is occurring with the advent of two prominent Bangla television channels. ETV Bangla and Tara Bangla, based in India, have gained easy access into Bangladeshi households. Tara Bangla carries regular programming targeted at Bangladeshi viewers, inclu ding talk shows, interviews and news. In a symbolic gesture, its newsreaders greet the audience with simultaneous 'Namaskar' and 'Salaam Walaikum'. ATN Kolkata has an agreement with NTV of Bangladesh, and it beams regular telecasts to Bangladesh, including the *Rater Khabar* daily news.

While these trends are positive, there is a need for an accelerated change in mindset that will help us to go beyond the stereotypical, mythical and frenzied representations. The political class and the bureaucracy in both countries must realise that if bilateral ties are to be raised to a higher pedestal, there must be a more nuanced mediation at the level of society. Indeed, the attempts at improving interstate relations must be complemented by generating mutual popular awareness in the cultural sphere. Policy makers on both sides must understand that India-Bangladesh relations involve a volume of emotions that go over and beyond the grammar of bilateral diplomacy, mainly because of the existence of the unique West Bengal-Bangladesh dimension.

It is thus clear that the media in Bangladesh and India can no longer remain, as it does now, appendages of official-level dialogue and negotiations. It must set out on its own to understand, explain and benefit from the coverage of each others' societies.

DAWN 17 June 2005

A question of identity
The Pakistani Southasian

by | **Sardar Aseff Ahmad Ali**

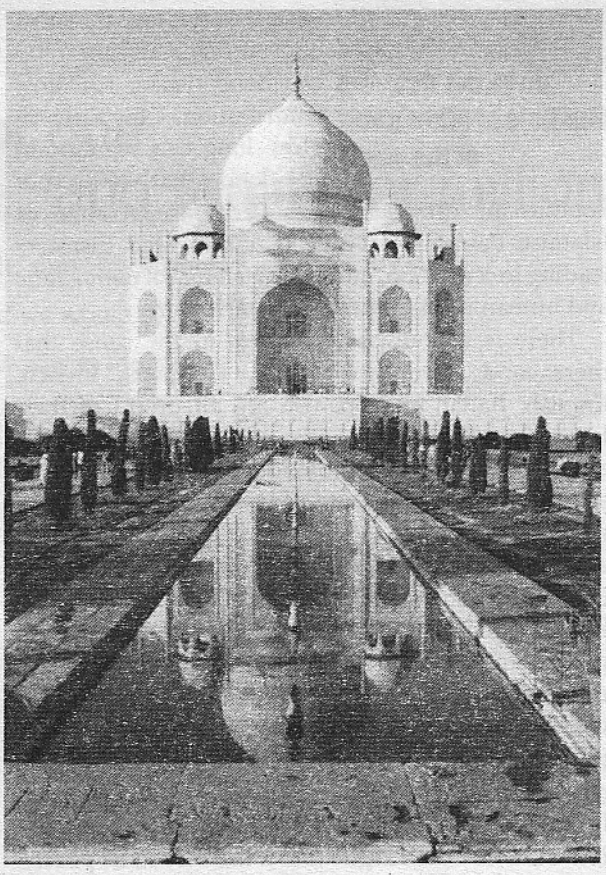
Some months back I was asked to open a photographic exhibition at the Shakir Ali Museum in Lahore. In my brief address I referred to the rich Southasian culture of which Pakistan is a part. A gentleman from the audience took exception to my remarks and later wrote to me to the effect that I had disclaimed the two-nation theory, and that the Pakistani Islamic culture was distinct from the Indian Hindu culture. For many months I have pondered the question. So important is the issue, a public answer might just be in order.

Let me at the outset declare that no one can question my Pakistani credentials, nor those of my family, which included stalwarts of the Pakistan Movement. On the issue of Pakistan's culture being purely Islamic, I cannot hazard a definition of what constitutes 'culture'. The overwhelming view now is that ethnicity and culture are what nations and societies use to define themselves. As an individual I am extremely proud of being a Pakistani and a Muslim.

Talk to a Sindhi, Baloch or a Pakhtoon and one will get an idea of our situation. Unlike the Punjabi, none is prepared to sacrifice his mother tongue or his subculture and history. Only the Punjabi middle-class and intelligentsia are too ashamed to talk to their children in Punjabi, which is perhaps among the oldest Southasian languages, rich in poetry and literature. Only in Punjab is Urdu is seen as a replacement of Bulleh Shah's Punjabi. The 'ideology of Pakistan' is too insecure to tolerate a language other than Urdu. This is not to say Urdu is not ours. It is and will remain the national language. There is no threat to Urdu from any regional language. Why is then Punjabi seen as a threat to Urdu?

My other problem is, how can religion alone explain our nationhood? If this were so, what of the 160 million Muslims of India? According to the two-nation theory, Indian Muslims would really be overseas Pakistanis stranded in India. Then there is the issue of Bangladesh. Previously, as a majority they rejected Urdu as their national language, but did not ask that Bengali, the language of the majority of the then Pakistan, be made the official lingua franca. If Urdu is the only symbol of the two-nation theory and a symbol of 'Pakistaniat', then by definition the architects of Pakistan negated the democratic basis of its genesis, i.e. a minority will dictate to the majority. Also, how do we explain the culture of Muslim Bengal in terms of the ideology of Pakistan, if the latter is to be defined in terms of the Urdu language and Islam only?

"How long can the fiction be sustained that we Pakistanis are not Southasian?"



Syncretism: the Taj has Rajput elements

Drawing the line

The intellectual problem arises in defining culture as a medium of religion only. In the Muslim world there are distinct historical and civilisational entities. It is true that practice of the tenets of Islam has much in common in all Muslim lands. In the spiritual sense there is an identity amongst Muslims all over the world. But in the temporal sense there is no one unifying identity. Each Muslim society defines its own paradigms of culture and civilization. Muslim societies of the Nile, Mesopotamia, the Indus and Oxus have pre- and post-Islamic civilizations. Their people are proud of their ancient and their recent past. They see no contradiction in claiming the past as their own.

We are Muslims of Southasia who evolved a culture of our own different from the Muslims of other parts of the world. Most of us were Hindus, but were converted to Islam by Sufi saints over the last thousand years. Over 10 centuries, those of us who came from foreign lands gave much to Southasia. A huge diffusion took place in languages, literature, music, food, poetry, architecture, paintings, etc. and we became Southasians. We should not be in denial of this reality, which cannot be wished away. Who can deny that the style of Taj Mahal's central structure minus minarets and domes is Rajput? Who can deny Ameer Khusro's contribution to music. How long can we sustain the fiction that we are not Southasian? All attempts to Persianise, Arabise or Islamise Pakistan have been unmitigated disasters leading to confusion, intolerance, denial of democratic and human rights, and, finally, terrorism.

We are Muslims of Southasia who evolved a culture of our own different from the Muslims of other parts of the world

There is a Southasian culture in the sense that there is a European culture. Germans, French, English, Italian and Spanish are all proud of their European culture and civilization. This does not take away from their individual identities, which caused so much historical discord. Why can't we conceive of a Southasian culture as a macrocosm and our own as a microcosm? This is a shared Subcontinent of races, languages and religions. In diversity and inclusion lies its identity. Southasia is several times larger geographically than the continent of Europe, and many times more complex demographically. There is vast diversity of language, race, ethnicity, nation and religion, yet there is a Southasian underpinning to it all – a commonality that it would be foolish to deny. It is time we in Pakistan accepted this as a confident nation, rather than argue that it has served us poorly. Our pride in our country and Islam cannot be so fragile that it is in any danger. An acceptance of this reality will remove the intellectual cobwebs in our mind, and remove the identity crises of Pakistan.

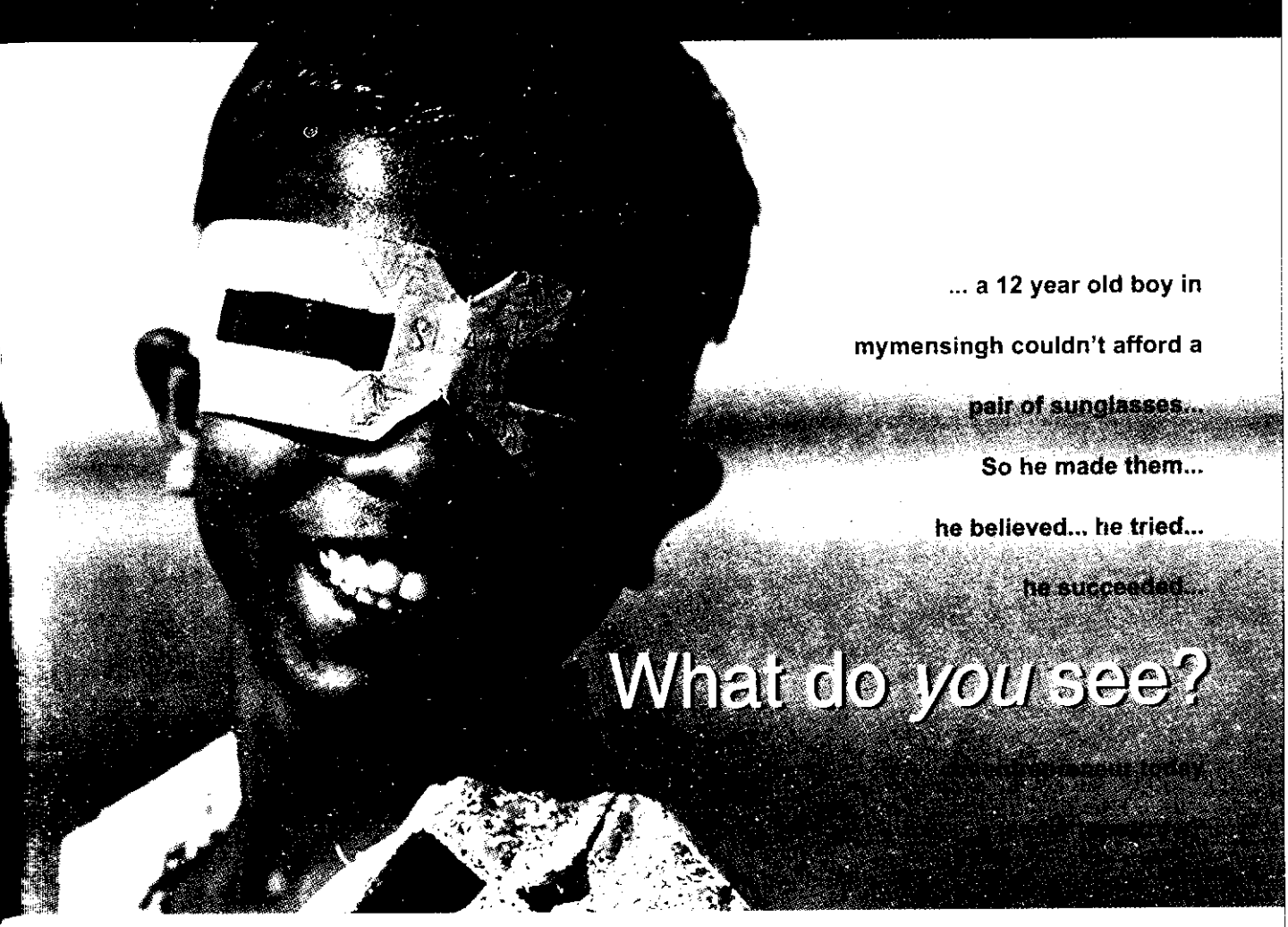
Owning the Indus civilisation

We must seek our identity in our land, in our deep roots which go back to the ancient Indus Valley civilization. To this day, our farmers use the same utensils, implements and bullock carts as those used in Mehrgarh, Harappa and Moenjodaro. Like millions of other children, as a child I too played with terracotta toys that hark back to ancient times. If Egyptian Muslims can be proud of their pharoanic past, Iraqis of their Mesopotamian and Babylonian history, and Iranians of the Fars, why can't we Pakistani Muslims take pride in the Indus Civilization?

Our history did not start with Mohammad Bin Qasim. I know of no other state or country that disclaims its own history and civilization. The whole ethos that the so-called intellectuals of Pakistani conservatism have evolved is based on the foreignness of Pakistan. The ideological history is based on conquerors and marauders, and not the gentle people of Harappa, Moenjodaro, Gandhar or Hindujah. It is true Arian Khushans, Arabs, Turko-Afghans and Persians migrated to this land, some in peace and some in war. All were assimilated in this region. None were ashamed of their new identity. They all made this land their home. None went back to Baghdad or Basra, none returned to Balkh or Bokhara.

Islam spread with the advent of conquerors; not by the sword but by the great saints who came and stayed. They preached love and tolerance. They preached inclusion. They condemned no faith, no religion. They saw truth and beauty in every religion. Through love, through spirituality, they converted millions of Indians to Islam. That is what Pakistan is all about; proud of its ancient history, proud of its diversity, proud of its gallant people and proud of its religion of the Sufi saints and their sublime poetry.

Let us wind up the identity debate and play our destined role as a proud Muslim state of Southasia. History beckons us to be a bridge between Central Asia and Southasia, between Southasia and the Middle East, and to be a moderator between Islam and the other great religions. Let us not circumscribe ourselves to some arcane and untenable definition of our statehood that belittles our ancient culture and civilisation. I do not propose to challenge the wisdom of our founding fathers, but only to re-define our identity in a historically realistic paradigm free of romanticism and arcane intellectualism based on faulty assumptions.



The future is the vision of one and reality for millions

There are some who live to get settled, some to get rich, some to get lucky.

And then there are the likes of those who once believed we would fly.

They are those who said that we would one day find our way to the moon.

They taught us conviction and they taught us freedom.

They taught us to believe.

BRAC

w w w . b r a c . n e t

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BRAC, a small-scale relief operation that started in 1971, is today the largest non-profit organisation in the South, taking health, education and microfinance programmes to 64 districts and over 68,000 villages of Bangladesh and 20 provinces of Afghanistan.

BRAC has recently started its operations in Sri Lanka.

Public Affairs & Communications, BRAC | Photo: © Syed Latif Hossain | Design: Aura Communications

Muivah's road to peace

by | **Dolly Kikon**

In an interview broadcast on the BBC on 29 April 2005, Thuingaleng Muivah, general secretary of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), made a departure when he proposed a special federal relationship between India and the Nagas, under which a separate constitution would be guaranteed to the latter. He ruled out the possibility of a quick, rough-and-ready settlement of the Naga issue within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Muivah emphasised that provisions of the Indian constitution did not guarantee anything because laws could be amended later without the consent of the Nagas.

Scholars studying the Indo-Naga conflict tend to conclude that the recognition of Naga sovereignty is an impossible demand for the Indian government to concede to. Yet, an armed conflict that has spanned over half a century has been centrally concerned with the Naga nationalist demand for sovereignty. The first Indo-Naga ceasefire agreement of 1964 focused mainly on the cessation of hostilities. Beyond that, there was no attempt to address vital issues of rights, justice, sovereignty and demilitarisation.

The 1964 agreement culminated in the infamous 1975 Shillong Accord, a humilating pact signed between Governor of Nagaland L P Singh and a six-member team of the Naga National Council. The Naga representatives, politically outmanouveured, unconditionally accepted the terms of military disengagement and agreed to a solution within the ambit of the Indian Constitution. After 1975, however, not only were the internal political power equations re-structured through bloody battles within the Naga armed opposition, but the Indo-Naga armed conflict itself escalated.

After a prolonged period of militarisation in Nagaland and the Indian Northeast as a whole, the ceasefire of 1997 between NSCN (I-M) and the Government of India led to hopes for peace among a new generation. Since then, the two parties have been engaged in a peace process. Although the peace has been fragile, it has held and has also forced Indian authorities into a dialogue with the Naga leadership. The political astuteness of the Nagas, as reflected in Muviah's recent interview, will test the limits of India's willingness to engage in the peace process. The Indian government cannot expect a Shillong Accord-style resolution this time around.

Muviah's comments, implying the need for a special relationship with the Indian state, might draw criticism from certain quarters. Article 371 (a) of the Indian Constitution already acknowledges and provides special status to social, religious and economic resources – including land – in the state of Nagaland. However, clause (b) of the provision allows the governor to use the 'law and order problem' to override the principles of custodianship to give the military greater say in civic matters. Hence, Muivah's own apprehensions and mistrust must be analysed with some seriousness. The Indian state's approach to addressing ethnic and sub-national demands has often evolved in the wake of bloody battles between security forces and the concerned communities. The suppression by the state has separated communities along ethnic, religious and territorial lines, sealed them off from each other, and forced them to create independent means to protect themselves.

A significant aspect in the post-1997 ceasefire period has been the utter lack of urgency shown by the Indian government in engaging with the political process. In contrast, the Naga leadership has initiated a process of interaction with the Naga people through consultative meetings in Naga-inhabited areas.

Muivah on BBC

Thuingaleng Muivah was interviewed on BBC World's HARDtalk India by Karan Thapar on 29 April. Excerpts:

On the dialogue between NSCN (I-M) and the Indian government:

We can come as close as possible but it's not possible for the Nagas to come within the Indian Union or within the framework of the Indian Constitution. Why? Because it amounts to dismissing the whole history of the Nagas and the Nagas cannot do that.

On sovereignty:

Sovereignty of the Naga people belongs to the Naga people and to the Naga people alone. Nagas have a right to decide their future, to determine their fate also. So long as that is there, adjustments can be made. . . So long as the national identity of the Nagas is recognised and honoured (adjustment) is possible.

On a possible federation:

When we say a special federal relationship, it has to be on the terms of the agreement that can be arrived at... It should be a federation of India and Nagalim (Greater Nagaland). Within the Indian Constitution is not possible.

On the issue of defence under a federation:

When we talk about defence we have to say that Nagaland must be defended jointly in the event of external threat. Why? Because if Nagaland would be in danger, naturally the security of India would also be threatened. And we appreciate that.

Control over external affairs:

So far as our external affairs is concerned, primarily Government of India should have them. But whenever the interest of the Nagas is affected, Nagas should also be represented.

On the Indian Constitution:

When we talk or when we say within the frame of the constitution, it is always dangerous because any provision in the constitution could be easily amended whenever expediency arises. So this is the danger. So we cannot (accept it). ... The agreement which is going to be arrived at should be incorporated in the Indian constitution (and) equally it should be incorporated in the Naga constitution.

About what made the present round of negotiations possible:

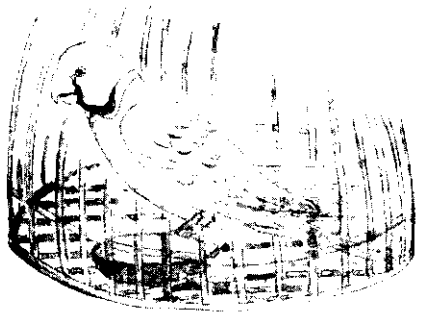
(For) the first time in history, the Government of India has recognised the uniqueness of Naga history. So it is a good chance for every one of us to seek a solution.

One of the biggest challenges to the Indo-Naga peace process is the demand for the integration of Naga-inhabited areas, which are spread out across other states of the Northeast. Indeed, the Naga people inhabit parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur besides the present-day Nagaland. Naga nationalists have reiterated that until the government of India agrees to this demand, there can be no solution. Meanwhile, the integration issue has met with opposition from the respective states in the region, and the resistance to re-mapping the existing territories is clear.

This is not to say, however, that the matter of integration of Naga inhabited areas has been outrightly rejected. It is the absence of a vibrant civic space that has furthered misconceptions about this demand. The militarisation of the public sphere in the Northeast has destroyed all existing democratic platforms where people of different backgrounds and persuasions could come together for consultations. There has been an absence of people-to-people dialogue, which could help build awareness of the aspirations of different communities, be they Dimasas, Nagas, Boros or Meities. The attitude of the Indian state and the militarisation of society has made it difficult for the communities to even come together to discuss coexistence. Without such initiatives, it is true that any attempt to re-map territories will only damage shared symbols of unity and history and invite a violent phase in the history of the region.

As repeatedly mentioned in Naga public discourse, the sole aspiration of Naga people is not a mad frenzy to break up the exisiting states but to seek just solutions to existing relations with neighbouring communities and the Indian state. Muivah's interview to the BBC highlighted the willingness of the Naga leadership to engage India in finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict, particularly because, he said, the "uniqueness of Naga history has been recognised". Indeed, there has been a sea change since the days when prime ministers of India would publicly berate Naga nationalists and vow to exterminate them. The flexibility of the Naga leadership is reflected in its efforts to nudge reluctant Indian policymakers to think of shared sovereignty on several issues. Such a step has been one of the positive results of ongoing consultations between civil society organisations of the Northeast and the Naga leadership and needs to be taken very seriously by opinion makers in the larger Subcontinent. It is on this concrete peg that hopes for a resolution to the Indo-Naga conflict can be hung.

Caged Regionalism
The disappointment of SAFTA and BIMSTEC



PK SAYA | K CHHANIJAKA KABITA

In order to take advantage of the global trade regime, countries of Southasia must first develop trade between each other.

by | **Posh Raj Pandey**

It was in 1958, with the signing of the Treaty of Rome, that the Europeans embarked on regionalism, albeit in the relatively narrow economic sense of trade liberalisation. They knew that regionalism would drive international relations in the future, and could foresee the economic benefits that would pour from efficient and productive use of available resources, an expanded market, specialization, rapid technology transfer, use of comparative advantages, and the spur of competition. In a region engulfed by mistrust and division, the pioneers of European regionalism could see ahead the peace dividend, ushered by political stability. That political stability, in turn, would be assured through increased intra-regional trade and economic exchange.

For the countries of Southasia, economic regionalism means much more than what it meant for those European pioneers. Beyond the obvious importance of trade within the Subcontinent, the additional incentive for us is that it can be a potent tool to bolster negotiating strength vis-à-vis developed countries.

Globally, economic regionalism has become a centrepiece in the commercial policy landscape, particularly after the advent of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the multilateral trade regime it supports. The debate over whether regional blocs are 'stumbling blocks' or 'building blocks' for multilateral liberalization has already ended in favour of the latter argument. Today, WTO rules provide a passage for the formation of regional blocs and Southasia would be wise to take full advantage of the facility.

There are about 235 regional trade blocks at present, and between them, they make up nearly half of global trade. A further 70 such groups are at the negotiation/proposal stage. An overarching view of regional economic combines, scattered across continents and among countries at different levels of development, reveals a confusing 'spaghetti bowl' scenario of crisscrossing and overlapping trade relationships. The majority of the arrangements wade in shallow waters, focusing only on trade liberalization. Very few have deep integration programmes targeting harmonisation of economic policy for a common market.

Theoretically, formation of a regional trade bloc is the second-best option to unilateral or multilateral trade liberalisation. However, such blocs are the only option amidst the existing complex environment, marked by countries with vested interests and discriminatory external environments. Economists are supported by empirical evidence when they argue that regional economic groups have a positive impact on the member state's living standards, with inconsequential effects on the living standards within non-members.

Economic association within the various parts of the Subcontinent was, of course, a part of the historical evolution of the region. But the formal process of regional cooperation in the modern era, among this basket of developing and least developed countries, was initiated only in the late 1980s, with the establishment of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Thereafter, the conviction among regional policy-makers on the role of intensified intra-regional trade for overall development is seen in the signing of framework agreements for the establishment of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in January 2004 and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical

and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Free Trade Area six months later. The two agreements assert that open, transparent and competitive markets among the parties will be the key drivers of economic efficiency, innovation, wealth-creation and consumer welfare for a region that houses more than a fifth of all humanity.

Divided loyalties

But rhetoric apart, the effort to concretise the vision of a Southasian fraternity through mutual trade expansion has been fraught with divided loyalties and fractured commitments. In fact, BIMSTEC, in terms of geographical composition, is SAARC minus Pakistan and Maldives, and plus Myanmar and Thailand. What this means is that, rather than looking inwards, most of Southasia is looking at East Asia as a prospective trading partner. The success of BIMSTEC Free Trade Area will naturally translate into a slowing down of SAFTA.

Another significant trend has emerged with India, the centrifugal powerhouse of regional trade and commerce, moving towards bilateral agreements with member countries of SAFTA and BIMSTEC, or with non-members beyond Southasia and East Asia. This has been followed by some of the other regional countries as well, putting the very concept of a Southasian economic bloc in a quandary.

Perhaps it is the weakness in the implementation of free trade agreements thus far that has encouraged some of these countries, including India, to run astray. Where, after all, do we stand in the wake of eight meetings of the SAFTA Committee of Experts and five meetings of the BIMSTEC Trade Negotiation Committee? Detailed negotiations on trade liberalisation, rules of origin, and a dispute settlement mechanism have been under way in both groups, and in SAFTA, the added dimension of a revenue compensation mechanism is also being discussed. But agreement has been lacking on all of these issues, despite the objective – as in the case of SAFTA – of starting implementation by 1 January 2006.

The list of sensitive products within SAFTA – products exempted from liberalization – had been initially brought within 20 percent of tariff lines. The draft provisions on 'rules of origin' – a system for determining whether goods are eligible for preferential treatment in the importing country – end up making the system unworkably stringent. The revenue compensation mechanism has been put on the back burner. To top it all off, the dispute settlement mechanism that is being worked on is virtually toothless.

Much of the developments on the SAFTA and BIMSTEC fronts have been counter-productive. There have been sceptics from the start who have argued that regional economic cooperation can be successful only among natural partners that already have high intra-regional trade at the outset. Therefore, say the sceptics, regional trade blocs among SAFTA and BIMSTEC countries are doomed to failure because existing trade within them is less than five percent of their total.

Taking this criticism in a positive spirit, while philosophically standing in favour of the concept of regional blocs as a way to countenance the new global regime for the sake of the larger population, it is obvious that the negotiation between the countries of Southasia should move towards expansion of trade. No stone should be left unturned in seeking to devise ways to lead towards such an expansion. The negotiators' instinct should be guided by the need to enhance exports between Pakistan and India, Nepal and Bangladesh, Bangladesh and India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, and so on. At the same time, intra-industry complementarities between the countries must be buttressed, not dismantled by protectionist interest groups. However, one can sense that such vested interest groups have already predisposed the on-going negotiations. One can expect anything but trade expansion by putting 20 percent tariff lines on the lists of sensitive products, as agreed to by both the SAFTA Committee of Experts and the BIMSTEC Trade Negotiation Committee, when 90 percent of the region's trade is concentrated within 10 percent of the tariff lines.

There have been sceptics from the start who have argued that regional economic cooperation can be successful only among natural partners that already have high intra-regional trade

It is not only the tariff barriers that obstruct free flow of goods within Southasia. Non-tariff barriers, including sanitary and technical standards as well as various administrative procedures, are even more significant obstacles that require immediate action. If we are serious about expanding intra-regional trade, it is important to address both tariff and non-tariff barriers simultaneously. Meanwhile, countries at a higher level of development will need to show magnanimity towards the less well-off members. They should be willing to be liberal on rules of origin and to address transitional losses in the adjustment process. A prosperous neighbor is always an asset, and India, as the regional economic powerhouse, should be the first to recognize this basic truth.

There is much to do in opening trade within Southasia, but too little is being done, and too slowly. Trade liberalization is like a resplendent bird that everyone views with awe, but it is in a cage. Trade thrives on the absence of rules or the ability to circumvent them. This is true in the rest of the world, and it is true in the Subcontinent. What we need are less rules and more commitment to a liberal regime.

Manisha take care

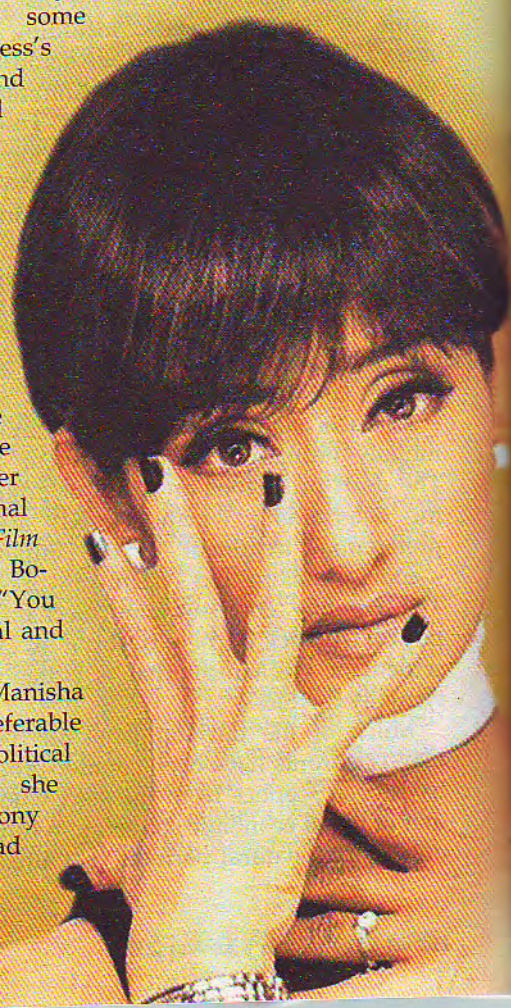
The career of the only non-Indian star in Bombay is on a nosedive; she needs to pull out of it fast.

by | **Nandini Ramnath**

Manisha Koirala recently split with her boyfriend. This piece of 'news' lingered for rather long in broadsheets, tabloids and fanzines and on websites and blogs dedicated to purveying details of the lives of the bold and the beautiful. Koirala's fresh-off-the-boat ex is Cecil Anthony, a London-based businessman whose association with the actress briefly made him a notable blip on Bombay's ever-promiscuous party radar. "The Nepali diva, Manisha Koirala, has another split. This time it is with her boyfriend of three years, Cecil Anthony. Apparently, the two had been living in different far-off cities and the relationship could not further endure this long distance test," explained the New Delhi edition of the venerable Indian broadsheet *Hindustan Times*. The paper also supplied information on the star's earlier liaisons, including actor Rahul Roy, business tycoon Ness Wadia (presently linked to Preity Zinta), and Nana Patekar. It failed to list in addition former model Ranjeev Mulchandani, a DJ named Husain (who spells his name 'Whosane') and Crispin Conroy, a former Australian ambassador to Nepal.

In the absence of any significant career enhancement, it is Manisha's off-screen life that has nurtured the Bollywood gossip grapevine for some years now. The actress's personal turbulence and her alleged drinking and drug-fuelled binges are better chronicled than her progress in cinema. This has led to much heartburn among diehard fans, and much resignation among disapproving critics. "She had a great break, and she only has herself to blame for the way her career shaped up," says Komal Nahata, publisher of *Film Information*, a respected Bollywood trade guide. "You can't mix your personal and professional life."

Perhaps it is that Manisha the party animal is preferable to Manisha the political animal. Just before she parted ways with Anthony of London, Koirala had



caused a few eyebrows to rise when she issued a statement (over e-mail) supporting the royal coup of 1 February and the state of emergency imposed in Nepal by King Gyanendra. "Our beloved and respected king had to take the step to stop anarchy," Koirala said. The statement was in tune with the support voiced by her father Prakash Koirala, son of the revered Nepali democrat, the late B P Koirala, for the king. While her grand-uncle, former Prime Minister and B P's brother Girija Prasad Koirala has been battling King Gyanendra in Kathmandu, Manisha described the monarch as "an epitome of selflessness" who was preventing "the country from falling into disgrace."

So there she is, Ms Koirala, in a most unenviable position: at odds with the movement to restore democracy in her mother country, and out of the reckoning in her adopted home, Bombay.

Letter 'M'

Koirala's most recently released film, a comedy called *Mumbai Express*, tanked at the box office. Her last notable role was back in 2002, in the film *Company* directed by noted filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma. There, she played Saroja, the nicotine-hooked moll of a character loosely based on the real-life underworld don Dawood Ibrahim. Manisha has a few upcoming releases listed, but none of them reads, or sounds, like comeback material. She also recently turned producer and bankrolled two films, *Paisa Vasool* and *Market*, both of which fared poorly. Manisha is also said to have plans to turn director. Her attempts at reinvention are being attributed to sisterly concerns: her brother Siddharth Koirala has been attempting to launch his own career as an actor, and so far hasn't got past the turnstile.

Fans are stunned at how quickly Koirala's acting career has managed to pack up. The future has never looked this dim for the 35-year-old ever since she emerged from the smog of New Delhi to star in Subhash Ghai's *Saudagar* in 1991. Back then, Ghai was one of Bollywood's top hit-producing directors. Though his finger has slipped off the audience's pulse lately (his last three films, *Taal*, *Yaadein* and *Kisna*, all flopped), back in the early 1990s he was unerring. Ghai was a star-maker who produced heroines in more than one sense and, just to please the gods, he ensured that all his conquests had names that began with the letter M – Meenakshi Sheshadri and Mahima (formerly Ritu Choudhary). Manisha Koirala had more going for her than just the first letter of her name: she was an unspoilt flower from the verdant hillside and she had a delicate, virginal beauty, underlined by one memorable photo-shoot in the *Stardust* film magazine in which she is clad in white and looking to the horizon with a lamb in her arms. She held her own in *Saudagar*, a film built around loud verbal exchanges between two of Bollywood's senior citizens, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kumar. The signing spree began.

Foreign passport

Before and after Koirala's debut, Bolly-wood has seen a steady stream of non-Indian actors who wash up on Bombay's shores in search of fame and glory. One of the earliest such 'foreigners' was Helen, whose dance numbers in more than 200 Hindi films in the 1960s and 70s reduced audiences by the million into piles of nerves. Helen, born Helen Richardson, was a British-Burmese hybrid whose family trekked to India like countless others fleeing World War II. In the 1950s and 60s, it seemed that one couldn't watch a film without a dance number featuring Helen, though her continued appearance in dare-bare costumes, skin-coloured tights, boas and blonde wigs ensured that she stayed on the fringes of acceptability. The more you saw Helen, the more you desired her, and the more you pushed her into the harem.

Mala Sinha, a star of the 1960s, can be considered Manisha's closest acting ancestor. Sinha is described thus by journalist Dinesh Rajcha on the website rediff.com: "Born a Nepali Christian, the young Mala was a chinky-eyed girl with curly hair and average height." None of these physical characteristics prevented Sinha from becoming a star and, truth be told, she was an Indian citizen of Nepali ancestry. The arrival of Pakistanis in Bollywood picked up after the 1980s – Mohsin Khan (*Saathi*), Salma Agha (*Nikaah*) and Zeba Bhaktiar (*Henna*). The latest entrant is Meera, who plays the lead role in Mahesh Bhatts' *Nazar*. But no non-Indian has made it to Bollywood stardom, except Manisha.

She was an unspoilt flower from the verdant hillside and she had a delicate, virginal beauty

Though Manisha's Nepali passport was, and still is, an interesting factoid to mine for profile writers, it did not raise eyebrows or hackles as her career took off. Her mix of political pedigree and porcelain skin made her especially desirable, even exotic, but never so alien that she couldn't have a fair chance at being a leading actress. She did come with more privilege, and baggage, than the others. Her family name gave her an aura reserved for royalty, and her schooling in Banaras and New Delhi made her more *desi* than *videsi*.

Manisha easily segued into the craze for fair-skinned actresses that has never waned in the Hindi film industry, and after *Saudagar*, she was directed by the topmost directors – Vidhu Vinod Chopra in *1942: A Love Story*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali in *Khamoshi*. Her best work has been reserved for Mani Ratnam, the Madras-based filmmaker who cast her in *Bombay* and again in *Dil Se*. Before long, though, Manisha's performance was also swinging from these uplifting

films to downright embarrassing ones, like *Sangdil Sanam* and *Grahan*. Her portrayal in *Dil Se* of the suicide bomber Meghna is Manisha's finest and most understated. It showed her ability to carry off a schematically scripted role.

Conservative Bollywood

As the acclaim swelled through the 1990s, so did the gossip. Koirala's boho chic lifestyle had never gone down too well in an industry that prided itself in wearing multiple masks even off the sets. It is only now, as late as 2005, that a top actress like Kareena Kapoor can have a boyfriend (co-star Shahid Kapoor) and flaunt the fact. For an industry that has constantly negotiated and pushed the boundaries of desire in its cinematic products, Bollywood is a notoriously conservative place: affairs are discussed with as much moral judgement as avidity; actresses who dare to turn 30 are immediately downgraded to playing the mothers of their erstwhile co-stars; stars with 'vices' like alcohol and drugs are gradually dropped from the marquee. There is an iron-cast divide between who you are and who you project yourself to be, and Koirala's singular mistake was to skate on the thin ice of acceptability and be unapologetic about her many-hued personal life. Bollywood would be unforgiving.

Koirala's singular mistake was to skate on the thin ice of acceptability and be unapologetic about her many-hued personal life

There is also the issue of ballooning weight, which Koirala has battled throughout her career and which is attri-buted at least in part to her out-of-control lifestyle. All in all, Koirala began to be seen as unstable: ergo, a box office risk.

It is easy to attribute Manisha's fall from grace to the vicious industry gossip, easy to paint her as a victim of malicious stereotyping. But really, on balance, Manisha is a victim of her own unwillingness to remain on the A-list of Bollywood actresses. She is a beautiful woman with a haunting screen presence, has been compared to Meena Kumari no less, but has become limited as an actress because she failed to challenge herself. Her memorable roles have been few and far between, and she has had to waste too much time trying to wash the mud from her image.

Somewhere along her journey from Kathmandu to Bombay, Manisha lost the roadmap. She has always lived life the way she says she wanted to, but in the end, it is the affairs that seem to add up, not the performances. She has fame, notoriety, hopefully a healthy bank balance, and still retains a fan following. Manisha needs now to get back to acting.

by | **A G Noorani**

Witnessing history
The kernel of Kashmir

A roundtable meeting was jointly organised by Panos South Asia and Himal Southasian on the subject of sustaining the peace dialogue between India and Pakistan. Specifically, the agenda was to look beyond 'confidence-building measures' and to focus on the eight-point composite dialogue between the two governments. The keynote address at the retreat, held in Bentota, Sri Lanka was presented by legal luminary and columnist A G Noorani. We reproduce below an edited transcript of his address, extemporaneously delivered. While Noorani ranged far and wide on the many subjects that make up the composite dialogue, what is presented here are his views on the all-important matter of Kashmir. The Bentota meeting was the third in a series of India – Pakistan retreats, the first two being on the role of the press in escalating bilateral tensions or ushering peace, and the second on nuclear proliferation in Southasia. A forthcoming meet is planned to discuss the subject of Kashmir itself.

This term, the 'composite dia-logue', is a rather misleading summation of what has been at the kernel of India-Pakistan relations since their birth. Immediately after partition, it became quite apparent that the basis of the Indo-Pak conflict could be neatly classed into Kashmir or 'K' and other 'non-K' issues. Kashmir on the one hand, and the others, which included evacuee property, division of cash balances, refugee movement and the division of the Punjab rivers. The passage of time dealt with some of the problems, but Kashmir remained standing in all its starkness.

Even though the problem began when the three states of Kashmir, Junagadh and Hyderabad did not accede to one side or the other, everyone knew the issue would come to a head on Kashmir. It was unfortunate that they did not devise ground rules so that the problem of all three states would be settled in one go. On 1 November 1947, less than a week after the ruler of Kashmir had acceeded to India following a raid by the tribals, India did offer Pakistan a formula- if the ruler belonged to one religion and people to another, the matter should be settled by plebiscite. This was rejected by Jinnah. It is, however, historically correct to say in the light of available documents, that even without that raid by tribals, the ruler would have acceded to India. And Sheikh Abdullah was privy to this.

Any resolution of the Kashmir issue has to be one that can be simultaneously proclaimed from the ramparts of the Red Fort in New Delhi, Lal Chowk in Srinagar and Mochi Gate in Lahore.

Jawaharlal Nehru unilaterally declared in April 1956 at the Ram Lila Ground in Delhi – "We are prepared to have a partition along the ceasefire line." In fact, the first thing he suggested to the UN Kashmir Commission, upon meeting them, was, "Are you prepared to consider alternatives?" This was because while Nehru was talking of a plebiscite, his heart was not in it. This was somewhere in June/July 1948. At any rate, in 1954-55, Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant said no to plebiscite in a speech. Panditji said then let us have a partition of Kashmir along the ceasefire line. Privately he had offered this to Liaquat Ali Khan in London in 1948, to Ghulam Mohammed at Delhi in 1955, to Mohammed Ali Bogra at Bandung in the same year, and so on. But the offer was consistently rejected by Pakistan.

To my mind the suggestion was a non-starter, and in any case, progress on Kashmir came to a dead halt. Nehru then went a step further. After having ruled out plebiscite, he also said the Kashmir issue was a bilateral matter. The term 'bilateral' - it is India's word, with Nehru saying that it is a matter to be solved directly between us. And just then Pakistan evolved this formula - either we talk about Kashmir or we do not talk at all. This was Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's contribution. He had an international outlook, and he borrowed a leaf from Sukarno's book when the latter had challenged Malaysia on Sabah by saying, "Unless you resolve Sabah, we will not talk to you." This was the line Pakistan took. There were direct negotia-tions under Anglo-American prodding and they presented some formulae. One, which was proposed in April 1963, envisaged partition, but with India ceding something like 3500 square miles to Pakistan, including the northwestern portion of Kashmir Valley. The Valley was to be split up two to one, one-third would go including Wullar Lake and Handwara. Pakistan said nothing doing, with Bhutto reminding India's then Foreign Secretary, "You are a defeated country, you were defeated by China. All we will give you is Kathua."

I need to mention some of these historical details because I find it silly the way we go on talking about trifurcation, which is a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh formula and also a formula of some Jamaat-e-Islami extremists in Kashmir. When the RSS talks of trifurcation, I notice a very self-serving approach on the part of some. You may split Kashmir from Jammu, but Jammu will not be split. Here Farooq Abdullah was right. He said, of course you may split up Jammu and Kashmir, but then all you (India) would get out of the six provinces of Jammu would be two-and-a-half. You will get Jammu, you will get Kathua and you will get two-and-half tehsils of Udhampur because the tehsil of Gul Gulabgarh has a Muslim majority. This is what trifurcation, so dear to the RSS, really means.

Will of the Kashmiri

I must tell you that in the 1964 and 1965 debates, not one country talked about UN resolutions. In fact the Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring, in his last report in 1958, said that time had overtaken the UN resolutions. In my opinion, some parts have been overtaken and some parts have not. The mechanism for the return of refugees and other similar issues are obsolete. But the fundamental principles about the will of the Kashmiri people, in my opinion, no lapse of time can overtake. Whether the will of the people has to be registered by a plebiscite, referendum or elections is another matter.

The 1965 war was, of course, primarily to get Kashmir. Even if the goal had been only to get India to talk, it had the opposite effect. Jai Prakash Narayan, foremost among the liberal lobby in India, had made his view very clear, that if the Kashmiri people are against us, why are we holding on? The war forced him to change tack. He said to the Pakistanis, "Supposing you had won the war, would you have held the plebiscite? You chose your forum, the battlefield. You lost, and now we cannot go back to the old understanding." But those who said that the matter became frozen there missed one important point, as everybody does...what about the people of Kashmir? What about their wishes? Nobody talks about that.

There was a very good opportunity for dialogue in 1966, which is when the issue of the composite dialogue came up. MC Chagla gave a draft to Pakistan's foreign minister and Pakistan said no, Kashmir will be the foremost issue. The summit in Tashkent between Ayub Khan and Lal Bahadur Shastri did not resolve anything, Tashkent left it to the parties. By now, the issue was frozen. The matter was deemed bilateral and it remained frozen till 1989. There is absolutely no doubt that the armed insurgency in 1989 was fostered by Pakistan because we have a statement by Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front leader Amanullah Khan that, "After 18 months preparation we decided to attack." And here India goofed badly.

Let me put matters in a historical perspective. The Janata Party and Zia-ul Haq got along like a house on fire. When Mrs Gandhi came back to power in January 1980, true to form, she started talking about war clouds and Zia panicked. He offered her a no-war pact which she rejected, by putting in various conditions that amounted to a rejection. I asked one of the foreign policy makers why we were rejecting it and suggested that it would give the wrong message to the Movement for Restoration of Democracy within Pakistan and also to the Soviet Union. He said the Soviet Union had not cared a tuppence for India when it decided to make friends with Pakistan. Zia then began befriending the Sikhs. That was a low cost, low investment operation and the rewards were very promising.

Just then, Mrs Gandhi decided for her own personal reasons to sack Farooq Abdullah, and he emerged a hero. Let me tell you one thing. To say that Sheikh Abdullah was the only popular leader of the Valley is utter nonsense. There were others also. I remember when I was one of his defence counsels and first went to see him in prison. I met a lawyer who was also a prisoner, Ghulam Mohiudeen Shah. He said, "Come in Noorani Saheb. Once upon a time, I was his prisoner. Now I am his co-prisoner. He has changed. I have not." So even when Sheikh Saheb was all-powerful, there were a large number of people opposed to accession to India. The historical truth is contained

in the letter by Mrs Gandhi to Jawaharlal Nehru from Srinagar in May 1948, in which she said except Sheikh Saheb, everybody says we will lose the plebiscite. So this was the position, and Sheikh Saheb was brutal. There was a law called the Enemy Agents Ordinance. People were not put in prison. He would grab them and throw them across the ceasefire line.

Militancy was never absent from Kashmir. Never. It was always there. There was a big crackdown after the 1965 war. Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq was arrested and tortured. But Pakistanis, in my opinion, are as imperialistic as Indians in their outlook on Kashmir. They had never bothered to find out whether the Valley would rise up in revolt. They said Sheikh Abdullah was behind bars, so things would go on. People did not like to revolt but the internal militancy came to the fore. However, basically the issue has an Indo-Pak format. It is on the agenda of the Security Council as an Indo-Pak question. So this composite thing was inherent in the Kashmir, non-Kashmir discord. No talks were held and the matter remained frozen until the Bangladesh war.

The Shimla Freeze

The Shimla agreement has a strange background to it. After all, the 1971 war was over Bangladesh and not Kashmir. How did Kashmir come in? Suddenly India decided that for durable peace, we must have a settlement of Kashmir. This used to be Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's stand, and here was India raising it at a time when it had won on the battlefield. At Shimla, the agreement was in two parts. One dealt with the direct consequences of the war. And the other was on the major issues.

There was a commitment in Shimla for a summit conference, while in the interim the repre-sentatives of the two countries would meet to discuss the modalities for the establishment of durable peace including the repatriation of prisoners of war and civilian internees, a final settlement of Jammu and Kashmir, and the resumption of diplomatic relations. The issue of diplomatic relations was odd. Obviously there was some tacit agreement, otherwise why would you link up Kashmir with diplomatic relations?

Much later, in 1979, during the time of the Janata Party government Atal Behari Vajpayee had challenged Mrs. Gandhi on Shimla, "You had agreed to another partition in Shimla." Mrs Gandhi denied it, and the Ministry of External Affairs also said, "We have no such record." But I stand by an article I wrote in April 1979 stating that there had, in fact, been an agreement for partition. P N Dhar has now come up with the disclosure that there was an agreement that the ceasefire line would have the characteristics of an international border.

Dhar is a good friend and I told him, "PN, if somebody were to tell you and me that we have the characteristics of men, I am sure you will slap him in the face, won't you?" To say that A has the characteristics of B is to imply that A is not B - just shares the characteristics. This was the barrister - the Berkeley graduate - in Bhutto. He knew what words meant. So some of my Pakistani friends said Bhutto fooled you.

Indeed Bhutto may have fooled us, but Mrs. Gandhi would have become a great stateswoman if she had gone to Islamabad and told Pakistan she would return the Pakistani prisoners of war, mollified Sheikh Mujib on that count by saying she would get him recognition, and told Bhutto that the private agreement of Shimla must now be converted to an agreed minute which would be kept confidential. According to James Durr, the New York Times correspondent, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had said "Give me some time."

By 1975, the whole agreement had collapsed. Bhutto raised Kashmir at Beijing, and the Indian charge d'affaires walked out. The understanding that he had agreed to it in a talk with K S Bajpai is, I think, moonshine. I do not accept this version. He had immediately retracted. I must mention to you diplomatic relations were resumed in 1976. Can you believe it? And by that time, Bhutto had internationalised Kashmir. He used to talk about Kashmir all the time. I think one Pakistani version is that Bhutto rudely said - tell her (Mrs. Gandhi) that there was no such understanding. Anyway, the whole thing fell through because it was all contingent on another summit. So you cannot bind Pakistan there, and in any case the people of Kashmir were not a party.

Sheikh Abdullah was opposed to Shimla. He said you two are nobody to discuss Kashmir in my absence. The Kashmir government was not consulted. In between, from July to December, Bhutto pleaded with Mrs Gandhi to have a second summit. She refused. She was advised by P N Dhar to settle with Sheikh Abdullah first. And she was eager not to put Mujibur Rahman on the wrong footing. Mrs Gandhi was criticized by the Jan Sangh for not being hard enough but never criticized for not being conciliatory enough in the national interest. The result was that the Sheikh Abdullah negotiations fructified only in February 1975.

Immediately after the Shimla accord, militancy erupted and the People's League was formed in jail soon after in 1978. So there has always been an anti-Pak-Indian movement in Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah or no Sheikh Abdullah.

Maintaining momentum

To return to Zia-ul Haq, he said that if my little investments in Punjab could yield such dividends, why not Kashmir? Here we did some very foolish things. Ravindra Mhatre was abducted and killed and we sent Maqbool Bhatt, who was in Tihar Jail, to the gallows. A time came when his writings were banned in Pakistan. India pressed the British to deport Amanullah Khan and where else could he have been deported? Not to Iceland but to Pakistan. There he was in the UK under the watchful eyes of MI 5 and Scotland Yard, and he landed up in the lap of Zia, who picked him up like a baby.

Amanullah Khan is on record saying, "After 18 months preparation we struck on 31st July 1988." That was the bomb at the Central Telegraph Office in Srinagar. Even Pakistan was taken aback by the fury of the unfolding events, because they had thought things would take some time to foment. Kashmir flared up and the Rubaiya Sayeed kidnapping gave another boost to it. This is when Pakistan got fired up. In February 1990, Benazir Bhutto and her colleagues in the Inter Services Intelligence decided to float the Hizbul Mujahideen. Nobody had heard of this body until even a couple of years earlier. Because they dreaded the JKLF and with Amanullah Khan being a most quarrelsome man, they decided on the Hizbul Mujahideen.

An internecine war broke out between the two. Pakistan did not want independence for Kashmir. Amanullah Khan used to tell them, "Look if you have a pro-secessionist body it becomes a territorial dispute. If you have a liberation body it is liberation movement like the PLO." Nothing doing. If a Muslim majority area could be independent, why not Baluchistan, why not Sindh? Anyway, that was the logic. At this time, after the whole issue had erupted for the first time in mid-1992, Mian Nawaz Sharif wrote a letter to P V Narasimha Rao, invoking Paragraph Six of the Shimla agreement on Kashmir. Under Para Six, both governments agreed that they would meet at a mutually convenient time so that there would be a commitment for a summit conference. And now Sahibzada Yaqub is on record saying in the Pakistan Assembly, I think, that to date neither side has invoked the Shimla Agreement.

Here let me tell you an aside. Under the Indian Constitution, Kashmir remains a live dispute because there is a provision, Article 245, which says that to enforce an international agreement, Parliament can make a law and override even matters of state autonomy. But as applied to Kashmir there is a proviso, providing that no final agreement on Kashmir shall be made without the consent of the government of Jammu and Kashmir. The reason is very simple. In 1949, they were committed to UN resolutions and the Constitution of India was drafted in 1949. Politics moved ahead and the Constitution has remained the same. And there are any number of assurances on record at that time that this

will not foreclose a plebiscite. Anyway, political reality is one thing and the law is another. By the time this issue crystallized way back in 1992, Narasimha Rao took the stand that we will talk about Kashmir only if cross-border terrorism stops because the Shimla Agreement is one composite whole. Pakistan felt that it is the only lever they have. If inspite of insurgency at this level, you do not talk about Kashmir, when the insurgency collapses what leverage would you have?

It is no use saying when the masses come out in Kashmir, that this hartal is a forced thing. It may be somewhere. But you cannot force thousands to throng funeral processions for slain militants. You cannot force women to go to the windows to weep. And here, there is a complete barrier not only between India and Pakistan on this discourse, but between Kashmir and the rest of India. The correspondents do not report some of the facts and neither do the correspondents in Pakistan. You have to read the Kashmiri press in English and here I must pay a tribute to my friend's paper The Kashmir Times. He reports very candidly and he, like me, is opposed to Kashmir's secession I may mention.

The Pakistanis, I must tell you, have a fear complex even in the best of their diplomats: "Bhai kya hoga agar aap solve karenge...." (What will happen if you resolve these things?). If even without a Kashmir solution, we get along fine, then they have this fear that we will feel no need to resolve Kashmir.

The composite dialogue will go on, but there is one major element this time that was never there before in our history. Such a remarkable groundswell of public opinion in favour of India-Pakistan détente was never there earlier. A very good friend reminded me before I came to this meeting in Bentota, "Noorani, you forget one thing. This groundswell will eventually influence governments, so keep up this momentum."

The worst mistake Pakistan could make is to say since there is no momentum, let us not talk. No, I suggest Pakistan should persist and I will tell those people who believe in progress on the Indian side that they should persuade the government to carry on talking. We must keep up the momentum. What we need to do is to eliminate the two extremes – plebiscite and making permanent, the Line of Control. I have this formula which I call the Red Fort, Lal Chowk and Mochi Gate formula. A settlement must be one which the Prime Minister of India can sell to the people from Red Fort so that he can persuade Parliament, the leader of Pakistan from Mochi Gate in Lahore and the Chief Minister of Kashmir from Lal Chowk in Srinagar.

Superhuman porters

It has always been believed that the porters of Nepal are the strongest load-carriers on Earth. With a strap that goes across their foreheads to carry the weight, they lean forwards to balance their wickerwork baskets piled high with goods. They grunt and heave their way up and down the Himalayan trails for days on end. It had seemed superhuman, it apparently is.

The load-bearing capacity of the Nepali highlander has been recorded by more than one scientific team on the Everest trail up to the Sherpa market town of Namche Bazaar. The teams have studied the rugged men and women of Nepal's midhills who routinely carry loads that greatly exceed their own body weight to altitudes that would give any seasoned trekker pause. In a new study published in the academic journal *Science*, physiologist Norman Heglund and his colleagues from the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium set out to determine exactly how the porters are able to carry so much.

BEN AYERS

Setting up a field research station near Namche Bajaar (height 3500 metres), the team examined over 100 male and female porters, chosen at random. The scientists determined the body weight and the weight of the loads carried by the selected porters, whose ages ranged from 11 to 68. Special masks were also used to monitor the oxygen intake of working porters as they climbed to reach the weekly Saturday bazaar at Namche.

On a single day before the Saturday market, the study counted more than 642 porters hauling an estimated 30 tons of freight up the steep climb from the Dudh Kosi valley. Most of these porters had traveled ten or more days by foot from the roadhead town of Jiri – logging more than 8000 metres of climbing and 6300 metres of descent. The average male porter on this route carried a load that amounted to 96 percent of his body weight, and female porters carried roughly 66 percent. The largest load observed was a whopping 183 percent of the carrier's body weight.

(An earlier study by scholar Nancy J. Malville published in *The American Journal of Human Biology* in 2001 studied male porters on the same trade route, but closer to Jiri. This study found the average load to be approximately 150 percent of the carrier's body weight. One explanation for the discrepancy with the *Science* report may be that the porters sell goods to households and stores en route to Namche, thus shedding weight as they proceed.)

Portering populations across the world use their heads to support their burdens, but none carry loads as heavy as those carried by the Nepalis. The source of the incredible strength of these porters is still unclear, but the *Science* article speculates that it may be tied to their short stature combined with their painstakingly slow walking pace and frequent rests. The researchers noted that the porters were extremely efficient workers – the average tourist trekker expends the same amount of energy to carry 15 percent of her body weight as a porter carrying 100 percent.

The sheer strength of these men and women and the astounding weight of their burdens is also a testament to the harsh realities faced by Nepal's poorest citizens. As the economy of the country continues to plummet, fuelled by the growing political instability and the near-collapse of the tourism industry, one wonders where the porters will turn next. Once the demand for their goods decreases, they will find themselves with even fewer options for survival. These men and women have already pushed the limits of human strength and endurance, and now they are being burdened even more.

- Ben Ayers

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT

Hard Livelihood: Second Conference on Himalayan Portering is planned to be held in Spring 2006. The first Hard Livelihood conference was held on 3-4 August 1995. Contact: **Deepak Thapa, Himal Association, Lalitpur, Nepal.**
Email: deepak@himalassociation.org

Hefty deity

Shri Hanuman, who should have been riding the airway from the Himalaya to the Sri Lankan coast on a search and rescue mission, today stands perplexed at a busy north-Delhi intersection. Sita's distress is forgotten as the 175 foot brick-and-cement figure straddles the Pusa Road roundabout next to Karol Bagh, unused even after all these years to the traffic.

It is actually a statue, this humongous figure, a gigantic equivalent to the 'monkey god' images that sprouted all over north India along with the rising tide of political Hindutva in the early 1990s. Work began on the Karol Bagh Hanuman in 1991, but immediately the structure was encased in bamboo scaffolding as a design flaw was discovered which could have sent him crashing to the ground in undeserved ignominy. And so there he has stood all these years, the scaffolding taken off only when the termite-weakened bamboo has had to be replaced.

Recently, some more scaffolding was added. Suraj Kumar, trustee of the temple that lies at the statue's base, says stronger buttresses were required so that the arms of Shri Hanuman, weighing 400 kilos each, could be attached to the body. All these years, he had been without the upper limbs.

At its base, the structure straddles the cavernous mo-uth of a demon that you enter by walking on what seems to be the tongue. Inside are a variety of deities, including Shiva, Kali and Krishna. A Sai Baba was also found. There are two stories to the temple and the legs of the deity start their journey upwards from the second floor.

While Shri Hanuman remains ensnared by scaffolding, a Delhi Metro line has come up right under his chin. The line is to become operational in a few months, and there is no saying what the train's rumbling reverberations will do to the hefty deity. If we were he, we would be praying to Lord Ram.

Borrindo

When archaelogists excavated the 5000 year-old ruins of Moenjodaro, they came upon a curious clay object with holes poked into it. It turned out to be a musical instrument, played with fingers placed on the apertures.

The instrument is still in use today in the province of Sindh, where Moendjodaro lies, and it is called the borrindo. But there is only one person remaining who plays it, a man who goes by the name of Zulfikar *(see pic)*. A team of five Pakistani folk music connossieurs went out into the rural heartland of Sindh recently to come away with a 16-part radio series that is being broadcast on the BBC Urdu Service. They also recorded Zulfikar playing the borrindo.

Says journalist and filmmaker Farjad Nabi, who was also part of the BBC team, "Sindh is as diverse in its folk music as in its terrain, from the Thar desert to the mighty Indus and onward to mountainous Kohistan. The folk music of Sindh stands as a link between modern times and ancient traditions. And the borrindo takes us right back to the beginning of civilisation."

Besides recording folk musicians all over Sindh, Nabi and the team also visited the shrines of Lal Shahbaz and Shah Latif Bhitai, which have musical traditions of their own. The great poet of Sindh, Shah Latif, not only wrote poetry and put it to song, but even invented a string instrument called the tamboora, which is not found outside of Sindh.

The BBC series is titled 'Aaj ka Beejal', after a legendary musician referred to in the folk stories of Sindh. Readers can join the musical trek through the province by following the link on the Net:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/specials/14442 akb_sami_ms/

Khamosh Pani

The re-writer of HISTORY

Indians, and some Pakistanis, rave about a piece of pure fiction, willing to believe it as fact.

by | **Ajmal Kamal**

Pakistan-born director Sabiha Sumar's debut feature *Khamosh Pani* has all the ingredients that can make a film click in post 9/11 Southasia, especially as our two traditional enemy countries are being forced to give peace a try. The youthful director had all the reasons to believe that her film would be received with enthusiasm. Hers is a charming effort to combine all current preoccupations into a neat whole, including the ever-increasing interest in the Partition of 1947, the phenomenon of militant religious fundamentalism, the continuing misogyny within the subcontinent's communities and the so-called war against terror. If the reviews in various publications, especially from India, are anything to go by, Sumar has not been disappointed. However, in her effort to connect these diverse and rather complex social and historical realities with one another, she seems to have preferred to rely more on her imagination than on the facts of recent history.

Khamosh Pani is the story of a Sikh woman from a village now in Pakistani Punjab, who survives the bloodbath of 1947 riots, when women fell victim not only to men on the other side of the religious divide, but also to their own kin. Her family wants its womenfolk to kill themselves by jumping into a well rather than be violated, but our main character flees. She later finds herself in the custody of a Muslim, whom she marries, after converting to Islam and taking the name Ayesha. The film begins in the late 1970s when Ayesha has grown into a middle-aged woman, a widow who makes ends meet by teaching the Qur'an to village girls. It is during this time that her teenage son Saleem slides into the clasp of the destructive jehadi militancy engendered by Gen Zia-ul Haq's Islamisation campaign.

This is the time when Sikh pilgrims from India have begun regular visits to the sacred gurdwaras in Pakistan. One of the pilgrim groups includes Ayesha's brother, who looks for and eventually finds his sister. The discovery of this Sikh connection enrages the Muslim villagers, including Saleem. The pressure mounts and in the end Ayesha jumps into a well and, so to speak, finishes the unfinished business of Partition. In the film's rather inexplicable finale, the supposed war on fundamentalism of Pakistan's current military ruler is hinted at favourably.

RAJESH KC

Riot in the script

The casualty in *Khamosh Pani* is history. Sumar is insensitive to social and historical nuances and her rewriting of Pakistan's recent past is so crude that only those desperate to be pleased by this politically correct product will be able to ignore its gross inaccuracies. To begin with, the director portrays Pakistan under the military rule of Gen Zia as constituting a sharp departure from the way it was in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's time, both in terms of religious bigotry and its anti-India stance. The film's logic necessitates this construction, for how else would

one link the fundamentalism of that era with Partition? However, anybody with the slightest understanding of Pakistani politics of the 1960s and 70s would know that Bhutto's appeal to the Punjab electorate – after the 1965 war and the Soviet-sponsored Ayub-Shastri negotiations at Tashkent – was based on strong anti-India rhetoric. Without that appeal to nationalist feelings, there would have been no question of his coming to power in the post-Bangladesh Pakistani state.

The same logic of the script forces Sumar to concoct a Sikh-Muslim riot in the rural Punjab of late 1970s. The idea of such a riot is rather hard to swallow. First, Pakistan's anti-India politics has hardly ever been anti-Sikh as such, the strongest vitriolic being reserved for the 'Hindu Bania'. Second, the riot is portrayed as being the handiwork of fundamentalists encouraged by the Islamist policies of Gen Zia. But one recalls that the military government in those days, and later, was especially friendly towards the Sikhs. Their Khalistan movement had touched a sympathetic chord on the Pakistani side of the border.

The biggest problem lies in the violent reaction of the villagers, including her son, to the discovery of Ayesha's Sikh antecedents. This goes against the traditional male reaction in situations of conflict in this part of the world. A woman from the enemy community, captured and converted – and assimilated to such a degree that her sole occupation is to teach the Qur'an –would usually be a matter of pride rather than shame for the bigoted, tribal male ego. But the riot is indispensable to the script if the aim is to force the poor woman to jump into the well and thereby provide the required connection between 1979 and 1947.

All this material could still have produced the intended effect, with much less crudeness in the finished product, in the hands of a more sophisticated rewriter of history than Sabiha Sumar and her scriptwriter. What one finds surprising is the nonchalance with which this fare has been dished out and the eagerness with which it is being lapped up.

Material to despise

But perhaps it is not so surprising after all. As journalist M J Akbar has written, "It is currently unfashionable to be aware of history, particularly the history of your own country." Considering her past experience in the art of forcing facts to suit the imagination (not to speak of more down-to-earth requirements), Sumar is well suited for the job of directing *Khamosh Pani*. One of her early exploits in the field of documentary filmmaking, *Where the Peacocks Dance* claimed to document the Sindhi nationalist movement in Pakistan. When it was screened in Karachi back in the 1980s, the film created some furore for having played fast and loose with the topic and the interviewees. (The reference to *Peacocks* is surprisingly missing from Sumar's filmography on the internet).

The Indian reviewers' reactions to *Khamosh Pani*, their showering of undeserved praise for its handling of history, can perhaps also be explained. They are after all no less susceptible to the urge of oversimplifying history than the film's scriptwriter. This tendency has its origins in the facile assumption that, given the common past of the two countries and the undesirability of Partition, it should not take much effort to understand the happenings in post-1947 Pakistan. This is an assumption the Indian reviewers are hardly likely to entertain while trying to make sense of any other society.

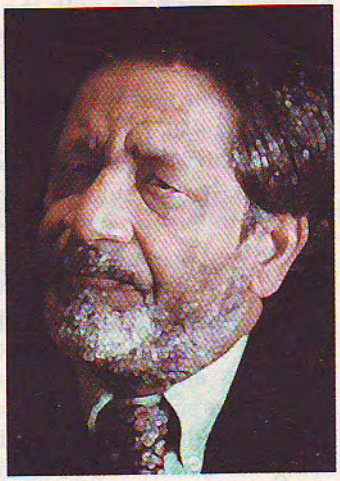
The simple fact is that those who wish to understand Pakistani society in any depth must approach the subject with a great deal more seriousness and care than is currently evident. The recent efforts at developing a spirit of friendliness between the two countries, admirable and necessary, will be for naught if thinking people don't adopt a more critical attitude on issues of history.

When *Khamosh Pani* was scheduled to be screened at the third Kara Film Festival in December 2003 in Karachi, the event coincided with a convention of the Pak-India Forum for Peace and Democracy, which had brought more than 200 Indians to the city. Among them were two relatively young filmmakers, one from Calcutta and the other from Jharkhand. They were eager to attend the screening of Sumar's production, which had received great attention in film circles in India. I told them not to worry – that as Indian guests in Pakistan they would definitely find a place in the hall. After two days of listening to talk of India-Pakistan camaraderie in the conference hall of the Beach Luxury Hotel where the Pak-India Forum was meeting, and of eating hot, oily food three times a day, the filmmakers were literally stewing in the friendship juices and willing to praise anything Pakistani, including, of course, material that the more cynical among us Karachiwallahs have learned the hard way to despise.

Anyway, I found myself watching Sumar's film flanked on either side by the gentleman from Jharkhand and the gentleman from Calcutta. They were making it a point to exclaim and make known their pleasant surprise at anything they found heroic – in the dialogue or action – in a hopeless place like Pakistan ruled by its army and dominated by the mullahs. The twosome's wholly uncritical reaction was a foretaste of what was to develop in the coming year into the aforementioned avalanche of raving reviews in Indian newspapers and websites.

To be fair to the Indians, not a few Pakistani viewers attending the Karachi event and the rare screening of *Khamosh Pani* reacted more or less similarly. Given our general attitude towards the facts of our remote and recent past, in both countries, this kind of film can be expected to define standard history before long.

Naipaul's Naxalites



The Nobel laureate rails against failed revolutionaries in India and then, perhaps in the interest of fairness, strikes a few blows at England's working class.

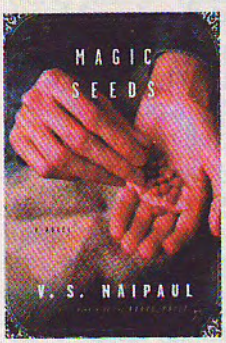
by | **Amitava Kumar**

A review written nearly 20 years ago – the book was V S Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* and the reviewer Salman Rushdie – ended with the observation that the word 'love' could be found nowhere in the text and that this was "very, very sad."

I am happy to report that that word occurs at least once in Naipaul's latest novel, *Magic Seeds*. It comes towards the end of the book. The protagonist, Willie Chandran, is listening to his friend Roger, a lawyer in London, as he describes his feelings for his mistress. Roger says, "Having got to know Marian, I wished to know no other woman in that special way, and I wonder whether that cannot be described as a kind of love: the sexual preference for one person above all others."

There is little love in this novel, but I didn't miss it, and not only because there is such distance that divides Naipaul's characters from each other. The truth is that a greater distance divides Willie from himself – and Naipaul is exact, if not also exacting, in his mapping of the arid landscape of loneliness and dislocation.

Willie Chandran's early life – his unhappy boyhood in southern India, his travel to England for his education and then his later stay in Africa – had been the subject of Naipaul's previous novel, *Half a Life*. The current work takes up the narrative with Willie in his early forties. The story is told in two parts: the first half is set almost entirely in India and is presented as an account of Willie's travels – and travails – with a murderous Maoist group; the shorter second section follows Willie's return to London, where he had spent his youth as an insecure, indigent student.



V S Naipaul
Magic Seeds
Picador, 2004

Razor's Edge

For most readers in Southasia, the first half of the book will be of greatest interest, not least for its critique of the region's middle-class leftists, who for reasons of vanity and worse, attempt to foment revolution. Willie's, and Naipaul's, sympathy is for the poor, not for their protectors. (One of the leftist ideologues that Willie meets soon after his return to India points to his servant girl and says, "She is fifteen or sixteen. No one knows. She doesn't know. Her village is full of people like her, very small, very thin. Cricket people, matchstick people. Their minds have gone after the centuries of malnourishment. Do you think you can make a revolution with her?") Scenes like this provide a prelude to the elaboration of the enduring Naipaulian theme of failure, and it must be said that the return to customary bleakness provides one of the lesser joys of reading *Magic Seeds*.

Half a Life had begun with the line: "Willie Chandran asked his father one day, 'Why is my middle name Somerset? The boys at school have just found out, and they are mocking me.'" The story of the name turned out to be rich with ironies. In a rebellious act that was also

an act of cowardice, Willie's upper-caste father had become a mendicant. This was in a princely kingdom in the India of the 1930s. But in that role, he was visited by the writer Somerset Maugham and became the source for the latter's book *The Razor's Edge*. Willie had been named after the author. When once his father asked Willie what he thought of that, Willie had replied, "I despise you."

In Naipaul's work, the names of books and authors, and the record of their use, repeat the story of newness, distortion, and often, loss. This is another of the smaller pleasures of reading him, although I suspect it would make Naipaul more popular among literary-minded readers, readers who like being charmed by the names of Victorian and Edwardian titles.

There is a larger story that Naipaul is telling even in the story of names. This is the saga of miscegenation – of what happens when literatures and cultures and people travel and mix with one another. It is another of Naipaul's unhappy obsessions and it finds expression in *Magic Seeds* in various pessimistic and repeatedly alarming forms. One could argue that the first half of the book is a narrative about the consequences of transplanting Marx and Lenin and Mao onto the Indian countryside. It is also proper to Naipaul's vision that Willie joins the wrong guerrilla group by mistake. The book's second half deals with the mixing of classes in England and how this process gets played out in bedrooms of convenience. Roger's painful experience with his working-class mistress is intended as an example of this thesis. But Roger's tirades are not limited to women – they include immigrants, Arabs, the common people.

The tone throughout, but especially in the latter part, is polemical and recalls some of Naipaul's own racialist statements in interviews. (We again meet Marcus, a West African diplomat, who "lived for inter-racial sex, and wanted to have a white grandchild." He succeeds. "His half-English son has given him two grandchildren, one absolutely white, one not so white." The novel closes with the marriage of the parents of the grandchildren. "It's the modern fashion. Marriage after the children come.") I'm tempted to say that the text is in equal parts misanthropic and misogynist, but that would be wrong, because the brutality is sharpened by what can only be described as honesty, not to mention tenderness, vulnerability, and even affection.

I found the book a pleasure to read. By now, one knows what to expect in Naipaul. His themes, sometimes even his motifs, repeat themselves. Depending on one's taste, this can be either satisfying or exhausting. I read him with the greatest attention because there is no one else who can turn, with such vividness and unsentimental intelligence, mere journalistic observation into novelistic prose.

A thing of beauty

Some years ago, I had heard that Naipaul had been interviewing members of the People's War Group in Andhra. The writer had told the BBC: "I met some of the middle class people who'd gone out to join the revolution and I wasn't impressed by them at all. I thought they were vain, I thought they were not a quarter as bright as they thought they were." This book is a report on the shallowness Naipaul encountered, but it begs the question: What if Willie had not "fallen among the wrong people" and had joined the right revolution, the one for which he had left Berlin and returned to India? Would Naipaul's portrayal have been more sympathetic? I am inclined to think not.

And yet, before I end, I must note that although the term 'love' is a rarity in *Magic Seeds*, one word that is often to be found is 'beauty'. Naipaul uses it to describe the turquoise flame of the furnace of a sugar factory where Willie performs hard labour; the scene in a weaver's colony; fields of mustard and peppers; poor villages; the black-trunked trees in the small garden that Willie sees when he returns to London; bound volumes of old magazines; the names of the streets in the great city, names like Park Lane and Grosvenor Lane; even the ceramic hobs on the cooker in the kitchen.

The list, unremarkable in itself, gives rise to another thought. I wonder whether this cannot be described as a kind of love: observation and passion finding expression in elegant language which thoughtfully gives order to ordinary life.

Although the term 'love' is a rarity in *Magic Seeds*, one word that is often to be found is 'beauty'

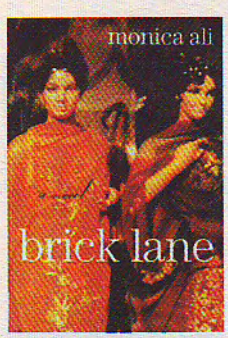
Women and work
employment and empowerment

Review article by | **Firdous Azim**

The two works under review include a piece of fiction and a factual research report on the choices women make in the labour market in Bangladesh. The books are bound together by more than the acknowledgement that Monica Ali makes to Naila Kabeer's work, from which she says she "drew inspiration."

Ali's Brick Lane has been one of those books about Southasia written in English and in the West that is much feted in its place of origin, but dismissed by native Southasian readers as sensationalised and pandering to Western notions and ideas. Both responses are over-determined. Perhaps the novel did not merit, on purely literary considerations, the kind of ovation it received in the overseas media, even being nominated for a Booker Prize. It seemed that Ali was being judged more on the merits of being from Bangladesh, a country that has stayed out of the sphere of Southasian writing in English. Also, her books represents a part of the discovery of multicultural London, which had been celebrated a few years previously by Zadie Smith in White Teeth. Written post 9-11, Brick Lane contained, for Western readers, valuable insights into both exapanding Islamisation and more conventional Islamic practices and beliefs.

Leaving aside these considerations, what is valuable in Ali's book is the fascinated gaze that the author – middle-class and British, notwithstanding her Bangladeshi roots – casts on her sisters living in the East End of London. The biographical elements in the book are subsumed under the story of two Bangladeshi sisters, whom fate has pushed onto very divergent paths. Each is made to choose a life of her own, and the choice centers around work, marriage and sexuality, as well as the ability to free oneself from a predetermined destiny.



Monica Ali, Brick Lane, Doubleday, London, 2003.

The real thing

Nazneen and Hasina are two sisters from Dhaka. Both end up working in the garments industry, Hasina in Dhaka and Narayanganj sweatshops and Nazneen doing piece-work in London. Neither sister is consciously looking for employment or 'empowerment', but the progression of life ensures that work and self-dependence is all that they can rely on. Neither sister had thought of joining the labour market, but both end up there. The matter of work – its availability, its nature and its place in a woman's life – is brought to the fore by the author in this work of fiction.

Hasina is the headstrong sister back in Bangladesh, running away from home to marry her boyfriend, who subsequently deserts her. She is buffeted along by life's challenges, and starts work in a garments factory before sliding into sex work and thereafter turning to domestic service. Marriage and men loom constantly in the background of her story, but her male 'saviours' turn out to be undependable to the last one, and Hasina is left to carry on as best as she can.

Nazneen – the heroine of this novel – starts out as the 'good' sister, obedient to her parents and marrying Chanu

Mia, who happens to live in London. A believer in fate, she unquestioningly takes whatever life's cards deal out to her. It is her unemployed husband who buys her a sewing machine on borrowed money and brings her a lot of zippers to be stitched on to dresses.

In London, Nazneen's piece-work gives her a new sense of power as it opens up to her another world. Through Karim, a young middleman who links her to a garment manufacturer, Nazeen begins to gain an idea of global political events – of starving children in Iraq, of the situation in Bosnia – and of the new connotations that terms like 'jihad' and 'taqwa' had acquired in twenty-first century Britain. She becomes acquainted with local Muslim politics, where a search for identity leads British-born Bangladeshis who have never visited Bangladesh to look for their roots in global Islam.

Karim and Nazneen become lovers, and at one point Karim confesses he finds Nazneen attractive because she is the 'real thing'. The 'real thing' means that she is an 'unspoilt' village lass from Bangladesh, a land he has never seen but with which he nurtures an intimate connection. While Nazneen opens up this pristine 'real' world to Karim, he brings her in close touch with contemporary global struggles along with the local responses that are mounted in the immigrant-held streets and neighbourhoods of Western metropolises. When Nazneen watches with her husband the events of 9/11 on television, she understands the connections that the event has with the lives that she and the people around her are living. That is quite a departure.

Nazneen's 'awakening' is effected not only through work and sexual association, but also through a bond she develops with her friend Razia. The two women share similar lives – husbands who have been thrust upon them, a London habitat, work and children. In the end, Nazneen decides to stay back in London even as her husband decides to return home to Bangladesh. It is Razia who gives her the space and the ability to make that choice. Nazneen emerges as the decisive character in Ali's novel – the person who grows and comes into her own. The men in the story, including the husband and the lover, remain people with indeterminate ideas and vague words. They are not people of substance.

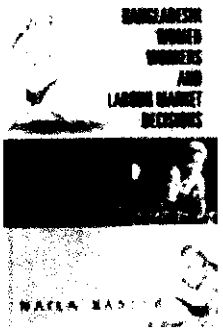
Sense of worth

From Monica Ali's fiction, which at times rises to the heights of what imaginative work should be and at other times disappoints through its somewhat lazy weaving together of events and characters, let us turn to the work cited as its inspiration – Naila Kabeer's *The Power to Choose*. Kabeer's title itself hints at the subject of the analysis: women's ability to choose their roles in the labour market. This book was researched and written out of a sense of urgency, to explain two very different responses to the selfsame phenomenon. Kabeer recalls her own sense of wonder at seeing the Dhaka streets transformed by the presence of women garment workers walking to and from work. But then there was the hue regarding bad working conditions and child labour, publicity which actually threatened the newly-emerging garments manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. What has resulted from Kabeer's concern is a remarkable record of Bangladeshi women's access to the labour market and the increase in choices they have from the success of the garment industry.

Beyond the broader economic and social considerations, the value of this report is enhanced by the first-person testimonies of women actually discussing their place in the labour market, the choices they have made, and the options that may have been available. How does one quantify or classify such testimonies; how does one categorise these life stories according to social science or economics? The question of empowerment – the power to choose – comes into operation with the decision to work, regardless of how that decision is made or who makes it.

Once a woman earns money, her position in the household changes noticeably and she also immediately gains more self-respect. Young women proudly ask their parents not to provide dowry, as they are now 'dowries' themselves! Older married women keep a little bit of their savings aside, to spend in ways that they choose. The dignity

Monica Ali's fiction at times rises to the heights of what imaginative work should be and at other times disappoints through its somewhat lazy weaving together of events and characters



Naila Kabeer, The Power To Choose: Bangladeshi Women Workers and Labour Market Decisions, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2001.

When women put pen to paper, it is often assumed that the secrets of a woman's life will be bared and a confessional autobiographical element will emerge

that work provides depends on several factors, including class, perception of choices, and so on. There has been a sea change in social values, with the enhanced public visibility of women in public spaces and the acceptance of the very idea of women working long hours outside their homes. All this has had an immense impact on how women are viewed in the country as a whole, and it helps that they now contribute to the largest foreign-exchange earning industry in the country. Lobbying for women's welfare in other sectors of the market has also become easier.

Naila Kabeer emphasises women's decision-making powers, for many believe that the garment worker ladies are merely 'dupes' of the marketplace, with little choice in entering the labour force and having little control over their earnings. The testimonies of the women presented by Kabeer tell an entirely different story – one of increasing empowerment, a growing sense of worth, and greater control by women over their lives and livelihood. These women compare their working conditions – low pay, long working hours, and so on – not with ideal situations but with the options they see available to them. They are able to compare different garment factories and they know where the pay is regular and where the working conditions and facilities are better. The women in the testimonies do not agree that you lose respectability by working in a factory, and they reiterate that respectability and even 'purdah' is something intrinsic to the individual woman and that generalisations made about 'garment girls' are unfair.

Her research took Kabeer to study London's garment industry as well. There, she discovered migrant women working from their homes, often under the direct control of their husbands and brothers, who may serve as channels to the factory. The women in London did not exercise the kind of choice that the women in Bangladesh reported, and neither did they occupy a central position in labour market discourse. In fact, Kabeer shows that home-based work is often overlooked in the trade union discourse of the United Kingdom. The story of Bangladeshi women in London is the story of dependent migrants, starting with dependency on the males who processed their migration papers and ending in reliance on their husbands, brothers or fathers. Meanwhile, the family fears of external influence on the woman, by which she would lose her Bengali cultural identity, thereby putting at risk the cultural and religious identity of the community as a whole. It is within these constraints that immigrant Bengali women in London set out to work and to negotiate their place within the confines of their families.

Women on women

The two books under review – one a piece of fiction and the other a work of socio-economic research – bring to the fore the issue of women writing about women. When women put pen to paper, it is often assumed that the secrets of a woman's life will be bared and a confessional autobiographical element will emerge. When that does happen, the authors are accused of being self-indulgent and vain. On the other hand, when women write about 'other' women, eschewing the autobiographical, they are damned for being patronising or even voyeuristic, and castigated for not delving enough into their subjects. This was definitely the response that Monica Ali received from her fellow Bangladeshis in London, and perhaps explains the relative silence that has greeted her back in Bangladesh. But the 'flight of imagination' that marks her novel must be welcomed, for it amounts to an act of solidarity, an expression of respect for women whose lives are like those of the protagonists in Brick Lane. The shortcomings of the book are those of style and story-telling, not of sincerity or sisterly empathy.

Naila Kabeer's is an effort to bring women centre-stage into the discourse, in a way such that their life stories and participation inform the analysis. *The Power To Choose* is a brave and pioneering effort to enliven academic discourse, to remind writers, researchers and policy-makers that real lives are involved in our deliberations and analyses, and that the voices of the subjects must find a place at the table. Both works are celebrations of the lives of Bangladeshi working women. They also stand testimony to Bangladeshi women as writers, be it in fiction or social science research.

Citizens and denizens

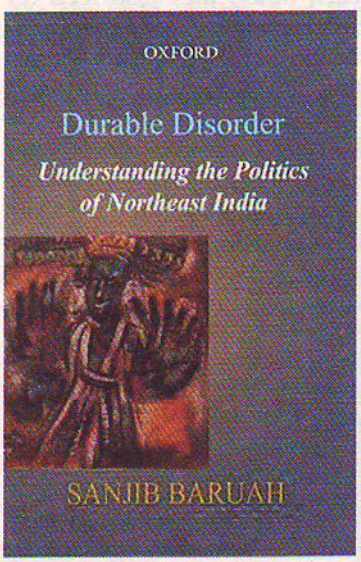
India needs a Northeast policy. The Northeast needs a Northeast policy.

by | **Samir Kumar Das**

In this collection of essays written over the last ten years, Sanjib Baruah offers one of the few closely argued critiques of what is popularly known as 'India's Northeast policy'. His first book, India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality (1999) had raised expectations from Baruah, and he does not disappoint here. Durable Disorder marks a distinct shift in the scholar's research pursuits. In his first book, Baruah calls for an effort towards "recreating conditions of civil politics", something that in turn would make reforms necessary in the state's institutional arrangements. Here, he addresses governmental policy and pays particular attention to New Delhi's 'look east' policy. He does this, though, without discounting the need to reorganise and reform the institutions of the state.

The task of weaving these essays that were written at different points in time into the framework of a coherently argued book would not have been easy. The long introduction provides the key to understanding the central argument that runs through the chapters. India's Northeast policy, through the recognition of exclusive ethnic homelands, creates "a regime of differentiated citizenship". According to Baruah, this policy provided the rationale for the creation of economically unviable state units, starting with Nagaland in 1963. The policy has never worked and is antithetical to the political economy of the region. The states of the Indian Northeast thrive largely on central grants-in-aid and fall under the 'Special Category' status which requires them to repay only 10 percent of the assistance received.

Baruah argues that the homelands regime marks a continuation of the early colonial policy of protecting the region's pre-capitalist social formations from the onslaught of global capitalism. Although the objective of this colonial policy was to keep the 'primitives' of the hills separate from the 'civilised' of the plains, it was also instrumental in obscuring the implicit transfer of land from the indigenous people to the immigrants. The book provides many examples of this, such as how the establishment of tea gardens encroached on tribal habitats and became the basis for many present-day disputes between the northeastern states. The transition from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture during colonial times and thereafter was accompanied by the commodification of land, something that not only created opportunities for the immigrants but gradually strengthened their hold on the political economy of the region.



Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India
by Sanjib Baruah
Oxford University Press, New Delhi; 2005
Pp 265; INR 495;
ISBN 019 566981 9

The existence of powerful immigrant communities in states created as ethnic homelands is characterised by Baruah as a "dissonance". The incongruity was accentuated through numerous "informal arrangements" that were eventually devised to enable the denizens - who, unlike citizens, are denied many rights and entitlements by the exclusionary homeland policies - to exercise control on such crucial matters as ownership of agricultural land and businesses. Indeed, the region's political economy has now reached a stage where the denizens are seeking a "formal change" in their status and formalisation of land titles. Baruah believes that the homeland regime is the problem underlying many of the region's inter-community struggles. And there cannot be homeland solutions to homeland problems.

The alternative imagination

Baruah draws our attention to the plurality of political structures that operate in the region. While these structures function parallel to each other, they also feed on each other. On the one hand, there is the existence of "a state within a state" that is directly controlled by New Delhi and, more importantly, is autonomous from "the formal, democratically-elected governmental structure" in place. The abrogation of democracy through persistent violation of human rights and such principles as rule of law, accountability and transparency is seen as the necessary cost for keeping the Indian state safe and secure from its enemies in the Northeast, both internal and external.

The norms of democracy are thus forced to give way to the imperatives of security. On the other hand, insurgent org-anisations run parallel fiscal administrations by collecting 'taxes' and protection money, and often project themselves as the custodians of their ethnicity's culture and values. Baruah superbly unravels the complex and intricate nature of the relationships between these regimes and shows how the complementarities that exist between the parallel and mutually hostile political structures help make the Northeast's disorder so durable.

How do we break away from such long-lasting disorder - that is to say, disorder that does not automatically trigger off any immediate catastrophe and that therefore may be sustained over long periods of time? Baruah's book makes the case for "an alternative institutional imagination". He proposes salvaging identity from the notion of a territorially rooted collectivity and encourages constant experimentation with diverse institutional arrangements until the Northeast's disentanglement from the homeland regime is complete. The objective of this imagination is to confer, albeit in a phased manner, "full citizenship" on the region's denizens. The granting of citizenship status will cause a "decisive break" with the current homeland regime.

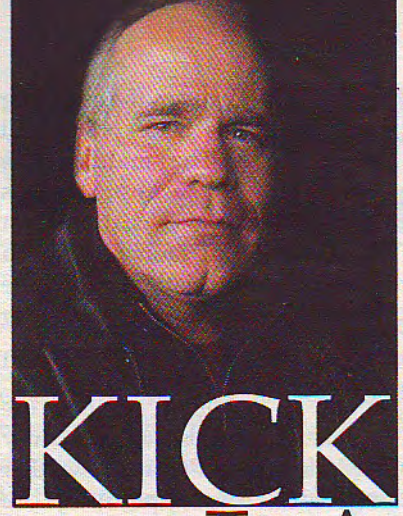
Baruah seems to be seeking to bring about a change in the policy regime through interventions that break away from the extant homeland regime and to develop the Northeast's relationship with its eastern neighbours. The argument sounds circular. While durability of the disorder in place, by definition, is supposed to work against any such change, the Indian state or for that matter the governments are least likely to break away from this circularity. Baruah does not see "actually existing" civil society as capable of bringing about such a change. According to him, it essentially circulates within the confines of a "sub-nationality" and dissent, whether from without or within, is hardly tolerated. Being deeply powered by 'homelandist' imagination, civil society cannot be regarded as the site from which a flexible re-thinking of the homeland regime will emerge. In addition to the central and state governments, therefore, civil society, too, requires an alternative imagination so that it can provide the normative ground for the initiation of such a change in the policy regime.

Transborder neighbourhood

The book ends with a plea for "connecting the region with its transnational neighbours" and for appreciation of the opportunities that such connection offers in "our era of globalism". Through the prism of this argument, the homelands regime looks like a "market imperfection". Available evidence, however, suggests that market exchange and transactions follow, rather than do away with, existing lines of ethnic preference. It will therefore be difficult to extend market forces across ethnically separate territorial spaces.

We know that in times of heightened inter-ethnic conflict in the region, members of rival communities refuse to be involved in any kind of commerce. Besides, it is likely that transborder communication will provide opportunities of comparison between the ethnic cousins (particularly amongst different groups of Naga and Kuki Chin descent) and might contribute to a certain hardening of ethnic positions. Unless these problems are addressed, any advocacy for connecting the Northeast with the transborder neighbourhood as per the model of the European Union is unlikely to bear fruit.

Durable Disorder represents a valuable contribution to the public discourse on India's Northeast policy. Baruah's writing style is polemical and often provocative, but this does not distract him from the substance of his argument. One may disagree with the author's contentions and recommendations, but one cannot ignore him.



KICK the LADDER

Lak is taken aback when Naidu is booted out by the voters, and is discofitted by the grim realities of India.

by | **Sukumar Muralidharan**

A tour of duty in India is worth at least one book for every journalist from the exalted community of foreign correspondents. The decade of globalisation, and particularly the last four years of the so-called war on terror, have stoked worldwide interest in what goes on in these dark and distant corners of the world where the majority of humanity lurks. The nature of the flourishing marketplace for books about the developing world provides testament to the fact that the cash value of any experience gathered here lies in its vulgarisation.

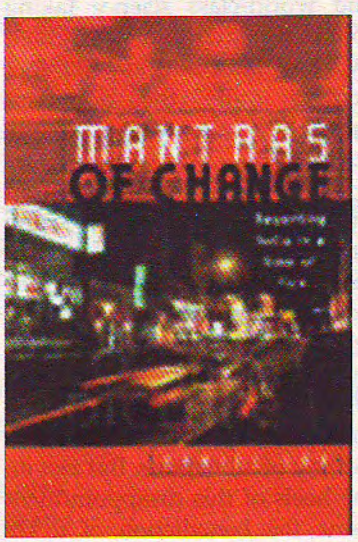
Daniel Lak has parlayed his many years in India as correspondent for the BBC into a racy narrative. Anybody imagining that he is embarked on the grandiose enterprise of identifying and capturing the inner dynamic of social change in India will be quickly disabused by his secondary title, which pitches the ambitions of the book at a more modest level. Lak's aim is to record his own experiences as a journalist covering the wide and complex canvas that is India. He does this by presenting a sequence of snapshots which help describe the social dynamics that have worked a major transformation in recent years. What Lak seeks to avoid is very clearly stated in his introduction: he does not want the reader to believe that she "will be able to understand fully the process of change in this huge, syncretic, fissiparous and utterly unique democracy."

Disarmed by this introduction, the reader is free to join Lak as he travels up to the "achingly beautiful" environs of Kashmir. She can share his frustration at the relentless role-play a journalist has to engage in in the troubled valley. Most encounters in Kashmir, Lak records, are shrouded in layers of camouflage, since everybody is practiced at dealing with the media, and deeply conscious of the need to live his role as the victim, caught in the crossfire of an epic struggle for identity and legitimacy.

Media motifs

Later, Lak engages one of India's leading demographers in a stimulating breakfast conversation. He learns that the abysmal state of India's welfare indicators hides deeper and more unpleasant truths in its folds. He learns that 'bimaru' (or sickly) – an insulting reference in normal circumstances – has become quite commonplace when discussing the performance of those states that drag down the national average. His initial discomfort with the term is dispelled when he is assured that it has acquired an entirely neutral, social-scientific connotation since its coining.

These revelations lead the author to make the obligatory trips to the software boomtowns of Bangalore and Hyderabad, where he encounters a different sensibility: an unapologetic attitude towards the enrichment of the individual as the engine of social change. Lak comes away aglow from these encounters, but then finds his spirits slump at the sight of the civic fiasco outside the scrubbed campuses of the IT industry.



Daniel Lak, Mantras of Change, Reporting India in a Time of Flux, Penguin/Viking, Delhi, 2005, pp xviii + 251, Rs 375.

Lak journeys to the disaster zone that was Orissa after the cyclone of 1999, and despairs that anything can improve where the human spirit itself seems defeated. In Orissa, those stricken by calamity seemed to have no recourse but to wait passively for deliverance from a paternalistic and benevolent government, which then fails spectacularly in meeting its most basic obligations. In earthquake -affected Gujarat in 2000, on the other hand, he experiences a different spirit - one of 'can do' self-assurance and determination to make the best of a bad situation, even when the government's response is lukewarm or worse.

The 50-year anniversary of India's independence was an occasion for the international media to engage in much peripatetic wandering about the country. It was a context that allowed Lak and his peers much latitude, since that anniversary celebration was strictly de novo. It had no rules, and every media organisation was free to set its own template. Unsurprisingly, the themes of democracy flourishing amidst grinding poverty and world-class science taking root in an environment blighted by blind faith and superstition, became quite the dominant motifs in international media coverage.

The following years brought India the notoriety of being presumptuous enough to break into the exclusive club of nuclear powers. Soon afterwards, there was the trauma of rejection by the world's single superpower, which had arrogated to itself the authority to determine the destiny of all nations. But fast on the heels of this disappointment came the benediction of a US presidential visit and an effusive reception into the intimacies of the global hegemon. India had, in a sense, arrived, and the poster-boy of that new global status was Chandrababu Naidu, the long-serving chief minister - or, as he would have preferred, chief executive - of Andhra Pradesh.

Naidu

It is a mystifying aspect of Lak's work that after ranging widely over the Indian landscape, commenting on changing sexual mores, environmental degradation and the blindness to reality that faith often induces, he should end his book with a distinctly apologetic postscript. It is quite likely, he concedes, that the reader would be seriously discomfited by the enthusiasm he displays for the man who was chief minister of Andhra Pradesh during his many visits to the state. By the time of the book's writing, Naidu had lost power, "a victim of his perceived obsession with information technology and the rich of his state capital, to the detriment of the many poor people among his electorate." Perhaps this short recantation of faith was penned by Lak in a mood of journalistic ire at the fact that he had allowed a politician of rather shallow convictions to overwhelm a robust reportorial judgment acquired over years of practice. Perhaps, but Lak remains convinced that Naidu's path is the way to go.

Change does not take place through the incantation of mantras, mystical spells that carry humanity along in an ineffable divine purpose. The social change Lak sees in India is driven by agents who work with a defined purpose and an implicit vision of their own role and position in the wider domain. The economic reforms of which Naidu served as the perfect embodiment were born out of the rising expectations of the Indian middle class, itself a creation of four decades of economic dirigisme, when the state served as a valuable buffer against the depredations of both national and international capitalism. At a certain stage in its growth, however, the cosseting embrace of the state proved all too irksome. The middle class had to break free to achieve its full potential and in that moment of revelation, it launched into a scathing denunciation of all the principles from which it had long drawn comfort.

In other words, having ascended to a higher stratum, the middle class chose to kick away the ladder rather than allow other segments the opportunity to emulate its climb. Once coddled by the state and given every opportunity to acquire the skills that would enable it to take on the world - even at the cost of depriving the masses in poverty the basics of health and education - the Indian middle class has turned against the hand that fed it. Reading between the lines of Lak's book, it is clear that he finds the confluence of private wealth and public squalor, the isolation of islands of enlightenment in the vastness of the country's decrepitude, one of the most disquieting features of modern-day India. The way ahead, he believes, lies in forging a new civic compact between the upwardly mobile segments and those who live out of sight in the morass of official neglect.

Perhaps Lak saw this philosophy incipient in Naidu, and realised from the latter's chastening electoral defeat that it was not even halfway complete in its conception. Perhaps in future years, there will still be occasion for other actors to enter the political arena and introduce the necessary changes to the paradigm of governance and accountability. Nobody would like to believe that the grim realities of Indian society are an encumbrance that will inevitably snuff out the ongoing awakening amongst India's elite. Lak evidently believes, after his maddening and mystifying excursions through India, that there is still a sliver of hope to cling to.

VACANCY

Professionals for International Program, BRAC

BRAC, a Non-Government Organization is founded in 1972 with dedication to alleviate poverty as well as to empower the poor and landless, mostly women and also to enlighten the children with education. Over the three decades of experience in development, BRAC operates both in Bangladesh and also in overseas countries including Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Africa. Holistic approach of BRAC combines health, education and social development programs with special focus on micro finance to target the different dimensions of poverty, its pioneering initiatives in sustainable development and its unique and dynamic development model has received attention all over the world.

For more information, visit: **www.brac.net**

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For Senior Professionals: The incumbent will require plan, develop and implement the program in the field of health/education/capacity building/social development/ micro finance/income generating activities. The goal of the program may vary from country to country, but will strictly remain adhere to improve the socio-economic condition and quality of life of women and poor.

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Vacancy Announcement

Regional Programme Coordinator, MAPPA-ICIMOD (P level)

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is seeking to recruit a Regional Programme Coordinator for its new programme on Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Programme in Asia (MAPPA) Network. The incumbent will be responsible for providing technical, intellectual and management leadership to the Programme.

Further information on the vacancy including Terms of Reference for the position can be found at www.icimod.org or can be requested from the address below. Applications with complete curriculum vitae together with the names and contact addresses of three referees should be sent to the following address by **21st July 2005.**

Qualified women and minority group members are strongly encouraged to apply.

Personnel Officer, ICIMOD, GPO Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: (00977-1) 5525313; Fax: (00977-1) 5524509
e-mail: admin@icimod.org.np

The Regional Coordinator - Emergency Response, based in Bangkok, supports the Deputy Regional Director (DRD) in providing supervision and oversight to the country offices (CO) in Asia to monitor, prepare for and respond to emergencies. S/he will have 5 major responsibilities: tsunami response implementation and coordination; Support CARE CO in their emergency preparedness plans (EPP) and the integration of the EPP with on-going development and relief programs; Assist emergency affected CO within the Asia region in their humanitarian response efforts; In collaboration with the CARE Security Unit, provide oversight and any required assistance to keep abreast of the security issues in the region; Assist in information sharing such as through participation in the Crisis Action Team (CAT) calls and regular updates to the DRD and Regional Director.

Requirements include:
Master's Degree in International Relations, Management or other relevant degree; 10 years development work experience; 5 years experience in emergencies and international NGO management; DM&E skills in emergency programming; Proficiency using MS Office.

Please apply for this position at the

CARE USA website www.careusa.org
DEADLINE FOR APPLICATIONS 7/13/05

Compiled by | **Hari Sharma**

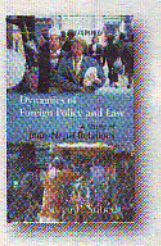
The Empire of Tea, by Alan MacFarlane and Iris MacFarlane. The Overlook Press, Boston, 2004. 308 pages. Price: USD 22.95

From the fourth century BCE in China, where tea was used as an aid in Buddhist meditation, to the Boston Tea Party in 1773, when its destruction became a rousing symbol of the American Revolution, to its present-day role as the single most consumed beverage on the planet, this work explores the effects of the humble Camelia plant – both tragic and liberating – in the history of civilisation. The text explains, among other things, how tea became the world's most prevalent addiction, its use as an instrument of imperial control, and how the cultivation of the crop led to the invention of machines and technology during the industrial revolution. The book also incorporates personal stories of those whose lives have been affected by their contact with the global obsession with tea, including the elegantly detailed account of Iris MacFarlane about her life on a tea estate in Assam, a major centre of tea cultivation.

Multi-Track Diplomacy between India and Pakistan: A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Security, by Manjrika Sewak. Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2005. 138 pages. Price: INR 225

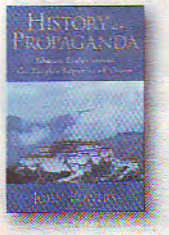
The conflict between Pakistan and India has been described as protracted, intractable and deep-rooted. Manjrika Sewak's book points out that such a conflict requires the energy and participation of a diverse group of actors who can bring unique skills and expertise to the task of building a lasting peace. These include politicians, military leaders, diplomats, and activists to name a few. This book advocates multi-track diplomacy as a framework for building sustainable peace and security between India and Pakistan. It makes recommendations for strengthening the impact of civil society peace initiatives and includes a comparative analysis of the non-official dialogue processes between the United States and the former Soviet Union in the hopes that the peace process between India and Pakistan can learn from those efforts.

Dynamics of Foreign Policy and Law: A Study of Indo-Nepal Relations, by Surya P Subedi. Oxford Univeristy Press, New Delhi, 2005. 274 pages. Price: INR 595



This book analyses the current state of treaty relations between India and Nepal in the light of contemporary principles of international law. Describing the complex historical background to these relations, it highlights those aspects of the India-Nepal interface that have remained stumbling blocks. Author Subedi goes on to propose ways to resolve outstanding issues between India and Nepal. The book also argues persuasively in favor of a major review of Indo-Nepal treaties and their replacement based on modern principles of international law that emphasise equity and mutual respect. The author also proposes a model treaty of peace and friendship between India and Nepal, to replace the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed between a newly independent India and a dying Rana regime in Kathmandu.

History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the Peoples' Republic of China, by John Powers. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004. 207 pages. Price: USD 27.50



Powers examines works on Tibetan history by Tibetan and Chinese authors that have been produced in English for Western consumption. He finds some of their claims absurd, others highly implausible, some humorous in an unintended way. The narratives in both categories are fraught with internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Even the most ridiculous notions, Powers notes, are often reflected in works by contemporary Western academics. Powers' impartial examination of the competing narratives will help us to better understand the issues involved in debates about Tibetan history – why apparently arcane vestiges of the past are so important to both Tibetan and Chinese nationalist narratives. This is a welcome contribution to literature concerning nationalism, ethnicity and historical contestation.

Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India, by William Mazzarella. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004. 364 pages. Price: INR 595

Shoveling Smoke is a critical and innovative intervention into current debates on the intersection of consumerist globalization, aesthetic politics and visual culture. Mazzarella traces the rise of mass consumption in India during the 1980s. He shows how the decisive opening of Indian markets to foreign brands in the 1990s refigured established models of the relationship between the local and global and ironically turned advertising professionals into custodians of cultural integrity. This book is also an account of how national consumer goods advertising is produced in metropolitan India, and the anxieties, commitments, and contradictions that animate that practice. The author also studies the broader transformations in Indian public consumerism.

Muslim Networks: From Medieval Scholars to Modern Feminists, edited by Miriam Cooke and Bruce B Lawrence. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2005. 325 pages. Price: INR 695

Crucial to understanding Islam is recognition of the role of Muslim networks. The earliest of these were the Mediterranean trade routes that quickly expanded into trans-regional paths for pilgrimage, scholarship and conversion, each network complementing and reinforcing the others. This volume selects major moments and key players from the seventh century to the twenty-first that have defined Muslim networks as the building blocks of Islamic identity and social cohesion. Although neglected in scholarship, Muslim networks have been invoked in the media to portray post September 11 'terrorist' groups. The thirteen essays here seek to provide a long view, correcting both scholarly omission and political sloganeering. Invoking the past to understand the present and envision the future through the prism of Muslim networks, this major new work addresses issues of faith, politics and gender in Islamic civilization.

THE RHINOS OF BANGLADESH

The Greater One Horned Rhinoceros (*rhinoceros unicornis*) inhabited the length of north Southasia from east to west, from the Indus plains right across the Ganga-Jamuna doab, along the Ganga maidaan, into the Brahmaputra valley and onward to the Burmese realm. Which means what is today Bangladesh was very much a part of the rhino habitat. About 1600 rhinos are now left in India, in the reserves in Assam, the biggest of which is Kaziranga; and about 400 remain in Nepal's Chitwan and Bardia national parks.

Bangladesh, indeed, has become the most wildlife deficient country in Southasia. The only climax species it can boast of are a handful of Royal Bengal Tigers in the rapidly diminishing Sunderban mangroves. Otherwise, what we have in this land of teeming humanity is the standard lineup of spotted leopard, Hanuman langur, rhesus macaque, chital deer, and wild boar. Nothing to boast at CITES conclaves about. Bangladesh's list of 'extinct vertebrae' includes the gaur, the swamp deer (Barasingha), the hog deer, the marsh mugger crocodile, the Gharial crocodile, and the one-horned rhinoceros. (The Lesser Javan Rhinoceros, too, once upon a time, trudged the delta but disappeared even before our local rhino.)

Even a look at the laws show that the rhino is not remote from Bangladeshi history. The Bengal Rhinoceros Preservation Act of 1932 was enacted in a united Bengal, not by the Indian, but by the Bengal government. The Act was superseded only in 1973 when the Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order was passed, possibly because they saw no hope of a rhino return. That was not very forward looking.

Any country that is cut off from its historical natural heritage is the poorer for it, and if it is true that what is today Bangladesh once had the Greater One Horned Rhinoceros lumbering about its oxbows and grasslands in the not-so-distant past, then it is right and proper to reintroduce the species to Bangladesh. At one stroke, we would be engaging in an act of environmental healing, introducing an imaginative way to educate children, and reviving excitement for the wild in a country that has hardly anything 'wild' left in it.

Reintroducing the rhino to Bangladesh would be a balm to the troubled psyche, a wildlife bio-logy equivalent of Rabindra Sangeet and/or Baul music. Certainly, the arrival of the rhino along the Brahmaputra/Jamuna banks will not resolve all Bangladeshi socio-political ailments, and it will most certainly not help the great ladies of the BNP and the AL resolve their bottomless animosity. But then again, it just might. Anything is worth trying.

To get down to the ecological nitty gritty of the matter at hand, historically, longitudenally, latitudinally, climatologically and vegetationally, Bangladesh is capable of sustaining the rhino. This is the same tropical monsoon terrain as one finds in the nearby sanctuaries of Assam and in Chitwan in Nepal. The managers of the Royal Chitwan National Park have a lot of experience translocating these massive beasts that weigh more than a ton. The rhinos translocated from Chitwan to Bardiya have been psychologically stable.

We do not propose the transfer of a couple of dejected specimen to Dhaka's Mirpur Zoo. What we propose is the setting aside of at least a couple of square miles of riverine expanse, to be cordoned off and allowed to recreate the habitat of yesteryears. In a country crisscrossed by rivers, it should not be difficult to find such a plot. What the rhino need is flowing water, wallowing pools and a mix of jungle and grassland. Undulating terrain would be nice but (this being Bangladesh) not essential. Before long, the habitat would be complete with Elephant Grass, indigenous trees such as simal (silver cotton), and perhaps even sal (shorea robusta).

If Bangladesh decides to go for a rhino habitat, Southasian neighbours Assam and Nepal, endowed with the animal, will undoubtedly lumber forward to help undo a historical wrong and an ecological misfortune. In late June, 40 marsh mugger crocodiles were translocated from Madras to Dhaka in the spirit of wildlife biology bhai-bhai.

After crocs, why not the rhino? Heritage-wise, Bangladesh could then take pride in being once again, not only the land of the Sunderban swamp, the Mahasthangarh mound, the Chittagong hills, the Buriganga ghats – but also the Jamuna rhino.

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