Nov-Dec 2005

HIMĀL SOUTHASIAN

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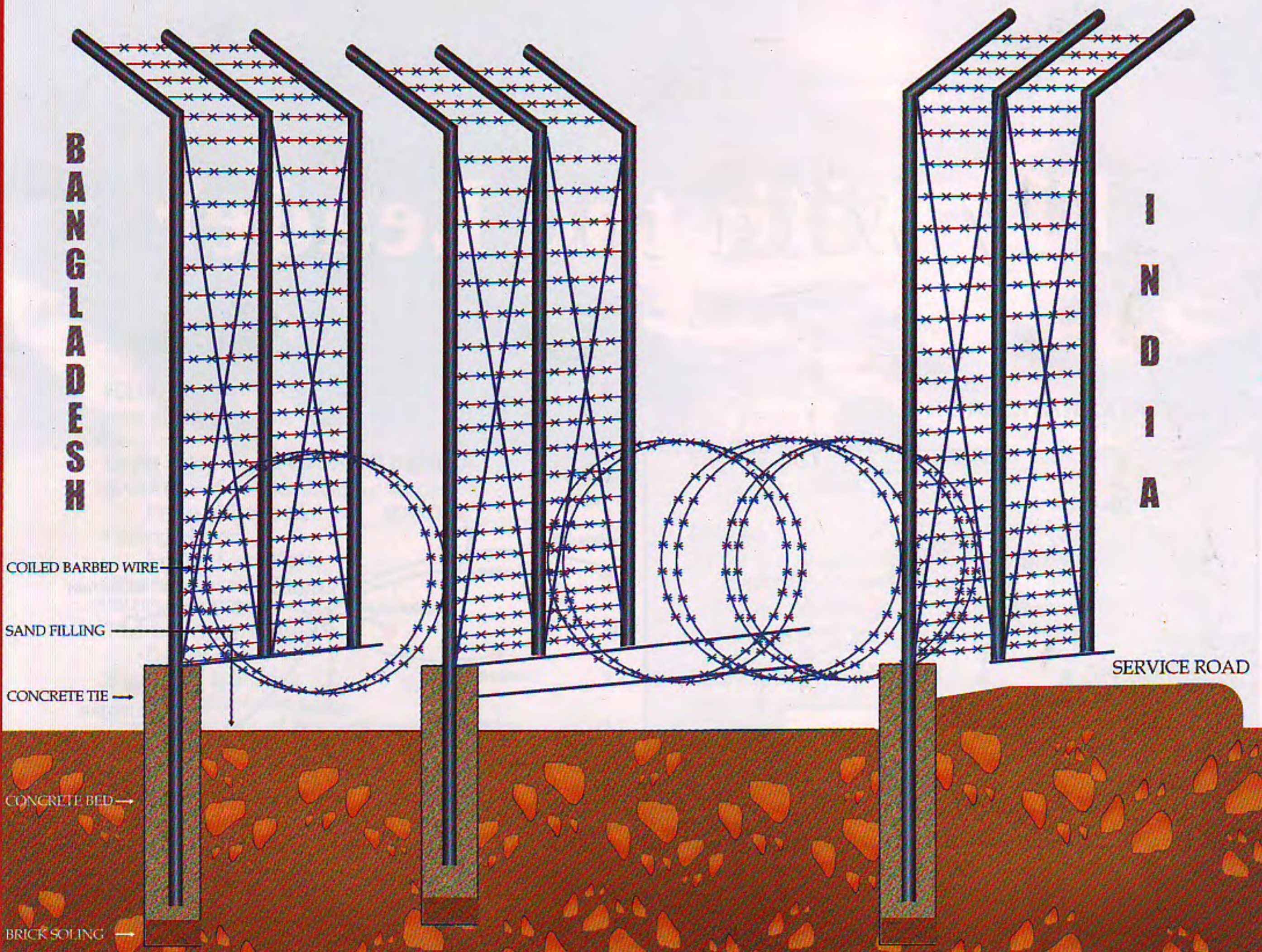

Soft Borders

What is a border fence doing here? We thought we had been promised a new Southasia by SAARC.

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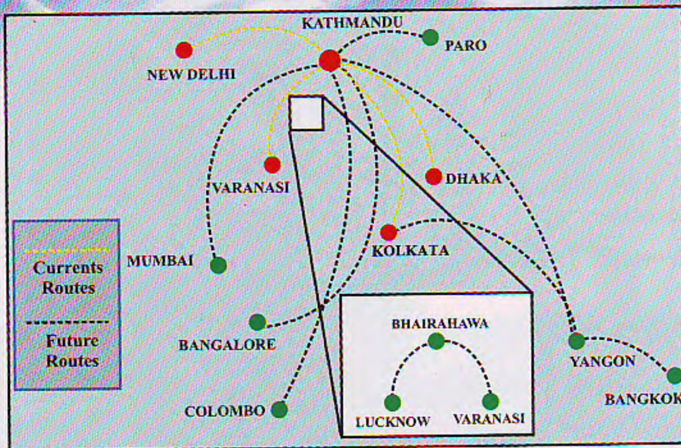

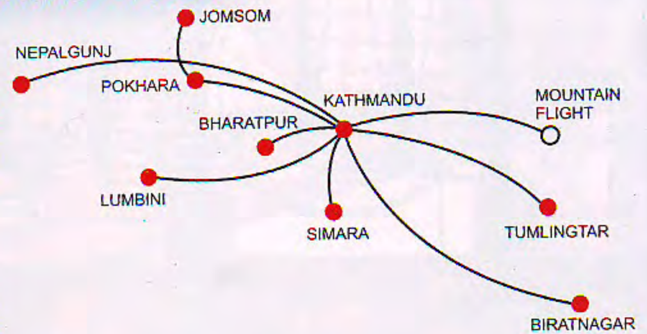

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This map of Southasia may seem upside down to some, but that is because we are programmed to think of north as top-of-page. This rotation is an attempt by the editors of Himal (the only Southasian magazine) to reconceptualise 'regionalism' in a way that the focus is on the people rather than the nation states. This requires nothing less than turning our minds right-side-up.

(download map from www.himalmag.com/images/map_poster.jpg)

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Gandhi, the Southasian

For our next issue, Jan-Feb 2007, Himal will look back at Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and explore his relevance in today's Subcontinent. At a time when Gandhi is increasingly seen as an 'Indian', it is important to rescue his legacy for the sake of all Southasia, including India.

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The crossborder mentality

Some expressions are inherently disturbing; others acquire their baleful tones from repetitive and wilful misuse. The term 'crossborder' has become a menacing qualifier amongst us. *Crossborder infiltration, crossborder raids, crossborder trafficking,* and *crossborder smuggling* are certainly phenomena that occur in Southasia. But even more authentic are ties that bind: *crossborder relationships, crossborder solidarity, crossborder conservation, crossborder road* and *rail links, crossborder trade* and *crossborder transactions.* These are the issues with which *crossborder journalism* and *crossborder activism* should engage.

This issue of Himal Southasian is dedicated to redirecting efforts towards energising flows across the frontiers of Southasia, with an eye also on the upcoming SAARC summit in Dhaka. Among other things, we would like the organisation to jettison its capital-centrism and allow neighbouring territories of individual countries the freedom to interact. We urge SAARC to consider the border regions as the places where regionalism must be ignited.

As things stand, we Southasians have become so insular that we rarely venture out of the official boundaries of 'home' mentalities. There is no getting around it: the demarcation of political frontiers in Southasia has thoroughly divided a people that had remained united in diversity over five millennia. These lines in the sand, mud and rock are neither natural nor bonafide boundaries; mostly they signify, in various parts, the parting kicks of the British colonialists. No wonder that these political boundaries, with little or no geographic, historic or cultural relevance, need such heavy policing and barbed wire fencing.

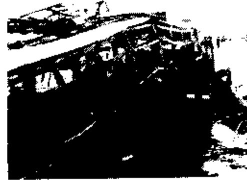
For the moment, we are all caught – Bangladeshis, Indians, Nepalis, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans – in the trap of the Westphalian nation state. Our opinion-makers manufacture political consent and challenge our civilisational unity. To undo the historical blunders, with feet firmly planted within the nation state that each of us has inherited, we Southasians need to rediscover our crossborder links and forge new ties.

The coverage of 'Soft Borders' in this issue of Himal *(pages 17-42)* contains essays on redefining Southasian regionalism, with particular emphasis on the frontier regions. Short samplings are also presented on individual crossborder points of contact, including Kerala-Sri Lanka, Meghalaya-Sylhet, Nepal-Tibet/China, Jammu, and the Pashtun lands that straddle Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The 'soft borders' of Southasia must be the points of engagement between our countries and peoples. We say this at a time when, on the ground itself, a barbed wire fencing project by India is making the frontiers ever more solidified.

The Delhi Blasts

As this issue of Himal goes to press on the evening of 29 October, we are receiving the news of the bombings in Delhi. Terror attacks on citizens not only cause senseless individual tragedies, but they derail attempts to build bilateral and multilateral friendships in Southasia.



There is no goal that can justify the taking of innocent lives. The Sep-Oct 2005 issue of Himal ("The Meaning of Terror") sought to emphasise that simple conviction.

The task of building trust amidst burning animosities is never easy, and the bombers know just how to undo the effort. One blast can set back years of the peacemakers' unswerving toil. We hope that our leaders do not fall for the trap set by those who do not want peace in Southasia.

'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 some feeling. 'Southasia' does the trick for us, albeit the word is limited to 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'.

Bangladesh

The hope of Dhaka

SAARC at 20, Bangladesh, and the possibilities of eastern Southasia

The twice-postponed summit meeting of SAARC leaders is slated for Dhaka in November, and will take place barring natural or manmade disasters. It was in this city 20 years ago that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was born, bringing to reality the statesmanlike vision of the late president Ziaur Rahman.

It needs no elaboration to say that SAARC has yet to fulfil its original commitment to promote mutual trust and confidence and to enhance economic cooperation in the region. Certainly, some of this can be blamed on the adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan over the past two decades, which has often dissipated much of SAARC's potential energy into meaningless polemic, benefiting none. But maybe it is also time for some real introspection: to see whether, in this age of globalisation, every SAARC member has adequately addressed its responsibilities to strengthen its neighbouring relationships. SAARC's success in promoting Southasian development and a Southasian voice continues to rest in the sum of its bilateral relationships.

By virtue of its size, population and location in the middle of the Southasian landmass, India's regional role remains of the most significant interest. While there is (and must be) parity of sovereignty between India and her neighbours, the latter cannot expect parity of power and influence. At the same time, we must keep in mind that any diminishment of India will also affect the Southasian dynamic as a whole. This is particularly so if, as suggested recently by the president and prime minister of Pakistan and India, the borders become 'softer' and there is more social, cultural and economic give-and-take. More simply, political instability in India, or an economic slump in this leviathan, would impact all the neighbours and their populations.

Within India, a degree of political mismanagement, coupled with the assertion by smaller groups of their individual identities, has led to a rash of insurgencies that have lasted for decades, sapping the energies of the people and the state alike. On the other hand, the recent success of the Indian economy has created an increasing number of stakeholders keenly interested in the country's future. It is important for India's neighbours to become stakeholders as well, for a large growth-engine like India offers immense benefits for others.

Out from the delta

Having given rise to the original idea for SAARC in its capital, Bangladesh is now acting as host to the organisation's summit for the third time, on 12-13 November. This will be a time when Bangladesh, as one of the SAARC Seven, must take stock of its own place in Southasia as a whole. This will mean considering its continuing complex relationships with rump Pakistan; the possibilities of expanding trade with nearby Nepal and Bhutan, as well as with faraway Sri Lanka; and developing strategies not only to countenance New Delhi, but also mutually beneficial links with West Bengal and the Indian Northeast.

Bangladesh could wield much greater regional influence, due to both its strategic location at the head of the Bay of Bengal and its proximity to Southeast Asia. Nepal, for one, has had close historical ties with Bengal. Today, Bangladeshi ports could offer important alternative routes for Nepali trade with the outside world. How Bangladesh fashions its future, then, should be of significant interest to Kathmandu. Both of these countries were represented in the first BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) summit of energy ministers in early-October 2005. Among other things, the New Delhi meet agreed on

country-to-country energy interconnections, development of hydropower projects, and the possibility of secure trans-BIMSTEC gas pipelines. Such agreements could bode well for both Nepal's hydro potential and Bangladesh's natural gas reserves and locale.

In the context of regional cooperation, the widespread suspicion of India that is harboured in Dhaka is clearly a matter for study. While the imperiousness and muscle of the larger neighbour must be resisted on diplomatic and intellectual planes, it would be unfortunate if domestic political concerns prevented Bangladesh from taking advantage of its Southasian connections, including with India. In this context, it is important to note the remarks of a Pakistani commentator – writing in a Dhaka daily after a visit to the city last August – on the country's widespread suspicion of India, which he said was hampering constructive cooperation. The 'trick' to tackling India is to upgrade one's engagement, and not to allow negative approaches to influence state policy.

Ziaur Rahman

As a country at the mercy of substantial river-flow from India, the issue of water resources is a matter of overwhelming concern for Bangladesh, with its teeming rural population. But India – which faces a similar water situation with respect to Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet/China – has been traditionally averse to discussing the issue in a wider regional context. Demanding the rights of the lower riparian party when it is convenient, but remaining unwilling to consider Bangladesh's similar concerns, has been the negative leitmotif of Indian policy. There is not nearly enough sensitivity in New Delhi about the extreme distress this causes in Dhaka. The lackadaisical manner in which river-linking schemes have been bandied about without reference to Bangladesh is a clear factor in this. Political boundaries may not determine the flow of rivers, but nations have a moral and legal responsibility to those downstream – a responsibility that would do well to be extended to a regional or basin-wide consideration. A good place to begin, incidentally, would be for India to release the river-flow data that it keeps so close to its chest.

A show of neighbourliness on the water front is bound to be reciprocated by Dhaka on a whole range of additional issues, most importantly on transit. The disinclination of Bangladesh to permit the transit of people and goods from mainland India to northeastern India may be inexplicable to the outsider, but within Dhaka it is enmeshed in larger suspicions. There does remain, on the other hand, an odd contradiction in Dhaka's excitement for greater use of its ports by Nepal and Bhutan, while denying those facilities for the movement of goods to Mizoram or Meghalaya from the Indian mainland.

Even in the run-up to the upcoming summit, it needs to be said that Dhaka should not limit its push for greater regional linkages to only the 'Southasia' as defined by SAARC. Indeed, Dhaka would do well to cultivate greater regional relationships with the Indian states along its borders, with which it has had historical and cultural links. Genuine cooperation is generally best cultivated at the level of subregional interactions and development. Such a dynamic would also do much to positively influence attitudes in New Delhi.

Migrant souls

The movement of peoples across the Ganga-Brahmaputra plains has been driven by economic imperatives since age-old times; this process continues to this day. For the moment, the flow of migrant souls is from Bangladesh into the populated Indian cities to the west. But a friction has grown between India and Bangladesh that, sadly, is escalating. The first step is to recognise that economic migration is indeed taking place. Such migration is sometimes implicitly encouraged by the host cities (migrants, almost always exploited, serve an economic function), even though there is occasional reaction against it by groups such as the Shiv Sena. There is a need for frank exchange between Dhaka and New Delhi to look for solutions that are both practical and humane. Dhaka's state of denial on the matter of migration to India does nothing to promote such solutions.

These are not easy days for Dhaka. Law enforcement authorities are fully stretched to bring to book those who seem intent to radically change the liberal, secular fabric of the state, as created in 1971. Civil society and a courageous media have been drawing attention to these dangers for quite some time, but have been faced with walls of official disclaimers. Authorities obliquely suggest that the problems are not internal. Rather, the state claims that these troubles have been promoted from elsewhere in order to tarnish Bangladesh's image – and that irresponsible media have helped enhance insecurity. Such explanations, however, are hardly credible.

On the 20th anniversary of the founding of SAARC, an important opportunity now exists for Bangladesh to rededicate itself to the vision of Ziaur Rahman: to act as a beacon of cooperation in eastern Southasia. ▲

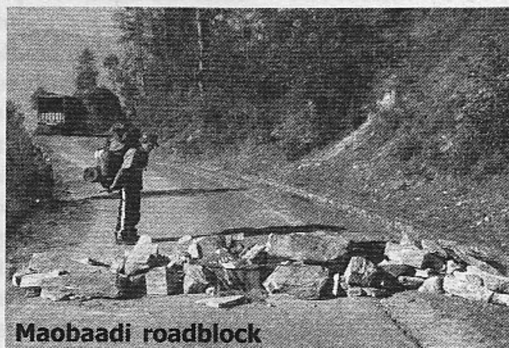
Nepal

A very Maobaadi holiday

by | **Deepak Thapa**

One of the more peculiar aspects of Nepal's decade-old internal conflict has been that, for the past few years, the autumnal Dasain festival has heralded a brief pause in the fighting. In deference to general public sentiment, the rebel Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has declared unilateral ceasefires, while the government has responded in spirit, even if not always with formal announcements. The importance of Dasain to Nepal lies not just in its religious significance, although it is the major yearly festival for the dominant, mid hills Hindus. More importantly, it is the time for hundreds of thousands of Nepalis to make the annual trip (or trek) back home in order to catch up with their families. The ceasefire declarations by the revolutionary atheists are greeted with relief by the multitudes that make their living far from home; many Dasain plans would otherwise remain sadly tentative, were it not for the brief respite.

As if on cue, again this year the Maoists announced a ceasefire on the cusp of Dasain, once again to the relief of the general population. Previous years, however, have seen the temporary cessation attributed specifically to the festival. This year's message was different, as was its three-month timeframe. There was no mention of Dasain in the 3 September statement to the press by the CPN (M) chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'). Rather, it declared that the ceasefire was motivated by "a deep sense of responsibility" to finding "the democratic political way out" and satisfying "the aspiration of peace of the Nepali people ... with an aim of doing away with doubts remaining in some circles about our movement."



Maobaadi roadblock

Disregarding the obligatory nod to the people's long-standing "aspiration of peace", the statement is instructive for two reasons. First, for a group that set out to establish a "new democracy" on the ruins of a "semi-feudal, semi-colonial" Nepal, it is a remarkable turnaround that they would now be so eager to prove their democratic credentials. Second, after having harangued the international community variously as hegemons and imperialists, the statement's "some circles" clearly targets the political parties, as much as it does any external forces that need to be placated with a peaceful visage by the revolutionaries.

Much has been written about the all-round failure of King Gyanendra's government, with him as chairman, which has been running Nepal since the 1 February royal coup. But more than eight months into the crisis precipitated by the royal takeover, it is equally to the discredit of the Maoist leadership that the revolutionary movement has yet to make any gains from the disarray of the mainstream political forces. As the major benefactors from a palace-parties schism, some meaningful attempts by the rebels to reach out to the political parties (in a manner acceptable to those politicians) could have resulted in a fairly unified anti-royal front. Granted, the political parties opposed to the king's direct rule are a disparate lot with varied agendas, but they are united in their opposition to royal activism and in their eschewing of violence to achieve political ends. If there has been an inability for a quick understanding between the political parties and the rebels, the onus must be placed at the door of the latter. Three-quarters of a year after King Gyanendra's coup, there has been no movement towards an agreement on how to take on the ambitious monarch, whose main claim to legitimacy at present seems to be the bayonet strength of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). Like the onus, the urgency is also on the Maoists. It is the insurgents who will lose out in the long run if they dilly-dally in convincing either the political parties or the international community (most importantly India and the US, where the latter has refused to consider the Maoists a legitimate political actor) that they plan to revert from being a militaristic to a purely political organisation.

Comradely reassessment

While it is still fashionable to lambaste the aboveground political parties for all manner of inefficiencies and lack of vision, the fact is that they harbour a deep sense of distrust towards the CPN (M), which is keeping them from fully embracing the insurgency in an attempt to isolate the king. For one, the assurances of the rebel leadership have not been matched in the past by its cadres' actions on the ground – particularly the continued harassment of party workers, including the use of extreme physical violence. For another, the political parties are not inclined to take the rebels' affirmations of democratic principles at face value. The Maoists have sought to explain their changed stance by emphasising that Nepal has yet to undergo the transition from a mediaeval monarchy to a 'bourgeois democracy'. According to an Indian newspaper report quoting the articulate Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai, only 'bourgeois democracy' opens the path to 'people's democracy' – an end that, apparently, can be reached even through peaceful means. The continuum from bourgeois-to-people's democracy has certainly informed earlier Maoist proclamations, but in retrospect those appear to be no more than the mechanical chanting of communist mantras.

After such hoary preaching, the new Maoist rhetoric seems to reflect something of a reassessment of the post-royal takeover political reality. This newfound desire to seek democratic legitimacy could indicate a political maturity gained by the Maoist leadership over the course of the previous decade. While India's role in nudging the Maoists and political parties to work together is widely accepted, that possibility would not have come about without a critical review by the rebel leadership of their organisation's own strengths and weaknesses. After all, despite their widely publicised control over 80 percent of the country's territory, the rebels are no closer to capturing state power now than they were four years ago, when the RNA entered the fray. Chairman Prachanda recently conceded as much in an emailed interview to a Nepali monthly. "Realistically speaking," he said, "in today's international context, outright military victory is very difficult..."

Various conditions – objective and subjective, domestic and international – seem to have forced the Maoists to prepare for some sort of compromise. Although they are still adamant about elections for a constituent assembly that would draft a new Constitution, the focus now seems more on meeting the political parties halfway. In the early days of the takeover, rebel overtures to the parties were heavy with tones of 'either you're with us or you're with the king'. The change from such language implies that the Maoists may have come to understand that the political parties are only willing to find common ground insofar as the rebels make space for the resumption of the democratic process in Nepal – which alone would define the role and place of the monarchy, as well. The fact that such a process would be the only alternative that would find favour with the international community does not seem lost on the Maoists either.

Conditions apply

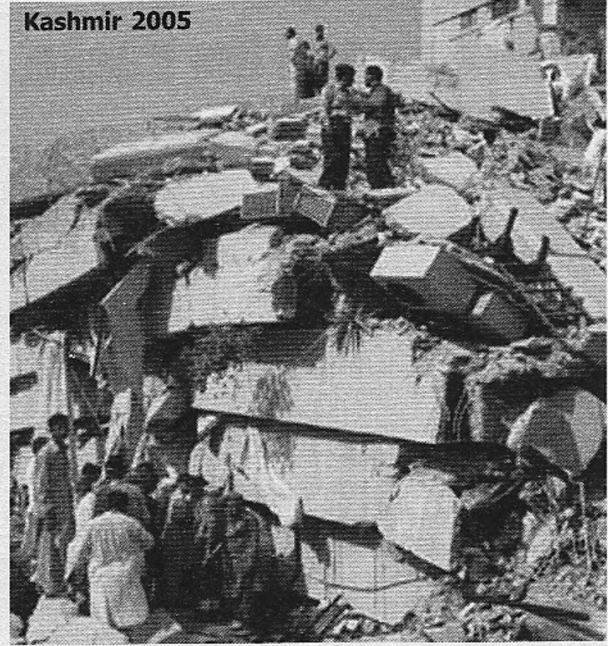
The challenge now for the Maoists is how to make the jump from revolutionary warfare to open politics. That is also where the role of the international community becomes paramount. To begin with, it would be highly unrealistic to expect the Maoists to surrender their arms as a prelude to a negotiated settlement; the best that could be hoped for, at present, would be their public announcement to give up the path of armed struggle, with certain conditions applied. But that alone would achieve nothing in the face of a recalcitrant king and his army, where the only restraint could come from foreign actors.

There is also a wider appreciation that the CPN (M) is essentially just another political party with a specific agenda, geared towards achieving power like any other political entity, the decade-long violence notwithstanding. A sober reading of all recent rebel pronouncements and documents leaves no doubt that the Maoists want it finished. The civilised response would not be to scoff at them at a time when they, or at least their leaders, seem to have seen the light. The proper reaction would be, as the catchword goes, to provide the rebels with *surakschit abataran*, or safe landing. It is subsequently up to the political parties to recognise this fact and to help ease the transition of the CPN (Maoist) into a legitimate and democratic political player; this would also obviate many more years of bloodletting, should the agenda be to crush the Maoists militarily, as seems to be the (misplaced) royal inclination. What is required now is for the political parties to engage the Maoists through a continuous process, challenging the rebels to stick to their commitments and helping them to help themselves in their desire to come aboveground.

The prospect of the parties and the king reaching a mutually acceptable settlement would certainly be the least favourable scenario for the Maoists. But considering the emphatic insistence of the international community on just such a combine (with negotiations with the Maoists thrown in as a proviso), it cannot be entirely dismissed. Unless the Maoists figure out a way to wedge their way into any such compromise, they will find themselves once more on the margins of Nepali politics. At the same time, unless they are invited to be party to any political negotiations, tragedy will continue to sweep the killing fields and terraces of Nepal.

Kashmir

Gujarat 2001


Kashmir 2005

The **deadliest** quake

The tragedy of 8/10 needs a dedicated, long-term response. Meanwhile, what about the rest of us potential victims?

We have not understood why the Kashmir Earthquake of 8 October has been termed the 'South Asia Quake' by the international media, including by the all-powerful, real-time satellite television networks. Southasia is a vast region and the ground trembled beneath one corner, well-known to the world as Kashmir, on two sides of a Line of Control. Somehow, it does injustice to the suffering of the living and the memory of the dead to call the disaster by the name of the larger region. The UN has declared the Kashmir catastrophe as more devastating than last year's tsunami. There are three to four million people suddenly without homes on the edge of winter, while Kofi Annan has stated that "there are not enough winterised tents in the world to meet the needs we have today".

The tsunami struck on the southern beaches of Southasia, while the earthquake hit the northwestern mountain fastness. The tsunami was, of course, also the result of an undersea earthquake; but because it was more unusual than a land quake, and also due to the fact that many holidaying Westerners died tragically, the emergency support was of a significantly different magnitude than what the Kashmir Earthquake is garnering. The world is not even close to matching the USD 11 billion gathered to date for post-tsunami relief. Barely a third of the requested USD 312 million emergency assistance requirement set by the UN had been filled two weeks after the Kashmir quake. During the same initial period, more than 80 percent of the announced needs had been filled after the tsunami struck.

In the face of an earthquake that knows neither borders nor lines of control, significant time has already been given over to the need to utilise the opportunity to ease the Kashmir tensions between India and Pakistan. We are heartened by the admittedly halting moves made by the two administering powers to make family contact possible across the LoC, and to allow relief organisations to work in these sensitive areas. Indeed, may the terrible tragedy provide some extra empathy for the people of Kashmir and their aspirations, particularly in New Delhi and Islamabad.

But let us quickly add that the geopolitical certitude in national capitals will require something more than a shifting of geological plates to undo the mental shackles. It will require the national establishments in both countries – including the geopolitical strategists, media elites and civil society gatekeepers – to understand that a Kashmir resolution will require taking into confidence the Kashmiris themselves, as well as finding a way to fuzz borders and sanction dual identities. In this time of tragedy, it is important

Militants and the quake

In the aftermath of the 8 October 2005 quake in Azad Kashmir, relief camps and operations have been established by many banned jihadi groups and charities. In response to the government's appeals for donations, the general public has in turn donated heavily to these projects. Indeed, the quake itself seems to have given a new lease on life to many of the banned groups, previously proscribed by Islamabad and Washington DC for their al-Qaeda links and alleged terrorist involvement. These have included Jamaat-ud-Daawa/Lashkar-e-Toiba; the Harkatul Mujahideen and Ummah Tameer-e-Nau, with alleged al-Qaeda links; and the al-Rashid Trust, which funds the Jaish-e-Mohammad. On government orders, militant-run relief camps have been allowed to operate in a variety of hard hit areas, including Muzaffarabad, Rawlakot, Bagh, Balakot, and the Neelum and Jhelum valleys. Doing so has not only bolstered the groups' images, but has reportedly won significant gratitude and support from the general public.

Talat Masood, a former army general and political analyst, worries jihadi groups are being strengthened by the goodwill. "They are working on the pattern of Hamas and Hezbollah", he noted. "Both organisations maintain elaborate political and social service infrastructures, designed to provide extremist ideological direction and social welfare services in environments of poor or nonexistent government control, in order to build-up and maintain popular support."

President Musharraf initially claimed in a 20 October interview to have ensured that organisations working in the quake-hit areas are not ones that have been banned by his government. He later qualified that statement: "I know that some extremist outfits placed on [the government's] watch list are participating in relief activities in the quake-affected areas," he admitted. "Their activities are being watched closely and anyone found involved in extremist acts will be punished. However, everyone is motivated to help the quake victims. I am not going to prevent anyone from helping the people."

-- Amir Mir

to remind everyone that the answers still lie in the past propositions of great Southasians, such as the late Eqbal Ahmad (*see Himal March 1999*).

The immediate challenge in Muzaffarabad, in Uri, in Hazara, in Tangdhar, is to help those without shelter and means of livelihood to make it through the winter of 2005-06. But thereafter, we are looking at many years of rehabilitation, starting with psychological support and ending with the rebuilding of homes, schools and bridges. Given the sharp drop that we can expect in humanitarian concerns as soon as the television cameras stop broadcasting, the intelligentsia of Pakistan, India and Southasia have a responsibility not to turn their backs on this quake and its living victims. They have to stay with the Kashmiris for the long haul of recovery and rehabilitation, with the understanding that while the voluntary agencies must be thanked, it is ultimately the governments that must constantly be kept on their toes for the follow-through.

Impending calamity

From the southeast to the northwest along the Himalayan ridgeline, the effects of earthquakes on Southasia are as old as geological time. These events are, after all, dictated by the shifting of tectonic plates as the Subcontinent collides with the continent, generating a friction that needs to be regularly released. The tortured geography of Kashmir on the surface reflects the complexity of plate activity underneath, where three tectonic forces pull at and against one another – particularly in the region just northwest of Muzaffarabad.

This year, nature chose Kashmir to sound a warning to the rest of Southasia – most importantly, to those who live along the Himalayan-Hindukush rimland. The geologists are not sitting easy, and neither should the rest of us. Seismologist Roger Bilham, who has warned of upcoming quake catastrophes in the Central Himalaya in these pages (*see Himal March 1994*), notes that the 8/10 quake probably did not release more than "one-tenth of the cumulative elastic energy" that has built up since Kashmir's last substantial quake, back in the middle of the sixteenth century.

According to Bilham and others, the prospect looms of a horrendous earth-shaking in what is known as the Central Himalayan Gap – essentially engulfing the entire country of Nepal. This is created by the fact that there has not been enough necessary release of 'cumulative elastic energy' in the rubbing of plates beneath Nepal and the nearby regions to the north, west and south. A huge swath of the Himalaya is dramatically *overdue* – by about two decades, if a timeframe can be put to such raw natural processes – for a devastating quake. This impending earthquake would put an estimated 50 million people in direct risk in hill and plain.

The people who live in the general region known as the Central Himalaya must therefore take heed of what has happened in Kashmir. If necessary, key policymakers must immediately make field visits to Kashmir on both sides, to be sensitised to the scale of devastation. This might give them a sense of what 'disaster preparedness' ought to be all about. The suffering of Kashmiris may at least inform those who are in a position to save lives when the earthquake hits the Central Himalaya.

Concrete deathtraps

The last big earthquake to hit the Himalayan region, in 1934, was known as the Great Bihar Earthquake. That was before the advent of cement, concrete and the modern technologies that have abandoned handed-down techniques. Cement and concrete have become the building medium of choice all over, because these 'pillar system' buildings provide flat roofs for multipurpose uses, wide indoor spaces, and lots of light. Unfortunately, heavy concrete floors and roofs in buildings with poorly designed foundations or pillars become deathtraps. All over Kashmir, people were crushed under concrete, as testified to by the numerous photographs of rescue workers trying to cut through cement and steel. Built poorly cement construction is dangerously frail, but the technology has with lightning speed supplanted or made 'obsolete' many of the region's traditional, evolved construction technologies.

The non-existence of rescue infrastructure should worry everyone throughout the region. Take the rapidly urbanising Kathmandu Valley, which would be a valley of death if the upcoming earthquake were to hit with full force. Unplanned urbanisation, a lack of building code implementation linked to continuous political instability, reliance on cement-concrete poured by artisans without engineering oversight, unavailability of open-spaces – these are just some of the concerning issues for those who have to plan for the day when the earth will tremble. The dynamic known as 'liquefaction' – when sand will become fluid and bring houses crashing down – is a particular worry. The Tribhuvan airport is itself built on an international sandbank, which may make it unusable.

Kathmandu Valley, as the largest urban agglomeration in the entire Himalayan chain, is obviously a place of extreme concern for what may happen to its 1.6 million inhabitants. But there would be deep stress throughout the Himalaya and its adjacent plains and plateaus. Landslides would bury homes, roads and other infrastructure. Glacial lakes in the High Himalaya would burst their banks, wreaking havoc downstream all the way to the plains. Levees may be destroyed; dams may crack; pipelines may break; and electric lines may collapse. As the most fortified region in Southasia, in Kashmir there were at least military helicopters available on both sides for immediate rescue. There would be no such facility elsewhere in the Himalayan region, where response times would be much longer than was seen in Kashmir in October 2005.

Being crushed beneath the weight of concrete, cement, earth and rocks is a terrible way to die. To die under rubble while awaiting rescue that never comes is even more gruesome. Kashmir will have to be helped back on its feet, while we look ahead to the next big one – and prepare.

GLOBAL CITIES - AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

Liverpool Hope University,UK
29th-30th June 2006

Call for Papers Deadline: 2006-02-28

This conference is intended to encourage interdisciplinary exchange on the representation, cultures, histories, experience, planning, and articulation of global cities. By interrogating the vocabularies that have arisen in several disciplines which might include in addition to the term 'global city', 'global village', 'megacities', 'cosmopolis', imperial metropolis', 'world cities', 'sprawl', 'postmetropolis', etc., the conference will bring together debates over images, narratives, economics, planning and, above all, experience, of the 'global' city. Papers are sought from any relevant discipline in the humanities, social sciences, architecture, urban planning, and beyond. We will be actively pursuing various publishing outputs related to the conference.

Abstracts of 200 words for 20-minute papers by 28th February 2006. Further information from Dr. Lawrence Phillips, phillil@hope.ac.uk.

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Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing

May 2006, Kathmandu

Himal is hosting a Roundtable Conference on Southasian Publishing in Kathmandu in May 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.

For more information, write to: **editorial@himalmag.com**

India-Iran

Embrace of the strategic partner

Too close for comfort?

It was in a conference room in distant Vienna where one of the most significant post-Cold War shifts in New Delhi's foreign policy was implemented. On 24 September, New Delhi decided to cast its lot with its 'strategic partner' the United States, and jointed a resolution against 'good friend' Iran at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The resolution accused Iran of pursuing a 'policy of concealment' with regard to its nuclear programme, saying that Teheran was 'non-compliant' with the IAEA statute. Declaring that Iran's nuclear aims fall 'within the competence of the Security Council', the resolution also demanded that Iran halt all enrichment and processing of uranium.

India's vote provoked outrage back in Delhi. Left-wing allies of the Congress party, the right-wing opposition, scholars and journalists alleged that India had gone back on the very principles of non-alignment that it had championed before the world, accusing the government of reducing the country to an American client state. Old friend Teheran expressed 'hurt', 'surprise' and 'shock' at this betrayal. But that was acceptable for a newly acquiescent New Delhi – it had gotten a pat on the back from the Bush administration. Sections of India's strategic elite were exultant at this 'realist' turn to foreign policy.

New Delhi's decision to jettison a decades-old posture was embedded within a complex web of regional and international issues: the evolution of Indo-US and Indo-Iranian relationships; the implications for Southasian energy security; and the Washington DC strategy to isolate Iran. India's Vienna decision reflects the broader trend towards subservience to US interests, and is both morally untenable and strategically myopic.

The betrayal

New Delhi has suddenly turned the tenets of its earlier Iran policy upside-down – those of seeking a decision by consensus, retaining the nuclear question within the ambit of the IAEA, and supporting Iran's right to develop a nuclear programme for peaceful purposes. The resolution paved the way for referral of the issue to the Security Council and sought to halt even those nuclear activities that Teheran is entitled to undertake under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Pro-establishment spin-masters in New Delhi have incongruously sought to portray the vote as a pro-Iran move, one that has bought time for diplomacy and prevented the immediate referral of the issue to the Council. In reality, the very recognition that the issue lies within the Council's purview means that Iran's nuclear programme is now officially deemed to be a 'threat to international peace and security', firmly putting the country in the dock. If Teheran is furious and Washington elated by the IAEA resolution, we would like to know, how can the move be in Iran's favour?

India, with eyes wide open, has played into the hands of the US neo-conservative establishment and their cheerleader George W Bush. This group is now focusing on Iran as the next country in line for intervention among the infamous 'axis of evil'. Once again, 'weapons of mass destruction' – yet to be found in Iraq – is the catchphrase being used to attempt to isolate Teheran. The fact is, the IAEA reports that Iran has shown 'good progress' on the nuclear question: "all the declared nuclear material in Iran has been accounted for and, therefore, such material is not diverted to prohibited activities."

No weapons-grade uranium has been found in Iranian facilities; only the prejudiced believe at this time that there is a 'clandestine weapons programme'. Iran does need to disclose the history of its P2 centrifuge programme – reported to have been obtained from the shadowy network of A Q Khan – and the IAEA needs to be fully convinced

that Teheran is not engaging in some undeclared nuclear-related activity. But the IAEA has processes for that, and the world need not jump the gun. Teheran has already signed the Additional Protocol that allows a liberal, even intrusive, inspection of its nuclear programme – this should have been the means to deal with any Iran-related apprehensions.

New Delhi's stand in Vienna, based on misrepresentations of Iran's nuclear programme, assists the US in the next phase of its 'war on terror'. While an American invasion is unlikely at this time, given the probability that it would end in a classic case of imperial over-reach, there is clearly a strategy of sanctions in the works. Washington has long eyed Iran as a prized catch in its West Asian game, mostly because of its large oil and natural gas reserves. The invasion of Iraq will not be justified until Iran is subdued, apparently. Besides, in the larger matrix, Iran is the only country in the region that has the potential to stand up to Israel. It is also the lynchpin for any independent energy initiative in Asia. With its Vienna vote, India has become complicit in a strategy that is being engineered for someone else's benefit; in so doing, it has infringed on the sovereignty of an old friend.

New Delhi's about-face defies strategic logic as well. Iran has been India's closest ally in the 'Islamic world' and has supported India at crucial junctures over the years. It has also helped to arrange India's economic access to Central Asia. But it is in the realm of energy collaboration that Indo-Iranian cooperation has such immense potential. The agreement between the two countries on the supply of liquefied natural gas, and Teheran's enthusiastic support for the Iran-Pakistan-India gasline, holds solutions for India's ever-increasing energy needs that are crucial for poverty reduction and economic expansion (*see Himal Jul-Aug 05*).

Immediately after the vote, Iran's disappointed representative in Vienna reportedly walked up to Indian diplomats and declared that the pipeline deal was now dead. While Teheran has since clarified that the energy agreements are still on, there is no escaping the mistrust that has now entered into the relationship. All of a sudden, the prospects for the 'magic pipeline' seem to have receded into the distance.

Adding to the vote's irony is India's own nuclear dynamic. Here is a state that has stayed outside of the global nuclear order and has tested nuclear weapons as recently as 1998. Suddenly, it has sat in judgement against another state that is a signatory to the NPT, that appears to have abided by international rules, and where traces of a nuclear-weapons programme have yet to be found. India's own 1998 logic of a 'hostile security environment' would seem to apply to Iran as a country surrounded by hostility – the US's orchestrations from afar and its presence in next-door Iraq and Afghanistan. Not to mention the nuclear-armed Israel in the vicinity, which geo-strategists tend to forget.

Great power

The Vienna vote has to be seen as a part of the broader shift in Indian policy towards aligning with the 'superpower' in a 'unipolar' world – jettisoning, as one laudatory newspaper editorial argued, the "weak and crumbling multilateral crutches". But New Delhi cannot hope to piggyback its way to Great Power status by curtailing its autonomous decision-making and turning its back on those it claims to represent.

In the specific context of Iran, there is little doubt that India buckled under the weight of its much-coveted 'strategic partnership' with the United States. American lawmakers had made it clear to New Delhi – 'in plain English', as one US Congressman put it – that the civilian nuclear cooperation deal signed between the two countries in July this year would come through only if India voted with the US in Vienna. The July agreement is prized because it includes de facto US recognition of India's nuclear power status; and promises the supply of previously prohibited nuclear material, in return for Indian pledges to separate its civilian and military nuclear facilities. For the deal to come into force, however, it has to be ratified by the US Congress – a clear US bargaining chip to bully India's Vienna vote.

Policymakers in New Delhi need to ponder exactly how this new alliance with Washington DC has curtailed India's own strategic and political space on the global stage. Given the asymmetry of power and inequality that characterises Indo-US relations, New Delhi may well find itself toeing the American line again and again, until all of its carefully cultivated independence is lost. This time, the scales were tipped by a nuclear energy deal – the very utility of which is extremely suspect, a fact that only went un-highlighted because India's anti-nuclear lobby seems dead in its tracks. The next time, it could be the lure or promise of a trade agreement. The benefits of such tradeoffs are as doubtful as the costs are clear.

As it seeks access to the corridors of power in Washington DC, New Delhi will rapidly lose respect and support among the countries of the South. While most countries of the Non-Aligned Movement abstained in the Vienna vote, India crossed the floor. In our view, for a country that is starry-eyed in its hopes to represent the voice of the developing world in the Security Council and the World Trade Organisation, this action was glaring and unwise. Will it be possible for New Delhi to pull back from the path it has already embarked upon? Even if better counsel prevails, how will it wrest back its autonomy? We will wait and see, as the IAEA meets again in Vienna this November.

Is the magic gone?

The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline is in trouble. Even as officials of the three countries publicly reaffirm their commitments to the project, there are clear signs that the gasline may not come through. 'Geopolitical realities' – a euphemism for sustained United States pressure on India and Pakistan not to engage in economic diplomacy with Iran – has pushed the prospects of the magic pipeline into the distance.

The compelling economic logic of the pipeline (*see Himal, Jul-Aug 2005*) has, for the moment, meant that energy officials from Islamabad, New Delhi and Teheran have continued to meet; bilateral working groups are working out agreements on pricing, gas composition, responsibility for delivery and other details. Iranian and Indian officials met as recently as late-October, agreeing to a pact under which India would be able to import five million tonnes of LNG per year over 25 years.

Throughout these complex negotiations, even while India and Pakistan shout themselves hoarse that 'outside powers' have no role in the gasline, the looming American shadow is all too obvious. George W Bush's administration has publicly expressed its concerns about the gasline venture, and would like to use its cancellation as part of its project to isolate Iran. On the larger plane, the US is said to be apprehensive that the gasline could be the basis for a push for Asian energy independence, where its own role as the primary player on the world energy stage would be significantly diminished.

Instead of the Iranian pipeline, which makes more economic sense for India, the US has supported the alternate Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) gasline. That the US energy giant Unocal has a stake in TAP, while the Russian corporate Gazprom would probably build the pipeline from the South Pars field in Iran, may also be leading Washington DC's stance.

To stall the Iran pipeline, the US has used the carrot of nuclear cooperation with India, as well as the stick of sanctions against companies that invest in Iran. The strategy seems to be working – at least in Delhi, where the Indian prime minister himself has come out publicly (after a meeting at the White House, no less) to say that the Iran project is fraught with risks, including those of financing. Meanwhile, after a period of quiet, when the gasline project had been gaining momentum and credibility, strategic analysts in the Indian capital have once again started a murmuring campaign about security issues related to the pipeline's passage through Pakistan.

There are also reports of a rift within the Indian establishment between the petroleum and foreign affairs ministries. The former sees the gasline as essential to meeting India's galloping energy needs; while the latter places priority on being in the White House's good books. If Singh's statement, the July Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation deal, and the recent Indian vote against Iran in Vienna (*see page 14*) are anything to go by – there's no prize for guessing which side is winning.

In Islamabad, too, there is some rethinking in progress. While Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has said that the pipeline would be commissioned even if India backed out of the project, Pakistan's ability to resist US pressure is doubtful. President Pervez Musharraf is said to have told Bush that he is willing to forget about the gasline, if he is provided with four nuclear reactors. But though angered by India's IAEA vote, Teheran seems to have adopted a wait-and-see approach.

In June, the three sides had agreed to start work on the gasline early next year. Given the unwillingness of New Delhi and Islamabad to stand up to US opposition, however, that is now seen as a remote possibility. The policies in New Delhi and Islamabad to simultaneously appease the US and continue the pipeline cannot continue for long. Something has got to break; unfortunately, for now, it seems as if it will be the pipeline.

SAARC and the sovereignty bargain

by | **Pratap Bhanu Mehta**

The recent earthquake that caused such enormous devastation on both sides of the Line of Control adds poignancy to any reflection on the future of regional integration in Southasia. It was a grim reminder of the region's shared vulnerabilities, and of the fact that we do not have even the beginnings of common institutions with which to respond. The natural geography of the region, so abruptly abridged by the processes of recent history and the designs of states, reasserted itself with a vengeance. It made so many of the boundaries we have constructed seem both brittle and hollow.

Where exactly did the earthquake occur? The short answer is easy: Kashmir. But even the naming of 'Kashmir' cannot be done without problems arising; the area cannot be identified in its wholeness, without various qualifiers. How does one most efficiently organise relief? Clearly, India and Pakistan had to use each other's territories and resources. Fortunately, in this instance the leaders did take recourse to history to abridge the demands of humanitarianism; borders temporarily melted faster that anyone could have dared to hope. But can this experience be a catalyst to help with the recognition that, if the countries of Southasia fight regional interdependence, they are fighting against their own interests? Can we recognise that our borders and restrictions, our mutual mistrusts and fears, harm no one but the people in the states of the Subcontinent? Does greater regional integration have a future in the Subcontinent?

In examining the future prospects for the SAARC organisation, it is worth considering the conditions under which successful regional integration can take place in Southasia. If the SAARC process is to be successful, it will have to be based on hard-headed economic and political logic – not sentimentalism and rhetoric. What are the conditions that promote regional integration? Do these conditions exist here?

We must distinguish between regional cooperation and regional integration. The former refers simply to a type of cooperation between governments. Regional integration, on the other hand, is the unleashing of a process that binds the societies and economies of neighbouring countries much more closely together. On one level, any project of greater regional integration involves what are called 'sovereignty tradeoffs'. Integration often requires the establishment and maintenance of structures of authority and institutions that surpass national boundaries. The European Union is a prominent example of an entity that possesses wide-ranging, supranational prerogatives. What are the reasons justifying sovereignty tradeoffs? Under what conditions can we expect these tradeoffs to take place?

The first condition that will make Southasian integration possible is a revolution in the understanding of 'sovereignty' itself.

Sovereignty obsession

The first condition that will make Southasian integration possible is a revolution in the understanding of 'sovereignty' itself. Although nationalists wave the flag of sovereignty as if it were a mystical, indivisible whole, in truth it is no such thing. Sovereignty actually has at least four separate components that pull in different directions: autonomy, control, legitimacy and identity. *Autonomy* refers to the independence a state has in making policy. *Control* refers to the actual ability of the state to produce the outcomes it desires. *Legitimacy* refers to its right to make rules in ways that are widely accepted and recognised internally and externally. *Identity* refers to the capacity of the state to endow people with an overriding sense of who they are as a collective group.

The difficulty is that these components of sovereignty do not hang together particularly well. A state may be autonomous, but may be quite ineffective in bringing about the results it desires. It might also lack control. Meanwhile, we in Southasia tend to confuse sovereignty with just one of its components – autonomy. Arguably, the postcolonial opposition to free trade that still marks most countries in the region (with the exception of Sri Lanka and now, increasingly, India) is rooted in just such a confusion. Bangladesh may nominally assert its auton that still marks most countries in the region (with the exception of Sri Lanka and now, increasingly, India) is rooted in just such a confusion. Bangladesh may nominally assert its autonomy regarding India by refusing to sell it natural gas; but by doing so it is diminishing its own power. Paradoxical as it may sound, sacrificing autonomy can sometimes enhance power. The crucial starting point for regional integration is when states begin to realise that autonomy does not necessarily create either control or power; that committing to forms of interdependence can enhance power, even though it may at first seem to diminish autonomy.

Almost all of Southasia was thus caught in a postcolonial syndrome, wherein that particular, narrow understanding of sovereignty became a mark of self-respect and identity. After all, colonialism was seen to have violated just this most-cherished aspect of political identity. An obsession with sovereignty, initially the result of the colonial experience, evolved on the part of the neighbouring states into a defensive claim against possible Indian domination of the region. India's political difficulties in the region have stemmed mainly from its relative size and power. In the interests of regional integration or the creation of free trade zones, one of two conditions must be met. Either most of the countries have to be of comparable size, or the economy of a dominant country has to be so attractive that others cannot resist the allure of integration. Neither condition currently exists in our region. With India's economy currently in the process of acquiring a new standing, however, this could offer a dynamic to pull the region together.

Bangladesh may nominally assert its autonomy regarding India by refusing to sell it natural gas; but by doing so it is diminishing its own power. Paradoxical as it may sound, sacrificing autonomy can sometimes enhance power.

Even if New Delhi does not act threateningly, the mere possibility of its regional domination elicits a defensive response from the neighbours. Arguably, if India sins against its neighbours, it is more a sin of condescension than a naked desire for domination. But for fragile states with insecure identities struggling to establish themselves, condescension might appear to be even worse that overt hostility. The result is that India finds it very difficult to overcome the fears and anxieties of countries like Bangladesh and Nepal, which is necessary in order to stabilise relations. As a whole, the regional countries have never felt secure enough, as states, to engage in sovereignty bargains that would be in their interest. Perhaps regional integration depends upon individual countries coming into their own as classic, full-fledged states that feel confident enough to consider transcending their own limitations. But with many not yet having achieved that status, the ruling establishments tend to become defensive at the mention of regional cooperation or integration.

Liberal economy

The second prerequisite condition for regional integration is a commitment by states of the region to liberal economic policies – 'liberal' in this case not in its strongly theoretical sense, but simply implying the promotion of free trade, greater mobility of citizens, and so on. Will the Southasian states recognise the benefits of an integrated common market? Certainly, all would see the benefits in the long run. In the short term, however, entrenched interests fear the consequences of opening up their economies; as such, they artfully disguise their immediate interests as the long-term welfare of their larger societies. The commitment to economic liberalism is still very thin in Southasia, and there is simply no example of successful regional integration amongst sovereign states that is not founded on a commitment to economic liberalism.

Here, two factors might turn out to be crucial. First, India has now clearly emerged as a dynamic economy – one that has sufficient power to carry the region with it. Sri Lanka, always a pioneer in this respect, has realised that it can piggyback on India's economic success. Not only has Colombo signed a free trade agreement and relaxed its visa regime for all arrivals; it is also negotiating a comprehensive economic agreement with New Delhi and openly discussing the possibility of a currency union.

If the Pakistani market were to open to Bollywood, the allure of 100 million-strong consumers would transform Bollywood cinema more than it would impact Pakistan.

The second factor is, in some ways, the opposite of the first. It could be argued that, precisely because India is becoming a powerful economy, its smaller neighbours will fear it even more and become more defensive. But while this fear is often exaggerated (if the Pakistani market were to open to Bollywood, the allure of 100 million-strong consumers would transform Bollywood cinema more than it would impact Pakistan!), India will still need to prepare to make unilateral concessions in order to avert those fears. When it comes to economic integration with its neighbours, India must move away from a paradigm of cyclical bilateral diplomacy, where each tariff concession depends on some reciprocal gesture from the other side. New Delhi can now easily afford to give preferential treatment to goods and services produced in the neighbourhood. This would create a long-term constituency for regional cooperation and defuse much of this fear.

If one looks beyond strictly Southasia, regional economic integration is already on the move, and the momentum is substantial. In some ways, India's strategy to look beyond SAARC and negotiate free trade agreements with ASEAN, Thailand and Singapore, and possibly the BIMSTEC grouping that brings together some South and Southeast Asian states, was a clever move. As far as India is concerned, the possible free trade zone now stretches from Kabul to Manila, in which only Pakistan and Bangladesh would be left out if they did not come on board. In the long run, they will have to join the party or pay a heavy economic price. But there is also this: politically, Dhaka and Islamabad might find it convenient to join a larger grouping than SAARC, which always carries the taint of being dominated by India.

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Empowering the hinterlands

The third condition for the emergence of greater regional integration would be the acceptance by regional states of what might be called a 'simultaneous dialectic' of greater regional integration and subregional power. Imagine if there were a free flow of goods and services throughout Southasia. Sri Lanka would likely develop extensive links with Tamil Nadu. The two Punjabs would come to a greater interdependence, as might West Bengal and Bangladesh or parts of Rajasthan and Sindh. It would also mean the greater development of the border regions of current states, where growth has been deliberately slowed.

Would the region's states look upon this kind of subregional integration without suspicion? On the ground, regional cooperation can gather momentum only when it is based on organic links between different subregions of the Subcontinent – not on links enforced from the centre of each country. None of these subregional linkages are likely to create any serious problem of secession from existing political units – though they will lead to a rediscovery of some old cultural identities. The allure of 'Punjabiyat', which has marked the recent thaw in relations between India and Pakistan, is one such instance. Regional integration will require future Southasian states to have 'strong' centers but 'weak' circumferences. The fears that regional integration would somehow swallow existing states are exaggerated; these states would emerge even more strongly, just with different definitions.

In a curious way, as has been shown by the experience of the European Union, regional integration can also help to solve identity conflicts. First, when states get habituated to unbundling sovereignty into its different components, they are less susceptible to seeing that sovereignty as an all-or-nothing affair – the outcome should not be seen as a zero-sum game. States used to sovereignty tradeoffs have a structure of domestic politics in which such arguments and bargains are more acceptable. These are states that have begun to understand that, just as in areas of trade, sovereignty tradeoffs can bring benefits; they can, in principle, do so in other areas as well.

Second, regional integration can help in identity conflicts because subregional devolutions undertaken in the context of wider regional settlements are generally easier to sell politically. As part of a larger process of restructuring, they are not seen as concessions to a demanding party, but rather as an innovation. Third, the parent state itself can begin to redefine its own core stakes in the subregional

conflict. If, for instance, its interests in trade, free movement, human rights or rights of minorities can be secured, then it might be more willing to concede some of its other powers. In fact, because both the subregional units and the parent state are encased in a larger, international set of institutions, both have credible assurances that their interests in these areas will not be undermined.

Fourth, as regions come together, the major laws of all countries, together with the values that they protect, begin to look more and more alike. Thus, the state itself is no longer the site where national differences need to be articulated and defended. Fifth, in cases of subregional issues that involve interstate conflict, the two states in question can acquire greater experience of working together within interlocking institutions. Sixth, states are also more attuned to accepting outside mediation.

None of these subregional linkages are likely to create any serious problem of secession from existing political units – though they will lead to a rediscovery of some old cultural identities.

Ideological convergence

Whether or not any of the mechanisms described above will lead to desired outcomes will depend on a variety of other factors; it would be unwise to believe in economic or political over-determination. But if the experience of the European Union is any guide, regional integration in Southasia under these mechanisms is certainly plausible. In fact, the one case that particularly bears this out is Great Britain – in reference to Scotland and Wales, but more importantly, Northern Ireland. It is noteworthy that the devolution to Scotland and Wales that took place was facilitated by Britain's integration into the European Union. That process provided assurances to the core British interests: a local assembly could not expropriate the English or pass legislation that discriminated against outsiders.

One of the fears of greater devolution in places like Kashmir – and one of the arguments against it – is that it is not clear what a new power structure might look like. But if power is devolved to regions within the context of a broader regional framework – where the larger region as a whole is committed to certain, specific values – these anxieties can become less pressing.

But the most crucial aspect of regional integration is ideological convergence across the member states. This does not mean that all politics would begin to look alike, but it would necessitate a set of commitments that all states would abide by and incorporate into their own laws. These requirements would include a commitment to basic liberal values, a respect for minority rights, a commitment to the rule of law, and so forth. Unfortunately, for the moment, the domestic politics throughout most of Southasia often disallows pledges on these core values.

On the face of it, the prospects for SAARC would look very grim. There is no ideological convergence on the Subcontinent; no deep commitment to trade as an engine of growth; and none of the states are willing to acknowledge that any solution to their problems might be found regionally, outside of their own national boundaries. On the other hand, insecurities abound in our individual states. Rather than transcending identities, the region's governments use identity politics to keep their populations hostage and to bait their neighbours. No country is serious enough or willing enough to make a definitive break from the historical agreements and compromises that, in the final analysis, are to blame for the current impasse. Thus, we have absurd situations where SAARC's countries do not collaborate on energy and hesitate from facilitating bilateral trade, even when their own populations would benefit. Meanwhile, every possible economic, geographical or cultural link is reduced. The result is that Southasia is one of the world's most militarised areas, with states needing to protect themselves against their own region.

Lankan paradox

At the end of it all, is there hope for SAARC? This question is best answered indirectly, by asking why one country in the region, Sri Lanka, is less afraid of regional cooperation and integration than are others, including big India. Modern Sri Lanka has always been something of a paradox. On one level, Sri Lanka has been an extraordinarily vibrant and cosmopolitan country – the first true democracy in Southasia. Of all of the region's nation states, for much of the 20th century it was the most open. Even at modest levels of economic growth, Sri Lanka's human development indicators put the rest of Southasia to shame. At the same time, this country, like so many others in the region, has also borne the deepest scars of modernity: a potent combination of Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms have fed off of one another to produce one of the century's most brutal and stubborn ethnic conflicts. The civil war diminished the lustre of Sri Lanka's other achievements and cast a long shadow on its economy.

Yet even today, the country remains the source of immense hope. Anyone following Sri Lankan politics and economic policy is struck by how it is positioning itself to take advantage of the process of economic globalisation. Of all of the region's

countries, it has found it easiest to overcome the legacy of strained relations with its neighbours. After India's controversial late-1980s intervention in Sri Lanka with the 'IPKF', the Colombo-New Delhi relationship had hit a low point from which few thought it would ever emerge. Yet within a decade, relations between these two countries acquired an extraordinary momentum. Today, not only do they have a free trade agreement and allow unhindered movement of nationals; as stated above, there is also discussion in Colombo already of a currency union with India. Sri Lanka already has a free trade agreement with Pakistan. In short, it has emerged as the one country that is determined to integrate its economy as fast as possible with the rest of Southasia.

Growth all across the world seems to follow regional rather than national patterns; regions often sink or swim together.

There is a good deal of farsighted prudence behind Sri Lanka's drive towards regional economic integration. First, Colombo has realised that the country can benefit from the general dynamism of the region. Indeed, growth all across the world seems to follow regional rather than national patterns; regions often sink or swim together. Sri Lanka has therefore had few second thoughts in aligning itself with the region's larger economies. Second, Lankan leaders have realised that national strength comes from creating economic interdependence, not by standing aloof. If a significant constituency in the large country comes to depend upon trade with a smaller country, that constituency then becomes a champion of the interests of the latter. To repeat: interdependence enhances power rather than curtails it. This is perhaps understood better in Colombo than in any other Southasian capital, including New Delhi.

Third, opening-up has also been a partial solution to some of Sri Lanka's domestic challenges. The government is under serious fiscal pressure and Sri Lanka needs all the investment it can muster. The process of capital formation will only be bolstered through trade and openness, something that government intervention can never achieve. Although they will not openly admit it, many Colombo politicians are of the view that greater regional integration will help to ease the brutal internal conflict that continues to drag Sri Lanka down despite best efforts.

Here the Sri Lankans take the cue from the experience of the European Union. Once a country gets used to making beneficial sovereignty bargains in areas like trade and currency, it opens up the path to sharing sovereignty in many other areas. Sovereignty was supposed to be a means to stability, peace and prosperity. Instead, our states have turned a narrow conception of sovereignty into an end itself. Instead of an instrument of well being, obsessive concern with sovereignty and boundaries becomes a shackle on peace and prosperity. From the European Union to ASEAN, those countries that have chosen the path of credible regional integration have not given up on sovereignty. But they have put its claims into proper perspective.

The requirements for integration into a wider region and global economy also necessitate a different kind of politics and conception of the state in Southasia. Contrary to the fears of so many, regional interdependence does not swallow up the identities of nations. Instead, the process provides opportunities to shape the new identities of the future. Consider what might happen to Tamil identity in both India and Sri Lanka if the economies of south India and Sri Lanka were to be integrated. By itself, regional integration will not solve the violence that has become entrenched in Sri Lanka; but imperceptibly, it could help to reduce the allure of entrenched identities. Somewhere in the rapid steps being taken by Sri Lanka towards regional integration is a powerful understanding: that economic integration is an opportunity to create new prosperity, to define new identities. Above all, it is not in the least a threat.

The eighth member?

Afghanistan might just officially become a part of Southasia, with the leaders in the upcoming regional summit discussing whether to include it as SAARC's eighth member state. The action would have historical sanction, for Afghanistan was not only the ancient corridor to the Subcontinent, but it has deep political, economic and cultural ties with the rest of Southasia.

In February this year, President Hamid Karzai declared his interest in joining the regional grouping. "Afghanistan will be honoured to be invited to SAARC and will work to take SAARC to Central Asia," he said. On 21 October, his foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, sent an official application to the Pakistani foreign minister, Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri; Pakistan is the organisation's chairman till the Dhaka summit. Afghanistan is said to have drawn-up the application only after it got a clear indication of support from SAARC members, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September.

Colombo announced that it had considered Afghanistan a part of the region way back in 1985, and that it would welcome the country's formal entry. President Pervez Musharraf in Islamabad is said to have given President Karzai the thumbs-up. During his recent path-breaking visit to Afghanistan, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also gave assurances to President Karzai.

If Kabul does make it in, the challenge for the SAARC Secretariat will be how to adjust the organisation's logo, which has served it well for two decades. It shows seven stylised swirls – and now there will have to be an eighth.

Fading history

The Malayali link to Sinhala culture has a rich past even if it does not have much of a present.

by | **Enoka Lankatilleke**

If one ventures out to sea from Colombo, it is still not uncommon to catch a glimpse of a Kerala schooner making its way south. They are still loaded down with the same goods that they have ferried for centuries – jute products, for instance, to be traded in Colombo's Pettah market for Sri Lankan spices. While trade between the two regions remains, today it is eclipsed by the huge volumes that move between Colombo and Bombay. Kerala and Sri Lanka rarely meet in the modern world anymore, except perhaps in development writings, which marvel at the high social indicators that continue to be shared by both the state and island country.

At the narrowest point of the Palk Strait, Sri Lanka is separated from Tamil Nadu by a mere 35 km of surf. It is the ethnic link between Tamil Nadu, the Indian state, and the rebellion-minded Tamil-speaking northeast of Sri Lanka that strikes the observer whenever reference is made to the two countries' littoral regions. Kerala is rarely mentioned, even though it is just 'around the bend' towards the west from the tip of the Indian peninsula.

The cultural connection between Sri Lanka and 'god's own country' – Kerala – was once vibrant, but now is rather thin. There used to be extensive commerce through the ports of Cochin, Calicut and Kozhikode, which also enabled regular flows of migrants to the island. While their proximity and similar geography has led to long, intertwined common histories, this traditional relationship has now been largely overshadowed by the economic and political realities of Sri Lanka's engagement with Tamil Nadu and India's larger commercial centres.

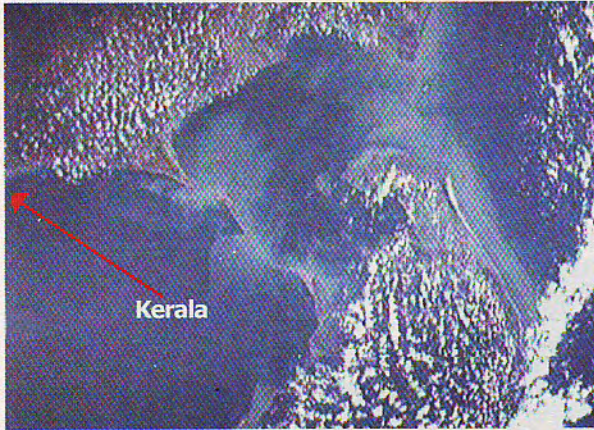
A close examination of the signatures of the Sinhala chieftains on the 1815 Kandyan Convention shows a mixture of Sinhala and Malayali characters.

Kerala has a wide stretch of lowland, extending from the Malabar Coast to the Western Ghats, which has long seen coconut cultivation. In meeting the Subcontinent's coconut demand, Kerala developed the manpower available for employment in copra, desiccated coconut and coir manufacturing, as well as toddy-based industries. Sri Lanka has a wide seaside belt running the island's perimeter, and utilised toddy-tapping knowledge originating on the mainland. In the early 20th century, Keralites began immigrating to Sri Lanka in order both to teach and engage in the practice.

The two similarly located regions have historically nurtured numerous parallel industries, including paddy and fisheries, as well as rubber, tea, pepper, cashews, coffee, cardamom, arecanut palm and citronella. Almost all fruits grown in Sri Lanka are also grown in Kerala. According to historical records, international traders that traditionally dominated shipping would frequent both Sri Lanka and Kerala in order to buy ivory, spices, gemstones and other goods for European markets. These frequent visitors heavily contributed to the promotion of cultural ties between the island and the mainland.

Over the strait

Ancient Indian texts such as Kautilya's *Arthasastra*, the writings of the 4th century grammarian Katyayana, and Ashokan rock inscriptions all refer to three states in the Indian Peninsula's southern tip – Pandya, Chola and Chera. The former two kingdoms were located in present-day Tamil Nadu; the latter was in Kerala. While historical records in Sri Lanka abound with references to the islanders' relations with the Cholas and Pandyans, reference to ties with the Cheras is limited. A few Sinhala chronicles, such as the *Mahavamsa*, *Culavamsa*, *Pujavaliya* and *Kohila Sandesaya* do include evidence that the connection with Kerala significantly impacted political life on the island.



Alternatively, there were migrations and invasions between the two regions. Throughout the first millennium, the Sinhala kings of the island enlisted mercenaries from throughout south India, including Kerala. Historical references also detail migrations of Keralites who joined the Sinhala forces in order to protect the kingdom of Rajarata. A century earlier, the same kingdom had been sacked by a king from Kerala, Kalinga Magha.

Certain Keralan families played significant roles in Sri Lankan court politics, where they served as ministers and wielded tremendous power. The Alakeshwara family, for instance, belonged to a Kerala dynasty that grew very close to the royalty of the 14th century Gampola kingdom. Reference to a minister named Alagakkona first appeared on a Kitsirimevan rock inscription from 1344, relating how Minister Alagakkonara renovated the Kelaniya Viharaya temple and constructed a new building there under the patronage of King Kitsirimevan.

Language plays an important role in relations between migrant communities and their hosts, with words and phrases passing from one tongue to the other. Kerala's Malayali language first became distinct from Tamil around 750 AD. Although the Sinhala language is rooted in Sanskrit, it shows affinities with Tamil, Telugu and Malayali, as well. Indeed, the presence of Malayali speakers in Sri Lanka has, since the medieval period, led to an enrichment of Sinhala. There are marked similarities in the two alphabets. In some instances, Malayali characters were used to write Sinhala, as can be witnessed in graffiti on the rock fortress of Sigiriya. More recently, a close examination of the signatures of the Sinhala chieftains on the 1815 Kandyan Convention (between the British and the Kandyan chiefs) shows a mixture of Sinhala and Malayali characters.

Religion and culture, too, echo this give-and-take. A Keralan influence that has its origins in the time when the kings of Kandy took on Nayakkar brides from across the water (complete with retinues) is still present in Sri Lankan society today. The *osariya* or Kandyan sari, for instance, is very similar to its Keralan counterpart, but is today a symbol of authentic Sinhala-ness. Religious practices such as the Pattini deity worship (as well as the worship of Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, Saman and Vibhishana) were also introduced to Sri Lanka from Kerala. Sinhala classical poems such as the "Perakumba Sinha" and "Kokila Sandesaya" also bear the Keralan stamp.

A melding, a loss?

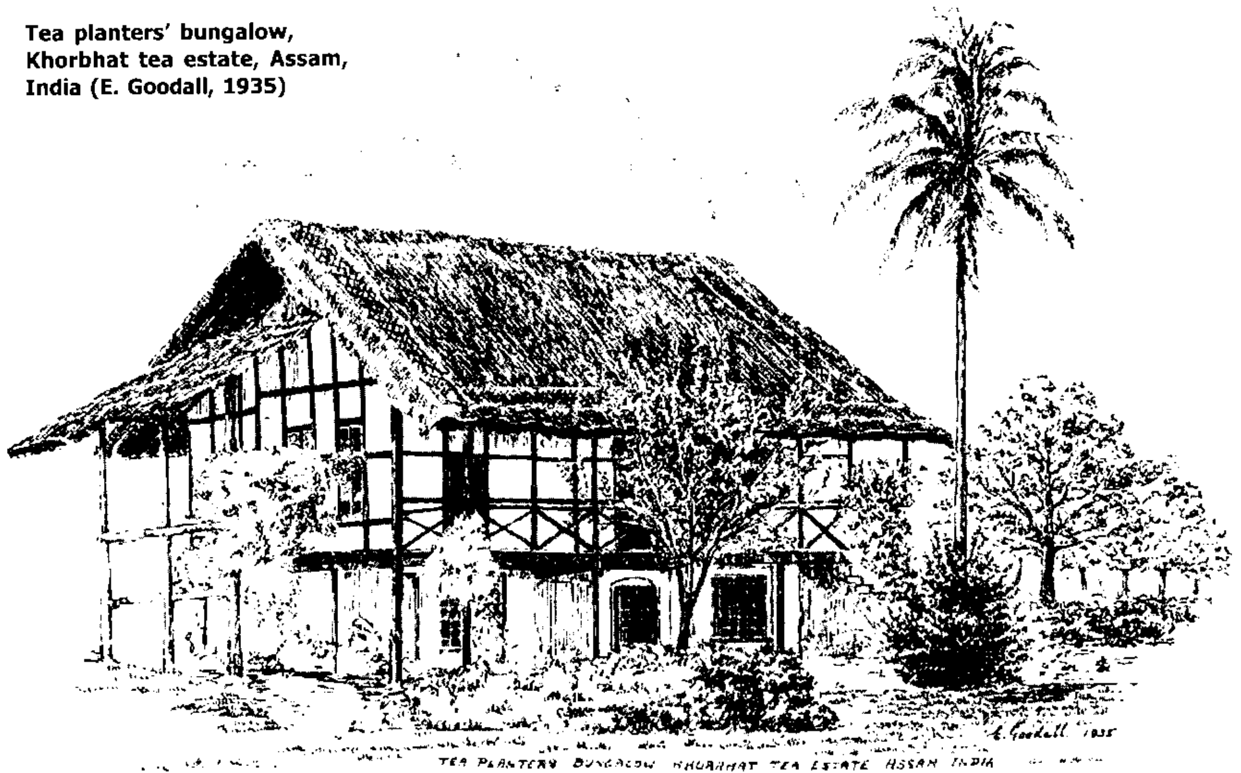
Over the course of the centuries, the people from Chera/Kerala who migrated to Sri Lanka have become part of the Sinhala community, adopting local names and Buddhist practices. Given the multiple shared features of the two communities, many have felt it easier to merge with the dominant local groups, rather than to try to maintain separations. In areas such as Lunuwila, Wennappuwa and Marawila, there are many descendants of Keralan migrants who today feel culturally and socially closer to the Sinhala people than they do to the Sri Lankan Tamils. However, descendants of Malayali migrants who initially married Tamil women have today become part of the Tamil community in towns along the west coast. Small groups of Cheras living in Dematagoda, Naharenpita and Maradenkulama still do try to maintain their ethnic identities.

Similar to what has happened in Sri Lanka with the native Veddha (the 'adivasi'), the fading of a distinct Keralan identity and absorption into the Sinhala community are symptoms of the strengthening of the larger Sinhala and Tamil communities. This process is supported by official and unofficial structures involved in state-building – a project that, unfortunately, tends to erase smaller and more fragile identities.

Interestingly, even as the Malayali identity fades in Sri Lanka, there is increasing interest in Colombo about Kerala – almost exclusively because of tourism. Both Sri Lanka and Kerala have come to depend extensively on visitors from the West. India's burgeoning middle class is also an increasing source of tourists to the two regions. The Sri Lankan tourism authorities have been talking about a possible joint venture with the Kerala Tourism Development Corporation, and there are also proposals for passenger ship services between Thiruvananthapuram and Colombo. If these ties deepen, as per official plans, Sri Lanka and Kerala could begin to "forge partnerships in several areas besides tourism, including health, education and fisheries".

All such plans are still only in the realm of possibility. The hope, however, is that Sri Lanka and Kerala, while starting small, can again develop healthy cultural and economic exchanges, as two neighbours of the Southasian south.

Tea planters' bungalow, Khorbhat tea estate, Assam, India (E. Goodall, 1935)



Where is ASSAM?

Instead of accepting the nationalisation of everything by political boundaries, we can use geographical history to locate current social realities.

by | **David Ludden**

Assam is today a state of India and, as such, an official region of a world entirely covered by nations and encompassed by national maps. We have no choice but to locate any region like Assam inside of national geography, for this both controls our spatial imagination and conveys a specific location, identity and meaning.

But other perspectives do exist. Despite the seemingly universal authority of national geography, the location of social reality is flexible. That Assam is part of India is indisputable; but it is important to note that this fact coexists with others that find different 'locations' for Assam. Indeed, looking at any area's geography in slightly less conventional ways allows for the appearance of a kaleidoscope of social realities. Such an understanding allows for important new frames of reference for scholarship, activism and policy-making.

The *first step* is to appreciate the political nature of all modern maps. Territorial boundaries – as well as social efforts to define, enforce and reshape them – represent political projects rather than simple facts. The makers and enforcers of boundaries use maps today to define human reality inside of national territory. As a result, everything in the world has acquired a national identity. We see the boundaries of national states so often that they almost appear to be natural features of the globe.

This virtual reality came into being only in the 19th

century, as various technologies for surveying the earth, mass-printing, mass-education and other innovations began to make viewing standardised maps a common experience. Making maps, reading maps, talking about maps, and thinking with mental maps became increasingly common with each passing decade. By the 1950s, people around the world had substantial map-knowledge in common. Today, we can reasonably imagine that most people in the world share common map-knowledge because they routinely experience various versions of exactly the same maps. During the global expansion of modern mapping, national territory suddenly incorporated all of the earth's geography. Though national boundaries only covered the entire globe after 1950, within a decade or two all histories of all peoples in the world came to appear inside national maps, in a cookie-cutter world of national geography. This has been the most comprehensive organisation of spatial experience in human history. Spaces that elude national maps have now mostly disappeared from intellectual life.

We see the boundaries of national states so often that they almost appear to be natural features of the globe.

Maps attain their form and authoritative interpretation from both the political economy and the cultural politics of mapping; the most influential people in these processes work in national institutions, including universities. State-authorised mapping is now so common that most governments do not regulate map-making, but almost everyone draws official lines on maps by habit anyway. Indeed, this dynamic is so pervasive that few people ever even think about it, yet it has covered the planet with the nation state's territorial authority. As a result, we are now accustomed to seeing maps that nationalise topography by erasing spaces on the edge of a nation's identity. In India, this includes several major spaces near Assam – areas in Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh – which have become mostly blank spaces in the country's national view of Southasia. Every day, TV and newspaper weather maps nationalise rainfall, wind and the seasons, by enclosing them inside national boundaries. This seemingly innocent nationalisation of nature makes it increasingly difficult to visualise any world not defined by national boundaries.

After understanding the political nature of maps, our *second step* is to appreciate the extent to which modernity depends on the idea of national territories. The whole notion of modern statistics, for instance, could only come into being inside 'frozen', unchanging geographical spaces.

This freezing of blocks of space inside nations had already begun by 1776 (when Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*), with the assumption that every nation's wealth belonged inside its national boundaries and under the control of its national government.

Fixing regions in place inside national maps brought to modern social life a newly rigorous, comprehensive order. Today, national maps describe the location of every single thing, person and place on the planet.

National territory also heavily affects cultural politics, both inside and across national boundaries. Human identity everywhere is attached to national sites; in those places, some people are always native, while others are always foreign.

In the Indian context, Assam is a part of a region officially called 'Northeast India' It has much more geographical contact with other nations than with the Indian mainland, however, from which it is most often described as 'remote'. Assam is also grouped with state territories in northeastern Southasia – described by the South Asia Foundation as "...the eastern states of India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal" – which has a definable population, GNP, land area and trade history. This relationship alone allows us to move our perspective around and to reconfigure Assam's geographical location. Following this strategy into the past, *step three* in this process looks at geographical perspectives that move along routes of movement, blending them together over history.

This method is actually quite realistic. After all, however natural, necessary and comforting it may seem to assign everything in the world a fixed location, doing so inside of firm boundaries can never succeed in creating a stationary social order. Most of the time, everything in social life is on the move, in a way that national geography cannot accommodate. By considering how trends of mobility have changed throughout history, we can locate Assam in a more flexible geography.

Assam-in-Asia

Nature is a good place to begin. An especially good place to begin is a river, as defined by the naturally downhill movements of flowing water. In such a water-view of the world, Assam lies in Asian spaces defined by mountains, slopes and plains. These monumental features channel the rains that arrive with Asia's longest, wettest monsoons and feed the extensive valleys where rice became the dominant crop by around 1500 AD. In this wet, river- and rice-fed Asia, human populations have historically moved into and concentrated in river valleys and their adjacent areas. Assam has long been a region of in-migration, hosting new generations of settlers from prehistoric times to the

present day. With low-density mountains on three sides, Assam is the eastern edge of the exceptionally high-density Gangetic population zone that runs from the hills of Punjab to the Bay of Bengal.

The impact of this water-view of Assam-in-Asia becomes immediately clear on the geography of river development projects today. All Indian rivers running through Assam also flow into Bangladesh; throughout these watersheds, people depend on the same water. Major dam projects disrupt that geographical reality. The proposed Tipaimukh dam in Assam and, more dramatically, India's plan to divert Assamese waters to parched Indian regions would reduce the flow of water into the delta. It is little wonder that such plans arouse concern (and outrage) in Bangladesh, which gets 80 percent of its fresh water through 54 rivers flowing from India.

Assam also occupies a borderland of Asian drainage systems, sitting astride a watershed that divides the western trajectory of the Brahmaputra at the Patkai Range from major drainages of Southeast Asia and southern China. Five huge rivers define the major corridors of settlement and mobility running from the Ganga basin across China, Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. The Brahmaputra (or Jamuna in Bangladesh) is the easternmost river of Southasia, but it is also the westernmost in East Asia. In this context, India's Northeast is commonly found on maps of East Asia. Assam and the rest of the Northeast, as well as the adjacent Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, can subsequently be seen as a western region of East Asia, an eastern region of Southasia, and as a region where South and East Asia overlap. It is this overlapping that is impossible to accommodate on national maps; it thus effectively disappears from the public conscious.

From ancient times, the NE-SE course of the river valleys east of Assam has channelled human movement inland through Southeast Asia and China. In Assam, important such historical channels have included: the routes of the ancient Khasi and Tai-Ahom migrations, which moved westward from the Red River basin in Vietnam; the routes of opium trade, with unknown origins but which extended from Bihar to China; the imperial expansion of Burma; and the military travels of the Chinese, Japanese, British and Americans along roads from Assam to Yunnan, during the 1940s.

River routes have long connected Assam in each direction. The major movements that decisively shaped the region in early modern times (1660-1830) included: the Mughals and British moving northeast from Bengal; the Ahoms moving down the Brahmaputra basin; Burmese armies moving around the Patkai and across the Nagaland ranges; and trans-Himalayan forces coming south from Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and China.

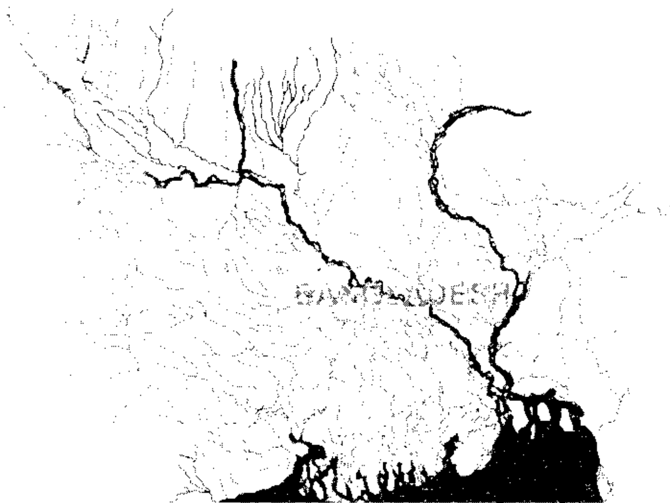
Before 1800, Indian Ocean routes seem to have had less direct impact on the Brahmaputra valley than on other Southasian regions comparably close to the coast. Most importantly for its geographical history, however, by 1800 Assam lay at the intersection of Indian Ocean routes with inland routes into interior East Asia. Thus, early British imperial geographers believed with some justification that Assam was India's inland gateway to China. Opium and tea, among other commodities, already travelled Indo-Chinese roads through Assam. When Europeans 'discovered' India and China, however, they did so at seaports; here they imagined all societies as being attached to separate inland civilisations. From this seacoast view of northeastern India, ethnic groups in the mountains looked more like East and Southeast Asian peoples than like those that dominated the Indian lowlands. Thus, Europeans viewed East Asian-looking peoples in Northeast India as marginal or even alien to the surrounding 'Indic' civilisation. These mountain ethnic groups, however, actually represent the historical overlapping of social spaces, defining Asia from the west and east at the same time.

British Assam

Our national traditions of geographical knowledge do not pay equal attention to all of the routes of human mobility that shaped Assam. Indian historical geography focuses exclusively on routes that run east-west along the Gangetic basin, where dominant social groups have always identified Assam with eastern frontiers. In the Indian national view, Assam has always been an Indian frontier, always in the process of being incorporated into Indo-Gangetic history. Even when the British Empire began its northeast expansion from Sylhet and Cooch Bihar, Assam still lay on cultural and political frontiers of South and Southeast Asia.

Every day, TV and newspaper weather maps nationalise rainfall, wind and the seasons, by enclosing them inside national boundaries.

Guwahati's relations with New Delhi, even today, represent a dynamic that began under the Gupta Empire in the early centuries of the first millennium. Like the Mauryas before them, the ancient Guptas carried their imperial ambitions far from their homeland in Bihar, but also much farther west



than east – lands to the east of the Ganga basin being considered undesirable. Gupta culture later influenced the Assamese Kamrupa kings in large part through trade. Indeed, the Buddhists who dispersed across eastern frontiers flourished there for centuries, in part because trade, rather than imperial power, extended across the water routes of Bengal.

A thousand years after the last of the Guptas, the strength of Ahom warriors in the Brahmaputra basin, combined with the difficulty of forests and raging river waters, largely kept Mughal imperialism at bay. During the age of Ahom rulers in Assam, the Mughal Empire was rooted in the far west. The renowned Mughal gardens derived from desert ideals in Central Asia and Iran; Mughal homesteads blended the cultures of Persia and Rajasthan. Lands of dense forests, deep annual floods, rivers, tigers, elephants and fearsome mountain warriors proved too difficult for the dry-land plains warriors to conquer. These lands paid very little imperial taxation anyway. As such, the Mughal *padshah* and his nobles mostly conquered and sported on the fringes of forest tracts that they left to local rulers, from whom they extracted as much obedience and tribute as possible.

Assam became part of imperial India only after the Mughals lost their grip in Bengal, as British imperialists expanded inland from the sea with a combined force of merchants, armies and Brahmans. Northeast of Calcutta, Mughal highways pointed to Assam; but because Assam lay outside of Mughal control, it remained so for early British India as well. Only once the British conquered Assam in 1826 did the area obtain – for the first time in its history – a firm regional identity as a part of Indian imperial geography. Until 1874, British Assam was part of a novel imperial territory called 'Bengal', which included West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, Northeast India and present-day Bangladesh. British Assam always included the Brahmaputra and Barak river valleys, as well as the Surma-Kushiara river basin of Sylhet. After 1860, the tea industry spread across hills around these rivers and enhanced control of the administrative unity of Sylhet and Assam.

Until 1947, British Assam was an eastern borderland of British imperialism, which tried to incorporate Burma and never quite established full control over the mountains between India and China. In the context of British India, Assam's Brahmaputra valley had special strategic significance as a borderland between British India and imperial China (until 1911) and Japan (1939-1945). In 1947, Assam became India's nearest borderland with revolutionary China. In this strategic location, the US Army built the so-called Stilwell Road in 1943 – running from Ledo in Assam to the China-Burma road as a supply link with the Bengal-Assam Railway for the US and British wars against Japan and, later, the Chinese Communists (*see Himal Sept-Oct 05 article on the Stilwell Road*). War along this road was intense. Recently, Indian investigators found as many as 1500 graves from the World War II era on the India-Burma border along the Stilwell Road.

Partition and after

The year 1947 dramatically changed the forces shaping Assam. Partition and its fallout resulted in the cutting and restriction of traditional routes around Assam, and introduced major demographic changes. Together, these two forces give Assam the shape and location we see today. Most importantly, the formation of East Pakistan (and later Bangladesh) created new national borders with a presumed hostile state to Assam's west and south. In Assam's southeast, Sylhet was the only region of British India where a referendum was held specifically on the question of accession to India or Pakistan; in 1947, the vote in favour of Pakistan separated Sylhet from Assam for the first time since 1826.

Partition also exaggerated a process of change in the cultural composition of the Sylhet population, which had proceeded slowly for at least 50 years after the first Indian census in 1871, when the Muslim and Hindu populations had been roughly equal in number. After 1871, migration into Sylhet farming regions increased the Muslim population with every census. Between 1891 and 1931, people reportedly born in the Bengal District of Mymensingh but living in Assam increased from one-third to two-thirds of the population of southern Assamese valleys, including Sylhet. Noting this upward trend in migrant settlement, in 1931 the Assam *Census Report* called Muslim Bengalis in Assam "invaders". To defend their territory against this 'invasion', the Assam

Congress resolved to move Sylhet out of Assam. The question of how to regulate migration into Assam from Bengal dominated the state political agenda in the 1930s and 1940s. After 1947, this topic became a new type of national issue, with reference to alleged threats to national security.

Migration continued to increase after Partition, however, and remained high for three decades, spurred in part by wars in 1965 and 1971. In the 1960s, the total Sylhet population rose 60 percent as one lakh Muslim Bengalis moved out of Assam into Sylhet's Haor basin, where open land was available. Sylhet's population growth was most dramatic in areas nearest Meghalaya and Tripura, where migration produced completely new localities filled with immigrants. In much of Sylhet, a new social formation emerged, which ranked the cultural status of old and new residents – a dynamic that continues today.

Although the ethnic composition of the population had been a political issue in Assam since the 1920s, it raised its head again after 1950. Assam then shrunk in size for two reasons: first, Partition cut out the mostly-Muslim Sylhet; second, nationalist territorial claims by ethnic groups produced the mountain states of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. The boundaries of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland are still contested today, representing a tug-of-war over ethnic claims to natural resources marked by state territory.

Trends in population change, the creation of territorial borders and the mobilisation of ethnic politics have indeed occurred throughout the Northeast's much longer history. This has historically moved people into more densely populated areas that then expanded physically upwards, moving from the lowland plains and valleys into the surrounding hills and mountains; during that advance, large populations have absorbed various ethnic and tribal groups. In the century after 1880 (when statistics appeared for the first time), the expansion of permanent cultivation proceeded at extremely high rates in Tripura, Nagaland, Sikkim and Assam – faster than almost anywhere else in Southasia, in fact. Most of this expansion appears to be the result of lowland farmers investing in land at higher altitudes. During this process, Tripuris became a minority in Tripura, where mostly Hindu Bengalis became dominant. A similar change occurred more recently in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where Muslim Bengalis became numerically dominant, triggering resentment and revolt among the region's ethnic groups.

Only once the British conquered Assam after 1826 did the area obtain – for the first time in its history – a firm regional identity as a part of Indian imperial geography.

Such transformations of social space moved investors and residents in 1947 into open areas still available for agricultural colonisation. Huge tracts of land remained free in forested regions of eastern and, especially, Northeast India. Indeed, this became one of the last agricultural frontiers in Southasia, where new farming communities were able both to improve their living conditions and to enhance national wealth. The physical expansion of cultivated farmland remained the major source of increases in Southasian agricultural production until 1960. Population densities increased very rapidly in these frontier areas, where, until 1880, people settled at an even greater pace than into urban areas – although most upland agrarian frontiers maintained very low population densities, which continues today.

The stubbornness of territorial anxiety

Against this backdrop, however, even in regions typified over many centuries by extensive mobility, national governments and popular movements worked harder after 1947 than ever before to close off and regulate traffic across national borders. Their goals were twofold: to defend national territory against foreign threats; and to suppress internal disruption that might be fed by crossborder forces. India's Northeast became an 'exposed' territory, facing alien states around most of its perimeter. Defending India's borders meant closing off the Northeast against crossborder threats. In Assam, a regional political movement also tried to close borders to alien immigrants, particularly from Bangladesh. Today, the Bharatiya Janata Party again reiterates this rhetoric.

New political efforts are now working against the trend of national enclosure, however. Today, civil society in Bangladesh is pressing its government and India to keep in mind the real-life implications of rivers that run through Assam and on into Bangladesh. State governments in the Indian Northeast are also calling for a reopening of trade routes along the old Burma-China Road, which would benefit landlocked state economies that currently face international barriers on three sides. At the moment, New Delhi is expressing considerable interest in such plans.

Still, Assam's continued official isolation from non-Indian territories is a serious security concern for the Indian government, now mostly due to the insurgent problems within the country's borders. In this respect, India's internal order problems are intimately linked with the *virtual*

impossibility of closing off Assam to the traditional channels of human movement – routes that are much older than any state in the region. This problem, of course, seems commonplace in today's age of globalisation. While world regions could benefit economically from simpler crossborder connections, communities on opposite sides of international borders would clearly benefit from common attempts to solve trans-border problems. Nonetheless, national political and cultural systems remain committed to strong border defences in the fear of disturbing the coherence of their national traditions. Indeed, the conflict between these two pressing modern needs – territorial openness and closure – seems increasingly difficult to reconcile.

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So, where is Assam?

From the above perspectives, a useful answer to the question of 'Where is Assam?' would be that Assam consists of all that has left traces in the valleys and mountains around the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers. In this view, locating Assam requires that we trace the mobility of all of those elements over the span of human history; after so doing, we can discover the geography where those elements most meaningfully overlap. While this would provide us with a good picture of Assam's location, it would not be one picture, but many – leaving the problem of actual location open for debate and endless research. Clearly there are numerous obstacles to thinking about geography in this way. At the moment, national borders simply don't function like this (although people may indeed be better off in regimes that would permit them freer mobility).

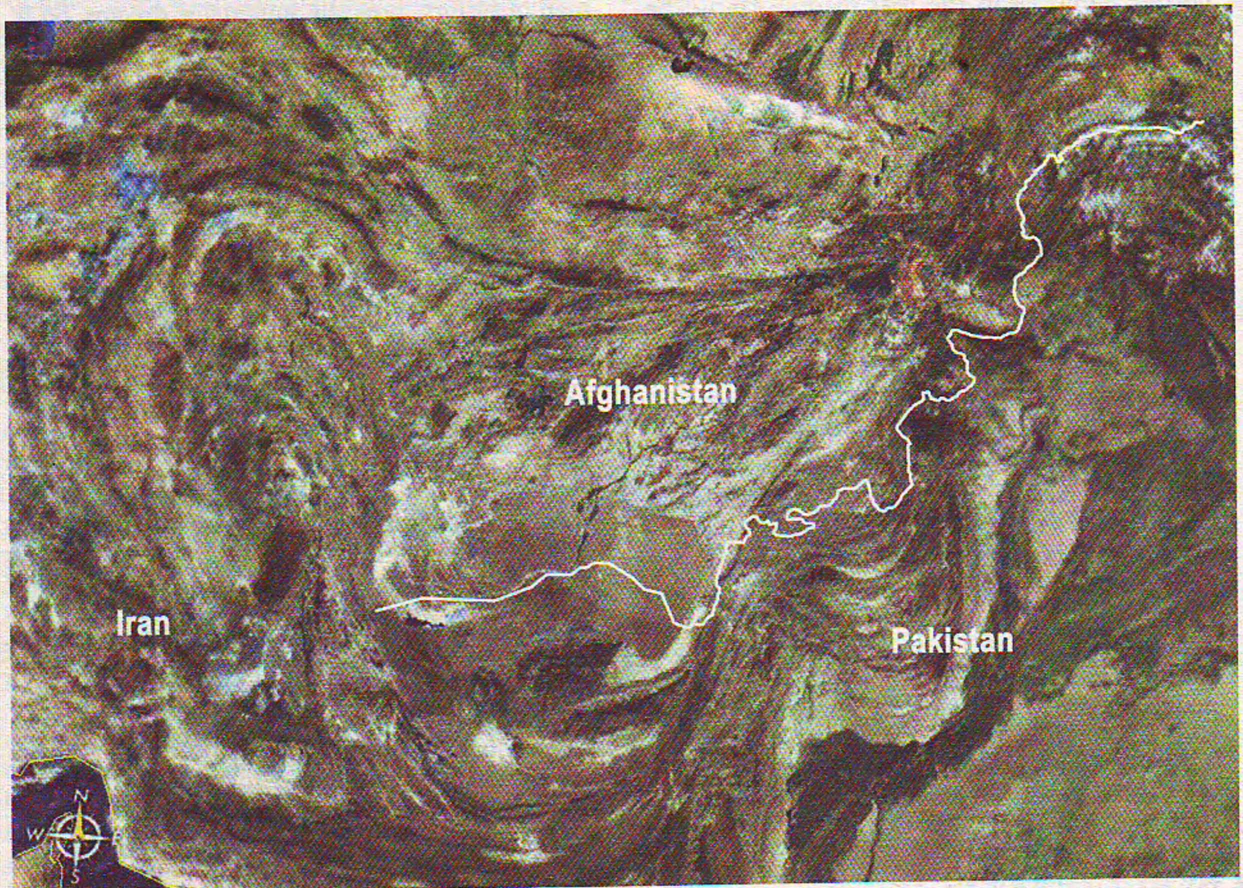
Plans for a new Asian Highway would put Assam at the centre of a new Asian transport system and would take the state from the periphery to the centre of a new territorial formation in Asia. But progress on the highway is now stalled, due mostly to Indo-Bangladeshi disputes over border issues, illegal immigrants, and terrorism allegations. Against this backdrop of hopes for expanding mobility and integration, however, it is worth remembering that new national borders are, in the long span of history, typically imperialist dreams. So it was in the days of the Guptas, Mughals and British, and so too when the US Army built the Stilwell Road to counter imperial Japan.

It is not surprising, then, that since 1945, independent nations have generally increased the regulation of traffic across their borders. Hostilities between India and Pakistan have cut old routes of communication and mobility more dramatically than almost anywhere in the world – this in a region that had maintained highways from the Mediterranean for a millennium. Elsewhere in Southasia, the Bengal-Assam railway tracks from Guwahati to Dhaka were torn up at the Cachar-Sylhet border in 1965. Nowadays, it is easier to communicate by phone or mail between Dhaka and London than between Dhaka and Guwahati.

In a world of national states it is thus worth pondering: who is it that sponsors and argues for the opening of geography and the crossing of national borders? Today, increasingly diverse interests are engaged in this project – including business groups, who are taking a lead in the border-crossing movement and promoting the expansion of Asian highways. Once upon a time, British imperial tea interests financed the railway from Dhaka to Guwahati and fostered Bengal's integration with Assam to link tea estates to ports and overseas markets. There is currently no major legitimate economic interest in place to effectively instigate or finance a major improvement in the Assam-Burma-China road and other routes of transit across the mountains. Indeed, the largest financial interests may be black- and grey-market trades, most notably in the weaponry that is used in the region's various struggles. The impetus to open borders across mountains spanning Nepal, China, Northeast India, Bangladesh and Burma still seems weak when compared to the pressures of enclosure, which remain significant. Still, this current dominance only obscures the compelling ongoing mobility that continues to locate Assam in the social reality of its Asian surroundings.

The line Durand drew

by | Daniel Lak



If a border isn't recognised by those on either side, does it still exist? That has long been the burning question along the Durand Line, the 112-year-old frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In theory, there is a border. Customs and immigration officials check passports and IDs at crossing points. Smugglers smuggle. There is an elaborate, twisting ballet at the frontier as vehicles switch sides on the road, driving from the left side in Pakistan to the right in Afghanistan. What more obvious way to denote a different country?

But a different country is not that evident elsewhere along the frontier, away from the official border posts. Most of the Durand Line goes through remote, uninhabited terrain – the High Pamirs in the far north, down through the snowbound Hindukush and into the Spin Ghar range. This last has been made recently infamous as a battleground between Osama bin Laden and the US military, ever since the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington DC. Thereafter, mountains give way to dust devils and deserts, with occasional moon-rock outcrops, all the way to the border with Iran.

No customs officers man gates along these stretches. No signs welcome visitors or urge caution on the highways. Instead, more than six million Pashtun tribal people live in these villages, valleys and occasional towns, refusing to tolerate any notion of a border. To them, this is Pukhtoonkhwa, Pashtunistan, their homeland; part of Afghanistan perhaps, but definitely not, on pain of death, to be considered Pakistani.

Mortimer Durand

Memories are unrepentantly long in these parts. The day in November 1893 when Britain forced the Afghan Amir to accept the Durand Line as a border – this might as well have been yesterday. It was unjust then; it remains so now. Never mind that Pakistan was carved out of British India in 1947 and has based its existence on the notion of this frontier ever since. Up here, Pashtuns know better. Islamabad does not rule them.

Theoretically, the tribesmen are right. Tired of decades of skirmishing with elusive, irregular militias known as *lashkars*, colonial Britain granted semi-autonomy to vast tracts of mountainous land along the Durand Line. These so-called 'Tribal Agencies' remain a major thorn in the side of modern-day Pakistan. Tribal leaders, most of whom owe their lineage to British times, rule the roost in these parts. Only major roads belong to Islamabad.

Before 11 September 2001, tribal zones such as South Waziristan and Kurram were infamous mostly as either smugglers' havens or places to manufacture hashish and heroin. Guns were sold openly in the bazaars. Foreigners and non-Pashtuns were and remain unwelcome. Today, South Waziristan and Kurram are known as hotbeds of al-Qaeda and Taliban activity. A white face in Waziristan is an invitation for assisted suicide. Osama bin Laden almost certainly lives near the Durand Line, along with his lieutenant and spiritual advisor, Ayaman al-Zawahiri. The Taliban may not rule in Kabul anymore, but their austere, tribal version of Islam still holds sway in what these days passes for Pukhtoonkhwa.

By any measure, the notional border of the Durand Line is a mixed blessing to the local people. By not recognising it, tribesmen (no one really knows about the women – they're barely allowed out of their homes) have guaranteed themselves infamy, income and illiteracy. The lawlessness and gun culture that helps keep al-Qaeda's leaders safe from America's wrath assures that they will remain infamous into the foreseeable future. Income derived from smuggling goods into Pakistan as part of the lucrative Afghan transit trade, worth anywhere from USD 500 million to USD 5 billion every year, offers a regular, irregular income. The region's inherent isolation means that it is backward in education, health and governance. Illiteracy is entrenched.

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International reinforcement

Adding to tribal obstinacy, Afghanistan itself has never recognised the Durand Line as a border, even though Amir Abdur Rahman Khan agreed to it in 1893. Afghans believe that the agreement the Amir signed with Sir Mortimer Durand was only valid for 100 years and has now ceased to exist. Of course, even a cursory reading of the document shows this not to be the case. Afghan reluctance to accept the border, together with the country's perpetual instability, have exacerbated volatility along the Durand Line, guaranteeing that the frontier remains a haven for crime, terrorism and backwardness – no matter what might happen elsewhere.

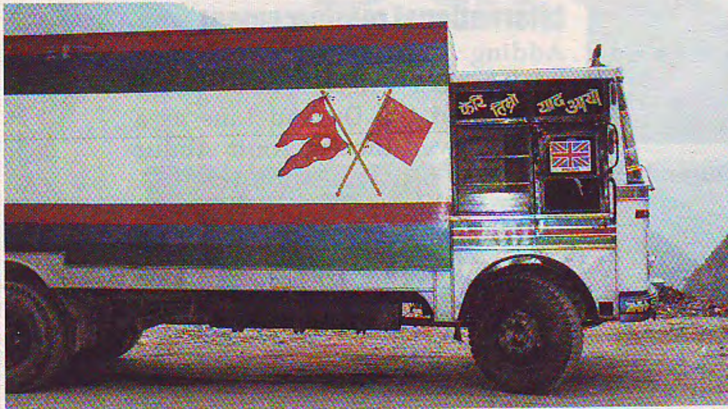
This is increasingly unacceptable to Pakistanis. President Pervez Musharraf has long wanted to demarcate and fence-off parts of the Line to increase his country's control over contraband and rebel activity. President Hamid Karzai probably agrees, but his authority is limited to Kabul and holds no sway along the frontier. But the presence of al-Qaeda and the continuing narcotics trade in the region are drawing international attention to the nature of the frontier. Everybody who is not a local seems to want a secure border through the Hindukush and beyond – Washington DC, London, Berlin, Beijing and the United Nations.

International opinion has in effect come to something of a consensus: Pashtun stubbornness and pride, not to mention warlordism and greed, is holding everyone hostage. However controversial or ineffectual has been George W Bush's 'war on terror', there remains a need to eliminate political violence affecting the innocent. A major step towards achieving that goal would be to secure the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, and to enforce the decisions of central government in Islamabad and Kabul. Then, the region's smuggling, gunrunning, drug trafficking and militancy just might diminish or disappear. The children might even be able to grow up literate. ▲

Swapping Identities

Borderland exchanges along the Nepal-TAR frontier

by | **Sara Shneiderman**



For most Nepalis, the Chinese border town of Khasa is synonymous with the cheap clothes and electronics that eventually make their way down the Arniko Highway to Kathmandu. But for a growing number of people from the Nepali villages adjacent to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Khasa is the gateway to a set of opportunities that take advantage of China's positive discrimination policies towards minority groups and borderland populations. While northward migration has increased in recent years in response to Nepal's internal conflict, the Nepali, Tibetan and Chinese inhabitants of the area are also bound together by a rich history of crossborder economic and social relationships.

The town's three names – Khasa in Nepali, Dram in Tibetan, and Zhangmu in Chinese – attest to its multiple personalities. Located at the mouth of the steep gorge where the Bhote Khosi River exits the Tibetan plateau and enters the Himalayan midhills, the original settlement of Dram was a customs outpost where Tibetan officials registered Nepali traders en route to the trading centre of Nyalam, 30 km further north. Before the Chinese army established Dram as the official crossing on their newly built border road in 1960, the now-thriving town consisted of little more than a cluster of shacks. More important settlements in the area were the villages of Gosa, Lishing and Syolbugang.

Until 1960, the residents of Lishing and Syolbugang considered themselves Nepali citizens, an assumption reinforced by the visits of tax collectors representing the Nepali state. When Chinese officials arrived, they asked local leaders to show them where the border was. One Lishing elder, now in his 80s, recalls: "We did not know what a border was or where it should be. We could not understand the language of the Chinese officials. They made us walk and walk and we just stopped when we got tired. That is where the border is now." Whether by accident or design, the villages of Lishing and Syolbugang ended up inside the TAR; in exchange, China granted Nepal the previously Tibetan villages of Lapchi and Lamabagar.

The Xiaerba

The residents of all four border villages were given a choice: either stay put and accept Chinese or Nepali citizenship by virtue of location, or move across the new border in order to maintain previously existing citizenship. Families often made mixed decisions and many are now split across the border, with some family members possessing Nepali *nagarikta* (citizenship) certificates and others Chinese identity cards. This situation proved traumatic during the Cultural Revolution in the late-1960s and early-1970s, when the border remained closed. With the liberalisation of the Chinese economy in the late-1980s, conditions have improved. The 1992 implementation of a Sino-Nepalese treaty, which allows citizens of either country who reside within 30 km of the border to cross freely without a passport or visa, has allowed many families to reunite. The provision has also proven an advantage to some families, who have been able to establish joint-venture businesses.

Despite the very real political boundary, most people in the area have complex identities shaped by the crossborder flows of language and culture. The term 'Sherpa', for example, used today by the inhabitants of Lishing and Syolbugang to describe themselves, has very different implications in Nepal and in the TAR. The Chinese government classifies the Sherpa (or Xiaerba) as a *dzu*, or 'less-developed ethnic people'. This classification falls short of the full status of *minzu*, or 'ethnic nationality', which defines larger Chinese minority groups such as Tibetans and Mongolians. The Sherpa do not qualify for *minzu* status, first, because their population is so small (approximately 1600, according to the most recent Chinese census); and second, because they have neither a distinctive writing script nor other cultural practices notably different from those of

mainstream Tibetans.

In Nepal, one would expect the Sherpa to establish an ethno-political organisation to agitate for incorporation into the higher status *minzu* group, but the Chinese state does not allow for such organisations. Anyway, as one Sherpa who teaches Chinese at the local middle school explains, "We are happy to remain in the *dzu* category because we get more positive attention from the government." Such attention includes educational and civil service quotas for *dzu* citizens; with such a small population, the competition is minimal. *Dzu* students also receive extended time to complete their exams and are graded on a more forgiving scale.

Perhaps most importantly, categorisation as *dzu* qualifies Lishing and Syolbugang's Sherpa community to receive support from Beijing's new fund for the development of borderland populations. According to a Lishing official, over the past two years the area has received over three-and-a-half million yuan (about USD 371,000), earmarked for infrastructure development, livestock improvement and income generation. The villages have been fully electrified and now have access to both reliable drinking water facilities and mobile phone services. When compared with the inferior living conditions of Sherpa and other ethnic groups immediately across the border in Nepal's Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha districts, it is little surprise that most 'Chinese Sherpa' feel certain that they or their parents made the right choice by accepting Chinese citizenship in 1960.

The big prize

Nonetheless, many Nepali citizens who were never presented with that decision have still been able to adopt alternative strategies to take advantage of China's rapid economic development and ethnic policies. After the 1992 Nepal-China treaty opened the border for locals, many Nepalis from the nearby villages of Marming and Tatopani relocated to Khasa. They opened businesses to import Nepali goods – mostly grain and ghee – into the TAR. "When I started, Tibetans depended on Nepali rice, flour and butter," explains Namkang, one of the first Nepali Sherpa to establish a successful business in Khasa. "The market was all ours and we profited enormously. But in the last decade, China has grown so much that now they can transport goods more cheaply from the mainland to Lhasa, so we are suffering." Nowadays, the more lucrative business goes in the other direction, forcing savvy businessmen like Namkang to reorient their trade and serve as middlemen in the transport of cheap Chinese goods to Kathmandu's markets.

Despite the diminishing profits, many Nepali border citizens still believe that the quality of life is better on the TAR side. Nepalis from the border areas can work for up to one month in Dram or Nyalam without any formal registration, but for longer periods they need to register for a foreign resident permit. With a recommendation from a Chinese employer or landlord, this process can be quick. Authorities in Nyalam estimate that there are almost 400 Nepalis with foreign resident status in the county, and thousands more who come to work for less than a month at a time.

The biggest prize of all is to become a Chinese citizen, although the only sure way to do so is by marrying one. Many Nepalis, both male and female, have taken this route. There is another, back-door option, however: changing one's name to 'Sherpa' upon crossing the border and hoping to be mistaken for a Xiaerba. This is why members of other regional Nepali ethnic groups (such as the Thami and Tamang, found across the border in Nepal) are difficult to locate in Khasa – most introduce themselves as 'Sherpa'. Some go further by dressing in a 'traditional' style that few Sherpa themselves do, or by pretending that they do not understand Nepali.

But there are also those who seek to capitalise on their Nepali heritage. In Khasa and Nyalam, Nepali food is perceived to be cheap and healthy. To emphasise their Nepali-ness and draw customers, many eateries display photos of the Nepali royal family or play Nepali pop music. Ironically, these are precisely the symbols of dominant culture from which ethno-politically active Sherpa or Tamang inside Nepal seek to distance themselves.

Historically, links between frontier citizens were found not only in the Khasa area, but along the full length of the Tibetan-Nepali border from east to west. For instance, the most traveled trade route between the 12th and 17th centuries did not follow the modern road, but rather ran through Kyirong – what is now Rasuwa District on the Nepal side and Kyirong County in the TAR. Only relatively recently have crossborder relationships become centred around the road crossing. For now, the adaptations made by Nepal's borderland citizens – as the highway connects them to the TAR, the Chinese market and Beijing's economic and ethnic policies – are most evident in and around Khasa-Dram-Zhangmu. However, with several new road links under development between Nepal's northern regions and the TAR (notably through Rasuwa and Mustang districts) it is likely that old frontier relationships will be rejuvenated and similar adaptations will occur in these border regions as well. For now though, Khasa-Dram-Zhangmu remains the best developed site for the give-and-take between contemporary Nepali-Tibetan-Chinese identities. There are as many ways to define identity along this route as there are people crossing the border every day.

SAARC: The inevitability of bilateral multilateralism

The Southasian regionalism of SAARC is locked into the seven-or-nothing formula. If the seven member states are to make regionalism work for the sake of the people rather than the national establishments, alternate visions are necessary. One formula for peace and prosperity is to promote openness in the areas where the neighbours and India meet on their borders. When they convene in Dhaka for the 13th Southasian Summit, will it be too much to expect the SAARC summiteers to address this most practical step towards regionalism? We need more cross-border flows in place, instead of the strictly inter-capital communication that has thus far been the Association's stagnant formula.

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

The self-realisation of Southasia as a single, cohesive space inhabited by multiple peoples took a beating with the partition of the Subcontinent in 1947. 'Nation state-ism' arrived along with that great divide, straitjacketing identities by citizenship. The national establishments that emerged in every country thereafter championed, nurtured and calibrated a particular type of chauvinism that is now up to regionalism to undo.

While providing a powerful sense of national identity and purpose at the 'centre' of each country, the separate exclusivist nationalisms have not always served the interest of the larger populations, particularly the millions living in the peripheries in relation to the capital regions. A formula has yet to be found in which the particular genius of the Southasian (the majority of them 'Indian' before 1947) peoples is allowed to become dynamic. Such a formula surely resides in a political and economic evolution of the Subcontinent (and the island of Sri Lanka) in which the nation states and their individual sovereignties would remain inviolable, yet where the people would be able to engage with minimal restrictions, allowing an instinctive remoulding of identities. This would energise society and usher a kind of socio-economic advance that can only be imagined.

Southasian cohabitation is the ideal, but despite the ongoing Indo-Pakistani rapprochement, the trend today is towards a blocking-off of borders, with barbed wire fences as the barrier of choice. The nationalist animosities reside just under the surface, ready to be exploited by the ultra-nationalist, often fundamentalist, phalanxes in every country. There is no doubt that the people at-large would welcome a crossborder opening with wide arms, were it not for the tacit collaboration of the capital power elites and the national rightwing in every member state.

It is important to seek a formula for regionalism in Southasia that would not threaten individual, sacrosanct sovereignties, and yet would bring together people from across borders as a natural outcome of their shared histories, religions, worldviews, sensibilities, tastes, languages, accents, habits and even gestures. The setting-up of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in 1984 was a search for just such a formula. In Dhaka that year, under the guidance of can-do leaders, in particular Gen Ziaur Rahman, the governments of the seven countries decided to bond. Their association would meet every year at summits, while a secretariat in Kathmandu would be manned by bureaucrats from the seven foreign ministries. It was a good beginning, as far as it went.

Unfortunately, two decades and a dozen summits on, the region remains marked by active mistrust between many of the SAARC members. Proof of the failure of SAARC regionalism is starkly presented by the hundreds of miles of barbed wire fencing put up by India along large stretches of its borders with Bangladesh and Pakistan. There are growing rigidities along the frontiers everywhere, where there should be loosenings. How can you have a multilateral friendship when there are bilateral animosities?

Despite the noise being made by the Indo-Pakistani rapprochement, the trend today is more towards a rigid blocking-off of borders, with barbed wire fences as the barrier of choice.

Meanwhile, the SAARC organisation has itself grown into an unresponsive foreign office project. The SAARC Secretariat is often used by the individual foreign ministries to put their unwanted senior officers out to pasture. The seven 'country directors' are given charge of portfolios regardless of competence or interest. While its miniscule annual budget is just over USD 1.5 million, the Secretariat engages in a host of aimless activities when it should be acting as a diplomatic catalyst for regionalism. Required to get the go-ahead from seven capitals even to lift a finger, the appointed-by-rotation secretary-general and his staff have to their credit: an unhappy audiovisual exchange of documentaries, broadcast on state television; a toothless poverty commission; some cooperation on tuberculosis; an information centre, and so on. SAARC's work on a preferential (subsequently 'free') trade area for Southasia has enormous potential, but progress has been affected by excessive ambition and unrealistic goal-setting.

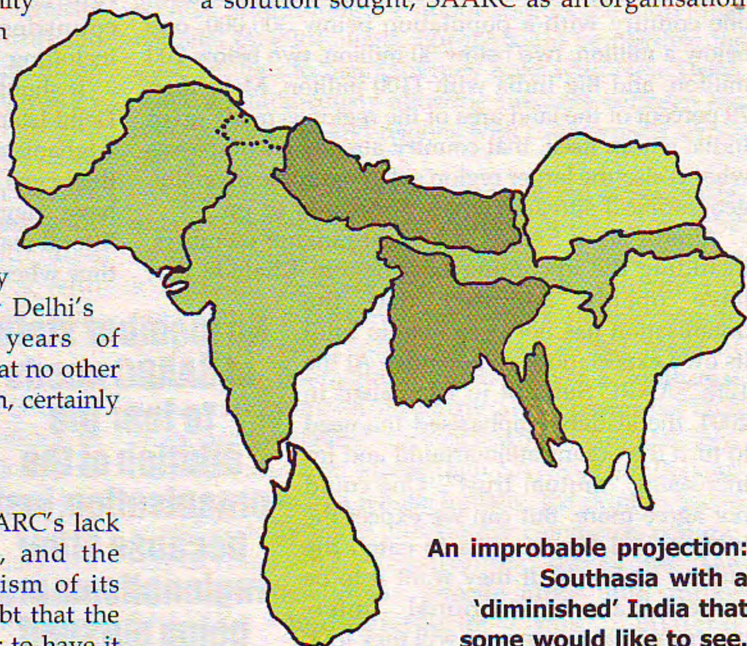
SAARC was started as a copycat organisation, attempting to mime the European Community and ASEAN. But it has been dragged down by ultra-nationalist postures in each of its member countries, most importantly in India. There, bureaucrats, international relations scholars and geopolitical strategists are unable to develop a high-mindedness commensurate with the great power status they aspire for their country. The very term 'Southasia' is only now grudgingly being accepted by New Delhi's media and academic elite. After years of prevarication, they have come to realise that no other term can today represent the whole region, certainly not 'India' or 'Indian'.

Because it is there

While being unequivocally critical of SAARC's lack of imagination, its feeble Secretariat, and the ambivalence and occasional opportunism of its member states, there should be little doubt that the organisation does serve a purpose. "Better to have it than not to have it" goes the refrain – and truly, at least one version of regionalism is kept alive through SAARC's very presence. This inter-state forum allows admittedly irregular opportunities for Southasia's political leadership to meet collectively. The diplomatic requirement for interpersonal decorum among the heads-of-state and government is itself a worthwhile aspect of an organisation like SAARC, for which reason alone it should be propped-up and kept going.

SAARC's existence also presents an established philosophical commitment to regionalism that challenges the rightist, ultra-nationalist – sometimes militaristic – establishment in each country. Indirectly and directly, under the cover of its professed multilateralism, SAARC also puts the stamp of state recognition on across-the-border camaraderie. In short, the organisation legitimises recognition to a left-liberal mindset that would otherwise be regarded as subversive by some and impractically idealistic by others. From that perspective, the ideals of SAARC are in fact in tune with the principles that seek a secular, non-chauvinistic regionalism in Southasia. That said, however, it is indeed a sad case that any organisation, particularly of the scope of SAARC, has to be appreciated merely "because it is there".

SAARC's larger failure has little to do with its staffing, budget or the dynamism of the Secretariat. The failure has everything to do with SAARC having been structured as a regional grouping of states as though there is symmetry in the size, power and reach of the member states. Unless this is understood and a solution sought, SAARC as an organisation



An improbable projection: Southasia with a 'diminished' India that some would like to see.

need not have any ambition beyond organising the occasional summit and acting as postman between capitals whenever there is a multilateral matter to discuss. If the organisation is to be something more than this, then the 'SAARC intelligentsia' active in each capital – even imperious New Delhi – must think catalytically to give SAARC and regionalism a whole new direction.

Cross-borderlands

SAARC's historical fact-of-life is the asymmetry among its member states. India is an enormous entity within Southasia in terms of its land area, population and economy, as well as its suddenly amplified clout in global affairs. This mammoth bulk continuously gets in the way of regionalism – by simply being there at the centre of it all, as a unitary, not-very-federal state. The very fact that India borders every other country of Southasia – while none of the others have any territorial contact with each other – vastly enhances India's 'centrality' to Southasia. SAARC is a regional organisation whose membership includes one country with a population below 300,000, one below a million, two below 30 million, two below 200 million, and Big India with 1100 million. More than 70 percent of the land area of the region is made up of India; within itself, that country already encompasses what is also the larger region's demographic diversity, geographical spread, climate zones and so on.

Almost all of SAARC's highest-ranking members, including the upcoming host Begum Khaleda Zia, have openly admitted that the organisation has not been able to fulfil its own expectations or potential. At the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad in 2004, the leaders emphasised the need to turn the organisation around and for increasing "mutual trust". One could not agree more. But can we expect the leaders and bureaucrats to catch the bull by its horns? If they want it to be more than a regional inter-governmental messenger, will they look into the structural challenges of SAARC?

The most realistic way to turn the high rhetoric that came out of the Islamabad summit into reality is to let the messenger service remain as a SAARC activity – but also to redraft its Charter and reorient the organisation so that it starts considering the bilateral frontiers as all-important points of contact for building regionalism. It is enough to ask that the organisation address the neglected 'crossborderlands' where two countries meet. With Southasia's official, intergovernmental attempt at regional cooperation now entering its third decade, it is time for such an imaginative re-approach. As Bangladesh's Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan said recently, the thirteenth summit in Dhaka needs to usher in "a decade of implementation, rather than mere declarations." Well, here's a thought for implementation.

Complementary visions

There is certainly more than one alternative vision for Southasian regionalism; no one idea needs to be exclusive. One critical shift would be the understanding that cooperative structures do not always need to rope in the entire region simultaneously and always require a seven-country platform. BIMSTEC is a good example, where the countries of the Subcontinental northeast have decided to engage with their neighbours in Southeast Asia. There is also a thus-far-unarticulated need for subregional cooperation between the countries/ regions that make up the northern Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra (Jamuna) belt. Much of the problems, challenges and cooperative potential – not to mention the population – of the Subcontinent actually reside in this belt of 'northern Southasia'. Similarly, in the future there can be cooperation between all the countries/regions of the Himalaya-Hindukush, including the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

It should not be impossible to imagine that a New Delhi-Islamabad thaw would lead northwestern India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran to put at least some of their eggs in one economic basket. Others, meanwhile, have suggested a regional grouping consisting of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean; there may come a time when south India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia, Thailand and Mauritius are able to forge collaboration across the waters. Occassionally, there is a murmur of disapproval when a state seeks out other groups, but no member of SAARC need fear the dilution of the organisation just because alternate regionalisms are being pursued.

No member state of SAARC needs to fear the dilution of the organisation, just because other regionalisms are being pursued.

There are also ways to tinker with a SAARC superstructure itself, and there is no reason why the seven-nation state membership has to be written in stone.

One possibility would be to expand the reach of the organisation, bringing in the TAR, Burma and Afghanistan – all of which may reside on the so-called outer-edges of the Subcontinent, but which are more Southasian than they are East, Central or West Asian. Indeed, in the wake of India's stepped-up relations with Afghanistan, SAARC foreign secretaries in late-September agreed to consider positively President Hamid Karzai's request to ponder Afghanistan's inclusion as the group's eighth member.

Steel columns set in concrete, barbed and concertina wire, floodlights and service roads ... These are not the best harbingers of the Southasian future.

One of the most significant departures of Southasian regionalism would be to go to the heart and configuration of the Indian state. If indeed India encompasses a large portion of Southasia, then practical, far-reaching regionalism would inevitably be ushered in if India were to become a federal union both in constitution and spirit. This is an issue not debated nearly enough within India, where centralising economic and political forces are coalescing around New Delhi, even as the regional parties are said to be emerging to take power away from the Centre. The argument for federalism in India, of course, is made first and foremost for the sake of India's people, but it would definitely serve the cause of broader regionalism as well. But if India's consituent states were to increase their own power while simultaneously reducing New Delhi's, a new closer-to-the-ground dynamic of self-government would emerge. This would allow others to engage with this humungous country not only as a unitary state, but also as a collection of self-governing regions, with their separate interests in social, cultural, economic and developmental interaction.

As with India and New Delhi, increased federalism would be a way to ratchet down the centralised nationalism in Pakistan and Islamabad. Federalism would allow more power than is currently enjoyed by the provinces of Sindh, Balochistan, Punjab and NWFP. Such a dynamic would hardly lead to self-destruction of the state that the Quaid-i-Azam created, but it would allow more space for a Southasia-wide regionalism to flower. The Sindh of a federated Pakistan could interact with great vibrancy with Gujarat, Rajasthan or Chattisgarh of a federated India.

Umbilical regions

These various options for regionalism, from SAARC multilateralism to complementary subregionalisms to internal federalism, are bound to evolve over time. This will happen as the individual, capital-centric nationalisms of Southasia mature and are able to countenance other structures beyond a straitjacketed SAARC – which presently supports the minimalist foreign policy agenda particularly well. In addition, none of the options are as yet ripe for the picking; SAARC as an organisation and a process, on the other hand, already exists. The simple approach to energise SAARC and to rejuvenate the broader concept of Southasia is, therefore, to invigorate bilateral contacts between the countries of the region – not capital-to-capital, but across the land (and sea) borders.

For now, SAARC remains a communication medium between the seven capitals – Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad, Kathmandu, Male, New Delhi and Thimpu. Let that channel remain and become more robust by the day. But let us jumpstart cultural and economic interaction between the border-regions – Calcutta with both Khulna and Dhaka, Amritsar with Lahore and Islamabad, Ahmedabad with Karachi, Multan with Jaipur, Kathmandu with Lucknow, Patna and Benaras.

The capital-based national establishments may all rally against such an approach, or try silently to sabotage it. New Delhi could be fearful, for instance, of how a Punjab-Punjab camaraderie could undermine its own sense of control. The same could hold true for Islamabad. But Fear of Punjab is hardly an auspicious excuse for the two capitals to finally see eye-to-eye. The various economic and political vested interests that have blossomed – even in the subregions – over the last half-century may also create similar roadblocks for a crossborder opening. For example, the mindset in Assam against 'foreigners' would work against breaching the Bangladesh-Northeast frontier with the beginnings of commerce and peoples' movements. Anxious power elites in Kathmandu, Dhaka and Colombo will probably not welcome the idea for their own selfish purposes. Crossborder openings could be seen as diminishing the importance of the individual national establishments. But it should be possible for these capitals to maintain their links with New Delhi, while simultaneously allowing linkages between the non-capital cities and regions with counterparts across the borders.

Under the current SAARC-led concept of Southasia, encouragement of transborder contact would be termed 'bilateral'. Hence, it would theoretically not be a regional exercise and hence fall outside the organisation's purview. But there is another way to look at it. The coalescing of a critical mass of crossborder interactions would deliver a Southasia-wide movement of empathy and openness. This crossborder, bilateral approach would, cumulatively, help to build and strengthen SAARC/Southasian multilateralism as a whole. Initially, the primary focus would be to promote crossborder commerce, cultural interaction, and transfrontier travel for the intelligentsia and lay people alike. But unlike SAARC's multilateralism, this 'bilateral multilateralism' would take off on its own, as people

would be the ones taking the initiative, rather than the governments. Such an opening would be a runaway success, because it would be true to the history of the Southasian peoples rather than to the history of the Southasian states and governments.

This 'SAARC bilateralism' could be criticised for giving inordinate importance to India, given that all the border regions touch those of the latter country. Capital elites may in fact feel they're being belittled for being asked to look to the outlying regions of India, rather than be and act as equals to powerful New Delhi. That is not the suggestion. SAARC capitals must necessarily consider New Delhi as their equal and sovereign counterpart on national matters; but they must also make up for the neglect of their border regions, where each of their countries meets the border regions of India.

Outside of the simple fact that the region's inherent geography puts India in contact with all other countries' land or maritime frontiers, however, such qualms would be short-sighted. Developing bilateral relations along the borders of Southasia would, if anything, loosen New Delhi's grip over its own 'peripheral regions' and make more independent their links with neighbours. Why should Calcutta await the facilitation of New Delhi for its dealings with western Bangladesh and Bangladesh as a whole? Why should Amritsar or Chandigarh not independently develop fraternal links with Multan and Lahore?

Certainly, the risk-averse bureaucrats and diplomats would not be the ones to promote this concept of developing ties between the pre-1947 umbilical regions. It will be up to visionary politicians to make such a suggestion, in particular those who are active in the states of India. When Amarinder Singh of Punjab State actively pursues links with Punjab Province, we need to regard that as a healthy, SAARC-friendly exercise which promotes the larger regional agenda.

The capital-based fears of runaway collaborations and conspiracies between separated regions are exaggerated – if anything, the new realities would only help to create enhanced cohabitation, and strengthen each member state. Already, for instance, the two Punjabs are straining to come together, an urge that clearly should not be obstructed. Likewise, the northeastern states of India may do well to be cautious of the Bangladeshi business and demographic juggernaut; but it will be possible to find local means to promote economic, social and cultural interaction without an inundation. Rigidity is the way of the centralised nation state. The fluidity of subregionalism is a plus-sum game, in which the nation states gain from the energising of their provinces.

In May 2004, in his first interview after becoming prime minister, Manmohan Singh suggested, "We need soft borders – then borders (will not be) so important. People on both sides of the border should be able to move freely." In April of this year, President Pervez Musharraf spoke of the opening of the bus route between Muzzafarabad and Srinagar as "the first step towards ... a soft border." If these topmost two officeholders are now willing to speak in a language that was once thought to be the preserve of romantic peaceniks, perhaps the Day of the Crossborder Opening is not really so far away. The catalyst for such a day in every region would be the dynamics of the Pakistan-India frontier – and here we are not even talking of the Kashmir LoC.

Even as we look ahead to an era of transfrontier relaxations – and even as the prime minister and general-president wax rhetorical about soft borders – the earth-bound reality is, unfortunately, that we are being taken in the opposite direction. Rather than softer, the borders are being made ever more rigid. Steel columns set in concrete, barbed and concertina wire, floodlights and service roads ... these are the barriers that have come up and are being extended along the lines that separate Bangladesh from India, and India from Pakistan.

Simply put, it is easier to conceive of peace (and prosperity) in our times when there has been a relaxation at the borders.

People-to-people barriers

There is one Southasian frontier where a 'soft border' is a daily reality – not an unsanctioned porousness like the Afghan-Pakistan border, but officially recognised as such by two countries. The

Nepal-India border was mandated 'open' by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two countries. The treaty has been lambasted by many for being an unequal agreement between a dying autocratic Rana regime and the youthful, independent India of Jawaharlal Nehru. But this open border between a non-colonised Nepal and independent India much more closely resembles the ageold grey frontiers of Southasia. Regardless of history and questions about the openness of this border (in both Nepal and India), here is a workable, official, open borderland that allows the intermingling of peoples, while keeping intact sovereignties - especially of the smaller, geopolitically weaker neighbour.

It is critical to remember this open border at this time, because the state-centric establishments in Islamabad and Dhaka, for instance, would not like to countenance or proffer such a solution. The New Delhi government, meanwhile, is hellbent on its fencing campaign that, although enriching barbed wire merchants and steel and cement traders, creates drastic people-to-people barriers - the socio-political ramifications of which will become evident after the damage has been done. On India's western frontier, the fence between Punjab the State and the Province is meant to control infiltration by militants; the illuminated line is visible to sharp-eyed travellers at night from transcontinental airliners. On the eastern side, the fence is said to have been erected to control the flow of economic migrants.

But these fences are band-aid solutions, the kind favoured by national security bureaucracies which prefer ever-sharper borders. They have no understanding of the need to go to the sources of geopolitical stress ('Kashmir'); nor of the economic needs of large urban spaces, regardless of the xenophobia of a few ('Bombay'). In their short-term vision (lasting until retirement, or sometimes longer) the generals, inspector-generals, secretaries and under-secretaries only see a fence that can prevent infiltration. On the ground, they do not consider the separation of villages, communities, families and markets. At the provincial level, they do not care to understand how a fence will prevent the softening of a frontier as a longer goal. Meanwhile, the divided communities will begin to live ever-more-separated lives. Without a fence, at least they could interact 'illegally'.

Nobody suggests that the India-Pakistan and India-Bangladesh frontiers be as completely open and unregulated as exists between Nepal and India. Still, there is a desperate need to ease interaction for border peoples, lest their histories diverge beyond the point of no return. The interests of West Bengal or Punjab need not coincide exactly with that of New Delhi. Simply put, it is easier to conceive of peace (and prosperity) in our times when there is a relaxation at the borders.

Coupled futures

A softening of Southasian borders would result in an economic, cultural and social rejuvenation for these multiple, interconnected regions. No crossborder rapprochement would be more important for this process than that of Punjab-Punjab. In his three years as chief minister in Chandigarh, Amarinder Singh has overseen a slew of activities promoting inter-Punjab exchange. From Punjabi language conferences, to greatly increased cross-border interactions, to a televised cross-border wedding - these are all indications of Punjab straining towards Punjab. Reopening direct road and rail links between Amritsar and Lahore would offer these two regions significant opportunities for cultural and commercial collaboration. The cultural vibrancy of Lahore would also energise all of Indian Punjab, challenging Delhi's cultural supremacy in a way that has not happened since Partition.

Unlike the fears of some, Punjab-Punjab amity would not weaken the respective nation states. In fact, it would provide the necessary balm for the fractured psyches on both sides. If it is true that the Punjab-based scars and subsequent animosities have provided the demographic foundation for the India-Pakistan hostility, then why should not the two Punjabs make-up on the basis of shared history,

SAARC's Symmetry

	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh	Nepal	Sri Lanka	Bhutan	Maldives
Population*	**1,084,700,000** *(100%)*	162,420,000 *15%*	133,377,000 *12%*	27,677,000 *3%*	19,400,000 *1.8%*	734,000 *0.07%*	290,000 *0.03%*
Area* (land mass) (km²)	**2,973,190** *(100%)*	778,720 *24.4%*	133,910 *4.4%*	136,800 *4.3%*	64,740 *2.0%*	47,000 *1.4%*	300 *0.0091%*
GDP (purchasing power) (USD)	**3.32 trillion**	347.3 billion	275.7 billion	39.5 billion	80.6 billion	2.9 billion	1.3 billion
Exports (recorded, USD)	**69.18 billion**	15.07 billion	7.48 billion	568 million	5.31 billion	1.54 million	90 million
Imports(USD)	**89.33 billion**	14.0 billion	10.03 billion	1.42 billion	7.26 billion	196 million	392 million

*Above: figure for given nation
Below: as a percentage of India

culture and language? The divergence in worldviews and identities that have developed in five-and-half decades are strong enough for each region to stay firmly within its parent state and economy. Seen in this light, the renewed contact within the Land of the Five Rivers would not only be important for Indo-Pakistani rapprochement, but would be a marker for the future of Southasian regionalism as a whole.

In the other frontiers of Southasia as well, there are tentative moves towards engagement at the borders. Mostly, they begin with travel, with possibilities left open for trade. In early-October, Pakistan's commerce minister invited proposals for new trade routes with India other than through the Wagah-Atari Punjab border point. Bus and train links between Sindh's Khókrapar and Rajasthan's Munabao will finally reopen in early-2006, for the first time since 1965. Meanwhile, the best that Sindh and Maharashtra/Gujarat can currently pin their hopes on is the mid-September announcement that a ferry service will start "soon" between Karachi and Bombay. That timeframe should coincide well with the January reopening of the Indian and Pakistani consular offices in the Southasian financial capitals of Karachi and Bombay – for the first time in more than a decade.

...economies and communities are thus allowed to interact naturally, *as they were meant to do.*

While West Bengal-Bangladesh cultural linkages have always been strong – and now being made stronger by crossborder Bangla-language satellite television – recent years have seen increasing interaction between elected officials in India's Northeast states and Dhaka authorities. Meanwhile, one of the most significant changes to have come about in Kathmandu Valley has been a heightened regard by the ruling establishment for the tarai region, in particular its Madhesi plains inhabitants, who have deep ties across the open border in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. As it evolves, this new amenability will hopefully make Nepal's decision-makers keener to establish and develop social, cultural and economic contact with the crossborder regions of the Ganga plains, with whose development Nepal's own future is also tied. Unfortunately, the deployment of Indian paramilitary forces along the Nepal border in response to the perceived threat of Maoist activities gives pause to those who would want this frontier to remain unrestricted.

Nuclear-tipped region

Making the matter of crossborder exchanges a part of regionalism should become an agenda of Southasian 'off track' activism, whose players have thus far preferred to go by the SAARC-mandated definition of seven-countries and seven-capitals. There is, after all, no need for Southasian civil society to be bound by this definition, unless it seeks to remain under the thrall of capital-centricism. But let the scholars and activists explore other definitions of regionalism – federalism, an expanded SAARC, new extra-regional or subregional grouping. At the same time, let them work to define the most practical and feasible means of energising crossborder flows. If the leaders of SAARC themselves are willing to make a new departure – just as did their predecessors two decades ago by creating the organisation – then let them bring the bilateralism of transborder openings within the SAARC agenda.

Southasia is now a nuclear-tipped region, where the need for peace is even more pressing than when the SAARC was chartered. As such, there is a need to urgently create new realities so that existing regional flashpoints (India-Pakistan) are defused post haste and potential flashpoints (such as Bangladesh-India) do not get to develop in the first place. While this can be done by creating top-down economic linkages – promoting cultural links, and so on – those dynamics will organically generate themselves by the simple act of re-establishing opportunities for interaction between the populations on the two sides of the 1947 borders. When economies and communities are allowed to interact naturally, as they were meant to, the likelihood of frightened nationalistic or religious fervour leading to potential largescale conflict would be greatly reduced.

When we begin to move in such a direction, we may ask – demand – a change of guard at the Wagah-Atari border point. The exaggerated, aggressive posturing of the soldier-gatekeepers during the flag-lowering ceremony at the end of the day must be replaced with the sedate choreography of civilians. With a softening of borders, the stomping of boots must be replaced by easygoing handshakes at dusk. We no longer need the ear-piercing clanging of the iron gates being slammed shut at the end of the ceremony. Those gates could simply be left open. ▲

Jammu's borderlanders

by | **Elisa Patnaik**

Their lives parallel the ups-and-downs of relations between India and Pakistan – ruled by crossborder tensions, fears of militancy, and various forms of destabilisation. Many have lost property, ancestral lands and family members. Yet for those residing in the strife-torn border districts of Jammu, hope and diehard survival instincts compel them to continue trying to lead 'normal' lives.

Driving through the dusty villages of Jammu's International Border (IB) sector, one is struck by the remarkable serenity. As farmers cultivate their fields; tube wells spew water; women wash utensils or tend to cattle; and children play cricket and volleyball, this could easily be mistaken for bucolic Punjab. However, we are just a stone's throw from the IB, where tensions between the Indian Border Security Force and the Pakistani Rangers are constantly simmering.

"We have got used to the situation, but the feeling of apprehension is always there," says 65-year-old Om Prakash, an ex-serviceman who lives in Keso village in Samba District. "This is our village and how far can one run from one's land?" For the residents of Keso and the adjoining villages of Barota and Pakhri, located within three km of the IB, existing side-by-side with active military personnel may not be new, but it certainly has gotten old.

In addition to the bloody riots of Partition, these villages have witnessed the subsequent three wars. One village on this side, called Khanpur, consists only of Hindus and Sikhs. Several families have been doubly-uprooted – once in 1947 and again after the capture of Chhamb by the Pakistani army. Living in continuous uncertainty has not removed the desperate desire of the inhabitants to see the situation improved. "Yes, we live our lives, but we do wish for this constant tension to end," says Khanpur resident Harpreet Singh. Along with her husband Gurcharan, the 51-year-old migrated in 1975 from a village near Chhamb, now in Pakistan. "For several years we had led a very terrifying life, but now it is relatively peaceful," says Gurcharan, a teacher in the local high school.

Step-up

Since 1971, the border districts had indeed been largely peaceful. But the early-1990s saw an influx of militants, who used the Jammu route in order to circumvent patrols along the Line of Control up north in the Kashmir Valley. Suddenly, the villagers began to notice discarded Pakistani biscuit-wrappers and cigarette packs in their fields. To counter the infiltration, the Indian government decided to put up a barbed wire fence along the border, as had been done earlier in Punjab and Rajasthan. Pakistani artillery attempted to disrupt the fence-building, forcing the Indian authorities to build an earthen bund to enable construction of the fence. The new barrier resulted in the displacement of several farming families. The military step-up culminated with the activation of 'Operation Vijay' during the Kargil War of 1999, with the civilian population fleeing with the arrival of the Indian Army.

Suddenly, the villagers began to notice discarded Pakistani biscuit-wrappers and cigarette packs in their fields.

More trouble followed. Mine fields laid during Operation Parakram – the massive mobilisation of the Indian Army along the Pakistani border after the attack on the Indian Parliament of December 2001 – displaced more farmers from their lands. No substitute livelihoods were provided and the compensation hardly sufficed. "The government compensation is too little for what we have lost so far," laments 66-year-old Chaman Lal of Pakhri village. In 1991, the residents of Gujjarbasti, a small hamlet of the nomadic community, were moved from their traditional lands near Balhad on the IB. "There is inadequate water and fodder for our cattle where

we now are, and we long for our old land," says resident Shamsuddin.

Most villages here have two or three memorials to commemorate their martyrs from various wars and operations. Many border families are kept afloat due largely to sons, husbands and fathers in the Army, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force, or the local police. Most of the older inhabitants are pensioners. Those who are unable to shake distrust of Pakistan and its intentions include the families whose sons have been part of the three wars. "India has always been the one for peace initiatives, and it is only Pakistan that does not recognise these efforts," says Puran Chand, of Mendhar in Poonch District, with conviction.

Even so, antagonism towards Pakistan is more palpable in New Delhi and the Indian hinterland than it is in these frontier communities of Jammu, among villagers who have been on the receiving end of various aggressions for the past five decades. Most harbour little ill will towards Pakistan, even though it is they who have faced the brunt of crossborder firing and militant infiltration. As 20-year-old Avinash Jamwal asks, "There is so much to do – where is the time for negative thoughts?" After so many years in the crossfire, Jammu's border residents would still be the first to wave the flag of peace to their next-door neighbours on the Pakistani side.

Meghalaya-Sylhet
A border without history or logic

by | **Sanjeeb Kakoty**

The partition of India was one of the 20th century's most tragically audacious experiments in social engineering, one that denied millennia of history at the stroke of a pen. Though Partition has been the subject of considerable research, the focus has generally been its study as either a macro-political event, or as a cultural (and personal) disaster. Little work has been done on the individuals, communities and regions that straddle the artificially created borders.

If you take the Northeast of India as a unit, then fully 98 percent of its frontiers are international borders, with the remaining two percent comprising the Chicken's Neck corridor near Siliguri in West Bengal. The international boundaries of the northeastern region all encompass communities that continue across into neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma and Tibet/China. These divided communities, as elsewhere in the region, share long histories of kindred language, ethnicity, culture and economic interdependence.

The hill state of Meghalaya is bound on one side by Assam and on the other by a 423 km border along what are today the Sylhet plains of Bangladesh. Colonial records are rife with reference to the commerce that took place between the hill and plain. One report noted in 1841 that, "A considerable trade in cotton, iron ore, wax, ivory, betel leaf and cloths, is carried on between the plains and the hills." The 1879 *Statistical Account of Assam* similarly found: "the external commerce of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is chiefly conducted on the southern boundary, through the district of Sylhet. The total value is more considerable than might be expected, owing to the fact that these Hills practically possess the monopoly of supplying Bengal with lime, potatoes and oranges."

The hill folks met the plains people in the *haat* markets, where the trade was brisk. During 1876, it was estimated that total imports to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were worth more than Rs 1.5 million. Rice was the major commodity, followed by fish products and textiles, as well as salt, tobacco, tea and coffee, brassware, liquor and the like. Total exports from the area were around Rs 1.6 million, particularly potatoes, limestone, cotton, betel and oranges.

With the redrawing of political boundaries and the emergence of new nation states, the centuries-old commerce evaporated; what little was left went underground. This is still the situation today, nearly 60 years after Partition.

One basket or two

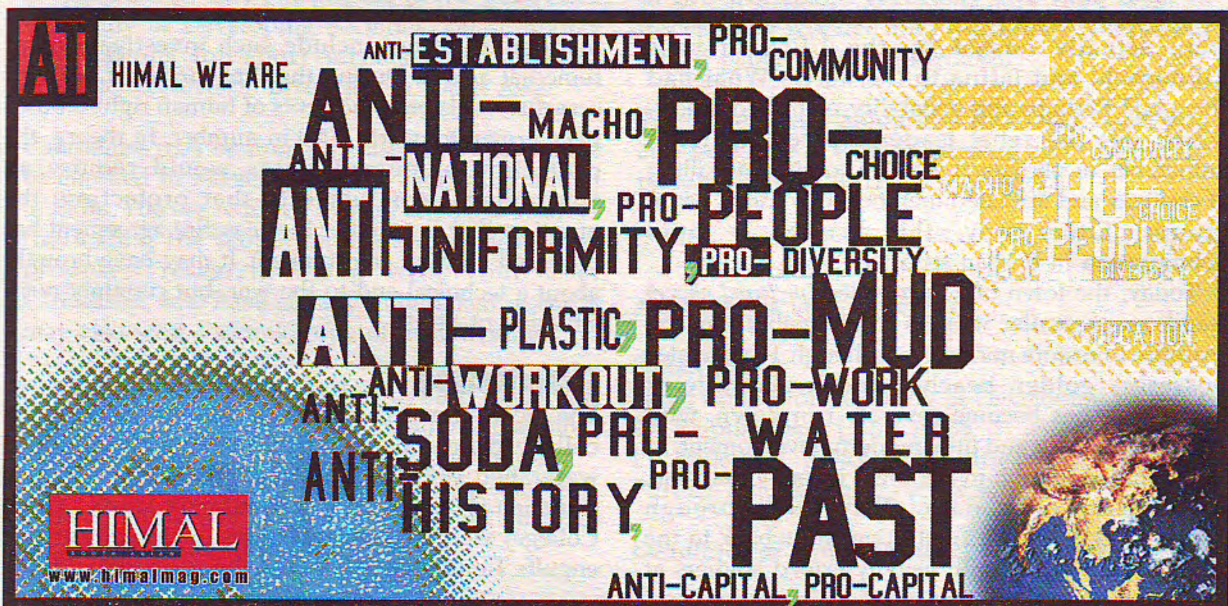
But the locals of Meghalaya have not forgotten this historical trade. In 2001, a group of indigenous Khasi organisations submitted a memorandum to the then-president of India, K R Narayanan, which stated: "We seek Constitutional recognition to our simple Hat Markets, for our open barter trade of our perishable items with Bangladesh which has been existing since time immemorial." The petition lists commonly traded goods, highlighting the fact that most of them are perishable and hence should rely on the traditional markets for quick consumption. The petitioners also lamented the fact that the indigenous peoples were never consulted when the border was demarcated, resulting in the deprivation of traditional rights.

The Khasi assert that the country's trade figures do not reflect the realities on the ground: "The present system of declaring an area as an export and import route will not solve the problem of the thousands of poor people as they are not in a position to involve themselves in the intricacies of export and import as the majority are illiterate. They are just thousands of poor people who want to barter one or two baskets of their perishable items in exchange for fish, etc." A subsequent petition stated that such arbitrary closures of borders and issuance of directives against "these very simple ancient activities is against all humanitarian considerations."

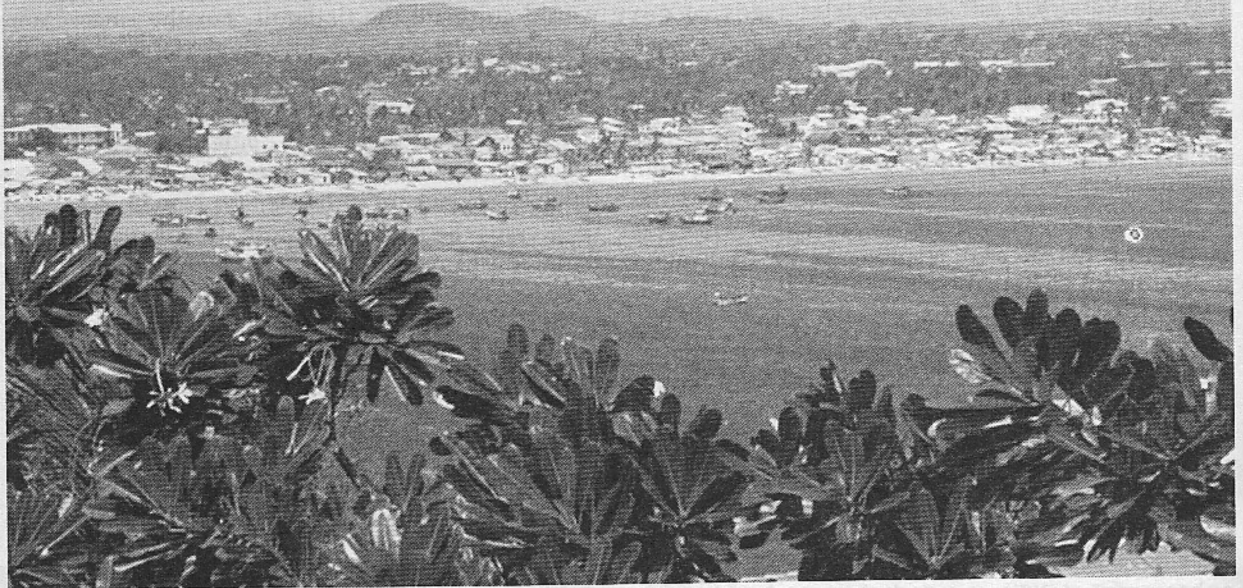
Amidst the din of high-level border talks between Bangladesh and India, however, few seem willing to address these concerns. As if the disruption of barter-trade were not enough, the borderlanders have also had to contend with state-imposed land alienation. The enormity of this problem becomes clear in the Jaintia region of Meghalaya – an area comprised of undulating hills and lowlands, turning golden as the ubiquitous paddy ripens. For centuries, the region has been inhabited by the Khasi-Pnar, a Mon-Khmer people who originally lived in the hills, while cultivating the plains below. But no more: the flatlands are no longer theirs. The logic of Partition in this part of the Subcontinent stipulated that the tribals would live in the hills, while the plains people would cultivate the flatlands. For the Khasi-Pnar, home became India, while their fields suddenly became part of East Pakistan. In one stroke, independent cultivators became a landless people.

Looking back, there is no doubt that the logic that led to the demarcation between hills and plains was flawed and lacking in humanity. Nonetheless, that flaw comprises today's international border with Bangladesh, reinforced with concrete and barbed wire fencing. People like U Ron Pohtam or U Wah Lykroh, who live near border-pillar number 1284-4S in India, have paddy fields that they can see across the border in Bangladeshi territory – being tilled all these decades by someone else. Similar experiences are being repeated in village after village. In the Meghalaya community of Amsku, farmers Shon Lakasiang and his neighbour R Lakasiang are both considered infiltrators because they regularly cross the border to reach their fields, which they refuse to give up. They have been fired at by border guards and classified as habitual criminals. For bringing home their produce, they are now considered smugglers.

At the moment, there appears little doubt that the voices of people like Ron Pohtam will be drowned in the rush to preserve the sanctity of national borders and sovereignties. If, in that process, small communities are rendered stateless or divested of avenues necessary for their survival, it can be assumed that their voices were considered inconsequential to the quest for harmony of the 'civilised' world of nation states. ▲



A backward slide



by | **Jehan Perera**

The weakness of the February 2002 ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil rebels is currently most obvious in the country's northeast. Recently, a group of journalists from the south was denied permission by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) from entering the areas of Trincomalee Province under their control. The group was on an exposure visit, to meet with civic organisations and distribute tsunami relief goods. A year ago, a similar group of journalists had not only been allowed to visit, but were actually hosted by the LTTE in both Kilinochchi and Jaffna to the north. What had changed? Perhaps the instability of the northeast, which left the rebel leadership feeling more vulnerable, or perhaps it was the continuous killing of civilians and affiliated members of various Tamil groups. Either way, this marked a rapid deterioration in human security.

Today, the town of Trincomalee (*pictured above*) stands as particular witness to the inability of the ceasefire to restore normalcy. Although Trincomalee possesses golden beaches and a magnificent harbour, it has become severely run down, with extensive squalor and little modern development. In addition, the tension in the town is today palpable, particularly after dark. Travelling through Trincomalee is now a frustrating throwback to the pre-ceasefire years, with heavily armed soldiers at every street corner, increasingly anxious as night approaches. One soldier even accused the LTTE of paying people to harass the armed forces. Meanwhile, the Tamil inhabitants are now reluctant to venture out at night.

The inadequacy of the ceasefire is particularly apparent in dealing with political killings. In the face of such incidents, there proves to be little remedy but to protest to the international monitoring mission, consisting solely of Scandinavians. The repetitious reaction from the mission is to reiterate that its mandate does not include such investigations or remedial action. During the three-and-half years of ceasefire, registered incidents of human rights abuses have grown to nearly 4000 in number. In theory, the protection of human rights would require an environment conducive to that protection; the question now is whether the ceasefire agreement has provided such an environment. It may have brought about a technical end to the war, but certainly not a situation of peace.

Two principals

The recent murders of two of the most well-known college principals in Jaffna might well comprise watershed events. N Sivakadathcham (of Kopay Christian College) and K Rajadurai (of Jaffna Central College) were on opposite sides of the schism that engulfs Tamil society – those who support and those

who oppose the LTTE. Sivakadathcham had virtually resurrected his school, after years of war had reduced it to a wreck. He had also been one of the main organisers of the recent pro-LTTE *Pongu Thamil* celebrations in Jaffna. The LTTE leadership conferred high honours on Sivakadathcham posthumously. Rajadurai, on the other hand, was a prominent social activist and one of the few civic leaders in Jaffna willing to be critical of the LTTE and its methods. Consistently opposed to child recruitment by the LTTE, he was murdered on his way to a cultural function.

The deaths of Sivakadathcham and Rajadurai have been taken as opportunities by the people of the north to vent their anger and disgust publicly; a sense of urgency seems suddenly to have gained momentum. Civic leaders both in Jaffna and elsewhere have strongly condemned the killings of the educators, warning that such incidents are destroying the Tamil community.

In peaceful, civilised societies, government and regional leaders do not order the assassinations of their rivals. In Sri Lanka, however, even during the recent years of ceasefire, there have been several hundred such murders. In peaceful, civilised societies, citizens do not languish in refugee camps or with distant relatives for 10 or 20 years, without even the remote possibility of returning home. In Sri Lanka, however, this is the situation of hundreds of thousands of people. No wonder the country's present condition is often described as one of no-war and no-peace.

The institutional framework and environment necessary to nurture and protect human rights in Sri Lanka is currently lacking. Therefore, if the citizens' rights are to be protected, new institutions need to be set in place. As such, it was disappointing that the mid-October visit by Ian Martin, the Human Rights Advisor to the Peace Process (jointly appointed by the government and LTTE), was not more successful. Indeed, Martin's diplomatic call coincided almost exactly with the assassination of the two Jaffna principals. Subsequent discussions with the LTTE proved unfruitful, with the rebel leadership suggesting that a joint declaration on human rights would only be possible once peace talks were restarted.

The reasoning underlying such a stance suggests that the ceasefire agreement by itself has not been the final settlement for the conflict: it has simply stopped the war. Building up institutions that will actually protect human rights will require additional negotiations, as well as progress on mutually agreed-upon political reforms. On the other hand, unless a respect for human rights underpins the peace process, it cannot succeed. Every violation of human rights further undermines confidence in the peace process, in the minds of both the political parties and the general public.

Sarai Programme, Centre for the Developing Societies, Delhi.

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Deadline for Application: 21 November 2005

The J & K State Human Rights Commission
The healing can begin here

What hope is there for human rights protection in war-torn Jammu & Kashmir if the state's human rights body is bound and gagged?

by | **Ravi Nair**

Toothless tiger. Now, a dead horse. If the Jammu & Kashmir state government wishes to make good on its promise to strengthen the J & K State Human Rights Commission (SHRC), it is going to have to take note of these sombre - but apt - metaphors. SHRC chairperson Justice A M Mir was recently quoted as saying that, as far as the implementation of the SHRC's recommendations was concerned, he was effectively "whipping a dead horse." With continued governmental meddling in the SHRC's affairs, Justice Mir recalled that an earlier chairman had called the Commission a 'toothless tiger' and that now "we have lost the tail as well."

If a 'healing touch' is what the state government of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed intended for the people of Jammu & Kashmir when it took over in November 2002, then empowering the SHRC should have been one of the first steps in that direction. Indeed, the Common Minimum Programme of the J & K state government - composed of the Congress Party and the People's Democratic Party - lists the strengthening of the SHRC as one of its key objectives. On the contrary, as Justice Mir publicly affirmed, the SHRC has seen a rapid decline in its credibility.

The United Nations principles regulating national human rights institutions, known as the 'Paris Principles', require that the entities be provided with "an infrastructure which is suited to the smooth conduct of its activities, in particular adequate funding." The purpose of this funding should be to enable it to have its own staff and premises, "in order to be independent of the Government and not be subject to financial control which might affect its independence." The infrastructure and resources provided to the J & K SHRC, however, are in no way "suited to the smooth conduct of its activities".

Take building and infrastructure. Although the SHRC is handling an increasing number of complaints, it is still operating out of a half-completed office building that has already fallen into disrepair. Although part of the SHRC's intended Srinagar headquarters was completed in 2001, work has subsequently slowed almost to a halt. In the meantime, the SHRC has been stranded in expensive rented premises - paying INR 46,500 a month for a space that is sufficient neither for the Commission's purposes nor its status. On the other hand, in order to tackle the increasing caseload, in early-2004 Justice Mir had tried to open an additional office in Jammu; when no office was provided, he was forced to operate instead from his residence.

The SHRC's struggle for adequate resources is not a recent development, with similar complaints being made in a 1999 report. Unfortunately, little seems to have changed since then, even though a new government is in place. In successive annual reports over the past six years, the SHRC has consistently noted its difficulties in investigating violations in remote areas due simply to the fact that it does not have a vehicle capable of traversing rough terrain. Without even a video camera, SHRC members are forced to perform on-site investigations themselves - greatly hampering efficiency.

Official neutering

Apart from the lack of physical resources, the Commission continues to be beset by a number of problems related to its powers and autonomy, all of which have had a major impact on its functioning and credibility. First, the SHRC is currently dependent on the state government for funding, needing to laboriously appeal to lawmakers whenever it requires an appropriation. Second, a 2002 amendment to the J & K Protection of Human Rights Act stripped the SHRC of its ability to appoint its technical staff, transferring this power instead to the government. Meanwhile, the government itself has failed to appoint the required staff, resulting in eight essential posts remaining vacant for three consecutive years. Whether through negligence or deliberation, such an oversight has severely weakened the human rights machinery in Jammu & Kashmir. The result of this low staffing is that the SHRC is referring complaints about police abuses to investigation by the police themselves.

Justice Mir

The SHRC's reach is also stifled by its own reluctance to pursue cases in concert with other legal authorities. When cases are pending in court, the Commission's policy is to dismiss them for want of jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the SHRC is empowered to intervene in any proceeding involving human rights violation allegations, with the approval of the court.

It is a matter of concern that senior civil servants continue to show marked disregard for the SHRC's recommendations. Officials have been known to initiate their own investigations – the conclusions of which have often contradicted the SHRC's findings – thereby undermining the Commission's authority. A report obtained from the SHRC details 23 recent decisions in which the concerned deputy commissioner did not implement the SHRC's recommendations. Justice Mir: "It is an anomaly that for executing warrants against the police officials, we are dependent on the same force." Without an effective enforcement mechanism, the SHRC's recommendations are meaningless.

The Commission's former chairperson, Justice Abdul Qadir Parray, made a similar complaint in 2002, stating that "cases of human rights violations in Kashmir at the hands of security forces are gathering dust in the official chambers of L K Advani [then-Home Minister]. Our commission is only a recommendatory body and has not been provided with enough powers to force implementation."

Thus, the SHRC's actual effectiveness is difficult to gauge. While the Commission had repeatedly called for the government to provide an Action Taken Report (ATR) on its recommendations, 2005 was the first time in several years that the government chose to comply. While the ATR detailed the government's responses in 141 SHRC cases in the 2003-04 report, compensation was actually ordered in 152 cases. The Ministry of Home Affairs reportedly asserted (falsely) that no recommendations had in fact been made for the 11 remaining cases. Furthermore, according to at least one source, in 108 of those cases the government did not follow through by providing any compensation.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Film South Asia '05, Kathmandu - Award Winners

Best Debut Film Award
"My Brother My Enemy" (India-Pakistan)
by Masood Khan and Kamal Negi
A unique joint-venture that reaches beyond borders to explore the psyche behind a stormy relationship. For its engaging treatment. That its subject – cricket – may help in defusing the tensions created between the two countries. (From award citation by festival jury.)

Special Commendation
"City of Photos" (India) by Nishtha Jain
A multi-layered film, skillful in its attention to form. A highly reflective production on the nature of representation itself.

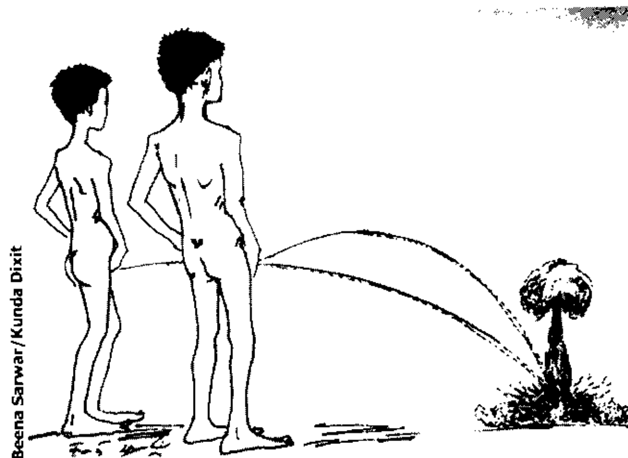
Special Jury Award
"Final Solution" (India) by Rakesh Sharma
A powerful testimony to the horrific events that unfolded in Gujarat. For synthesizing immediate documentary evidence with a historical investigation of the crisis.

Second Best Film Award (shared)
"I for India" (UK-India) by Sandhya Suri
For showing that filmmaking is about telling a human story well. For crafting an immensely moving film that lifts ordinary home movie footage and weaves it into a depiction of a larger human condition.

"A Certain Liberation" (Bangladesh) by Yasmine Kabir
For a poignant character portrait that provides a complex insight into the 1971 war, one of the biggest historical tragedies of the Subcontinent. Also, for the empathy that the film shows for its subject.

Ram Bahadur Trophy for Best Film
"Continuous Journey" (Canada-India) by Ali Kazimi
For proving once again that there are no limits to imagination. For creating a powerful film out of scarce source material. For bringing to light a lesser-known historical event – the case of The Komagata Maru in 1914 – and giving it a powerful contemporary relevance. For its meticulous research and highly creative blending of animation, sound and archival material.

Film South Asia Secretariat, Himal Association, Patan Dhoka, Lalitpur, Nepal fsa@himalassociation.org



Beena Sarwar/Kunda Dixit

Blinded by the BOMB

Against all civilisational values, Islamabad and New Delhi proceed to prepare their bombs and missiles – for nuclear war to be fought on our soil.

by | **Zia Mian**

For decades, leaders of India and Pakistan have been bewitched by the power of the bomb. Regardless of their various other differences, they seem to have believed that the threat of massive destruction represented by nuclear weapons is a force for good, and that the weapons themselves are vital to the well-being of their respective countries. President A P J Abdul Kalam, for instance, has claimed that nuclear weapons are "truly weapons of peace". For his part, President Pervez Musharraf has declared that his country's nuclear weapons are as critical and important as national security, the economy and Kashmir.

For those not blinded by the Bomb, however, the pursuit of nuclear weapons has brought nothing but a competition in destructive capabilities and crisis after crisis. The Cold War seemed proof enough, but the lessons have been lost to those who rule in India and Pakistan. New Delhi's nuclear ambitions have served only to encourage Islamabad to follow blindly. The 1974 nuclear test at Pokhran sharpened Pakistan's determination not to be left behind and, as many had feared, the bomb was not willing to be left in the shadows for long. First India and then Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in May 1998.

Things went from bad to worse. The Kargil War followed barely a year afterwards, proving that two nuclear armed countries could indeed fight wars – contrary to the suggestions of some. Many hundreds of soldiers died on each side, as the leadership in the two countries threatened apocalypse. A little over two years later, India and Pakistan prepared to fight again. An estimated half-million troops were rushed to the border and, as days turned into weeks and months, nuclear threats were made with abandon. What lessons were learned from the extended standoff at the border? None, it seems – other than perhaps that each country needed to be better prepared to fight a nuclear war.

In 2005, both countries carried out major war games that assumed the possible use of nuclear weapons. An India-Pakistan nuclear war, in which each used only five of their available nuclear weapons, would kill an estimated three million people and severely injure another one-and-a-half million. Meanwhile, even as Southasian and world public opinion press both countries to step back from the nuclear brink, New Delhi and Islamabad respond with efforts to portray themselves as 'responsible' nuclear states. At the same time, they continue to push forward as hard as possible with their arms race.

The abyss between words and deeds was clear from the first public show of nuclear responsibility – the 1999 Lahore summit between prime ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Mian Nawaz Sharif. Even though the two men had ordered their nuclear establishments to undertake tests barely a year earlier, in Lahore they discussed "sharing a vision of peace and stability" and "progress and prosperity" for their peoples. The summit produced little in the way of tangible progress on controlling the nuclear arms race. The two states did agree to inform each other about ballistic missile tests, but it was only in October 2005 that they finally followed through on that agreement. Even so, the accord does nothing to limit the future development or testing of missiles.

War games

The Subcontinent is in the middle of a missile race. Both India and Pakistan have tested various types of missiles in recent years, even taking initial steps towards the deployment of nuclear-armed missiles. India has introduced the 2000 km-range Agni-II missile into its arsenal. Pakistan has done the same

with the 750 km Shaheen missile, as well as having tested the 1500 km Ghauri. These missiles would need as little as five minutes of flight time to reach important cities in the 'opposing' countries.

Just as happened during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, in Southasia the development of these missiles has triggered a frantic search for a defence shield, as well as a counter to such a defence. India has sought ballistic missile defences from Russia, Israel and the US to neutralise Pakistan's missiles. Pakistan has responded by testing a 500 km-range ground-launched cruise missile, which General Musharraf linked to concerns about Indian plans: "There was a feeling that there was an imbalance, which is being created because of the purchase of very advanced-technology weapons ... Let me say this improves the balance."

The quest for advantage triggers the quest for balance and on it goes. It is no surprise that military budgets in both India and Pakistan have spiralled since the nuclear tests began. India spent over INR 2.2 trillion on its military between 2000 and 2004. Gen Musharraf has revealed that Pakistan has spent more since 2000 on its nuclear arsenal than it had in the previous 30 years.

The future looks worse. In June 2005, the US and India signed a 10-year defence-cooperation agreement, which involves the sale of advanced weapons and assistance to both India's space and nuclear programmes. As a senior US official explained: "[Our] goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century," adding, "We understand fully the implications, including military implications, of that statement." The agreement's purpose was made clear when former US ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, asked, "Why should the US want to check India's missile capability in ways that could lead to China's permanent nuclear dominance over democratic India?"

Despite all the talk of a 'minimum deterrent', Pakistan may now seek to prepare for an expansion of its own programme.

The June decision was followed in July with a more explicit nuclear deal, in which the Bush administration agreed to overturn US and international regulations that have for decades restricted India's access to uranium, the raw material for both nuclear fuel and nuclear weapons. For its part, India will separate its military and civil nuclear facilities and programmes and will volunteer its civil facilities for inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The US has not asked India to halt the production of nuclear weapons material as part of the deal; India is unlikely to do so. Access to the international uranium market would allow India to free up more of its domestic uranium for a significant expansion of its nuclear weapons capabilities. India's options could, for example, include building a third nuclear reactor to make plutonium for more weapons; beginning to make highly-enriched uranium for weapons; or making fuel for the nuclear submarine it has been trying to build for decades.

Pakistan has now asked for the same deal from the United States. Former army chief Jahangir Karamat, now ambassador to the US, has warned: "The balance of power in Southasia should not become so tilted in India's favour, as a result of the US relationship with India, that Pakistan has to start taking extraordinary measures to ensure a capability for deterrence and defence." The US has refused Islamabad's request, citing, among other things, Pakistan's role in spreading nuclear weapons technologies to North Korea, Libya and Iran, and its refusal to come clean on the A Q Khan affair. Despite all the talk of a 'minimum deterrent', Pakistan may now seek to prepare for an expansion of its own programme. A former Pakistani foreign secretary has even argued that Islamabad "should refine its deterrent capability by stepping up research and development and by integrating strategic assets on land, air and sea – though even that project would be costly and take years."

Time of madmen

The increasingly powerful nuclear weapons complex in both India and Pakistan is overwhelming good sense and derailing the possibility of peace. On both sides, with similarly narrow goals, nuclear weapons proponents are driving the Subcontinent ever faster down the path toward bigger and more dangerous nuclear arsenals and war. The time has come for us to echo the words of the American sociologist Lewis Mumford, writing soon after the dawn of the nuclear age: "Madmen govern our affairs in the name of order and security. The chief madmen claim the titles of general, admiral, senator, scientist, administrator, Secretary of State, even President."

If Southasia is to survive its own nuclear age, we will need strong peace movements in both Pakistan and India, as well as throughout the rest of Southasia. The first steps have already been taken. The Pakistan Peace Coalition, founded in 1999, is a national network of groups working for peace and justice. On the other side of the border, Indian activists in 2000 established the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace. These movements will need all the help and support that they can get to keep the generals, presidents and prime ministers in check. Leaders in India and Pakistan must be firmly told that the people will not allow a nuclear war to be fought. ▲

As we look ahead to the SAARC Summit, we'll just remind the reader that a two-day meeting of **SAARC information ministers**, held in Kathmandu on 30 August, appeared to accomplish a lot. They decided to set up a regional media development fund, with seed money of USD 1 lakh put up by India. They will broadcast a weekly radio news programme, 'SAARC News', and a monthly TV news programme, 'SAARC Roundup'. Sri Lanka has agreed to organise a SAARC Film Festival, covering feature films, telefilms and documentaries. The 'fifth SAARC quiz' will be broadcast via teleconference. The meeting also requested Pakistan to complete a video documentary titled "SAARC in the New Millennium". After so much accomplished, the ministers agreed to meet next in India in 2006. All *Chhetria Patrakar* can say to the SAARC-wallahs is this – remember quality, shun quantity.

■■

To get ahead in life, one needs to remind one's self every so often of the full name of A P J Abdul Kalam, whose presidency India is presently undergoing. He is **Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam.**

■■

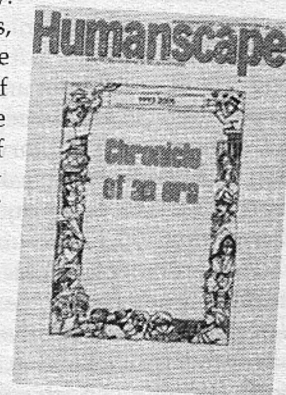
Speaking of people with titles and long names, how about this one: **Nava Yubaraj Hridayendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev**, grandson of the king and queen of Nepal. Now there's a young man to watch – born 20 July 2002, with a lineage, a title and a surname that extends on and on. This picture was distributed to the media by the Kathmandu royal palace press secretariat, and *Chhetria Patrakar* is happy to oblige. The grandson-prince has an elder sister, Yuvarajkumari Purnika Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah, as well as a younger sister, Yuvarajkumari Kritika Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah.

■■

Word arrived that there was a media institute getting started in Barabanki, 30 km east of Lucknow. The **Jahangirabad Media Institute** is located in a renovated 150-year-old palace-fort. The brainchild of a group of overseas Indians, it is all set to offer "world-class postgraduate courses in media and mass communications". With 50 percent of its seats reserved for minorities, the Institute was deliberately located in this "backward area" of Uttar Pradesh, say the organisers. JMI's advisory board is packed with Indian media biggies, the likes of Javed Akhtar, Tarun Tejpal, Sashi Kumar and Aparna Sen. So, *Chhetria Patrakar* tried to get in touch with the Institute by email for more information, but received no response. If the reader wants to try, go to *www.jmimedia.org*.

■■

For those who knew ***Humanscape*** magazine, say goodbye. It suspended publication in October 2005 because it ran out of money. Over the past dozen years, the magazine saw the sweat and labour of notable editors, while seeking to cover issues of development and society through the perspective of the 'individual'. The closure was announced by the current editor, Geeta Seshu. There is now one less publication to stand up against the tide of commercial journalism that has overtaken the Indian mediascape. When will that tide turn?



■■

A magazine dies, a magazine is born. This one is ***Hills and Mountain Today***, a new bimonthly edited by Jawaharlal Nehru University academic and Darjeeling native Mahendra P Lama, who, until a decade ago, had brought out *Himalaya Today*. The new mag's intention is to provide 'thinking space' to consider the culture, society and progress in hill and mountain regions of Southasia. Good luck!

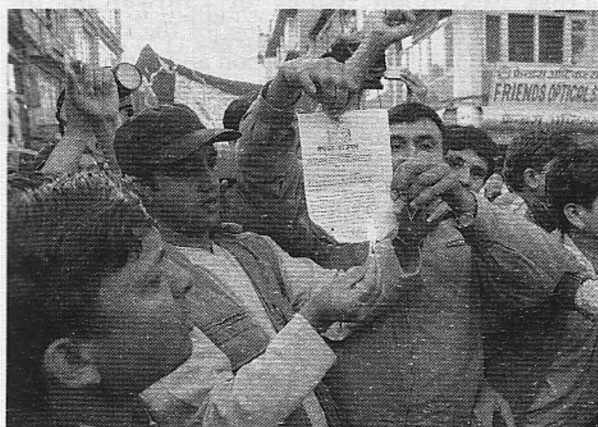
■■

While still on the subject of periodicals, *Chhetria Patrakar* believes that one reason that Hindutva fundamentalism is on the rise in Bharat is because publications like ***Ravivaar***, ***Dinmaan*** and ***Dharmayug***, which provided intelligent reading in Hindi, were snuffed out by their publishers more than a decade ago – supposedly because they did not make money, or at least a sizeable profit. But the vernacular intelligentsia lost out significantly in the bargain. Someday, a social scientist will look into the phenomena and write a thesis titled: "India's rightward tilt and the demise of Hindi-language review magazines."

■■

Indian Minister for Information and Broadcasting Jaipal Reddy spent August and September giving broad hints of his ministry's active support for energising India's desperate **community radio** situation. There are only about 10 such stations nationwide - in a country the size of *India*. Among the as-yet unofficial promises: community stations can carry sorely-needed advertising (good for the stations and good for small, neighbourhood businesses); non-hard news coverage is okayed; and a streamlining of the licensing process for NGOs is promised. Community radio activists are counting the minutes. Even as community radio struggles to gain a foothold, the world of commercial FM radio in India is set to boom. Currently, 300 new stations are slated to kick-off next year.

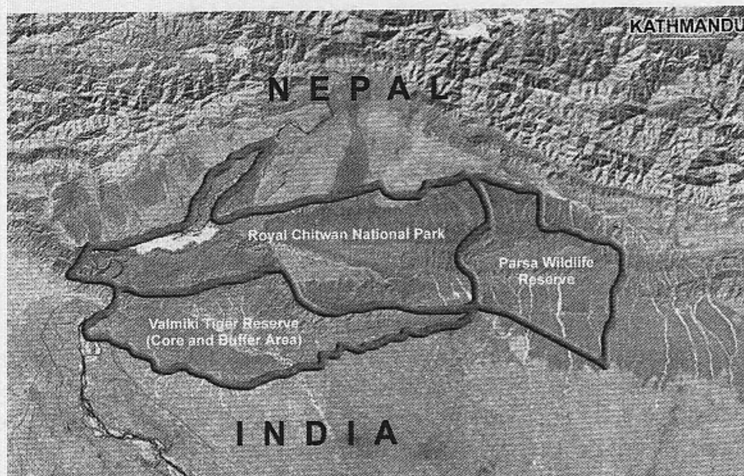
While the country was essentially shutdown for the eight-day Dasain (Dusshera) holiday, King Gyanendra's regime sprung a trap. It promulgated a **media ordinance** to clamp down on the vibrant vernacular press and radio. The move towards muzzling editorial independence had actually started the day after the royal coup of 1 February 2005, with a government notice threatening dire consequences to those who did not follow the regime's diktat. But over the subsequent months, journalists have stubbornly resisted, managing to keep the flame of media freedom alive. In a counterattack, the regime pushed through the ordinance in mid-October, announcing stiff penalties to out-of-line journalists; banning FM radio stations from broadcasting news; and barring all criticism of the 'royal family', without defining who constituted that family. There was also prejudiced targeting of the largest Nepali media house, Kantipur. It has become still clearer that the royal regime lives in a century entirely of its own - ignoring public and world opinion, while trying to suffocate a rambunctious press that will have none of it. King Gyanendra has been cautioned on overstepping the bounds of propriety by the likes of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and UNESCO Secretary-General Koichiro Matsuura. Said Matsuura San: "The new curbs on media rights contained in this ordinance would indicate that the situation is getting worse. All of these acts represent attacks on the independence of the media, and therefore on democratic progress." This is Nepal's journalists' finest hour - the privilege rarely comes to stand up and be counted.



In plain sight for the Southasian audience, there is a dumbing-down happening with the **Hindi news channels** of India. Recently, the story of an astrologer predicting his death at a particular time on a particular day led to hours of coverage on most news programmes. And no, he did not finally die. A child remembering his past life recently hogged the limelight. News channels go live as the winners of reality TV shows are announced. During lunar eclipses, in-house astrologers hold extended discussions about the ramifications. In the midst of the Dusshera festival that just ended, one channel brought an actor into the studio, dressed up as the demon-king Ravan to discuss the festival - he was addressed as 'Ravanji'. The obscurantism that all this is promoting among the north Indian middle classes should be a matter of worry, for into which dark alley will this group drag the rest of us?

In a particular Southasian magazine, a columnist was asked by an editor for clarification: why had he placed some lines of verse about the breeze (*hawa*), by the poet Ramesh Prajapati, at the top of his column, with context unclear? His eloquent reply is worth a read: "Editor sahib, there is an inherent message behind that reference to *Hawa* - even when we think nothing is happening, subtle changes that will define the future are taking place all around us. It is a poetic license, yes - but not of a lazy, but rather of a languid columnist. In Pakistan-India relations, *Hawa* is a powerful metaphor: *Garma Hawa* that created Partition, *Sarda* responses in the seventies, *Shusk* relationships in the eighties, *Talkhi* in the nineties, and a little *Garmahat* thereafter. A prose composer would need to write a book to express all of these. Ramesh Prajapati has captured the essence in all of 15 words!"

- Chhetria Patrakar



Wild frontier: Valmiki-Chitwan-Parsa

Shouldn't the tigers of a trans-boundary Nepal-Bihar forest area be given dual citizenship, so that they are protected on both sides?

by | **Samir Kumar Sinha**

Flying northeast into Kathmandu from the direction of New Delhi, just as the aircraft begins its descent adjacent to the Nepali tarai, a wide stretch of jungle suddenly appears beneath. This is an unexpected swath of green, given that whole stretches of the tarai region have been deforested over the past half-century by logging and human encroachment. This expanse of low, wooded valleys and riverine jungle is unique as the finest stretch of wild lands west of Assam – also a vibrant reminder of the great jungles of the Ganga plains that disappeared long ago. Today, this expanse is habitat to several Southasian 'climax species', most importantly, the one-horned rhinoceros, the tiger, and the gharial and marsh mugger crocodiles.

Perhaps just as distinctive is that this area of jungle falls under three wildlife units in two different countries. The Royal Chitwan National Park and the Parsa Wildlife Reserve are protected areas within Nepal; the Valmiki Tiger Reserve is part of Bihar State in India. This crossborder region thus offers unique possibilities for cooperative protection of one of the few unique, surviving natural habitats in the region. Unfortunately, due to recent political confusion in Nepal and a general lack of interest all around, the possibilities for cooperation are, for the moment, in abeyance.

The Valmiki reserve is named after the sage Valmiki, who is said to have written his epic *Ramayan* in a retreat located in these rolling hills. Located in West Champaran District, the reserve extends westward from the town of Valmikinagar, by the Gandak River, to Bhiknathori, a railhead settlement in the ancient trade route from the plains to Nepal's central hills. In the middle is the Someswar range, part of which is known as the Shiwalik range in India and the Churia in Nepal. On both sides of the Someswar undulation, in Chitwan District of Nepal and West Champaran of India, are found the indigenous forest-dwelling Tharu people.

What is today the Royal Chitwan National Park was once part of a much wider area populated only by the Tharu in forest pockets, extending all the way across this 'doon' valley of Chitwan to the Himalayan foothills. After most of the valley was cleared through lumber extraction and settled by hill folk starting in the early 1960s, it was decided to convert the southernmost region, as yet uncleared, into first a protected area and later a national park. The Parsa Wildlife Reserve extends eastward from the national park and is part of Parsa District, otherwise highly populated by the Bhojpuri-speaking Madhesi community and containing the entrepot town of Birgunj.

The contiguous forests of Chitwan-Parsa-Valmiki (CPV) support a healthy population of what can be considered the Subcontinent's flagship wildlife species, the Royal Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris*). In the colonial era and earlier, this wildlife-rich area attracted rajas, nawabs and zamindars who came in for extended hunting expeditions. Later, colonial royalty such as King George V and King Edward VIII (Prince of Wales) also came to hunt big game – which would be conducted spectacularly on elephant-back with sometimes hundreds of additional pachyderms providing support, driving prey towards the hunter.

This area was once continuous woodland, stretching from the Dehradun region of present-day Uttaranchal, 1800 km east to Assam, past the Nepal tarai and the Bhutan *duars*. Today, it is visible in satellite imagery only in patches. This fragmentation of habitat has presented a crisis for the Subcontinent's tiger population, which make up about half of the world's total. Of the estimated 6000 tigers that survive in the wild today, as many as 200 of them survive in the alluvial grasslands and moist, deciduous forests

along the India-Nepal border – in the Bardia and Shukla Phanta reserves of Nepal's western tarai and Chitwan-Parsa-Valmiki at the centre. Besides being larger, the CPV region also has the largest area under forest cover, which affords a more ideal tiger habitat. An estimated 80 tigers reside in the trans-border region, with about 35 thought to be normally resident in Valmiki in India and the rest in Nepal.

The CPV region has become so vital for tiger conservation that the US World Wildlife Fund has identified it as a Tiger Conservation Unit (TCU) that should receive top international priority. A TCU is defined as an area of habitat that either already contains or has the potential to host an 'interacting population' of tigers. CPV is a priority because of what scientists call 'habitat integrity', a situation of low poaching pressure and a relatively abundant tiger population. Scientists assume that such an environment offers the maximum possibility of long-term survival for tigers in the wild.

World heritage

Because of the three regimes and two countries under which Chitwan-Parsa-Valmiki is located, the full extent of the size and scope of this conservation area is not fully appreciated by the administrators on the two sides of the border, nor by the public at large. Taking the TCU as a whole, this is a protected wildlife area of 2311 sq km, which includes 932 sq km of Chitwan, 499 sq km of Parsa, and 880 sq km of Valmiki. Including buffer zones and other areas outside the core wildlife reserves, the total conservation area covers an area as large as 3549 sq km.

Chitwan was declared a national park in 1973, while the Parsa Wildlife Reserve was announced in 1984. Wild elephants are actually the star attraction of the latter reserve; Chitwan is known for the tigers in its sal and other forests, and the rhinoceroses in its riverine grasslands. The habitat had been well protected as a royal hunting reserve from 1846 to 1951 during the Rana regime. In 1963, an area south of the Rapti River was demarcated as a rhinoceros sanctuary, which was later converted to the national park. In 1984, recognising the wealth of its natural habitat, Chitwan was added to the World Heritage List by UNESCO.

Prior to Indian independence in 1947, the Valmiki forest was owned by the Bettiah Raj and the Ramnagar Raj. Interestingly, the rulers of Ramnagar were descended from a raja said to be named Burangi Singh, a satrap of "the mountains of Telhoni or Telahu" in Nepal, according to a historical source. Owing to oppression by the king of Nepal, he is said to have taken refuge in the low hills around Tribeni Ghat, which is the point where the Narayani River (Gandak in Bihar) flows onto the plains. The fleeing raja established himself at Ramnagar, which today falls in a subdivision of West Champaran.

Both Bettiah and Ramnagar states took advantage of the income that the jungle offered. The Valmiki forests were subsequently leased out to companies such as M/s Dearr & Co and Nepal Timber Co, which led to years of commercial exploitation and degradation of the woodlands. The government took over the tracts after Independence in 1947, later establishing the Valmiki Wildlife Sanctuary in two stages, in 1978 and 1990. Between 1974 and 1994, however, Valmiki was heavily exploited by the Bihar State Forest Development Corporation, until the area was declared a Tiger Reserve under the Project Tiger programme originally started by Indira Gandhi as prime minister. Finally, there was a complete ban on the extraction of all forest products. Though not fully implemented, this new policy led to a healthy recovery of the Valmiki forest. In fact, a recent study of the entire tarai region in India found Valmiki's forest cover and species wealth to be far better than elsewhere.

Nationality of the tiger

The Chitwan-Parsa-Valmiki forests together form the territorial area of many tigers. The crossborder movements by the animals increase during the breeding season. During the summer, there is a general move north into Chitwan by the beasts inhabiting the northern side of Valmiki. The Indian paramilitary forces deployed along the border in response to the Maoist rebellion in Nepal have also noticed these movements – they file reports, for example, of a 'Nepali tiger' entering the Valmiki or an 'Indian tiger' moving north into Chitwan. Of course, the international frontier has no meaning for the big cats. They have no citizenship: they simply traverse the habitat that evolution has ordained as their own.

During the 2003 monsoon, a tiger corpse remained trapped for two days in the sluice gate of the Gandak Barrage at Valmikinagar. The Indian press reported that a dead "Nepali tiger" was stuck in the barrage, as if the deceased creature had a passport or identity card. In reality, no one can guess the origin of a tiger in these trans-boundary habitats unless it is radio-collared or in some way marked. Even then, because of the animals' shifting bases, it is impossible to locate the points of origin of borderland tigers. In essence, a tiger can move through the forests of either country, and in any of the three protected areas. The responsibility for its care and protection subsequently rests with the forest wardens and policymakers of both countries.

In the Madi Valley of Chitwan, which hosts a cloistered settlement of Tharus and hill migrants surrounded by jungle, one hears similar references to the nationality of tigers. Between 1980 and 2000, nearly 50 people were said to have been killed in Chitwan; 24 of these deaths took place in the four

years prior to 2001 in the Madi region. Most of the 'suspect' tigers were said to have been 'Indian', entering from some degraded tracts on the other side of the border. Conversely, when a tiger killed two villagers at Raghia in India, it was assumed by the Indian authorities that the culprit was 'Nepali'. The real cause of the deaths, of course, was the increasing encroachment into the protected forests by villagers of either nationality – this is the habitat of tigers, after all, for which the only citizenship is the jungle.

Eco-regional cooperation

As yet, no thorough study has been done on habitat status, land use, and the population and movements of tigers in the area south of the Madi Valley within Chitwan, where the Nepali and Indian forests meet. It is assumed that this is an important corridor for tiger movement between the eastern part of the Valmiki reserve and the Chitwan-Parsa forest. During a May 2005 tiger census in Valmiki, several tigers were reported in this eastern sector. Evidence of tigers has also been found near the Someswar Fort, on a summit of the range by the same name, south of Madi. Boulder mining has recently been banned from Valmiki's easternmost edge, which is further expected to improve tiger habitat, with less human disturbance.

As it cuts through the Churia/Shiwalik hills, the meandering Narayani River ('Gandak' as it flows into India) provides a direct link between Chitwan and Valmiki. This corridor sees the downstream movements of tigers, rhinos and ungulates from Chitwan into Valmiki during the monsoon floods. In August, a field assistant with the Wildlife Trust of India even saw a tiger cub floating downriver near the barrage. In 2000, a 'Nepali' rhino was located in the Pandai riverbed of eastern Valmiki. A herd of elephants was also recorded having entered Valmiki from Chitwan and moving southward towards human settlements before being driven back.

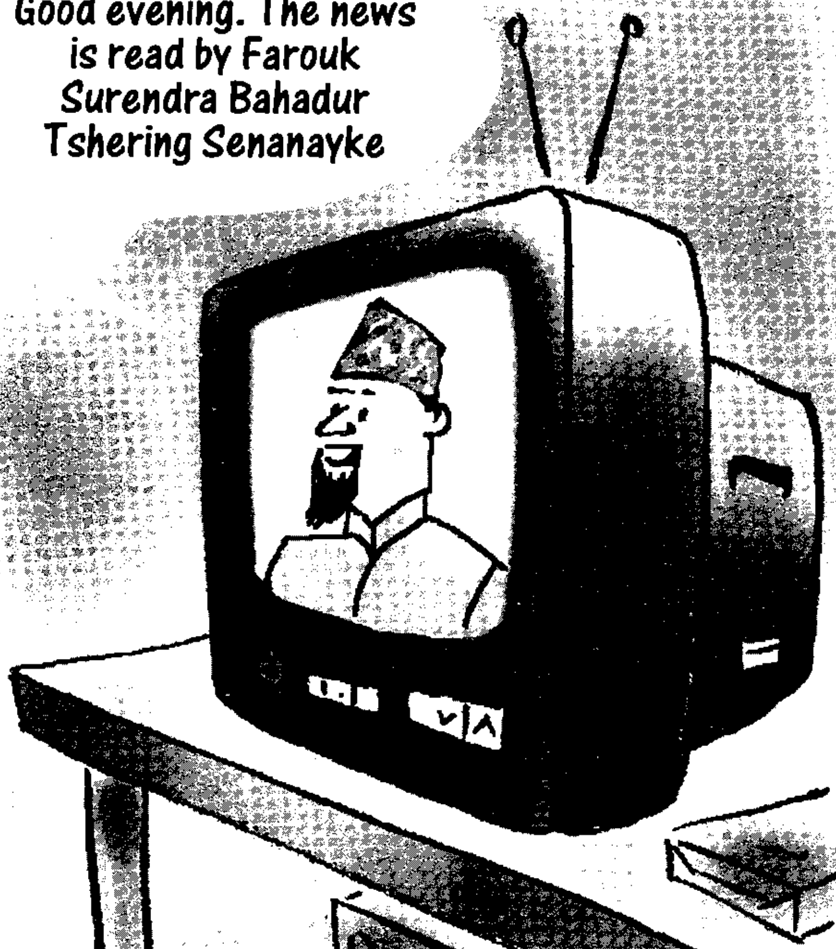
A clear protocol has still not been agreed upon as to how to deal with these animals of the contiguous forests of CPV. The across-the-border arrangements have generally been ad hoc. If this TPU is to be maintained in the relatively high quality of its habitat and wildlife, there is a need for the two countries to begin sustained cooperative efforts. This includes control of illegal logging and poaching, and ensuring that the encroachment of human inhabitants in surrounding villages does not degrade the quality of habitat required for the tigers and other animals.

For their parts, poachers and loggers currently use this wild frontier to their advantage, quickly hopping the border after committing forest- or wildlife-related offences. Nepal's Maobaadi reportedly use the Someswar forest tract from the Bhikna Thori railhead into the Madi Valley as an arms and material supply route into the hills of central Nepal. While it is unclear whether this has impacted Nepali conservation efforts, a sharp increase in the number of rhinos killed by poachers is clearly problematic. The national park's protection has always been the jurisdiction of the Royal Nepal Army, which is presently preoccupied with anti-insurgency operations throughout the country, and is said to have a lean presence in Chitwan.

The national park has long been the pride of the Nepali conservation effort, and it has a far better protection system than does its Indian counterpart. But reports of a sharp rise in rhinos killed here in the last year bespeaks of the deteriorating situation in Chitwan, which results in a degradation of the status of the entire crossborder region. Poachers and contraband runners come from both sides of the frontier. Last year, Nepali authorities arrested Indian villagers with leopard skins and tiger bones at Tribeni Ghat on the Gandak; earlier, a Nepali was also caught red-handed with leopard skins by Valmiki authorities. Surveillance of the region by wildlife authorities from both sides – rather than just by the paramilitary forces of one side – would help tremendously in tackling poaching and contraband trafficking.

A meeting of Indian and Nepali wildlife officials on trans-boundary conservation was held between Nepal and India in Kathmandu back in January 1997. Far-reaching resolutions were adopted to promote the establishment of trans-border conservation areas in appropriate regions, maintain appropriate databases, and share relevant information for biodiversity conservation. It was also decided to create complementary anti-poaching mechanisms, conduct joint-training, and to exchange research information on wildlife matters. At a follow-up meeting in New Delhi in 1999, the two sides agreed to develop communication systems in Nepal-India trans-border conservation areas, as well as to protect corridors for the seasonal movements of wildlife. In particular, there were expressed commitments to develop eco-regional cooperation in the CPV area.

Unfortunately, these laudable decisions have yet to be implemented on the ground, particularly in Chitwan-Parsa-Valmiki. Here, trans-boundary cooperation is still in its embryonic stage. Admittedly, Valmiki is on the road to recovery after being included in the Project Tiger scheme, added to the ban on forest resource exploitation. But because the ecological integrity of the entire CPV region is vital, it is important to maintain the high standards of management in the Royal Chitwan National Park, as well as to enhance the 'integrity' of the Parsa Wildlife Reserve. All in all, focus in all three units should be on protection, containing wildlife trade, regular habitat monitoring, and paying attention to the needs of the large carnivores, especially the tiger.



Rajesh KC

Channel Southasia

Isn't it time for a regional television network that 'thinks Southasian' and broadcasts via satellite and cable throughout the region? While Latin America's incipient Telesur and West Asia's energetic Al Jazeera might provide models, it is clear that we will have to go our own way.

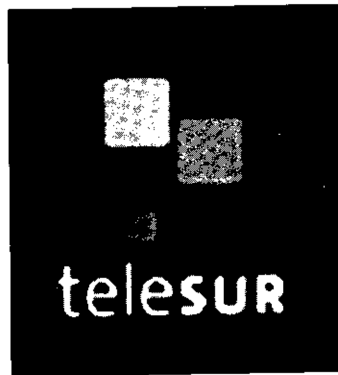
by | **Aman Malik**

On 24 July this year, in an ostensible bid to "promote Latin American integration", a new pan-South American television channel began broadcasting from the Venezuelan capital of Caracas. Telesur - short for 'Television of the South' - has the patronage of the left-leaning governments of Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay and Cuba. It hopes to be the 'ideological rival' to the perceived pro-American CNN Latin, which has been the only international television news network available in the region. Beginning with USD 10 million in start-up capital provided by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez's government, Telesur's bosses also hope to rope Brazil into the project - although that country is currently looking into launching its own international network.

In Telesur's favour is the fact that the 'mainstream' audiences in all of the major Latin American countries have similar cultural and linguistic sensibilities - Spanish and Catholicism. Whether or not these commonalties are enough to make the channel a viable alternative to the Western media in general and CNN Latin in particular remains to be seen. Moreover, the fact that the venture is overtly backed by governments with distinct anti-US predilections puts a political colour on the project

and a question mark on the editorial independence and credibility of the new channel. Despite these potential pitfalls, however, this model is significant in that it could, with suitable variations, be replicated in other developing regions of the world, including Southasia.

Telesur has only recently begun broadcasting, and it might be premature to propose a regional television channel for Southasia on the basis of its untested concept. However, it is interesting that another region of 'the South' has felt the need for an audio-visual voice for itself, at a time when the idea of a channel for the Subcontinent as a whole has begun to take hold in the minds of many. Regionalism in Southasia, which got a boost with the official sanction of the establishment of SAARC two decades ago, has been an increasingly important theme for civil society in each of the region's countries. Over time, such groups have felt the need for print and electronic media that cover the region as a whole; the overwhelming presence of western satellite news has made analysts call for native channels. The spread of Indian channels, in particular the satellite footprints of Hindi and English broadcasts emanating from India, has again led people in other countries to call for a satellite channel that is uniquely Southasian, without allegiance to any national sensibility.



Some believe that now is the perfect time for a Southasian channel; they tend to be the idealists who hanker for 'soft borders', Southasian camaraderie, peace and the prosperity that comes from peace. There are others who believe that the time is not right for such a channel; they tend to be the realists who point out, first, that the audiences are currently not present for a channel that tries to be all things to all audiences across seven nation states. They also point to the enormous costs of running a satellite channel in Southasia. Such an investment would be unlikely to be backed by bankers and investors - at least, not until the movement for Southasian regionalism evolves into a revolution.

The look-inward policy

While Southasia as a whole has always had a vibrant media in comparison to many other regions of the southern hemisphere, each of the region's media has traditionally looked homeward. The space that remains on the pages beyond national news - or the time, in terms of television or radio programming - is filled by news on Western societies. "Most of the countries in our region are striving to become developed; hence the focus is only on 'ourselves'", admits CNBC's Karma Paljor in New Delhi. Intraregional news seldom filters through the airwaves, except in the case of particularly dramatic developments. An average Indian or Pakistani today is perfectly clued-in to the American 'war on terror', but knows next to nothing about the Maoist insurgency in Nepal or the status of the ceasefire between the LTTE and the government in Colombo.

Coverage of the Southasian neighbourhood is hampered by the fact that no television channels, beyond the few big Indian channels, keep correspondents (or even stringers) in the neighbouring countries. As a result, the news that is used is filtered through the medium of Western wire services and television channels. A region the size of the Subcontinent generates an enormous volume of news, but you would not know that 'there is a region out there' if you watched television in any of the countries of Southasia. The Indian channels that are able do so send camera units parachuting into nearby countries - if there is a bombing spree in Dhaka, for instance, a state of emergency in Kathmandu, or a tsunami disaster in Colombo. But they themselves have neither the wherewithal nor the interest to stay with a story to do follow-up.

The fact that the existing nation-based channels do not do justice to neighbouring societies is perhaps to be expected. As yet, television is a new medium, still in the process of finding its feet within each country. In India, for example, the pan-Indian channels are now giving way to regional language channels. Some may say that this will actually make the channels more localised and parochial. But by the same token, such channels could look more closely at issues of a crossborder nature (Bengal-Bengal, Punjab-Punjab, and so on) than would a national channel based in New Delhi. Be that as it may, over time audience interest in regional matters has been on the rise all over the Subcontinent. Concedes CNBC's Paljor, "Editorial rooms need the regional picture, otherwise the story sinks."

As audiences in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan or Sri Lanka get fed more news about neighbouring countries, their appetites are bound to be whetted. Over time, this will pave the way for a Southasian television channel.

A pan-regional network?

In an increasingly globalised information system, every region must *hear of* and *be heard by* the world at large. By this rationale, doesn't Southasia owe itself and the world its own regional television network? Sri Lankan writer and media commentator Nalaka Gunawardene approves of the idea. Bobby Ramakant, an Indian freelance journalist, similarly

believes that such a media initiative would contribute greatly to stabilising the region: "The Indian and Pakistani media have contributed significantly toward the polarisation of their citizens against each other," he says. "Now is just the right time for Southasia to have its own regional TV broadcast. Such a network will make media more accountable, not provide misleading or provocative imagery of others countries, and instead talk about common issues and problems."

Philip Fiske de Gouveia, of the Foreign Policy Centre in London, echoes Ramakant's sentiments: "An independent Southasian broadcaster would help forge regional consciousness and cultural links." However, New Delhi-based television personality and educator Paranjoy Guha Thakurta reckons that these are "early days yet" for a regional television channel: "Within Southasia, there are highly heterogeneous nation states. These countries are diverse and differ from one another in more ways than one. There are many 'Asias' within Southasia." Indeed, for all the unity and commonality that this region may lay claim to, political, linguistic and religious differences have played heavy parts in dividing its peoples – which may make a central channel unviable, he says.

Al-Jazeera

Before even addressing the feasibility of a Southasian channel, however, the crucial question is: Why is it important for Southasians 'to see ourselves through our own eyes?' In answer, consider the earthquake that took nearly 80,000 lives in Pakistan on 8 October and after. In order to keep updated, Southasians all over – including in India, Pakistan and Kashmir on both sides of the LoC – needed to turn on the BBC or CNN. A good Southasian news channel would be one that would be watched by Southasians everywhere with a feeling of ownership, covering earthquakes and tsunamis, as well as triumphs of the human spirit.

The foremost hurdle that such a project would face would be finding a viable common platform. Creating intraregional, multilateral institutions, at least at the governmental level, has previously proved a frustrating challenge in Southasia. The non-starter that is the SAARC Secretariat, headquartered in Kathmandu, only proves the point. Its only attempt at bringing together television programming – called SAARC Audio-Visual Exchange (SAVE) – is a dismal affair, doomed because it is nothing more than a collaboration between governmental channels.

Aside from the fact that official involvement would immediately rob a Southasian channel of all dynamism (like SAARC and SAVE), regional governments are so far apart that they are unlikely to spend time and money on any such project. State intervention would also jeopardise the channel's editorial independence. *Time*'s Alex Perry, who covers Southasia for his magazine, cautions: "If you want this channel to be independent, governments should stay out." The "effectiveness" of a Southasian channel would depend entirely on how daring its directors want it to be, says Perry. "By being based in a country other than the one being reported on, it could probably be a lot more effective than national channels."

Broadcast tongue

Language remains one of the definitive, dividing factors in Southasia and would be a stumbling block for any pan-Southasian media venture as well. Paljor believes that such a channel "will succeed only if it is in English." Indeed, English is clearly the Southasian lingua franca – as the only language that can be understood by the capital elites in each country, it allows them to communicate at business conclaves and SAARC meetings alike. Still, English has its drawbacks. Only a small minority in each Southasian country can understand English. It is an elitist tongue that should be utilised as a regional channel's broadcast medium only if it is used as the first step towards a pan-Southasian channel. The decision on English, however, should be taken with the full understanding that it will have only a niche audience. Guha Thakurta predicts that a pan-Southasian TV channel will be a reality a decade from now, mostly having to do with the audience's facility with English: "By that time, hopefully more people in Southasia would be able to converse –_ and be able to watch – a TV channel in English ... I don't foresee a Southasian channel using any other language."

The key question, suggests Paljor is, "Who is it that will want to watch the larger Southasian picture? Will such a channel be for people living within the region? For non-resident Southasians? Or for the world at large?" Clearly the answer has to be that a Southasian channel would be targeted at people residing in Southasia. Initially, at least, it could be restricted to the English language. A pan-regional channel in Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani, however, with a decidedly Southasian rather than 'Indian' or 'Pakistani' focus, would be sure to rope in a large number of viewers from the entire Indus-Ganga-Brahmaputra basin.

Al Jazeera

The governments of Southasia clearly cannot be expected to back a Southasian television channel -- neither by themselves, nor due to their lack of trust in

each other. Such a channel would be an expensive project, from the hardware and satellite hook-ups, to region-wide networks of correspondence and marketing reach. But if not the government, then who would have the required cash to promote it? While a sense of regionalism may be developing, it is still incipient as far as the marketplace is concerned; investors are hardly going to come up at this time with the multimillion dollars that the project would need.

Businessmen or consortia of entrepreneurs interested in such a venture would require nerves of steel to be able to withstand – and buffer the fledgling channel from – multiple pressures coming from state, sectarian, fundamentalist, commercial and multinational sources. "And if that's not too much to wish for," quips Gunawardene, "can we also hope that such a channel will discern well between news and entertainment, and keep the two separate?"

If it is not to be a government combine or an entrepreneur's consortium, who will back a Southasian channel? As one journalist interviewed said, "What we really need at this moment is a maverick, courageous financier with deep enough pockets to launch Southasia's own Telesur."

In a way, that would bring the proposed 'Channel Southasia' awfully close to the Al Jazeera model – which is not necessarily a bad thing, considering that channel's success in breaking the Western media monopoly in West Asia. Indeed, the Al Jazeera model remains an alternative to the Telesur template for new media initiatives in Southasia, Africa and elsewhere. The Foreign Policy Centre's Philip Fiske de Gouveia is convinced that such a venture would bring about greater transparency and accountability: "Al Jazeera is unique in the way it is financed – by the Emir of Qatar, who is head of a small principality and is seen to have no conspicuous political agenda himself."

De Gouveia has been championing an article called "An African Al Jazeera?", in which he writes: "...if freedom is indeed on the move in the Middle East, Al Jazeera can claim a good deal of the credit. The station's broadcasts, which are available across the region, pressure governments to open up. In just nine years of existence, Al Jazeera has received hundreds of complaints from regimes not accustomed to scrutiny. Now, Arab governments realise they must justify their actions to millions of television viewers."

An average Indian or Pakistani today is perfectly clued-in to the American 'war on terror', but knows next to nothing about the Maoist insurgency in Nepal or the status of the ceasefire between the LTTE and the government in Colombo

Everything about a possible African regional channel may not apply to Southasia. But who can deny that an additional, independent channel, with a decidedly regional focus, would provide just the kind of programming that would be interesting in itself, while also challenging other networks. Furthermore, a liberal, thoughtful and daring channel going all over Southasia via satellite and cable would do more than a hundred newspapers to change mindsets for the better, and to pour oil over troubled geopolitical waters.

Networking

If governments should not be allowed to fund Channel Southasia; if private financing is unlikely; and if a maverick magic-wand investor cannot be wished from the ether, where do we go with the idea of a regional television station that speaks to the sensibility of Southasia? The answer may lie in two directions. First, the existing successful stations, such as Geo of Karachi or NDTV of New Delhi, may see an advantage for themselves to evolve into a 'Southasian' station (*for article on Geo, see Himal Sep-Oct 2005*). This would depend on how much the current India-Pakistan thaw will or is allowed to continue. A less ambitious but more realistic plan for the moment may be one of linking existing private channels of Southasia, so that they form a loose network that can initially share programming. Such an approach would then be able to evolve and establish itself, even as it helps to create a unified group of what could be called the 'Southasian viewers'.

Each of the larger countries of Southasia already has a number of private media initiatives. If some of these could join forces to form a professionally managed network – with governments kept strictly out – and if the emerging network programming were allowed editorial autonomy, there is every likelihood that television, at long last, could begin to serve the region's people with regional programming. This would do more than any number of crossborder cricket tests and peace marches to help re-cement the relationships of the people of Southasia, across the frontiers created in 1947. If these channels can sell – or even hope to sell – content in their respective capacities, couldn't they do it from under a collective banner? Before long, the time would be ripe for Channel Southasia; then, the sceptics could keep their own counsel.

Public TV for the SOUTHASIAN public

by | **Sanjeev Chatterjee**

Airwaves transporting an agenda of connectedness throughout Southasia, right into homes across the region – what a concept! With equitable representation of news, culture, public opinion, debate and even entertainment, what is not to like? The difficulty, of course, is that such a project faces restrictions imposed by regulations (or lack thereof), market forces, and the now-established culture of television as a primarily commercial entertainment medium. Facts, however, have never precluded the dreamers.

The conceptualisation of a Southasian public service channel must start with the questions: What is the overall philosophy of a public service channel? Who would operate it? Who is it for? What is its programming model? What is the best means to reach the target audience? What will be the primary language of operation? How will it gain acceptance in the varied socio-political landscape and national agendas of Southasia? Where are the revenue streams for the establishment and sustenance of such an 'out-of-the-box' type of model?

Programming model

The very proposition of a regional public service channel goes against the nature of today's television marketplace. The commonly accepted values of public good, education, accountability, good taste and so on have been largely eroded by the unbridled growth of commercial TV, as delivered by such satellite giants as Star and Zee, which do not have standards of public service imposed on them. Even while stations like NDTV have succeeded in maintaining high journalistic values within India, they have fallen short of developing a voice for Southasia. Television advertisers have, without exception, gravitated towards the vast market potential of India, while marginalising voices from everywhere else in the region.

The reality is that Southasia is host to a vibrant non-governmental culture with a predisposition towards the articulation of a social voice. The ground would thus seem to be fertile for public television. So far, however, the media output of the non-governmental sector has mostly been in the form of 'alternative' voices – sporadic documentaries, for instance. Such output rarely finds broadcast opportunities on either government or commercial channels.

The NGO sector possesses the links and networks throughout Southasia to become a prime mover in the effort to develop a regional public service channel. However, to develop a recognisable voice in an already raucous marketplace, it will be necessary to develop working partnerships with governments, corporations and professional media organisations.

One way to promote public sector television would be, first, to promote an autonomous Southasia-wide institution for training and engaging with the best practices of the broadcast media. In other words, we need a media education institution comparable to a teaching hospital, from which fully qualified electronic media professionals can graduate and begin to engage with the world. Such an educational institution could begin by having an online presence, where faculty and students present samples of work, eventually to a larger audience. A comparable model that seeks a democratic voice through online programming of potential TV programmes can be found with Current TV (*www.current.tv*), a US project led by former vice president Al Gore. Such a scalable model could grow into a thriving channel over time.

Admittedly, starting with a media college could deliver a public service channel overnight. What this model would promise, however, would be a new generation of media professionals. Such a group could play a key role in redirecting the power within television circles, so that there is adequate attention paid not only to the public's wants, but also to its needs. If the recruitment of both faculty and students at the proposed institution was truly representative of Southasian regions, the programming would be bound to represent the same diversity. It is conceivable that in the foreseeable future, the

dispersion of students (as new professionals) throughout the region would create a decentralised model of reporting and storytelling that could become the channel's hallmark.

Rather than trying to follow an all-news-all-the-time model, the proposed channel should build a reputation for quality programming, focused on representing both the diversity and common interests of Southasia. While news, public affairs and documentaries should form the core of regular programming on the channel, heretofore underserved areas – such as culture, heritage, or quality children's programming – provide opportunities ripe for exploitation.

Audience

Over the past four decades, the ideal of television as an educational medium has been systematically abandoned. This process has included state-run operations like Doordarshan in India and PTV in Pakistan, which have invested heavily in 'production values' to maintain viewership and revenues amidst a flood of private sector competition. In essence, government channels have either outright abandoned public service models, or have simply not allowed these models to evolve. As such, now is the time to develop a truly public-spirited channel, outside of officialdom.

The audience for a potential public interest channel in Southasia is somewhat self-evident. Although their mother-tongues are as diverse as the region itself, the common language throughout the satellite footprint is English. The primary audience, then, is cosmopolitan college graduates who are active media consumers, monitor the leading English-language newspapers, and regularly watching a variety of regional, national and international TV news. This is a segment with purchasing power, and with a potential to be attracted by programming that has real informational content.

Although this primary audience resides in Southasia, the channel would also have a considerable audience elsewhere. A truly representative Southasian channel would draw global attention from the day of its launching. It would also have a following among the Southasian diaspora in the West, the Gulf, in Europe and Southeast Asia.

Non-alternative voice

One mistake that this channel cannot make is to represent itself as an 'alternative voice'. Thus, the programmes must hit the airwaves as technologically, aesthetically, journalistically and professionally first-class. The channel must exercise the utmost care in recruiting the best people and deploy leading-edge technology. All in all, the public interest channel must project itself successfully as a 'new reality' that speaks to the future of Southasia as one region with differentiated countries and societies. Journalistically, the channel should characterise itself as an intrepid 'presenter of all sides', rather than as a 'revealer of truths'. The channel must be viewed as a forum for expression – not as a conduit for opinions.

No doubt this would be an expensive project, with a gestation period of five to eight years. Although the initial investment would be high, the audience profile and easy portability of developed programming would allow the channel to expect widespread subscription numbers. For this reason, the project should be developed as an advertisement-free, for-pay channel; advertisers would otherwise tend to influence programming in order to favour the largest audience segments, by country or by income level. Experience tells us that support by either governments or advertisers also tends to result in static, non-dynamic programming. The practical challenge, then, is to devise a regionwide, independent voice. This can best be achieved through a funding strategy wherein representation on the governing board truly represents the region's diversity and diverse needs and wants.

The internet is becoming an increasingly viable channel for the delivery of audio-visual content. In upcoming years, the hope is that it will present easy and cost-efficient ways to establish an evolved culture of free multimedia expression for regional consumption. As technological advances make this feasible, committed Southasian media professionals should be there to take advantage of its opportunities.

View from the ground

During the recently held Film South Asia '05 documentary festival in Kathmandu, Pakistani journalist and filmmaker Munizae Jahangir offered a few key points on the idea of a Southasian public service television station:

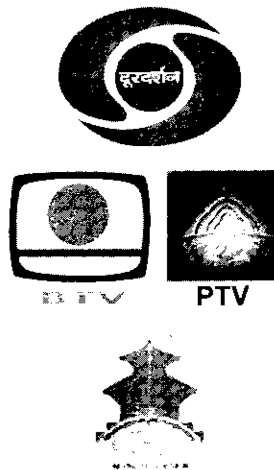
"An objective Southasian television channel would be vital in bringing together the region and helping us to understand one another. Although no particular format should be enforced, specific airtime should be set aside for new filmmakers and producers, particularly for those with new innovations. Experimental styles should be encouraged and, once the broadcast is established, funding should be offered for new genres. The channel would need to run regular, uncensored news bulletins. Talk shows and debates should bring together a wide spectrum of Southasian journalists, politicians and academics. Particularly useful would be a forum where Southasian politicians face questions from a wide Southasian audience, comprised of all regional nationalities."

Real broadcasting for a real public

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

Just as Southasia at large has failed to utilise the democratising power of radio, public television also seems a distant dream. First, this is because the government in each country does not want to let the airwaves out to anyone who seeks anything either innovative or people-friendly. Second, it is a matter of money. At the moment, who other than the private, commercial broadcasters can come up with the kind of funding required to put up a terrestrial or satellite channel? As a result, a public that makes up a fifth of humanity is kept from receiving information, gaining knowledge, being entertained at a higher plane, and being empowered.

As with radio, it is interesting that we do not even have a concept of public broadcasting in television. Because we have known only state-owned and private commercial channels, we do not even know how to demand 'public' fare. There is no doubt that Southasia as a whole, as well as each of our individual countries and societies, needs public broadcasting - but any talk on the subject gets bogged down in matters of finance and funding. Who would pick up the tab for an expensive television channel?



There is one obvious solution that we should give serious consideration to implementing: convert all present-day government television channels in Southasia into autonomous entities with independent governing boards. Until a general understanding of the parameters of public broadcasting evolves - and the Southasian political classes achieve a threshold level of maturity - these channels will have to be prevented from broadcasting hard news. Coupling government funding with current infrastructure, existing stations in each country would emerge as what are known as public broadcasters.

This has, of course, already been tried in India with the Prasar Bharati Act. The 1990 legislation was created with its Parliament drafters' best of intentions, attempting to convert both All India Radio and Doordarshan into public service broadcasters. But that did not happen, mainly because the ruling parties were loathe to let go of the electronic media as powerful and useful tools. The bureaucrats went along with what their masters dictated, and today Prasar Bharati has become nothing more than a government handmaiden, with personnel and budget assigned by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry. As we speak, there is little debate in India about how the public has been cheated.

But it is never too late. There must now be a region-wide campaign to develop a sense of urgency, particularly within the region's intelligentsia, on behalf of Southasian public broadcasting. This push must lead to the conversion of the existing government channels into adequately-funded independent stations. Bangladesh Television, Doordarshan, Nepal Television, Pakistan Television and Rupavahini have no business being broadcasters as government-run organisations.

The first step would simply be to prevent the broadcasting of hard news by the state-owned channels. Half the battle would then be won outright. As soon as the news function is taken away, the politicians would lose interest and stop meddling; the stations would then automatically become more public-friendly. The next step would be to charter BTV, DD, NTV, PTV and Rupavahini as independent corporations, with governing boards made up of cultural heavyweights, so that no government of the day would be able to succeed in any subsequent hijacking. In the meantime, it is important to learn from what went wrong with Prasar Bharati, so that we can embark on this process with eyes wide open.

There will come a day when the individual public television channels will collaborate and create a Southasia-wide public broadcasting network. There will come a time when, under the umbrella of public broadcasting, we may actually have children's programming for Southasian kids. For now, there is nothing worthy of the name. That is an ongoing shame.

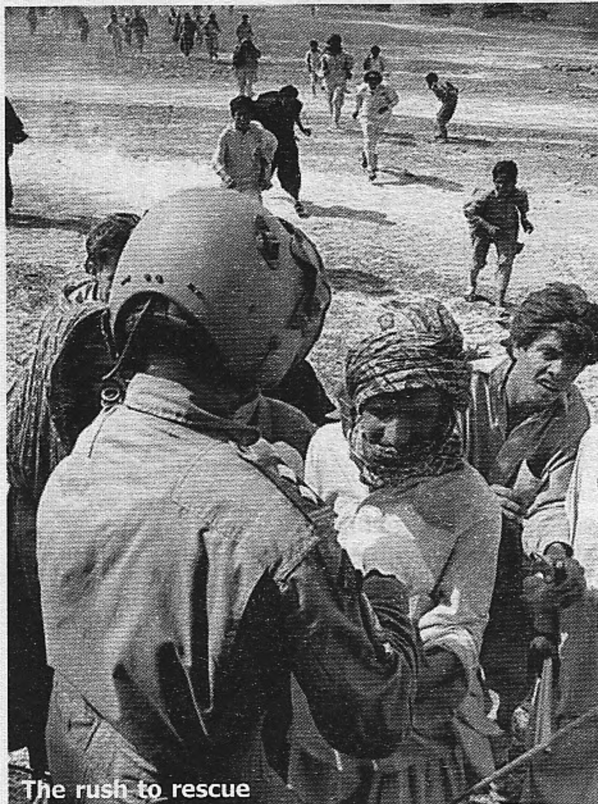
Southasiasphere

WAYS of the WIND

by | **C K Lal**

Wind -
Even when it is not blowing, it blows
Who can lash down the wind?
- Ramesh Prajapati in the Hindi poem "Hawa"

Polls in Afghanistan have once again proven that feuding warlords often decide electoral outcomes in fractured societies. According to Ahmad Fahim Hakim, deputy chairman of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), "More than 80 percent of winning candidates in provinces and more than 60 percent in the capital Kabul have links to armed groups." Despite the preponderance of politicos of uncertain provenance, the composition of the Wolesi Jirga (lower house) is such that it will not be able to challenge the sweeping powers of President Hamid Karzai and his American overlords.


The rush to rescue

The Taliban may have failed to disrupt the elections, but if the Parliament proves as ineffective as it is expected to be, the ominous warnings of US Army General Jason Kamiya could yet come true: "There still will be an enemy insurgency next spring." President Karzai's claims notwithstanding, Afghanistan is far from a success story on the road to democratisation.

In these parts of the Hindukush, the core issue is fashioning a participatory democracy where no ethnic group feels that it has to submit to the brute majority of one faction or another. If the Jirga is allowed to function in an environment free of foreign pressures, the members themselves will be able to decide on the kind of Afghanistan that is to be built. The very fact that some 6.8 million (around 53 percent) of 12.5 million Afghans registered to vote actually participated in the 18 September polls is a good sign.

In Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia's government completed its fourth year in office, just as Transparency International announced that her country had - for the fifth consecutive year - topped the list of most-corrupt nations. It is time to remind the prime minister that she had fought elections back in 2001 on two planks: containing violence and combating corruption. She has failed on both counts. Thanks to an equally discredited opposition led by Begum Sheikh Hasina, however, no real threat to her government is expected anytime soon - although the Awami League is threatening the BNP-led ruling alliance with the possibility of mass resignations by its Parliament members.

Contrary to the fractured nature of Afghan polity, homogeneity of the ruling elite is the bane of Bangladeshi politics: regardless of their affiliations, the bigwigs of Dhaka society all swear by the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Opposition to the Washington Consensus is conspicuous by its very absence in this teeming country with limited resources. Liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation are extremely beneficial for garment exporters, NGO entrepreneurs and aid industry associates. But what is the public official in any Structural Adjustment Programme country to do to afford health services and education for his children,

if not to accept bakshish? Who will tell Transparency International that petty bribes taken by officials give rise to the perception of corruption, rather than its real prevalence? Tthat is the preserve of the Northern multinationals. Let us understand the importance of scale here.

Burma is trying to benefit from the entrepreneurship of the Bangladeshi trading class. If the road-link between Bangladesh and Burma is restored, Dhaka's commercial farmers will be sure to be taking over fallow tracts across the border and cultivating them on contract from the Burmese military. A buy-back arrangement of some type is currently being dangled, in an attempt to entice the Rangoon junta. Should the arrangement succeed, Burmese brass would have yet another lucrative source of extra income; and one more Southasian country would compromise high principle on the altar of lucre and realpolitik.

Tremors in paradise

Granted, the magnitude of the earthquake (7.6 on the Richter scale) that hit Kashmir in early-October was horrendous. But that does not justify the subsequent neglect of the people suffering in one of the most militarised regions in the world. Outside of conflict, militaries are supposed to wage war on ravages wrought by nature. But when tragedy struck in Kashmir, Pakistani helicopters were too busy serving the needs of their own troops to worry about the suffering of common Kashmiris.

General Hamid Gul, the controversial former head of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), has drawn an alarmist parallel. He thinks that the 1971 uprising in then-East Pakistan had a lot to do with the ham-handed way in which the 1970 relief operations were carried out in the flood-ravaged plains of Bengal. Pervez Musharraf and his fellow brass in Islamabad will have a lot of explaining to do as to why it took three days before anything resembling a systematic relief operation could be organised.

But it is true what they say about the silver lining: the thaw in India-Pakistan relations has been long in the making, but the shared tragedy of Kashmir will have speeded up the process of reconciliation. Helicopters in no-fly-zones and cellphone links across the de facto border may sound mundane, but let us recognise acts of daring among the leaders when it does happen. Once the body count is done, the blame is allotted and responsibilities are shouldered, Indian and Pakistani administrators must sit down and devise a joint strategy of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction in these contested mountains.

Perhaps there is a bit of fatalism among us Southasians – regardless of frontiers or lines of control – that makes us take natural calamities in stride. Or perhaps it is a reliance on the Almighty – when tremors struck Islamabad, participants on a TV talk-show were shown praying until the lights went out. There is nothing wrong with a bit of meek submission to His will, but better preparation to lessen the suffering of the public is unlikely to offend the Omnipresent.

Ceasefire bilateral/unilateral

The post-modern monarchy in Nepal is trundling along its carefully charted course of establishing the primacy of the crown in Nepali society and polity. After making sure that the country's constitution had been turned, twisted and mauled beyond recognition, King Gyanendra commanded that elections be held by April 2007, to validate all of the controversial decisions he had made since the royal takeover of 4 October 2002. A gag ordinance has been simultaneously issued to tame the ebullient media of Kathmandu Valley; the beleaguered press in the countryside, meanwhile, have already been long exercising self-censorship in the face of threats from both the military and militants.

For the moment, the prospects of a sustainable peace in the kingdom appear bleak – although hopes of an extension of the three-month unilateral ceasefire that the Maoists declared in September have not yet subsided. Were the insurgents and mainstream parties to reach a compromise on the nitty-gritty of a republican polity (meaning, minus the king), the oldest state of Southasia may yet emerge as its most vibrant democracy, as well. The vigour of freedom regained, after all, is of a different magnitude than the freedom acquired for the first time around.

A bilateral ceasefire still holds in Sri Lanka, where presidential elections are scheduled for 17 November 2005. If previous experiences are anything to go by, the battle of the ballot box is a time of extreme risk. While campaigning in 1999, President Chandrika Kumaratunga barely survived an attack that killed more than 20 people. Five years earlier, a suicide bomber claimed the life of United National Party candidate Gamini Dissayanaka, along with 50 others. There had been a hope that Sri Lanka had turned the corner and that the polls the next time around would be peaceful. But then, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was assassinated.

Even though upheavals in all parts are more the rule than the exception in Southasia, the trauma brought by surrounding disasters – both natural and manmade – never ceases to be extremely unsettling. But as Alama Iqbal sang long ago in the poem "Taraanaa-e-Hind", often referred to as India's second national anthem:

Kuchh baat hai ki hastii mitatii nahin hamaarii
Sadiyo rahaa hai duhman daur-e-zamaan hamaaraa

There is something in Southasians that makes us endure, survive and thrive all over again. ▲

Brain gain, being brown

A Malayali Southasian's thoughts on going away and returning home.

by | **Cyriac George**

Flying east-bound 9000 metres above Germany, I was flipping through a newspaper in the cramped cabin of a transcontinental airliner. There, I found an article on the new trend of 'brain gain', linked to India's Westernised émigrés return home. I was interested: I was on my way to New Delhi to take up studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, having spent the past 18 years, since my childhood, in the United States.

Not so long ago, I had been to my birthplace in Kerala, and the first thing I noticed upon arrival in Delhi was that north India *smelled* a lot different than south India. I confirmed this sensation soon after, when I travelled to Madras. There, I experienced a slew of Tamil aromas that were close cousins of those smells with which I grew up in Kerala, but were quite different from those in New Delhi.

I was confronted with challenges as to why I could not speak Hindi, and why I would choose to return to India when everyone 'here' is trying to get 'there'.

In the United States, I was always asked about spicy food, Hindi films and the Taj Mahal. Here in New Delhi, I was confronted with challenges as to why I could not speak Hindi, and why I would choose to return to India when everyone 'here' is trying to get 'there'. While I thought I had anticipated India's surprises, I was caught off-guard by some of the things that I found. There were fewer English speakers than I had expected to find on the street, but the number of people for whom English was a primary language (the one in which a person

thinks and dreams) greatly exceeded what I had anticipated. The rich were also somewhat richer and the poor were much poorer than I had expected. But the rumours of the heat of the Indian pre-monsoon summer had not been exaggerated in the least.

A good part of my first week on the JNU campus was spent engaged in a favourite Indian past-time – waiting in line at one window or counter after another. Even though my passport declared 'United States', I felt that my brown skin gave me a birthright to complain. The first in-depth conversation that I had with my hostel-mates was emphatically and unapologetically about sex. Asked about the sexual pursuits of Indian men abroad, I shrugged and took a draught from my Kingfisher, hoping in vain to pass on to the next topic. My new friends were shocked that we were not at the top of the sexual food chain – did they (the Americans) not realise that we were from the land of the *Kamasutra*? They were perplexed, though I would wager that they were going by reputation, rather than having actually read (and practiced from) Vatsyayana's treatise. When Indians themselves/ourselves internalise the exotic, one can hardly blame the foreigners who come seeking the same: bright bazaars and camel festivals in Rajasthan, ayurveda in Keralan backwaters, or the expressive temples of Madhya Pradesh.

It is said that Southasians, more than any other immigrant community in America, desire one day to return to their homeland.

In any case, we need to re-evaluate our conceptions of exoticism and diversity, as well as our perceptions of other people. Judgment works both ways and it is safe to say that a good part of the postcolonial world has its own distorted view of Occidentalism. Southasians of Southasia might be surprised to know that the diaspora in fact has a much more developed sense of regional identity than do the citizens of the various nation states back home. Although this is less to our credit than a result of our weak demographic clout in the States, this dynamic proves helpful in erasing the ill-conceived boundaries that have ripped apart communities back in the mother region. Two families from Calcutta and Dhaka can get along in a way in which I, as a Malayali, can take part. Political boundaries fade and the more organic, age-old cultural communities emerge all of a sudden, as though they have been bottled up by decades of nation-building.

Growing up brown in New York, I found many opportunities to bond with others who thought like me – groups such as the South Asian Journalist Association (well known by its acronym SAJA) or the Indian Cultural Society of the Bronx High School of Science. The latter was interestingly made up mostly of non-Indians. Or non-Southasians. While at college, I was easily a part of both the Asian student associations, as well as the Southasian history classes. I also remember getting into a grade-school fight with a Bangladeshi classmate. When his mother confronted me the next day, she informed me that "such behaviour is not appropriate for brothers. We are the same." Even today, the memory of that confrontation is refreshing.

Desi dilemma

If that newspaper report is to be believed – and I find it believable – then it seems that some of these long-departed brothers and sisters are returning home. It is said that Southasians, more than any other immigrant community in America, desire one day to return to their homeland. Although most will make it back to 'till the soil' of their romantic notions, their longing is indicative of the Southasian's extensive connections with the ancestral earth. There is a deeper disassociation from the host society, as well as an enduring hope for the future.

But we must keep in mind that in the midst of this 'brain gain', the Western conception of India, at least, is also changing. That image is no longer only of cows and malnourished children; nowadays, one term describes it all – IT. The accuracy and significance of this image can be endlessly debated, but perceptions are what drive people. In the Western eye today, office parks are rapidly replacing the Subcontinent's slums. But instead of exulting in this change of imagery, my own suggestion would simply be not to feel insulted the next time you see a tourist taking a picture of a beggar child. As the divide between the urban rich and the urban/rural poor develops into a chasm, let's use that photographic event as an opportunity to remind ourselves of the 'real India' that is still out there. Lest, in our urban-centric or diasporic cocoons, we forget.

I have come to realise over the past year that there is a civilisational dilemma at hand. At one extreme, there are so many young and talented individuals that are seeking their first tickets to the US, in pursuit of material security and respite from the fatalism that they think afflicts their homeland. On the other hand, I notice so many here who have no interest whatsoever in visiting the West, much less settling down over there. Instead, they are completely satisfied with – and determined to improve – their present lives and environment. I also find so many Southasians wavering between these two extremes – but each time I share my own story of return with someone new, it feels as though that fatalism recedes just a bit.

Burqa and Shalwar, Jeans and Sari - Changing Fashions on the STREETS OF DHAKA

by | **Firdous Azim & Ayesha Banu**
Photographs | Bayazid Akter

'Clothes make the man', they say - or the woman, or the city. On the streets of Dhaka these days, one cannot help but be struck by the variety of female attire - the traditional *Bangalee nari* with her red-and-white sari and dot on the forehead, the fully-veiled 'Muslim' woman, and the 'modern' woman in jeans and short kurta.

Are more of Dhaka's women veiling themselves today than in the past, as casual observation would indicate? This photo essay has its origins in research done by the Department of Women's Studies at Dhaka University, to seek an answer to that question. In the course of the study, we discovered that, while use of the veil is indeed on the rise, the style of the burqa is also being adjusting to new trends and fashions.

Together with a burgeoning of burqa styles, we charted an explosion in other attire - from the shalwar kameez, jeans and short kurtas, to the traditional sari, which tends to be worn even by young girls on special occasions. From the burqa to the sari, this suddenly expanded spectrum of women's wear is an intricate part of the Bangladeshi woman's changing views of herself and the world.

The transformation has been nothing less than dramatic. Bangladesh started its journey to independence in the 1950s and 1960s with a consciously-held image of the Bangalee woman - long tresses, clad in sari, and the 'modern' among them more often than not carrying a political placard or banner. Three decades after independence, a huge variety has replaced those few images.

Rather than revert to the defined images of the past, contemporary women are experimenting and exploring. If clothing can be taken as a badge of identity, then Dhaka women are playing around with identity - sometimes highlighting their regional roots or declaring their Islamic identity, at other times simply choosing to be modern and contemporary.

Choice, you may say, is a matter of luxury, for how many can really choose their clothes? We looked at working class women in Dhaka, particularly the by-now familiar sight of young garment workers walking to and from their factories. Variety and choice seemed to be at work there as well.

Intriguingly, choices need not always be free; sometimes they are dictated by the constraints placed on women's movements. Many individuals we interviewed said that they choose to veil themselves as a protective measure, as the burqa provides them security from the sexual harassment prevalent on the city's crowded streets and public transport. Even though working women today dominate Dhaka's streets, the special measures that they have to take in order to occupy many public spaces says much about the continuing challenges women face in modern-day Bangladesh.

When all is said and done, these pictures not only illustrate how women negotiate the streets of Dhaka, but offer a glimpse into how Bangladeshi womanhood is evolving. That picture is anything but static.

'She' and the silver screen

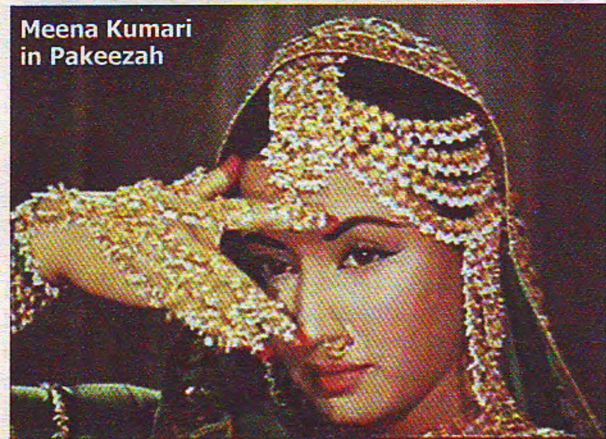
While there are outstanding examples of sensitivity, Indian cinema over the decades has largely neglected the lived experiences of women.

by | **Sai Paranjpye**

As with real life, the projection of the 'Indian woman' in Indian cinema over the decades has been, at best, ambiguous. As in other parts of Southasia and the world, the women of India remain, by and large, second-class citizens groomed to be obedient wives rather than independent individuals. A good marriage, not a sound education, is supposed to be her ultimate goal. Even in cases where the wife is the major bread-winner, she is seldom the head of the family. Things may be changing in urban India, where women are increasingly conscious of their rights, but the winds of change do not blow strongly enough in the rural areas, nor among lower-income groups. The Indian woman must continue to practice that noble virtue to which she is traditionally so accustomed: patience, as she fulfils her secondary, subsidiary, supporting role.

Cinema necessarily reflects the social environment from which it springs and in which it flourishes. Even as the multimedia apparatus wields a tremendous influence on society, cinema's populist reach particularly shapes public opinion as does no other medium. Such power begets unique responsibility, requiring periodic reassessments with questions such as: How has Indian cinema treated the Indian woman? Has it been fair and realistic in portraying women? Has it been able to analyse her numerous problems? Has it championed her cause? Has it come up with solutions? On the whole, these answers are in the negative.

For the most part, women have adorned the silver screen in a decorative capacity. Seldom do we see a woman of substance in film – a flesh-and-blood person facing up to challenges and trying to come to terms with her environment. Instead, what we get to see are feminine shadows in the background – wives, mothers, sisters, sweethearts and vamps playing second-fiddle to the male protagonists.


Meena Kumari in Pakeezah

Sati and Shakti

Popular Indian cinema began in earnest with D Phalke's *Raja Harischandra* in 1913; and the first film dealing with a woman's dilemma appeared in 1919 with the mythical *Ahilya Uddhar* ("The Purification of Ahilya"). In the early days of silent film, however, particularly in the 1920s, much of the country's women-focused cinema revolved around *sati* films, around the woman who 'voluntarily' enters her husband's funeral pyre. The sati woman had no separate identity of her own – her only purpose in life was to look after the well-being of her lord-and-master husband. Sati films continued to be produced throughout the following decades; even after the 1960s, the decline of traditional sati stories led to modernised versions that focussed on devoted wives. Today's cinema continues to suffer from the sati

syndrome, limiting the portrayal of women to one-dimensional creatures with no personal ambition or drive.

Paradoxically, side-by-side with the sati stereotype, the image of the single woman of tremendous strength of character and physique reigned supreme on the screen from the 1930s until well into the 1950s. She was portrayed by the fearless Nadia, the stunt queen, who believed in action rather than the silent suffering of the virtuous. Nadia's on-screen acts of daredevilry would have put Tarzan, James Bond and Rambo to shame. In 1934, she made *Hunterwali*, followed by a series of similar films. After a few lean years, during which time Nadia took hairdressing courses, in 1943 the 'Queen' made a grand comeback with *The Daughter of Hunterwali*. Nadia continued fighting onscreen for the next decade, but there wasn't another heroine to take on villains single-handedly until *Geeta aur Seeta* (1972), when dream-girl Hema Malini exploded onto the scene in a double role.

The dual portrayal of the onscreen Indian woman actually has ancient roots. According to traditional beliefs, a woman can be the incarnation of either of two ideals. On the one hand, she can be a gentle, pious and submissive creature – always sacrificing for the sakes of others, particularly the husband. On the other hand, she can be Shakti incarnate, taking after the goddess of vengeance and destruction and exhibiting her bloodthirsty and remorseless side. Here, she is the representation of female brute force, striking terror in the hearts of men. Given such traditionally contradictory manifestations of femalehood, it is not surprising that so many sati films ran side-by-side with Nadia's stunt movies.

Rejecting submission

Although women-oriented films have been few considering the number of productions to come out of Bombay over the years, the list does include a number of brave efforts that present female protagonists with empathy. The director Subramaniyan, himself of high caste, made the very bold *Balyogini* in the 1930s in Tamil and Telugu, exposing the bitter lot of widows. He featured a real Brahmin widow with a shaven head, for which the director was angrily declared an outcaste. Indeed, the subject of widowhood has inspired daring filmmakers over the decades, starting with the 1925 production of a silent film titled *Child Widow*. In the early-1980s, Prema Karanth's *Phaniamma*, in Kannada, depicted a young widow defying tradition by refusing to shave her hair upon her husband's death.

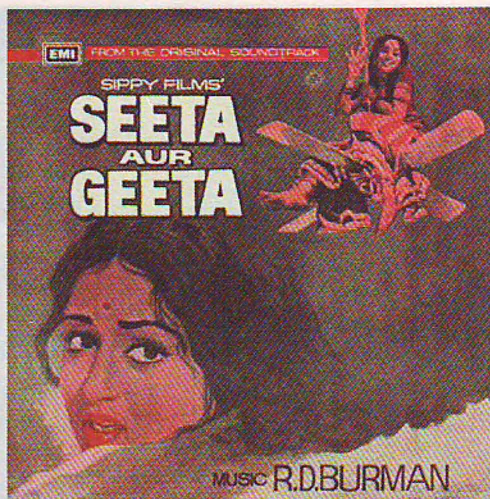
In 1937, V Shantaram produced a cinematic gem called *Duniya Na Mane*, about a young woman married off to an elderly widower by a money-minded uncle. Instead of accepting the husband as would a tradition-bound wife, the girl refuses to put the *kumkum* on her forehead and stays away from the marital bed. Indeed, *Duniya Na Mane* can be considered India's first combination of uncompromising social statement and gripping cinema. Achyut Ranade's *Gudia* and *Swayamsidha* in 1941 and 1948 were of the same calibre; both follow the development of timid, traditional girls as they gain the self-confidence needed to assert themselves.

In general, however, the poor treatment of wives and daughters-in-law in Indian cinema has become a cinematic narrative trope, as has the woman's response. In 1933, Devki Bose made an allegorical, highly stylised film called *Apna Ghar*, which depicted colonial India as the tormented wife and the British state as the tyrannical husband.

Working women

Filmmakers have long been enthralled by one particular group of women – those who, by dint of birth or circumstance, are forced to take on the world's oldest profession. The father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, weighed in on the subject with *Kanya Vikray* in 1924. Despite considerable subsequent contributions to the genre, however, Indian filmmakers have done little to delve into the problems or social implications of prostitution. Rather, it has been the romance of the high-class courtesan or dancing girls that has fired the imaginations of many directors.

There have been many popular and well-made films on the glamorous but ill-fated lives of the court entertainer, the classic being K Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). Recently colourised, the film is a tragedy based on the love story of the historic Prince Salim (Jahangir) and the commoner-dancer Anarkali. Both *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981) evoked a bygone era when the beauty of a courtesan could purportedly change the course of history.



but they are generally seen as lukewarm efforts.

Only a few sterling films about working girls spring to mind. One was certainly *11,000 Girls*, written and directed by K Abbas in 1962, about the ordeals of Bombay's working women. Satyajit Ray's lyrical *Mahanagar*, made a year later, is of the same calibre. Mrinal Sen's *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979) poignantly described a typical middle-class situation in which a daughter is allowed to earn for her family, but inspires a family crisis when she comes home late. Despite the efforts of Abbas, Ray, Sen and a few others, Indian cinema has largely failed to keep up with the experiences of the country's working women.

Over the years, a few exceptions have taken more realistic looks at the sex worker. *Chetna* (1970) , directed by B R Ishara, brought a prostitute's story to the screen in a bold manner. *Bazaar* (1982) was a low-budget film by Sagar Sarhadi that dealt with the sale of young girls to the Gulf countries. *Mandi*, a film by Shyam Benegal made in the early-1980s, was a black comedy that not only depicted the lives of prostitutes in a graphic and unromanticised manner, but deigned to accept them as a part of social life. Many inconsequential, sensational films have also been made on the titillating aspects of ladies of the night. *Midnight Girl*, *Society Butterfly*, *Vamp* and *Gutturna Gulab* were some early productions on the subject. These days, many such works are produced in Kerala, with names like *Hot Nights*, *Night Girls* and so on.

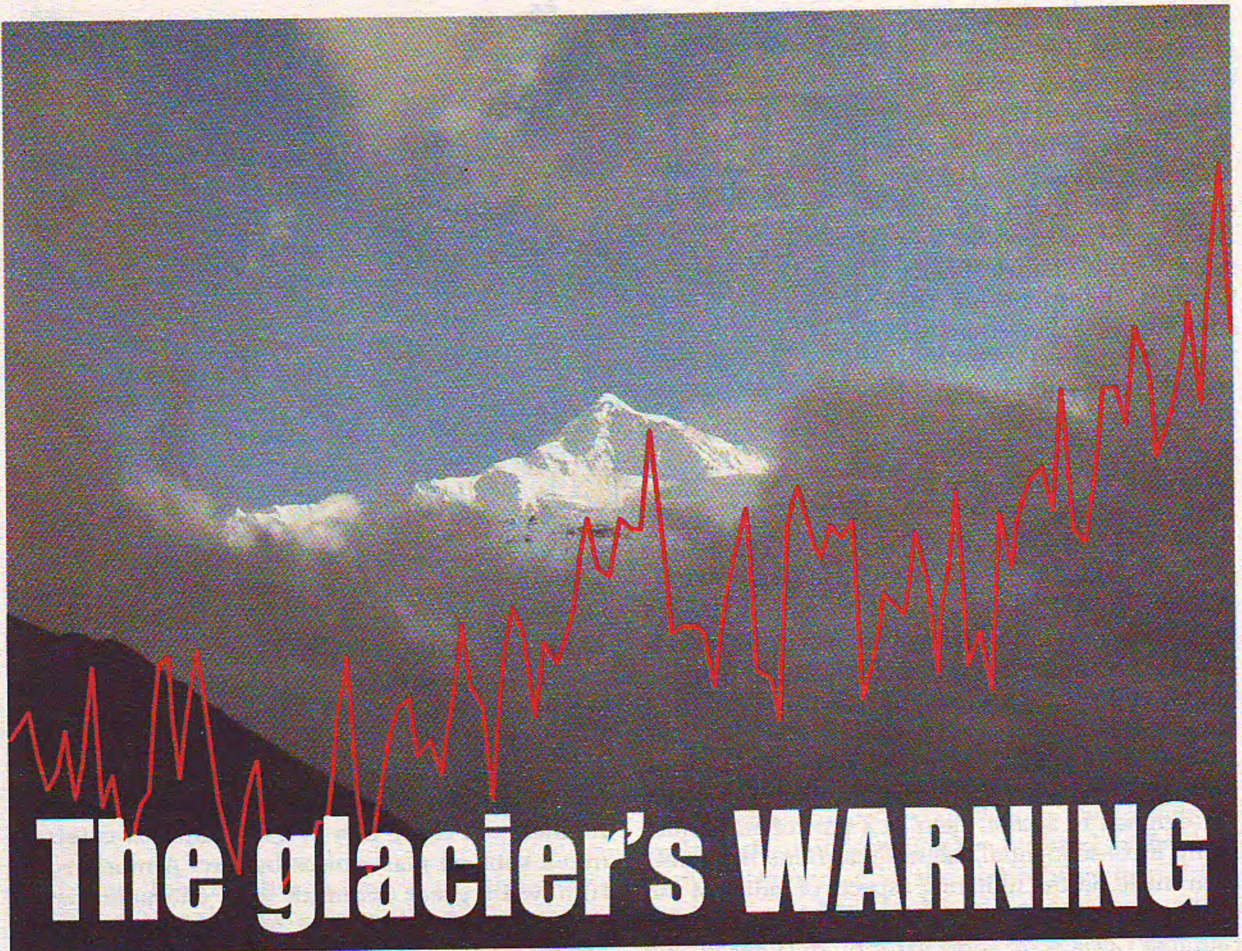
Typist girl

Away from the travails of the courtesan and prostitute, it was important for cinema to begin dealing with the dilemmas confronting the modern working woman in the hostile urban environment. With socio-economic circumstance compelling more and more women to share and shoulder the burden of supporting the family, the film world could hardly neglect this aspect. Curiously, however, few directors took up the issue as their theme. Though films like *Typist Girl*, *Telephone Girls* and *Educated Wife* were made in the 1920s, the following decades have not yielded a crop to keep pace. *College Girl* and *Indira M A* in 1934, *Nurse* and *Lady Doctor* in the mid-1940s, and *Dr. Vidya* in 1964 attempted to depict educated and working women,

Charulata

There have been some subtle films that have dealt successfully with complex nuances of the feminine psyche. *Charulata*, made by Satyajit Ray in 1964, describes the unspoken platonic love a woman feels for her brother-in-law; a subject that could have resulted in a crude film in lesser hands was turned into a sublime masterpiece by Ray. A more recent film with great strength and character is *36 Chowringhee Lane* made by Aparna Sen in 1981, in which Jennifer Kapoor plays an ageing, lonely Anglo-Indian teacher, in one of the best performances ever brought to the Indian screen. Finally, no discussion of female depictions in Indian cinema would be complete without paying homage to the great director Bimal Roy. *Parineets*, *Biraj Bahu* and *Madhumati* in the 1950s and *Bandini* in 1963 will be remembered for the grace and charm of their women protagonists, as well as for the masterful unravelling of their stories.

While all of these outstanding films have served the cause of Indian women in one way or another, as a whole they remain in the minority. The woman of today's commercial Indian cinema is a one-dimensional creature. She is either self-sacrificing to a fault or a painted trollop out to ruin every man and marriage she finds. What has been a necessity in the past remains so today: we need realistic, credible depictions of women, portrayed so even in the simplest of films. Modern characters need to be neither pure white nor midnight black – but full, real and in technicolour. There is an audience out there, a large proportion of it female, to appreciate such output.



The glacier's WARNING

Himalayan glaciers are like thermometers for the earth's health, and they have begun to warn of a worldwide ailment – global warming. The receding glaciers are harbringers of a climate shift that could bring massive, unforeseen changes to Southasia's environment and livelihoods.

by | **Mahtab Haider**

Amidst the snow-capped peaks of the Annapurna Himal, in the northern reaches of central Nepal, nestles the high valley of Manang, sprinkled with small settlements clinging to its steep slopes. The panorama is as breathtaking as the terrain is harsh; the terraces cradled by the craggy slopes do not yield enough high-altitude grains to feed the district's 10,000 or so inhabitants. Since the time of their ancestors, the 'Manangba' of this region have had to make the most of brief summers, with quick-growing crops like potatoes and buckwheat to support their subsistence living.

So it went, until a few years ago. Manang and its surroundings, it seems, are experiencing a slow but deliberate thaw. Someone seems to have hit the defrost button.

"Before my very eyes, this valley has become greener than I have seen it in all my 80 years," a local farmer told scientist Ngamindra Dahal, when he visited the area last fall. "Today we grow cauliflower, cabbage and tomato – unthinkable even a decade ago."

In the neighbouring district of Mustang, on the other side of the Annapurna range, 53-year-old Shenjing Gurung could not remember the last time he had seen the long, chilly winters that were commonplace in his youth. "The people in these districts seem happy with the changes in the weather patterns," says Dahal, with a shrug. "It's easier for

the aged to survive the winters, when the young people are away working down-valley or as migrant labour overseas. Plus, they find that their apple harvests are improving."

"The average temperature in Nepal has been increasing by 0.09 degrees Celsius every year since the 1970s – that's a projected increase of roughly 9 degrees over the course of a century," says Dr. Madan Lal Shrestha, of the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology (DHM) in Kathmandu.

However auspicious this turn in the weather may seem to the locals of Mustang and Manang, they herald a looming crisis for Southasia as a whole. According to one major international study, the average global temperature may rise anywhere from 1.4 to 5.8 degrees Celsius by the year 2100. At the moment, Nepal looks set to outstrip that global average significantly – and it would happen long before 2100 comes around.

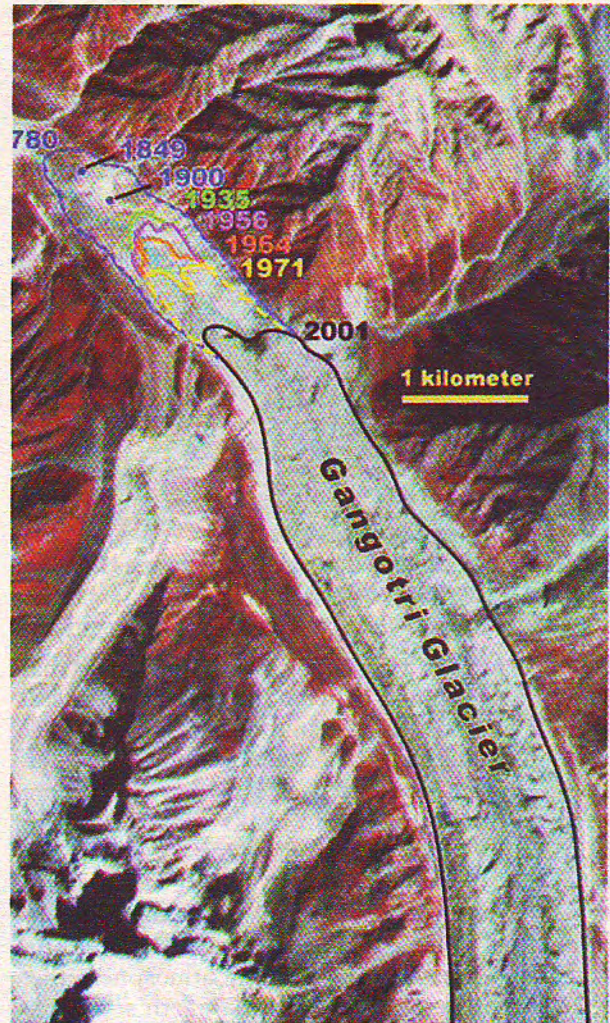
Shrestha point to a graph tacked to his wall, where a jagged line on a sharp upward incline resembles the gradient of Mt Everest, or Sagarmatha to Nepalis. "That," he says emphatically, "is what the temperature chart for Nepal looks like. And make no mistake – it is global warming."

As political leaders worldwide wrangle over the credibility of scientific data on global warming – each according to their own ideological proclivity – the nay-saying scientists have fallen silent one by one. It has become clear that global warming is here and that it is here to stay, unless there is an emergency programme to reverse the trend in rising temperatures. The fallout of changing climate patterns are already becoming evident in the corners of the developing world, while the scientists in the United States warn that the Arctic ice has shrunk to record lows. But one of the most unambiguous signs of global warming is, in fact, emerging out of Southasia. Warmer valleys, hotter summers and receding rivers of ice are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Khumbu and Gangotri

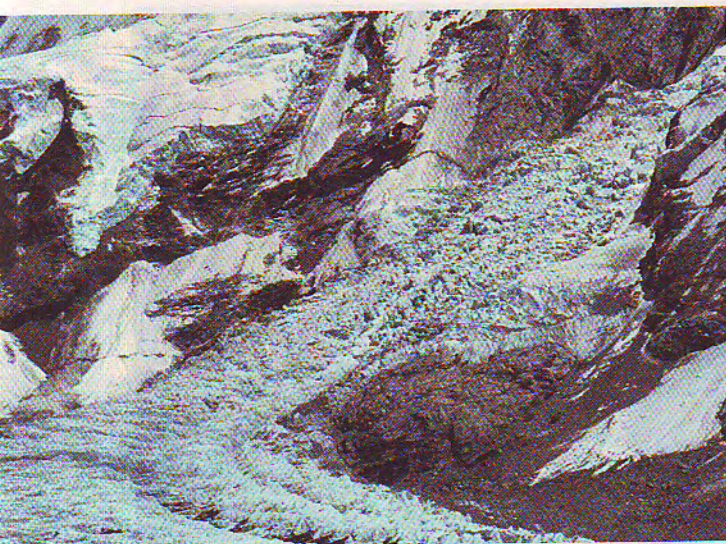
The Himalaya have the largest concentration of glaciers outside the polar caps. During the dry season, when water is in short supply, these glaciers feed eight of Asia's greatest rivers, to the east, south and west: the Yangtze, Hwang Ho, Salween, Irrawady, Mekong, Tsangpo/Brahmaputra/Jamuna, Indus, and the many tributaries of the Ganga, including the Kosi, Gandaki and Karnali, that debouch from the Nepali midhills. The Marsyangdi and Kali Gandaki sub-tributaries of the Gandaki have their origins in the glaciers of Manang and Mustang. Himalayan glaciers as a whole are referred to by scientists as the 'water towers of Asia', because they serve as storage that release water throughout the year into the Asian river systems.

According to a recent report by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), 67 percent of the Himalayan glaciers are melting at a startling rate and "the major causal factor has been identified as climate change". The Khumbu Glacier, from where Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary began their historic ascent of Mt Everest, has retreated more than five kilometres since they climbed the mountain in 1953. The 30 km Gangotri Glacier in India, near the Badrinath pilgrimage centre, has been receding over the last three decades at more than three times the rate of the previous two centuries (*see graphic*). The Rika Samba Glacier in Nepal's Dhaulagiri region is retreating at 10 metres per year. Such measurements alarm scientists, who were previously used to gauging glacial retreat in centimetres.



Aster image courtesy of NASA Eros Data Center

This process is not taking place just in Nepal's mountains. Across the Himalaya, from Tibet in the north to the Karakoram in the west, the glaciers are melting so fast that the WWF fears that a quarter of the ice floes could disappear by 2050. "What's happening with these glaciers is fairly easy to understand," says Arun Bhakta Shrestha at Nepal's



The Khumbu Glacier has retreated more than five km in five decades.

DHM. "The high Himalaya are warming faster than the plains because of what we call an *ice-albedo feedback*." In the climate equilibrium that has evolved over millennia, the glaciers (because of their white colour) reflect sunlight back into the atmosphere, keeping the high-altitude peaks within a certain temperature range. As the glaciers start melting and receding, however, they reveal the darker rock beneath, which in turn absorbs more sunlight and intensifies the melting process. Meanwhile, greenhouse gases trapped in the atmosphere then reflect that heat back onto the earth's surface, accelerating the process even further.

"And this is not our unique experience," emphasises Arun Bhakta. "We are observing similar patterns of glacial melt in the Alps and the Andes." Recent research suggests that the legendary snow-capped peaks of Kenya's Mt Kilimanjaro could be barren in less than a decade.

"The melting glaciers represent a time-bomb that is ticking away even as we speak," cautions Pradeep Mool, a glacial specialist at Kathmandu's International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. "Glaciers melt to form high altitude lakes, dammed with [the] debris and moraine that characterise the landscape of the Himalaya. But as the water from glacial melt accumulates over the years, these dams, which are structurally weak, suddenly give way – resulting in what we call glacial lake outburst floods, or GLOFs."

GLOFS, indeed, are the most obvious results of glacial melt. In 1964, one such GLOF destroyed entire stretches of highway in China and washed 12 timber trucks more than 70 km downstream. A GLOF at Nepal's Dig Tsho glacier in 1985 destroyed a hydroelectric project near Namche Bazaar, as well as bridges, houses and farmlands worth USD 4 million. "And it isn't just water that crashes down into the valleys," says Mool, holding up a photograph from a 1991 outburst in Nepal that swept away entire villages. "You have rocks and other debris that rush downriver at enormous speed."

Since 1964, Nepal alone has witnessed 13 catastrophic GLOF events. There are over 5000 glacial lakes between Bhutan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Tibet/China, and scientists regard at least 90 of these lakes to be potentially dangerous. "The real problem," sighs Mool, "is that we don't even know the extent of the problem, since countries such as India and Pakistan will not share the data and maps of their mountainous regions." As the glaciers melt and recede, scientists expect more glacial lakes and, hence, more incidence of GLOFs.

Southasian catastrophe

"Contrary to popular perception, this isn't Nepal's problem or Pakistan's problem, but a problem for the entire Subcontinent," says Madan Lal Shrestha. "The melt waters from these retreating glaciers mother the river systems of the Brahmaputra and the Ganga, so if these glaciers eventually disappear, the flow in the rivers will be drastically reduced and almost negligible during the non-monsoon months." He continues: "Glaciers accumulate snow during the Southasian monsoon and it is meltwater from these glaciers that feeds river systems that flow through India and Bangladesh during the dry season until April-May."

As the glaciers recede, not only will these rivers flood during the rainy season – with the water that is not frozen and held back by the glaciers – but in the lean seasons, there will also be less and less river flow. Eventually, when the glaciers disappear, there will only be a trickle of water in these great rivers during the wintertime, Shrestha explains.

The decrease in non-monsoon flows would affect the populated plains of Southasia in a myriad ways. Winter agriculture would suffer; recharge of underground aquifers would be altered, thus reducing groundwater reserves; the use of water for urban and industrial purposes would be impinged upon; and water transport, fisheries, wetlands and water-dependent wildlife would all be irrevocably affected. Overall, these are long-lasting impacts that, as yet, have barely begun to be studied.

For downstream Bangladesh, a country that would probably fare the worst in the face of climate change due to raised sea levels, the consequences of glacial retreat from the melting Himalaya icecaps could be disastrous. With large swathes of Bangladesh's coastal belt already ravaged by cyclones, salinisation and rising sea-levels, scientists say that the decrease in volume of year-round freshwater from Himalayan glaciers could bring disease, drought and deluge of an unseen magnitude.

A model developed in part by the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology under Nepal's 'Sagarmatha 2004' project reveals that glacial melt will result in "an increase in river discharge at the beginning causing widespread flooding in the adjacent areas." But after a few decades, the model warns, this situation will reverse and water levels in these rivers will start declining to permanently decreased levels. In the upper Indus, the study shows initial increases of between 14 and 90 percent in flows over the first few decades; this would be followed by flows decreasing between 30 and 90 percent over the following century.

For the Ganga and the Brahmaputra, the predictions of climate change-related impacts are equally apocalyptic. "The Brahmaputra will be worst affected because it originates in the rain-shadow of the Himalaya and is largely non-rain fed, which means that it gets all its water from snowmelt," says Arun Bhakta Shrestha. "No one can make accurate predictions about what form climate change will take in Southasia, because the number of unknown variables easily outnumbers the ones we have data for. What we need to do is recognise the threats we are confronted with and commission studies to understand them better."

The lumbering response

The rash of extreme weather events and alarming data emerging from places as diverse in their ecologies as Greenland and Mumbai are directing countries large and small towards an inevitable realisation: nothing short of a coordinated global policy can avert the prophesied cataclysms we are beginning to witness.

As dismal as the prospects look, however, there are reasons to be hopeful. An international process is in place – one seemingly remote from the receding glaciers of the Himalaya, but which, like these ice bodies, is intimately linked to the issue of climate change. One such hope comes in the form of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which sets cutback targets for industrialised nations for their greenhouse gas emissions – unequivocally responsible for rising global temperatures. In February of this year, the Kyoto Protocol became legally binding, despite attempts by the US government (largely led by the energy lobby) to scuttle the document.

Russia's entry on 18 November 2004, prodded by the European Union, has been crucial in satisfying the Protocol's requirement that the signatory countries account for at least 55 percent of total global emissions. "Russia played cat-and-mouse for a while, before realising that the collapse of their economy in the post-Soviet era meant they had already reduced emissions by up to 40 percent," says Dr Saleemul Huq, of the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development. Even without US participation, the Kyoto Protocol is now being used to prod Brazil, India and China to reduce their emissions. At the UN's climate change conference, scheduled for November in Montreal, these three countries will be expected to make their own emissions reduction commitments for the post-2012 era.

This year also saw a landmark achievement in July, when G8 leaders finally succeeded in getting the US administration to admit that observed changes in the global climate are indeed human-induced. Almost simultaneously, however, the US and five Asia-Pacific states, including India, made a surprise announcement of a new, rival anti-emissions pact. Although these signatories – China, India, South Korea, Japan, Australia and the US – account for nearly half of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, the agreement focuses instead on developing new, cleaner technologies. "The problem with [this] US-led pact is that it does not set binding targets to member nations, urging voluntary action instead," says Huq. Although many believe that the pact is a US bid to sell this 'cleaner technology' to the other member countries, the public shift in the previously static US position on climate change has to be welcomed.

"The tone of climate change negotiations has changed dramatically in recent years," says Huq. "The 'South' is no longer asking for charity when it seeks help with global warming. We consider ourselves aggrieved parties and we are seeing it as our right to compensation for damage caused by the industrialised world's actions." According to Huq, the fallout from global warming can be likened to a precipice, slowly being approached by modern civilisation. "It's still a long way away, but the vessel we are in changes direction very slowly," he warns. "We are privileged to have this foresight. But in order to avoid a fall, we have to act now."

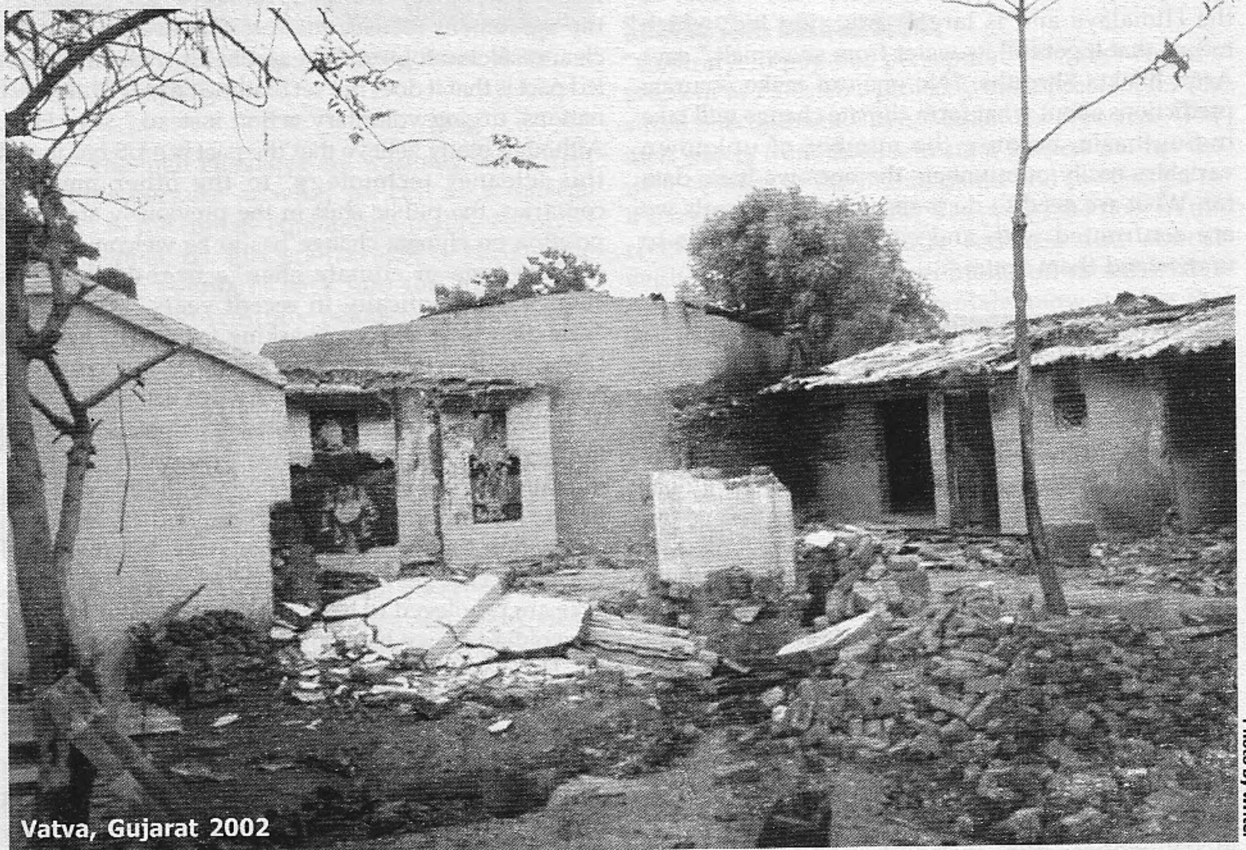
"Third-world nations are at the receiving end of the damage," adds Madan Lal Shrestha. "We can't restrict and protect our own atmosphere. So the only option is to fall into line with a single regional or even global strategy that is scientific and serious. It's not Nepal's duty; it's not Bangladesh's duty; but the duty of all mankind."

Receding Himalayan glaciers – likely to affect hundreds of millions of people facing GLOFS or drying rivers – are only a single facet in a montage of global environmental breakdown. Shrinking glaciers – like rising sea levels, like melting Arctic ice sheets – can be likened to thermometers signifying the arrival of global warming. In literally countless ways, climate change will lead to transformations of Southasian and global agriculture, demography, the larger economy and society as a whole. For all of this, melting glaciers are but a seemingly timid warning that nature has delivered – to those who will listen, to those who wish to listen.

Remember the gaam

Relations began to sour between historically united groups in a neighbourhood of Ahmedabad after 'outsiders' arrived.

by | **Swara Bhaskar**



Vatva, Gujarat 2002

Photo by writer

In 1969, Vatva is awarded the Medal of Honour by the mayor of Ahmedabad for maintaining a peaceful atmosphere during communal riots. In 2002, about 5000 houses in Vatva are burnt and broken in post-Godhra violence.

I first came upon Vatva as part of an enthusiastic team of volunteers for the Aman Ekta Manch – an umbrella-NGO initiative setup in the wake of the Gujarat carnage of 2002 to oversee relief and rehabilitation work in the affected areas. Spread on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, Vatva is an industrial wasteland that was once a village.

We arrived in Vatva after it had been ravaged by the violence that had consumed much of Gujarat after the unfortunate and controversial 'Godhra incident' of 27 February 2002. The colonies, buildings, shops and streets wore the telltale marks of communal frenzy: burnt remains of beauty parlours, ruins that were once mosques, rubble that was once residences.

As we settled into our work at the Qutb-e-Alam Dargah refugee camp, we were wary of our curiosity, having been warned by supervisors against developing the tendency of 'riot tourism'. But we heard the stories, nonetheless – from the residents

and from the landscape. Our work was limited mainly to three colonies in Vatva, centred around the tomb of the Sufi saint Qutb-e-Alam. These colonies were religion- and caste-specific ghettos – Saiyidvada and Navapura were Muslim; the residents of Vaghrivaas were Vaaghris; and Bharwaadvaas was a colony of Bharwaads.

What rendered these colonies different from the usual idea of ghettos was the 'soft borders' where they met. To the outsider, their limits and boundaries seemed invisible. I remember walking towards the camp from the rubble tbat was once Navapura and ten minutes later, running into a wall that displayed half torn pictures of Hindu deities to discover that I was in Vaghrivaas (*see picture*). And yet, these unseen boundaries exercised a definite constraint on the colonies' residents.

Facts and conjecture

Vatva's experiences during the riot were unusual. It was one of only a handful of places in Ahmedabad that reported just a few deaths, despite large-scale destruction of property. What took place in Vatva was not horrifyingly sensational like the massacre that took place at Naroda Patiya, but it also was not ordinary. There were no clear victims in Vatva. Or, maybe everyone was a victim.

There are some uncontested facts about the events of those four days in the end of February 2002, beyond which verification is difficult. On the morning of 28 February, a huge Hindu mob of about 2500 people attacked Navapura. The residents fled to other Muslim colonies, while the mob torched and looted all of the houses in Navapura.

But Vaghrivaas was burnt as well. That's where the line between victim and perpetrator blurs, where the numerous narratives emerge.

A reconstruction of the events, culled from multiple accusations, suggests that Navapura was attacked by a Hindu mob that consisted not only of 'outsiders', but also of members of the local branch of Bajrang Dal. The Muslims claimed that the Vaaghris – bribed with money and liquor by the Hindutva-oriented Bajrangis – attacked their neighbours and participated in the looting. On being asked why Vaghrivaas was also burnt, many Muslims feigned ignorance. A few, however, stated categorically: "If they had stood by us, we'd have stood by them. But if they attack us, we are forced to retaliate." For their part, the Vaaghris claim that the Muslims are simply lying; they describe the 'unprovoked' Muslim retaliation as an attack on an easy target. At the same time, however, they also see the attack as punishment for associating with Hindus, blaming the Bajrang Dal for deserting and betraying them.

Colleges reopened and we returned to Delhi, leaving the camp in Vatva to a new set of volunteers, and leaving the new volunteers to a leaky tent and the same confusions we ourselves had found.

Shared space

I returned to Vatva in 2005, on the pretext of a research project. Together with another ex-volunteer, we came in search of signs of violence hidden in the rebuilt landscape of the once-ravaged colonies. Instead, we stumbled upon the memory of a 'golden age' of religious syncretism and communal harmony.

While investigating the history of inter-community relations in the colonies, we discovered a curious, 700-year-old parallel, legendary history, explaining how the settlement came to be. While each community had its own version of the history, these stories converged at some points and reflected a collective memory. All three communities – Sayyid Muslim, Vaghris and Bharwaads – traced the beginnings of their settlement in Vatva to a Sufi saint named Hazrat Sayyid Jalaluddin Bukhari-Makhdum Jahaniyan-Jahangast.

Makhdum Jahaniyan, who lived between 1307 and 1383, was part of the Suhrawardi order of Sufis. Born at Uch Sharif in present-day Pakistan, he was widely travelled and came to be known as *jahangast*, or world traveller. During his travels, we were told, he arrived at what eventually would become the Vatva *gaam* (village), where he performed miracles and won the respect and aid of the resident Bharwaads. He told the Bharwaads that two *peedhis* (generations) later, people would come from *Arbastaan*; these people would be *jodidaar* (partner) to the Bharwaads. The Arbastaanis were the Sayyid Muslims. The locals were also instructed to serve Qutb-e-Alam, Jahaniyan's grandson, who would come to settle in the Vatva area. With Qutb-e-Alam came the colony of Sayyid Muslims that still live in Sayyidvada. The Vaaghris themselves claim to be the descendents of a brave tribal hunter, who was invited by Qutb-e-Alam to settle in the area and protect the Muslims.

That the Sayyid Muslims once owned the land of Vatva *gaam*, upon which these colonies are today found, is well-known and accepted. The Sayyids were the *maalik* landlords and the Vaaghris were the *khedut* tenants. This arrangement seemed to have continued for centuries, until the abolition of the *Inaamdaari* system (a land tenure mechanism similar to Zamindari) in 1952. With the arrival of the Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC), which acquired the farmlands of Vatva in the early-1960s, the *gaam*'s agrarian culture began rapidly to disappear.

Old and new

The presence of industries attracted a migrant population of prospective workers from within the old city of Ahmedabad, as well as from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. The migrants were both

Hindus and Muslims, who settled in numerous community-specific colonies in Vatva. Navapura is a mixed settlement of migrants from the inner/old city, as well as from outside Ahmedabad and Gujarat. Interestingly, many residents also pointed out that it was after the 1969 riots in the old city of Ahmedabad that many Muslims migrated to Vatva – then still fairly agrarian and peaceful.

From 1969 into the 1980s, Vatva saw a steady influx of new population (*navey log*) and the settlement of new colonies, like the Muslim Navapura and the Hindu Aasopalav. The *jooney log*, on the other hand, are the area's original inhabitants – the Bharwaads, Vaghris and Sayyid Muslims. This new-old divide emphasises a shared history, a shared material past, a shared living space, and a shared life that have all been shattered. That this divide goes beyond religion and caste is best illustrated in the way in which the views of the *jooney* Muslims, Vaghris and Bharwaads converge on the issue of the *navey* Muslims and Hindus.

When speaking of this evolution within their areas, all members of the original communities tend to emphasise a lost golden age, where peace prevailed together with friendship and communal harmony. It is noteworthy that this remembered utopia was both agrarian and pre-industrial – a pastoral idyll from before the GIDC acquired lands in Vatva. As such, industrialisation, urbanisation and – almost coincidentally – communalisation are simultaneous and overlapping phenomena in the collective memory.

In our discussions, nearly all *jooney* residents agreed that it was with the coming of the new migrants that relations between communities began to fray. All of the three original communities independently spoke of their amicable relations with each other. It is also notable that while both of the original Hindu communities (the Bharwaads and Vaghris) had friendly and frequent interactions with the original Muslims (the Sayyids), they had almost no relations with the new Muslims of Navapura. Meanwhile, contact between the Sayyid Muslims and the new Muslims have been cordial and friendly, particularly so since the events of 2002. Religious faith, memories of violence, and feelings of being a minority are strong unifiers. But the Sayyid Muslims are clear in their opinions that, apart from the Bajrang Dal, the new Muslims have been largely responsible for the all-around worsening of relationships in Vatva.

It is remarkable that these recollections – independently recorded among the Sayyids, Vaaghris and Bharwaads – match so perfectly. To the last one, each respondent was of the opinion that the old residents were 'okay', and that it was the migrants from the big city who had brought with them their prior experiences of suspicion and violence. The *navey log* were quite alien from the communitarian rural ethos. Some Bharwaad men recalled how, during the 2002 riots, members of the Sayyid community assured the Bharwaads of their support and cooperation, but made it clear they would not be able to vouch for the new Muslims.

Reviving the ethos

This transition of social relations from pastoral harmony to an urban experience of extreme tension can also be seen in governance. The residents recall peaceful times, when the affairs of the village were in the hands of the *Gram* (*Gaam*) *Panchayat*, as well as the competence of the elders in matters of intercommunity conflict. In 1969, when the city of Ahmedabad had burnt in communal rage, the Panchayat decided that there would be no fighting in Vatva. To back up the decree, a village defence committee was formed, comprised of 25 Hindus and 25 Muslims. The Hindu patrol paraded in the Muslim areas, ensuring that no Hindu miscreants entered; a Muslim patrol did likewise in Hindu localities. Thus, even while the nearby city core was under curfew, life in the village continued as normal.

In the mid-1980s, as the urban expansion continued apace, Vatva came formally under the jurisdiction of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. Apart from the general decline in the civic administration of the area, the period when Vatva came under the municipality marked the beginning of the steady fraying of intercommunity relations, as reflected in Ahmedabad's 1992 riots following the desecration and destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. While there was no overt rioting in Vatva proper, the mutual strategising for peace, which had marked the 1969 affair, was replaced by tension and mutual suspicion. While there were still defence committees, the patrols of one community would no longer visit the other's locality.

Uneasy peace reigns in Vatva today. On the surface, everything seems back to normal. Most houses have been rebuilt and the original residents are back. NGOs have setup projects in the colonies and are working extensively with the youth. But so is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the country's largest extreme right-wing Hindu organisation. The Vaaghris now regularly visit a local RSS *shakha*.

The riot was a reminder that the culture of Vatva *gaam*, one of tolerance and coexistence, is lost – and yet, an intangible kind of faith survives, especially in the older generation. It is a faith based on more than memory: one that believes that the violence ended because it came from 'outside', and that if the ethos of the village is taught to the young, then the spirit of Vatva *gaam* may yet return.

A future out of grasp

We've seen poverty, and it is us. A Millennium Development Goal target-evaluation exercise tells us there is no need to smile.

by | **Kunda Dixit**

Take a map of Southasia, remove the national frontiers and instead superimpose the Subcontinent's poverty index by districts, states and provinces. What you see emerge are hotspots of deprivation and destitution that are trans-boundary in nature and that leave no country shining brightly in its totality. The region's persistent and widespread poverty is a serious indictment of the inability of successive national governments to address the crisis; they make a mockery of their international commitments. Southasian governments as a whole are given to megalomania, wasteful spending on the military, and lavish expenditures on showcase projects, all while their citizens remain mired in misery.

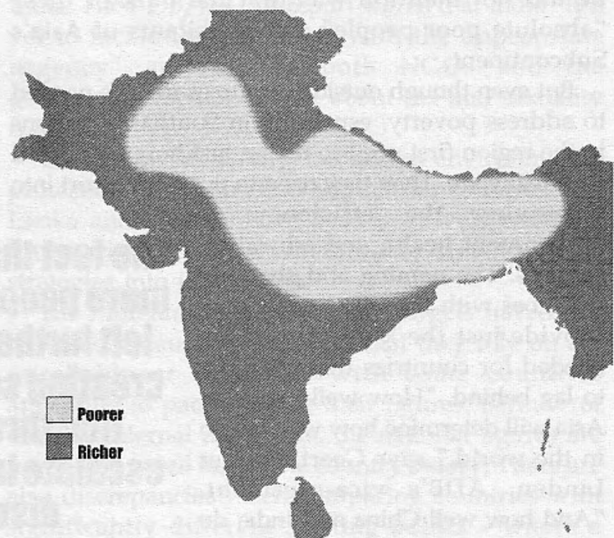
National security for each of the Southasian countries should be less about military preparedness and more about addressing the destabilising after-effects of having more than half of their populations living in extreme poverty. Defence should now be redefined as defending the citizens from hunger, disease and deprivation – not against a rebel group or neighbouring country.

In 2000, world leaders, including those from Southasian countries, met at the UN headquarters in New York for a 'Millennium Summit', where they committed themselves to eight targets to be met by 2015. While burdened by an unwieldy acronym (MDG – the Millennium Development Goals), the programme commits to eradicating extreme poverty; halving hunger; ensuring that all children go to primary school; promoting equality between women and men; reducing child mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-fourths; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB; and making sure that economic progress does not harm the environment.

The MDG exercise is said to be unique because the goals are supposed to be measurable, time-bound and easy to track and monitor. But the flaw in the process is that there are no penalties for governments and regimes that do not meet them. The only deterrent to failure is that a country's name would be stuck at the bottom of a list for not meeting the goals. As 2015 draws closer, those countries getting failing marks would then be spotlighted in the international arena.

With five years down and with only a decade to go before the deadline, Southasia appears to be way behind, and with little energy to play catch-up. The majority of countries are far behind target in most of the eight goals. Even the individual countries that have acceptable national averages have a dirty secret: regions within the countries lag far behind on the MDG register.

In India, for instance, the poverty and health figures for Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan are a disgrace. But within those states, there are districts where education and health statistics are significantly below even the poor state-wide averages. Two of these states are contiguous with districts in Nepal's central and Midwest tarai region, which are also both lagging. Nepal has shown progress in reducing child mortality and providing safe drinking water in some pockets, but even on national averages it is off-track on most targets; the dislocations brought on by the Maoist insurgency is certainly not helping to improve matters. Indeed, if Southasia is at the bottom of the global heap, Nepal is at the bottom of Southasia. Bangladesh is making strides at the national level, but 88 percent of children in Sylhet District are stunted because – quite simply – they get too little to eat. In Khulna, that figure is just over half. Pakistan is off-track on many MDGs, and its northwestern regions are not at all likely to meet targets on reducing child mortality or promoting gender equality.



Indian record

The Asia-Pacific MDG progress report is optimistically titled, "A Future Within Reach". While releasing the report in Manila in September, Haruhiko Kuroda, president of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said: "Not all parts of the [Asia-Pacific] region, and certainly far from all the region's poor, are feeling the benefits of our region's accomplishments." Given the deep disparities both between and within the region's countries, that sounds like an understatement. The economic gap between Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, measured against Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal, is as stark as the inequality between Africa and Europe. There are also wide gaps within Asian countries: not everyone, for example, has benefited from the breakneck growth in China and India. The fact that more and more people are being left further behind is creating social stress that threatens to escalate into political disorder.

If Southasia is at the bottom of the global heap, Nepal is at the bottom of Southasia.

The ADB prepared "Future Within Reach" in collaboration with the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and presented it at a summit of world leaders in September in New York. The report notes that despite the slow response of the laggard countries thus far, the MDG goals can still be attained. But for this, the Asia-Pacific countries must strengthen governance and improve delivery of development service on a war-footing. A region known for the miracle of its economic tigers currently has 680 million people living in absolute poverty. This rankles ESCAP's executive secretary, Kim Hak-Su, who says that Asian poverty is always overshadowed by Africa's need. "Asian voices are just not heard. There are more absolute poor people in the Asia-Pacific than anywhere else, yet the perception that Asians are doing all right is difficult to break," Kim said. What he did not mention was that the bulk of these "absolute poor people" are inhabitants of Asia's Subcontinent.

But even though outside resources may be needed to address poverty, especially in Southasia, nations in the region first need to realise just how far behind they really are. Then they need to put more effort into improving the efficiency of government health and education services. The naming and shaming that goes with the MDG goals may provide just the kind of impetus needed for countries that continue to lag behind. "How well we do in Asia will determine how well we do in the world," says Geert van der Linden, ADB's vice-president. "And how well China and India do will determine how well Asia does."

The fact that more and more people are being left further behind is creating social stress that threatens to escalate into political disorder.

Indeed, Asia's overall averages have been brought down by the weak performance of India on criteria like hunger and poverty. The proportion of Indians getting less than their daily energy requirements did decrease from 25 to 21 percent between 1991 and 2001. However, the report notes, because of the increase in population, the absolute number of hungry people rose from 217 million to 222 million during the same period.

The Asian development gap has also opened up the debate on how to get on a fast-track to equitable development: whether to follow the Chinese or Indian model. At present, it looks like neither model works particularly well. China's post-socialist but still-centralised command economy has left many behind, even as it races ahead. Meanwhile, India's open society and liberalising free market is also not lifting the neediest out of poverty fast enough. But as agencies like the ADB pin their hopes on economic growth, the blistering pace set by the national economies of China and India are seen as the only way to ensure large-scale human development. Beijing, however, has now officially stated that this is not enough, given that the Chinese hinterland continues to lag behind the booming eastern seaboard. Since August, even China's tightly-controlled state media has been officially allowed to draw attention to this regional disparity. The trickledown has not materialised fast enough in India either, despite the roaring 8 percent-and-above growth rate.

Political will

So something is missing, and the report provides a hint about what it could be. "Countries will need to change how they do things," it urges, "developing sufficient skills and capacity ... and well functioning institutions to help accelerate progress towards delivering health, education and vital services to the poor." Shorn of UN-ese, this means reinventing politically decentralised governance that is answerable and responsive to the needs of the poorest citizens, by efficiently managing service delivery. Compare Kerala and Bihar, and the two Indian states seem to exist on different planets. One has 96 percent literacy; the other has barely 40. One has less than 10 percent poverty; the other has more than 50. One only needs to compare the quality of governance in the two states to see why these statistics so starkly diverge.

The best example of the huge difference that political will can

make is a comparison of Bangladesh and Pakistan. These two countries used to share the same human development indicators, when the two countries were still one. But in the past three decades, Bangladesh has surged ahead of Pakistan in female literacy, which is a litmus test of socio-economic advancement. In turn, this achievement has reduced fertility rates by half and brought down child mortality. In Pakistan, fertility rates are stuck at above 5.4 per family, while Bangladesh has achieved a low 3.2.

This extrapolation can be taken further, taking into account political systems, by comparing Sri Lanka with Malaysia. To start with, there is a large difference in per capita income between these two countries. One is a fully-functioning Westminster-style democracy despite a devastating civil war; in Malaysia, on the other hand, basic political freedoms have been sacrificed to ensure economic growth. But in terms of human development and social welfare, the two countries are nearly equal. The lesson seems to be that, where lifting the citizens' standards of living uniformly is concerned, it matters less whether or not a country is 'democratic' or not; more important is how accountable the political leadership is and how seriously it links performance to legitimacy.

> **We need politically decentralised governance that is answerable and responsive to the needs of the poorest citizens, by efficiently managing service delivery.**

Poor but democratic countries like Bangladesh, Nepal or the Philippines are sometimes tempted by the 'Mahathir model'. In fact, they have all tried dictatorships for decades, which have not worked either – strongmen simply plundered these countries. It is now more clearly understood that the antidote to malfunctioning democracy is to fix it, not to discard it. Bihar has had elections for decades, but they do not seem to have made a difference in lifting the Biharis out of poverty, because elected leaders were not accountable. Burma has been ruled by an iron-fisted junta and is almost as backward. The lesson: elections do not guarantee accountability, just like a dictatorship doesn't guarantee development. The answer, then, is to have elections and insist on accountability.

After the restoration of democracy in 1990, Nepal's political devolution and decentralised decision-making started to deliver development because elected local leaders were forced by voters to be more accountable. Unfortunately, those gains started to go awry again in the mid-1990s, as the Maoist insurgency mounted and confusion pursued the state. In the past three years, a retrogressive royal rightwing regime has promised to take the people on a nonexistent shortcut to development through an autocratic state structure.

Long road to 2015

Currently, four of the five Asia-Pacific countries with the worst records for malnutrition and poverty happen to be Southasian states. Although Cambodia rests at the bottom, Nepal is just above it, with 48.3 percent of its children stunted. Afghanistan is only slightly better at 48 percent, followed by Bangladesh and India with 47 percent. While there is every reason for Nepal and Afghanistan to feel remorseful, the fact is that in Bangladesh – and even more so in India – with their larger populations, the number of people suffering in poverty is so much greater.

The largest number of preventable child deaths takes place in India, with some 2.3 million dying in 2003. That is, 2.3 million young boys and girls, who did not need to die, died in India three years ago. In Pakistan, with its smaller population, that number was a grievous 500,000. At these levels, neither country is expected to meet their MDG targets by 2015. All this is nothing compared to Afghanistan, however, which has the region's highest rate of child deaths – one out of every four Afghan children do not live to the age of five. In contrast, child mortality in Bangladesh and Bhutan are improving so fast that both countries will surpass their MDG targets for child survival.

Maternal mortality is the other indicator where both Afghanistan and Nepal have rates reminiscent of sub-Saharan Africa: 1900 and 740 mothers respectively die for every 100,000 live births.

It is the spread of HIV/AIDS that is most worrisome in India and Nepal: both countries are actually regressing on the related MDG targets. While Nepal is taking steps to spread awareness, with social mores providing more acceptability to outreach programmes, the problem is much larger and more multifaceted in India. The ADB/ESCAP report warns that India "has yet to tackle the pandemic with the appropriate urgency" and blames both NGOs and the government for not talking about sex and sexuality frankly.

The eighth MDG target concerns environmental protection. Thus far, two Southasian countries, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, have been positively cited for integrating national sustainable development strategies into their plans.

The Millennium Development targets have been criticised because the statistics that they rely on are unreliable or outdated, with some countries appearing to pad or fudge their figures. Because of obvious internal disparities, the national figures are never able to tell the whole country's story. There are also discrepancies when comparing countries with significantly different starting points – where a

country that has higher literacy levels, for example, appears to be progressing slower in meeting targets than one that started with lower initial rates.

Attempting to compensate for these shortcomings, "A Future Within Reach" formulates two categories: by cluster, and whether or not countries are meeting the goals. But whether by one criteria or another, there is no way Southasia can hide from the fact that it ranks as the poorest performing region in Asia. Six of its countries, including Afghanistan, are off-track on the most significant MDG targets. The report singles-out some countries for particular concern:

- Pakistan has the lowest primary enrolment rate and has been making no progress in gender parity.
- All Southasian countries (except Sri Lanka) have either under-5 or infant mortality rates that are worse than the Asian average.
- India needs to take HIV/AIDS much more seriously to avoid an Africa-type pandemic.
- In Nepal and the Maldives, women have shorter life-spans than men, indicating a severe gender imbalance in health care and social status.

All the of the region's countries must wake up and do something about their poor MDG record – behind these numbers are the tragedies of hundreds of millions of children, women and men. Even if the 'MDG' acronym fails to rouse us to action, our imaginations should be able to compensate and force us into an understanding of how poor, unhealthy and hopeless the bulk of the Southasian population really is. If we even come close to grasping the magnitude of this tragedy, perhaps we will begin to do something about the poverty in our region.

Mind the communication gap

How can we get the public and governments to take the MDGs more seriously?

by | **Nalaka Gunawadene**

The United Nations often reminds us that the Millennium Development Goals, which leaders committed to at the UN Millennium Summit in New York in 2000, are "time-bound and measurable goals for socio-economic advancement". The eight MDGs come with a set of 18 specific targets and 48 indicators. They cover a broad spectrum, from halving absolute poverty and combating HIV, to getting all children to attend primary school, and saving mothers from and childbirth-related deaths.

But these all-important targets have failed to capture the popular imagination. Even among government officials, levels of awareness and enthusiasm vary considerably. The reason the MDGs are not catching on is clear: nobody is discussing them in simple terms.

Having worked with techno-geeks and development workers for years, this writer recognises that they have at least one thing in common: they speak a language that doesn't make sense to the rest of us. They bandy acronyms with incredibly ease – LDC, LLDC, SIDS, NSDS, PRSP, DOTS and TRIPS. And now MDG.

In mid-September, world leaders gathered at the UN in New York to review progress on the MDG programme and to renew their own commitments. But did the prime ministers and presidents even know what they were signing up for? The UN needs to demystify the MDGs so that the media and public can understand them. Here are some suggestions:

- Go beyond the 'broadsheet' mentality. Broadsheet newspapers are influential with policy-makers and business leaders, but the mass outreach is with the tabloids and their broadcast equivalents. In countries with vibrant vernacular media, stick to them rather than to the English press.
- The NIT test. Before reaching out to the media with a story or op-ed piece, it always helps to ask three basic questions: Is it new? Is it interesting? And is it true? Don't hesitate to use terms, metaphors and analogies from popular culture.
- Rise above mere publicity. The trouble with many UN agencies is that they cannot discern between institutional publicity and issue-based awareness-raising. Often, all the country offices care for is press clippings (from the English press) to send back to headquarters.

Today's MDG promoters all over Southasia need to revisit some of the more successful development efforts of the past few decades and study the role that good communications have played in each. From promoting universal human rights to eradicating smallpox; from popularising oral rehydration salts to forgiving Southern debt, there have been some remarkable campaigns. Effective public communication was a key element of success in all.

When all is said and done, please remember that MDG branding does not matter – it is the core set of issues that the MDGs embody that need mass attention and aggressive promotion. 2015 will be here sooner than we expect. We do not want to find that we've missed the chance of a millennium to do a few things right in development, just because we've been too busy speaking to each other, instead of to the public out there.

Peeking out of your pocket

India's national ID scheme is 'on schedule'

by | **Aman Sethi**

In a quiet office off of Mansingh Road in New Delhi, a small team is working on a secret project. If successful, this plan will transform India from a 'soft state', open to all sorts of Subcontinental contamination, into a hard, impenetrable fortress – safe, sure and secure. The mild-mannered men seated behind large, untidy tables at the Office of the Registrar General of India patiently explain that the project is not exactly secret – it's just that only the Home Secretary is authorised to speak on the subject, and he rarely does. They can only confirm what is already in the public domain: the Multipurpose National Identity Card (MNIC) project is on schedule; the pilot project has been initiated; and the first cards are to be issued by April 2006. The entire system is state-of-the-art – a symbol of India's prowess in information technology and the perfect weapon to battle corruption, inefficiency, infiltration, terrorism, treason and sedition.

The first time anyone spoke about a national identification system was in 1992, when the right-wing Sangh Parivar and its allied organisations staged protests against the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants into the states of Assam, Bengal, Delhi and Maharashtra. Arguing that the migration of the primarily Muslim Bangladeshis was altering the demographic profile of the country as a whole, they took every opportunity to air their xenophobic slogan, *Infiltrators, Quit India*. In response, the Central Government launched Operation Pushback, with the expressed purpose of deporting Bangladeshi immigrants from the capital region. At the time, a major practical problem was the identification and enumeration of the immigrants. A meeting was called between the chief ministers of the states on India's eastern frontier, which passed a resolution to issue identity cards to all citizens in border districts. The government, however, failed to execute the proposal.

In 1998, when the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as prime minister and L K Advani in charge of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the party had not forgotten its obsession with 'aliens' and 'anti-nationals'. A report titled "Reforming the National Security System" observed that illegal migration had assumed serious proportions. "There should be compulsory registration of citizens and non-citizens living in India," was its stark recommendation.

Simulated National ID Card of Shri Rahul Gandhi

To quote Home Minister Advani, the MNIC project was setup to assist in "checking illegal immigration and infiltration and in tracing of criminals and subversives, especially in the border areas of the country." These cards were also to be used for the issuing of passports, driving licenses and ration cards; as well as to receive health care, admission in educational institutions, employment in both the public and private sectors; to access life and general insurance; and to maintain land and property records. The ministry envisaged a massive information superstructure that would maintain records on every Indian resident. The task of carrying out a feasibility study for the project was awarded to Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), and the MNIC was on its way.

Category anxieties

A modern nation state consists of a clearly demarcated physical boundary, as well as a clearly defined body of citizens. The compulsive needs to demarcate physical space and to identify people as 'citizens' are essential for the processes of state creation and maintenance. The MNIC project is interesting, among other things, because it gives us an insight into the anxieties and insecurities of modern-day India as a nation state.

The well-regarded sociologist Rogers Brubaker defines citizenship as "a powerful instrument of social closure" that establishes "a conceptual, legal

and ideological boundary between citizens and foreigners." But how is such a boundary created in the case of an avowedly multicultural and secular state like India? Attempting to balance a strong and centralising state on the one hand, with the demands of a federal, multicultural, secular Constitution on the other, creates severe category anxieties. What does it mean to be Indian? How is it different from what it means to be Pakistani, Nepali or Sri Lankan?

Given that the bulk of the Subcontinent has gone from being one administrative entity (undivided India) in 1946 to three separate, sovereign states (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) in 1971, this identity crisis is understandable. We therefore see in India an almost paranoid urge to conclusively identify the *outsider* and the *infiltrator*, simply to make the category of *citizen* more meaningful. Currently, if the government and the stateist media are to be believed, the nation of India is under threat from Pakistani terrorists, Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants, Nepali criminals and LTTE rebels. What makes these 'infiltrators' so particularly dangerous is that they look like 'us', talk like 'us', and think like 'us'; in fact, they are 'us'.

The process of categorising populations helps to create the conceptual boundaries between citizen and foreigner of which Brubaker speaks. Gradually, differences begin to emerge that reinforce these boundaries. Reams of paper, ration cards, licenses, passports, voter ID cards – all of these give us a uniquely 'Indian' identity with respect to state and public institutions; indeed, they are the glue that holds the nation together. The identity card is simply the newest way to differentiate between a mass of people who look the same, speak the same language, and used to have ancestral properties 'across the border'. The outsider is now easily identified as the one without the national identity card and can subsequently be dealt with as seen fit.

Theft of identity

While the identification of a 'normal' citizen may prove useful for a state engaged in nation building, the process of arriving at that recognition is fraught with complexity. By definition, the process of 'counting in' implies a parallel process of 'leaving out'. Indeed, the biggest danger of the MNIC project is that it could create a vast body of individuals that exist outside of the national socio-legal framework. Critics of a national identification system usually make two points. First, that the system will cause more harm than good if it works. Second, that it won't work. MNIC supporters, on the other hand, take it as a given that the card will be foolproof and secure. Their assumptions collapse, however, the moment that we begin to study the process of issuance of the ID cards themselves.

Unlike the United States and other developed countries, where most citizens have a social security number and, thus, a fair amount of authentic information in government databases, the MNIC project aims to start the verification process from scratch. The government will first carry out a census-type survey to create a National Population Register, based on which the cards will be issued. But how will identity be verified or authenticated? What sort of proof will be required to obtain a card?

Issuance will obviously require verifiable documents such as ration cards, voter identity cards, proof of residence documents, and so on. Given that, in the eyes of the authorities, the present system of identification is insufficient, how will the MNIC work when it relies on these same suspect documents? The problem could actually be accentuated by the introduction of such a card, because the MNIC will now bear a legitimacy that the other documents lack. It can also work the other way. While a misspelling on a ration card would have simply been an error, it could now imply that the cardholder is a dangerous subversive using a falsified identity card.

The larger problem the census authorities will face is the absence of documentation, particularly in the hands of the landless poor. This category constitutes a large percentage of population in the rural areas, who have no real means of identification and have never needed any. The same will hold true for a large number of the urban poor, who will lack property, fixed residence, and birth and death records. In many cases, the rural and urban poor will also be without ration cards. The poorest and most vulnerable would thus run the risk of being labelled aliens, harassed by police, and stripped of the few rights and assets that they possess. A similar hysteria can be seen in the current case of Bangladeshi immigrants in India.

The MNIC project is supposed to be valuable in the fight against terrorism. Supposedly, keeping a massive citizenry register would allow security agencies to maintain tabs on 'potential terrorists' and to catch them well before they strike. A report by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, however, makes the obvious point that "there is no database containing the names of each and every 'bad guy.'" First-time or unknown terrorists using legitimate identification documents will not be in law enforcement databanks. It is difficult to see, therefore, how a national identity system, now matter how sophisticated, could compensate for such shortcomings. An obvious, recent example was the March 2004 bombings in Madrid, which killed at least 190 people. That terror could not be prevented, even though it is mandatory for all Spanish citizens to carry identity cards.

While its supporters claim that the MNIC project will eliminate identity theft, the concentration of large amounts of sensitive information in one databank, and the emphasis on making the MNIC the gold

standard for all identification purposes, would only make identity theft more lucrative. The first signs of growing identity theft are visible in countries that already rely on personal information stored in databanks. According to the US Federal Trade Commission, identity theft has been the top consumer complaint in the US for the five years in a row.

Programming pogroms

Any system that ensures the rights of individuals based on whether or not papers are in the right order puts too much power into the hands of authorities. An examination of the track record of supposedly secure databanks in Western countries reveals a history of abuse. In 1994, *Business Week* magazine revealed that the US state of Ohio had sold its driver's license and car registration lists to a private company for USD 375,000. In early 1995, more than 500 US Internal Revenue Service agents were caught prying into the tax records of American citizens.

Some of the most horrifying instances of the misuse of census information were observed during the Holocaust – which was, after all, based on an elaborate system that required all German Jews to carry identification papers by the end of 1938. The authorities of the Reich hired IBM's German subsidiary, Dehomag, to track entire populations of Jews across the German empire using unique 5-digit numbers assigned to each individual. The infamous Auschwitz tattoo is said to have begun as one of these numbers – a system of identification that was made possible with a machine less sophisticated than a modern-day programmable calculator.

It does not take a great leap of imagination to see how governments controlled by fundamentalist forces could misuse the demographics information so easily available in the MNIC database. Indeed, it is important to consider two factors: whether an identification system is desirable just because it is technically feasible; and whether the many instances of prejudiced action against defined communities by state and central governments in India's modern history should not make us a little more wary of the MNIC project. The communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 and the wholesale targeting of Muslims in the state by a complicit BJP-run Ahmedabad government are enough of a reminder of how supposedly 'classified' information can be misused. The ruling party members – who were systematically drawing up the demographic compositions of residential neighbourhoods months before the 2004 riots – managed to supplement their information with the records of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation.

MNIC proponents like to point out that most of the information that will be collected for the cards is already in the public domain. A collation of the information on ration cards, voter identification cards, insurance schemes and passports would furnish much of the information that would eventually find its way onto the MNIC, they claim. What this argument fails to address is the fact that, in all of the other schemes referred to, the citizen provides information on a voluntary basis. Should an individual so choose, he can refrain from signing up for any of these schemes, thereby retaining complete control over his privacy and personal information. On the contrary, the government has made changes to the Indian Constitution that would make it mandatory for every citizen to subscribe to the MNIC project.

Human intelligence

Richard Sobel, a Harvard political scientist specialising in privacy issues, believes that a national identification system runs contrary to the principle of 'fair information' – that information required for one purpose should not be used for another. For example, personal medical information should not be accessible to potential employers, if one is to protect people from workplace discrimination. By putting all of the information about an individual onto a single card, the MNIC severely compromises privacy, making the individual vulnerable to potential discrimination, social targeting and humiliation.

Identity cards are not simply the 'proof' of our identities. They represent an elaborate series of institutions and processes put in place by both the society and the state. They also help the state to establish itself as the sole agent of social control. While state interventions in society are not inherently negative, moves to map, categorise and monitor citizens prove problematic for the rights of members of a free society. After the events of 11 September 2001, the Western world is gripped by an anxiety that seeks to gather as much 'human intelligence' as possible. States are sacrificing citizens' rights of freedom and privacy for reasons of national security. With the MNIC project, spearheaded by the previous BJP government, Indian authorities are now rushing headlong into extremely problematic terrain. It is anyone's guess how, when and where citizens' rights could be trampled on a massive scale when the MNIC database becomes available to prejudiced authorities.

The MNIC push is part of a proclivity that seeks technological fixes to deal with vast and complex socio-political and economic realities and challenges. A solution to terrorism, crime and corruption would require a comprehensive reshuffling of existing hierarchies of power. On the other hand, surveillance and enforcement simply ensure that the status quo can continue. The Multipurpose National Identity Card is a project that could create extensive upheavals in an unprepared society. India is not ready for it. No country is.

Hydro Nationalism

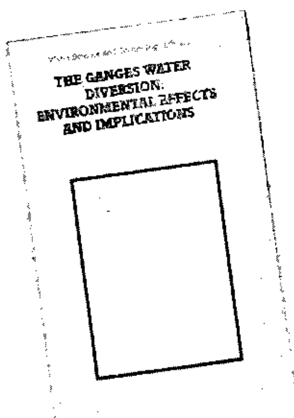
As SAARC prepares to meet in Dhaka, they must understand that our rivers bring us together, and river engineering projects should not be used to break us apart.

by | **Jayanta Bandyopadhyay**

Political differences and mutual recriminations have long characterised the uneasy Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. Among the primary issues of contention between the two states has been that of water-sharing of the Ganga River. The construction of a barrage by India at Farakka in West Bengal diverted the river water into two distributaries, thereby reducing the water inflow into Bangladesh. While India saw this construction as a sovereign right, Bangladesh held it as a violation of its own rights as a lower riparian country. In 1996, after close to two decades of political deadlock on the issue, the two countries arrived at an agreement on mechanisms of water-sharing that determined the extent of Bangladesh's right to access the river's dry season flows. But even though a political agreement has been reached, the barrage and its impacts remain hotly contested in both India and Bangladesh.

The roots of the dispute lie in the barrage's vastly different consequences on the two sides of the border. India commissioned the barrage in 1975 to make the Calcutta port navigable. By diverting the Ganga into the Hugli-Bhagirathi River, on which Calcutta is located, India hoped that the barrage would regenerate the city's harbour. However, the project also resulted in the reduction of the river's dry season flow into Bangladesh, causing a subsequent regional environmental decline. Dhaka claims that the barrage caused an adverse impact on the country's agriculture, fisheries and navigation. This emerged as the basis of opposition to the project from both Bangladeshi politicians and civil society.

Even while the political debate and acrimony has continued for decades, there has been inadequate scientific work on the barrage's impact. Monirul Qader Mirza, a scientist and editor of the 2004 *The Ganges Water Diversion*, is well aware that "much of the techno-political debate over the impact of the Farakka Barrage on Bangladesh is based on observations and anecdotal evidence rather than sound analyses of relevant data". Mirza's compilation deals with the environmental effects of the Farakka project, as well as that of other smaller but numerically significant lift transfers along the river; in so doing, he provides a much-needed scientific perspective. The book offers a breath of fresh air on an issue that has been reduced to a largely polemical and politicised debate, tinged with resounding hydro-nationalism.



The Ganges Water Diversion: Environmental Effects and Implications
M. Monirul Qader Mirza (Edited)
Dordrecht; Kluwer Academic, 2004
Water Science and Technology Library.
364 pages. USD 129 (hardbound)

Facts and flow

Much of the hard data that serves as the background and foundation for the book's analysis comes in the second chapter, 'Hydrological Changes in Bangladesh'. Using the flow data of the Ganga at the Hardinge Bridge in Bangladesh, the book's editor, Mirza, comes to the surprising inference that there has been a 13 percent increase in the river's peak-discharge after the construction of the barrage. A closer examination of the claim, however, reveals that the author has included the years from 1935-47 in his analysis – a period when the annual peak-flow at Hardinge Bridge was very low, inevitably bringing down the average peak-flow data for the pre-Farakka period. While there could be a multitude of reasons behind these very low pre-1950 figures, they cannot constitute a sound basis to evaluate the 1975 construction at Farakka. On the other hand, Mirza makes a stronger presentation of the impact on dry season flow at the Hardinge Bridge by exploring the average monthly discharge for March-April between 1965 and 1997.

The author also looks at the impact of the barrage on the Gorai River, a tributary of the Ganga downstream from the Hardinge Bridge. In contrast with the earlier conclusion that there has been an increased peak-flow on the Ganga, Mirza suggests that the Gorai's peak-flow has clearly declined. This incongruence is tentatively explained as a result of the Gorai River "aggrading due to sediment

deposition, which results from decreasing inflow from the Ganges into the Gorai River". Indeed, such important processes need to be examined in a more intensive and extensive manner, as the data could provide an ideal basis for purposes of collaborative research and sharing of detailed hydrological knowledge between the two states.

Impact of diversion

In the following chapter, S K Mazumder, an engineer, explores the possible links between the barrage and the disastrous 1998 floods in the Malda District of West Bengal. The author identifies inoperable spillway gates, the deposition of sediments upstream from the barrage, drainage congestion in the Malda basin, the meandering of the Ganga and the breaching of its embankments as the primary causes of the flood. His prescription of 'training' rivers as an essential strategy for river engineering, however, is problematic: "It is of utmost importance to control the river Ganga both upstream and downstream of the barrage to arrest erosion ... Considering the national importance of the project, it is desirable that the Central Government ... should take the responsibility of training the river upstream and downstream of the Farakka Barrage." Indeed, such a perception of 'national' priorities needs to be reviewed – these have already been used to justify massive investments into projects that attempt to control rivers, often with questionable long-term economic gains and unaccounted-for environmental costs. Rivers are not bound by national boundaries. They need to be understood in a framework that not only involves regional priorities, but is also backed by credible scientific and economic understanding of the vast processes associated with the great Southasian rivers.

Contributors to *The Ganges Water Diversion* highlight several of the negative consequences of the barrage, including changes in the flow of the Gorai and the growing salinity in southwest Bangladesh. Maminul Haque Sarker, a leading river morphologist, for instance, explores the physical changes in the Ganga-Gorai river system that have necessitated upstream human interventions – a particularly important discussion for the potential it opens up for future research. A large part of the Sunderbans' fresh water supply is received from the Gorai, which connects upstream interventions to a much wider issue, given the vast number of people that rely on the mangrove ecosystem. The authors point to a "need to increase the discharge of the Ganges River at Hardinge Bridge during the dry months in order to limit salinity in the Southwest region at certain threshold limits."

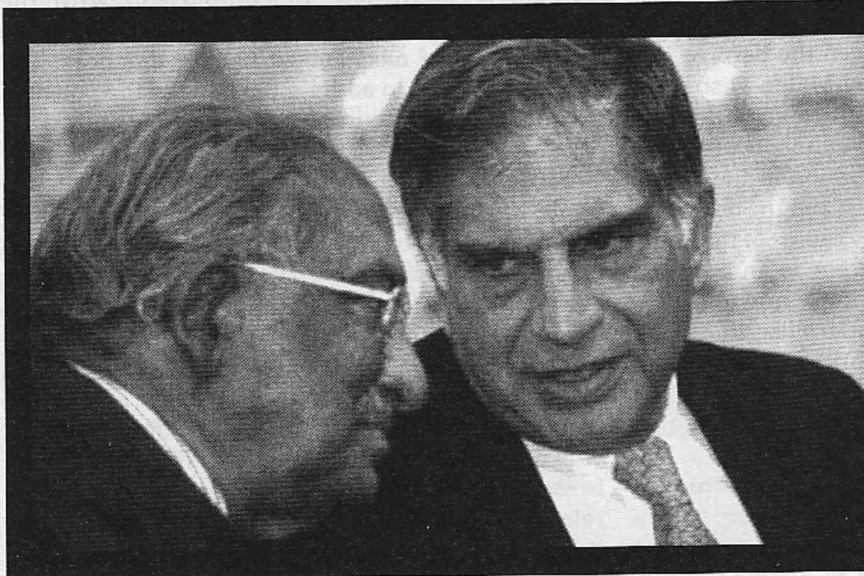
M Sinha analyses the impact of the Farakka Barrage on both upstream and downstream fisheries. He notes that the barrage's construction "has adversely affected the fishery of river Ganga in its upstream, especially of the migrant fish population. But the fisheries downstream, especially of Hugli estuary, have shown a continued upsurge after the commissioning of the barrage." The downstream movement of salinity in the Hugli-Bhagirathi has been well documented. Sinha, however, does not separate the figures of increased downstream fish landings in a manner that allows the barrage's impact to be singularly identified, in comparison with the widespread changes that have come about due to the introduction of mechanised fishing practices. The chapter also fails to address the issue of the potential sustainability of the increased fish catch.

Rivers of Southasia

Some of the more indirect implications of water diversion are also addressed in these pages. Within issues of ecosystem change and agriculture, correlations become increasingly general and less quantitative, highlighting the complexity of these linkages and the lack of scientific information on them. Ansarul Karim notes that, "historically the Sundarbans has evolved under the reduced salinity, which used to be maintained by large amounts of freshwater upstream. The decline of forests is directly related to the declining flow of freshwater in the rivers." A more politically sensitive impact of water transfer has been its effects on agriculture. Mirza and Altaf Hossain seek to demonstrate the adverse effects of the Farakka Barrage on Bangladesh's agriculture, concluding that "Productivity of crop agriculture has significantly reduced." While not all of these claims are backed by convincing data, the environmental impacts addressed in these chapters are nonetheless significant.

As SAARC leaders prepare for their Dhaka summit, it is important to emphasise that river engineering cannot be allowed to disconnect Southasia: it is, after all, rivers that tie the region together in the first place. In an era when water has already emerged as a critical resource, Southasian states would do well to build a cooperative framework to deal with the issue and use it as a basis for economic advancement. The time has come to break away from the traditional ways of thinking about water and rivers within narrow, nationalist frames; instead, we need to arrive at a holistic, trans-disciplinary approach. *The Ganges Water Diversion* lays open gaping holes in these related knowledge bases. Along the way, it establishes the need for extensive, collaborative research on water in Southasia that is based on a new paradigm. Such an approach needs to transcend the limits of national boundaries and refrain from making water a domestic, political tool. While Mirza's book raises important issues surrounding this question, it is beyond the scope of scholars alone to accept this millennial challenge. Will the SAARC leaders read the rising tide?

The Tata-Bangla combine



The Bangladesh government and the Tata conglomerate size each other up, with a proposed investment pie of three billion dollars. Will they? Won't they?

by | **Khawaza Main Uddin**

In April this year, India's corporate powerhouse, the Tata Group, submitted a proposal to the Bangladeshi government for the commissioning of four projects: a steel plant, a fertiliser factory, a power generation unit, and a coalmine. All told, the investment would amount to roughly USD 3 billion, a figure that sent out regionwide ripples for its significance. The negotiations process had included two rounds of talks between thegroup and the Dhaka government, as well as the signing of an 'expression of interest' note in September 2004 in the presence of Tata boss Ratan N Tata and Dhaka's Minister for Finance and Planning M Saifur Rahman (*see picture*). The major hurdles had seemingly been cleared for what would be the largest-ever one-time investment by an Indian multinational - not only in Bangladesh, but in all of Southasia.

For some time, Dhaka's Board of Investment (BoI) had been urging Tata to invest in Bangladesh under the liberalised 'foreign direct investment' (FDI) programme that it had developed, encouraging the conglomerate to look into areas as diverse as power, IT services, bicycles, ceramics and garments. For Dhaka's energetic business community, Tata's willingness to come across the border was a major show of confidence in the nation's economic prospects, and an obvious departure point that would deliver multiple 'downstream' benefits. Most importantly, the presence in Bangladesh of what many consider to be India's most respected multinational - with 91 companies under its wings and an expanding worldwide presence - might also lead to an opening of the unfairly protected Indian market, which has been hurting Bangladeshi business expansion. For those working in the 'track two' sphere of geopolitical security and economic alliances, the promised investment was an opportunity to prove that trade, FDI and profit-sharing were favoured means to more stable bilateral and regional relationships in Southasia as a whole.

But perhaps such hopes and expectations had been allowed to mature a bit too early. The two parties are currently in the midst of their third round of discussions in Dhaka, with both the Tata Group and the government putting up brave fronts. But difficulties have arisen. Both sides now concede that matters are at a make-or-break phase, requiring significant compromise in order to avert a deadlock. The hope had been that groundbreaking ceremonies would be held this year and that the projects would

all be commissioned by December 2009. Now, all bets are off. Observers expect the deal to proceed or collapse by the end of November 2005.

It has not been easy for Tata to get this far. The group, with a USD 17 billion annual turnover and accounting for six percent of India's total exports, first had to overcome the reservations of the Indian Foreign Ministry when it sought to deal directly with Dhaka. Sources now say that it is Dhaka that has suddenly gone into back-gear, declaring that it cannot compromise with existing laws to give Tata what it wants. The multinational also may not have been sufficiently sensitive to the concessions the government can and cannot provide, due to national interest as well as domestic political pressures.

Big money

Things looked rosy back in October 2004, when the expression of interest was signed. The deal had been facilitated by Dhaka's BoI and its chief, Mahmudur Rahman, with Tata initially seeking to invest USD 2 billion in natural gas-based industries. The very fact that the signing ceremony was attended by the finance and foreign ministers demonstrated the government's considerable interest. When Tata came out with its formal proposal, the investment size stood at USD 2.5 billion, which has since ballooned to USD 3 billion. If negotiations succeed, such an amount would exceed the entire USD 2.7 billion in investments that the country has attracted since its independence in 1971.

If negotiations succeed, Tata's investment would exceed the entire USD 2.7 billion in investments that Bangladesh has attracted since its independence in 1971.

The Indian multinational's major enterprise in Bangladesh would be Tata Steel's plans to set up a USD 1.8 billion plant in northwestern Bangladesh (in Pabna or Kushtia districts) – the approximate price of which would also include the development of a nearby coalmine. The plant would have an annual production capacity of around 2.4 million tonnes of what is known as basic steel, for which there is a booming market in both South and Southeast Asia. Half of the plant's production, however, is expected to be consumed within Bangladesh, where the projected demand for steel by 2010 is around 1.3 million tonnes per year. Tata's plan is to produce hot roll steel, from which secondary products are made. The company had to put aside its plans to produce cold roll steel, due to strong opposition by the Bangladesh's domestic steel industry.

Tata's proposed USD 700 million power plant would have a 1000 megawatt capacity, 50 percent of which would be supplied to the steel plant. The coalmine, in the adjacent northern district of Dinajpur, would also have to be made available as part of the deal, as its output would be required to feed the power plant. Tata foresees extracting up to six million tonnes of coal per year, about 3.2 million of which would be used by the power plant, while the rest would be exported to India.

In addition to Bangladesh's coal reserves, Tata has expressed significant interest in the country's natural gas resource. The three plants together would require 600 million cubic feet of gas per day; Dhaka has agreed in principle to guarantee a 20-year supply. Some of this gas would be essential as raw stock for a USD 600 million fertiliser plant, which is planned for Chittagong District in the southeast. The facility would produce a million tonnes of urea per year, which would go a long way to cover the current national annual urea shortfall of 800,000 tonnes.

The impact of the proposed investment would obviously go far beyond the steel, power and fertiliser sectors. Tata's willingness to hold a substantial stake in the Bangladeshi economy would be a vote of confidence for a country that could stand to better its image and rub away the label of 'international basket-case'. Indeed, Tata's arrival would add to Bangladesh's international credit-worthiness and help to attract additional international investment. Although the proposed capital-intensive projects would only create around 6500 jobs, Tata estimates that in their 25-year life-span, they could infuse the country with USD 18 billion in the form of export and import substitution. Annual exports are expected to total about a billion dollars per year.

Cold feet

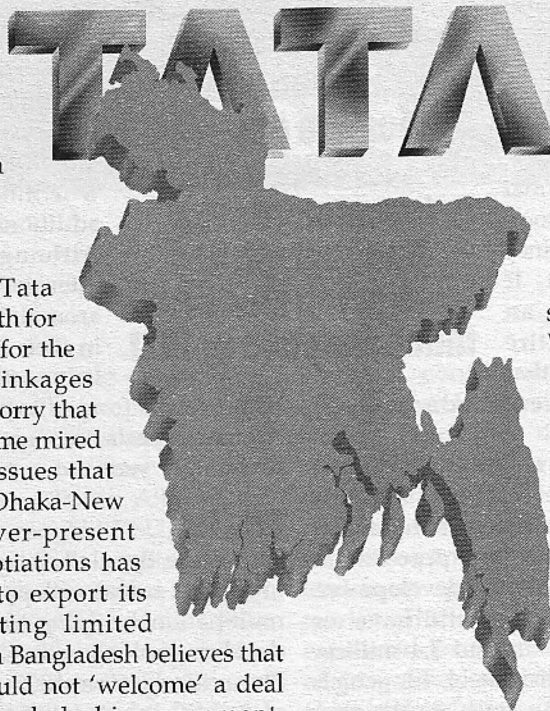
So has the Bangladeshi government gotten cold feet in signing a deal with an Indian company? Or, is the multinational driving too hard a bargain? The Tata deal brings along with it inherently sensitive matters. Five critical issues are on the table, including security of natural gas supply for the proposed projects; the pricing of the gas supplied; purchase tariffs for electricity from the power plant; access to coalfields; and, most importantly, fiscal incentives for Tata's investments.

Tata has also issued several demands: a decade-long tax holiday for its proposed units; guarantees from dedicated gas fields, ensuring an uninterrupted natural gas supply for 30 years; and specific formulae for gas pricing according to industry and product. Although the third demand has yet to be discussed, Dhaka has already rejected the first two, deeming them impossible under the country's current laws. (However, it has agreed to give gas supply

guarantees for 25 and 20 years for particular plants.)

One top bureaucrat involved in the negotiations, wishing anonymity, provides the reason for governmental resistance: "We do not need foreign investment of the kind that will cause a loss to the exchequer, instead of overall gains." Another potential stumbling block is the Baropukuria coalfield, which Tata wants to access in order to save years of development in starting a new coal-fired plant. A powerful lobby inside the government is against such a lease, offering instead any other nearby undeveloped field, which Tata would have to prospect on its own.

Tata's Chief Executive Alan Rosling, who has made several trips to Dhaka over the three rounds of negotiations, has reached a point where he is willing to be quoted in his exasperation: "If the government finds it too difficult to make a trade-off, they should tell us. We can go somewhere else – Iran, Egypt or Kuwait." As negotiations have progressed, however, Tata has toned down its rhetoric. The government, too, has decided to provide 'special facilities' to Tata – though not 'arbitrary facilities', which might create an uneven investment climate.



Which way forward?

Those who see the Tata investments as important both for Bangladesh's economy and for the possibilities of building linkages with the Indian economy, worry that the negotiations might become mired in the larger geopolitical issues that regularly get in the way of Dhaka-New Delhi relations. The ever-present backdrop to the Tata negotiations has been Dhaka's reluctance to export its natural gas to India, citing limited reserves. A certain section in Bangladesh believes that the Indian government would not 'welcome' a deal between Tata and the Bangladeshi government, unless Dhaka agrees to meet New Delhi's demands for the implementation of the planned tri-nation gas pipeline from Burma to India through Bangladeshi territory.

BoI chief Mahmudur Rahman, who is also Energy Advisor to Begum Khaleda Zia's government, emphasises that for all their intensity, the negotiations are being held as transparently as possible. "It is being explained why the investment is good for the country," he says. "If the negotiations are successful, the people will know why and how it happened. And even if it fails, the people will know the reasons."

Rahman is swimming in troubled waters. Lobbies within the government are vehemently divided. Backers of the Tata project say that it would be a crowning economic success for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party government and for Begum Zia, known for her anti-India rhetoric when in the opposition. Critics, meanwhile, fear electoral repercussions, with current opposition leader Sheikh Hasina Wajed (of the Awami League) set to pounce on any opportunity to 'expose' Begum Zia. That Tata is a private sector entity may not wash when the time comes to stoke the electorate's anti-India sentiments. For its part, the Indian corporation has sought to quell some of the opposition by putting a non-Indian, multinational face on its activities, in the personage of Chief Executive Rosling – an Englishman, with an Order of the British Empire to boot.

To gain some traction, Dhaka has now engaged an Asian Development Bank consultant to carry out an economic impact assessment on the overall proposal. Tata, meanwhile, has also appointed an economic intelligence consultancy to calculate the costs and benefits of the four projects. Coupled with additional pending issues, concerned officials have said that these reports will probably extend negotiations beyond the current third round, originally slated to have been the last. With both studies due around the middle of November, the two sides will most likely hold off from further bargaining until then.

Either way, negotiations have reached a point where both sides now need to show flexibility if a deal is to emerge. Even though Tata has maintained a take-it-or-leave-it public posture, the fact is that the Bangladeshi economy is bullish and Tata knows that it is on the inside track. Bangladeshi authorities need to understand that it is not for nothing that Tata's projected investment in Bangladesh would be second only to its expenditures in Singapore. For Dhaka, however, the deal involves not only some radical fiscal policy departures; it also bring along high-wire political risks, at a time when the BNP-led alliance has stepped into its fifth year in office and elections loom for early-2007. A dispassionate observer, however, would look to see which force will win this round, by the banks of the Buriganga: parochial politics or multinational economics. ▲

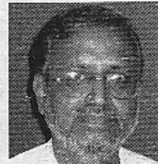
Modern zamindari

Abysmal, tragic, rotten, archaic, misgoverned - these are only some of the terms used to describe Bihar. And that's by those who live there. But the people of Bihar are slowly turning the politics of the region on its head.

by | **Rakesh Ankit**

In the Hindi heartland, where north India meets east India, the democracy that is India is facing one of its most intriguing challenges, as Bihar goes to the polls. Often perceived as representing the worst in Indian governance, the state is characterised by complex social stratification, economic backwardness, and the comatose condition of its public institutions. The fact that identity has emerged as the essential basis for political mobilisation in Bihar has further added to the complexity.

It is ironic that the structures of state would be on the verge of collapse in a region where attempts were made to institutionalise the territory's control and social life as early as the 6th century BC. While its remarkably deep history makes Bihar's present all the more tragic, it is to modern history that we need to turn to understand why the people of the state find themselves in the situation they do today.



Most of the rampant stereotypes about Bihar's underdevelopment are actually true. The state is marked by deep-rooted poverty, little opportunity for upward mobility, a dismal education system, and a sky-high crime rate; extortion in particular has emerged as a major industry. All this is coupled with an unresponsive and corrupt civil administration. For nearly a half-century, Bihar has been consistent in one respect: poor ranking on almost all major social and economic indices. Education remains, simply put, a dead loss. With the great schools and colleges of the past having lost all strength and credibility, anyone who can afford it sends their charges to Delhi, Calcutta or elsewhere, as long as it is outside of Bihar. With young Bihari men and women clearing the country's most prestigious entry-level civil service exams year after year, it is obvious that the problems of Bihar lie not with its people.

The rotten state of Bihar's roads provides a window into the state's abysmal physical infrastructure. The lack of productive employment pushes unorganised labour to the metropolises in western India, Delhi and Calcutta, while organised labour within the state is used as cannon-fodder by the various political parties. The professional class in Patna is skeletal, with the best and the brightest having evacuated. A heavily compromised bureaucracy and judiciary are used to uphold the status quo. Faced with such a wall of inadequacy in governmental institutions, the people have decided to tune out and live their lives as best they can - in the manner of their ancestors, who similarly did not expect help from the state.

What little industrial base Bihar had was wrested away with the creation of Jharkhand State in November 2000. There is next to no mechanisation in the agriculture of a populous region inhabited by peasantry. Land reforms never took place in a sustained manner; the modern system of land controls remains archaic.

While there has been increased democratic participation by previously marginalised sections in the wake of the 'Mandal revolution', grassroots democracy and local self-government are almost non-existent. The last local panchayat elections happened in 2001, after a gap of more than two decades. Remarkably, the state's low economic development and welfare parameters never seem to figure as even minor issues in electoral politics. The apathy of the urban middle class, together with the strong parochial voting patterns, are enough to derail the system of regular elections as a means of providing good governance. In Bihar, elections have come to mean getting someone from your caste into the seat of power - be it a Yadav, a Bhumiyar, a Rajput or a Kurmi.

Looking Back

With the onset of colonial rule, Bihar became a part of the Calcutta Presidency and was subjected to economic exploitation along with most of the rest of Southasia. Unlike the other comparatively enlightened administrations of the maharajas of Baroda, Mysore and Gwalior, the princely states and zamindaris in Bihar seemed to have paid little

The modern zamindars: Top to buttom, Sushil Modi, Laloo Yadav, Nitish Kumar

attention to education. These elites, who remained in place as long as they paid revenue first to 'Company Bahadur' and then to the Crown, took no initiative in establishing cross-cultural centres of learning. Therefore, there were no traditional launch pads for modern education like in Allahabad, Benaras, Calcutta or Mysore.

The strong nationalist movement set in motion against colonialism was nurtured to a large extent in Bihar. Two particular personalities were key to the evolution of the region's political consciousness, and for bringing it into the national political milieu. When Mahatma Gandhi led a movement of indigo farmers in Bihar between 1916 and 1918 to protest an oppressive revenue system, he gave strength to the newfound sense of national integration. Rajendra Prasad, later independent India's first president, subsequently gave that energy concrete shape by building and strengthening the pan-Indian Congress Party in the state.

J P Narayan

Along with the rest of the country, elections were held in Bihar in 1952. Until 1963, Bhumihars and upper-caste Brahmins dominated the representation in the Legislative Assembly and the executive branch. Caste subsequently began to emerge as an emotional, politicised issue, laying the groundwork for its future exploitation by politicians of all backgrounds – including the energetic assertion by the backward castes during the past two decades. Because the Bhumihars and Brahmins used caste as a strategy of electoral mobilisation from the late-1950s until the 1970s, it set in motion the use of parochial identities for electoral purposes by other communities, as they gained their own voices and confidence.

Failed revolution

While the decade leading up to the early-1970s witnessed political ferment both at the national and state levels, it was in Bihar that there emerged the first real movement against the Congress Party hegemony at the Centre and in the states. The increasing disillusionment with Indira Gandhi, reflected in student protests, coalesced around one particular person – who had character, commitment and a theoretical mind given to practical exhortations. That was Jay Prakash Narayan. Born in Sitabdiara in Bihar, 'JP' was a left-leaning Congressman who later became a Gandhian and challenged Indira Gandhi's autocratic proclivities. His actions instigated the latter to impose the Emergency of 1975-78, but he also helped to setup the first non-Congress government at the national level, that of the Janata Party. However, JP was also a very keen observer of Bihar, active in an entire arena from political mobilisation of the peasantry, to organising flood relief.

JP's movement centred on an ideological mix of individual liberty and devolution of power. For what he called (with some hyperbole) 'Total Revolution', he sought to mobilise students and youth, particularly in Bihar and Gujarat, to protest, oppose and launch a street movement against the Congress government. The 1972-73 economic crises, massive unemployment, and tenuous relations between the labour unions and the government (as reflected in a runaway railway strike in 1974), provided a ripe context for JP's anti-establishment dissent. While the declaration of Emergency soon after saw all opposition leaders in prison, the traces of Total Revolution remained.

This movement has had a deep impact on Bihar's politics, with reverberations being felt to this day. The leading lights of many of the current political combines – Laloo Yadav of the Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD), Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United), and Sushil Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – all began their political careers under the auspices of the Total Revolution. JP's struggle, admired by many, had the effect of setting off a chain-reaction of half-baked ideas, while ushering a volatile mass of students into politics. In retrospect, there was little in the form of socioeconomic programmes proposed by the ageing, ailing, semi-retired JP or his followers; all that kept the forces together was the negative rhetoric whipped-up against Indira Gandhi and her state of emergency. Bihar is still reeling from the tragedy of a Total Revolution that was transformed into Total Failure.

Boss Laloo

Laloo Prasad Yadav, India's current Railway Minister, has been the boss of Bihar, directly and vicariously, for 15 long years. He was a formidable product of JP's movement. Then a student leader, Yadav emerged as the state's chief minister in 1990. He competed for political power at a time when national politics was marked by a resurgence of identity politics, and political mobilisation was based on caste and religion. Both the Shah Bano court case – the controversial litigation of a widow seeking maintenance that had orthodox Muslim leaders agitated – as well as the Mandal Commission report, providing reservations to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), had deeply polarised the country as a whole. Communal riots during this period in Bhagalpur further created an environment of religion-based politics.

It was in this context that Yadav evolved his approach to electoral politics by focusing on two things: the assertion of identities of backward castes, as defined in opposition to the 'forward castes'; and securing the Muslim vote. This Muslim-Yadav (or 'MY') combination, appealing to a third of the state's population, was Yadav's core support-base. Muslims were successfully weaned away from the Congress.

The Yadavs were coalesced solidly behind him, along with other backward castes such as Kurmis. The massive majority he received in the 1995 elections reconfirmed his stature based on this political arithmetic.

For eight years, the Laloo Yadav formula worked – even as the state's education, health, public works and power supply collapsed under his command. But in mid-1997, the fodder scam struck, with accusations that bureaucrats and politicians had siphoned off unimaginable amounts of money meant for animal husbandry in the state. Being among the prime accused, an increasingly insecure and isolated Yadav tapped his own wife, Rabri Devi, to hold down the political fort and become chief minister. He himself concentrated on fighting his legal battles.

But the magic was already gone. The ultimate irony was to come around the 2000 state elections, after which the Congress supported Rabri (and her spouse) in forming the Patna government. Bihar thus saw Yadav – the former upper-caste baiter and Congress-hater – become the new power-thirsty collaborator with the former enemy party. The previous battle-lines were obliterated; fresh ones were drawn; and who exactly were the friends and foes was redefined. The notion of forward and backward castes as homogeneous vote-blocs was shattered. Brahmins and Bhumihars were divided among themselves, voting for Congress, BJP and JD (U). While Laloo Yadav had retained the majority Yadav vote, other regional leaders managed to break in and carve out a base for themselves among Yadavs. Nitish Kumar emerged as a formidable Kurmi leader. Dalits split between Laloo and Ram Vilas Paswan. Among Muslims, the vote divided between Yadav, Paswan and the Congress Party.

Re-cycling?

The February 2005 elections resulted in a hung Legislative Assembly in Patna, paving the way for a fresh round of polls, currently underway (*see box*). Already, they have confirmed some political trends. The national parties (Congress and the BJP) now appear to be finished as powers in the state of Bihar, and require the regional parties to support them to maintain any pretence of influence. Laloo Yadav's hold on the backward castes has also generally weakened. He is now identified only as the leader for the Yadavs. Muslims too are no longer exclusively devoted to his RJD party.

Most importantly, however, the February elections revealed that local politics in Bihar are now well entrenched in its own right; no longer are local politics a secondary appendage to the political zamindars, such as Laloo Yadav or Nitish Kumar. The idea of transferable vote-banks also seems to be over; no longer can the leaders handpick candidates for particular regions without considering the local electorate. Laloo has recently been observed bending over backwards for his party workers – hosting a series of 'tea parties' at his home and issuing public apologies to them. As forced and as late as this evolution may be, such changes do symbolise a process of deeper democratisation in Bihar.

But the state's current electoral cycle has also made it clear that political battles will continue to be fought along social lines. The entry into Bihar's politics of Mayawati, the former chief minister from Uttar Pradesh who commands a sizeable Dalit vote in north and central India, is symbolic of the possibilities of yet more political alignment and social alliances in the state.

Bihar's ongoing social engineering and identity assertion will continue, as will the cycle of social conflict. More groups, as they realise the potency of their numbers, will see the advantages of voting as an organised bloc. Ten years ago, Bhumihars and Brahmins fought the upcoming Yadavs in democratic elections. Today, it is the Yadavs versus the Kurmis, Paswans, Dalits and Other Backward Castes. Not too far in the future, it might be the Kurmis and Paswans versus the lowest of the low castes. Bihar's political and social reality, it seems, will remain the complex web that it has been for so much of its recent past.

Analysts and observers generally have given up hope on Bihar. But the state's people themselves are slowly coming to terms with their politics, utilising it to progress forward. Even while the rest of the world smiles patronisingly at Bihar and looks away, the Biharis themselves are on their way to doing away with the political zamindars who inherited a state from the feudal zamindars of old. A churning is underway in which personality-based politics have led to caste- and community-based politics; but this too will pass. The final success will be achieved when the zamindars are no more. Then, political bosses like Laloo Prasad Yadav – even for all that he may have done for the people of Bihar, perhaps unknowingly – will be a character of the past.

Back to the polls

Bihar Legislative Assembly polls: 11 October to 19 November. Results to be announced 22 November 2005.

Total number of constituencies – 243

Alliances and major parties in the fray:

1. Rashtriya Janata Dal + Congress Party + Communist Party of India (Marxist) + Nationalist Congress Party
2. Janata Dal (United) + Bharatiya Janata Party
3. Communist Party of India + Lok Janshakti Party
4. Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation)

Phase	Phase-I	Phase-II	Phase-III	Phase-IV
Date of Poll	18.10.05	26.10.05	13.11.05	19.11.05

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~ASIAN STUDIES IN ASIA~

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2. Research proposals must be in the humanities, social sciences and policy sciences only. Projects must be designed to be carried out in 6-9 months in the People's Republic of China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Philippines or Indonesia, or in any of the seven South Asian countries above.

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10. Applicants may not propose to carry out their projects in more than one country.

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The Best of Times and the Worst of Times
Bangladesh and Southasia

by | **Ishtiaq Hossain**

Now is the time for Bangladesh to further develop and strengthen its political, economic and cultural relations with the rest of the Southasian states. In the favour of such an attempt, India and Pakistan seem finally to be serious about smoothing their political, economic and cultural relationships. The present 'thaw' might indeed prove to be the single most important factor leading to improved bilateral relations throughout the region. Bangladesh must also strive to take advantage of the situation.

Indeed, Bangladesh, with an average annual economic growth rate of 5 to 6 percent, is in an excellent position to benefit from India's and Pakistan's current 7 to 8 percent growth rates. Southasia's political elites also seem to have finally started appreciating that their respective economies will not grow until they are engaged in trading inter-regionally. Today, this trade is still very low, compared to internal trade within the European Union or the ASEAN countries. Hopefully, however, with the implementation of a Southasian free trade zone, either within SAFTA or the larger WTO process, regional trade will grow dramatically.

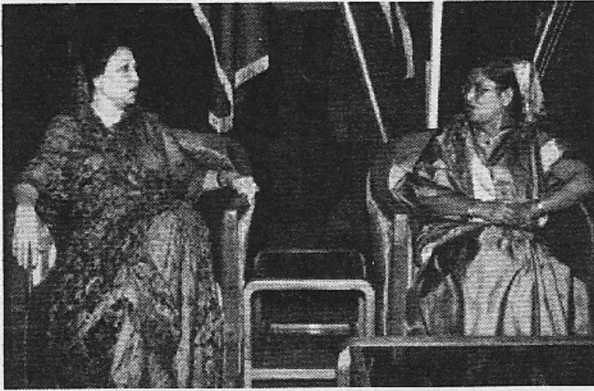
But this is also a problematic time for Bangladesh to deepen its relationships with the other Southasian countries – again, most notably India and Pakistan. Perhaps more than another regional country, the pursuit of an effective foreign policy by Dhaka necessarily requires the consolidation of the domestic socio-political and economic orders. Despite relative economic success, an increasingly unstable internal political scenario has meant that the country's foreign – including regional – policy is yet to be put on an even keel.

Despite relative economic success, an increasingly unstable internal political scenario has meant that Bangladesh's foreign – including regional – policy is yet to be put on an even keel.

Home and the world

Soon after the 1971 independence war, international observers began to express serious doubts about the viability of the Subcontinent's newest independent state. Nonetheless, during the subsequent 34 years, Bangladesh has registered notable successes: the deceleration of population growth; food self-sufficiency; substitution of jute by textiles as an impressive export earner; notable attendance of girls in primary and secondary schools; an energetic private sector; micro-credit as a powerful home-grown response to rural poverty; and three successive elections held under caretaker governments.

But despite all of this, a stable political system still eludes the country and people. The list of ongoing political woes includes the fact that the state has failed to control an increasing gap between the rich and poor, thereby negating much of the success achieved in the economic arena. Successive governments have dragged their feet in separating the country's judiciary from its executive branch. The



brutality practiced by law enforcement personnel against the common people, as well as their impunity, is a peculiarly Bangladeshi phenomenon. The country has yet to establish an independent human rights commission, as well as an effective, autonomous anti-corruption authority. Extortion of businessmen by hooligans large and small is on the rise. Meanwhile, the state agencies have been endlessly politicised by successive governments; while Dhaka's political elite have failed to turn Parliament into a meaningful institution. As a result of all these flaws, poverty remains rampant and militancy is on the rise.

The intense animosity between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the BNP and Sheikh Hasina Wajed, leader of the Awami League (AL), has contributed to the development of a sense of helplessness in the country's political environment. Their never-ending feud is a stumbling block towards a consensus within the national political spectrum. Even after 34 years of independence, intense debates still take place within political and intellectual circles over such questions as who was the first to announce the country's 'declaration of independence', or who is to be considered the 'father of the nation'. Such wrangling has gone on for so long that it has affected the very fabric of national society, and this has clouded the spirit of the younger generation. Students are bewildered by the fact that their textbooks tell differing national histories, depending on which of the two parties is in power.

But it is not all about personality politics. Deep differences do exist between the two leaders on several issues of national importance. Regular rows erupt over secular versus Islamic-based approaches to both policy and national identity; as well as questions over the role played by the AL in the 1971 war. These differences have significantly impacted Dhaka's foreign relations, particularly with India. In the latter context, the BNP-AL differences have centred on the 1996 Ganges Water Treaty; land transit to allow goods to reach India's Northeast from its 'mainland'; as well as India's potential purchase of gas from Bangladesh's natural reserves. Interestingly, party viewpoints have flip-flopped on each of these issues, depending on who is in power or in opposition.

Such internal bickering has led to an increasingly blurry security situation. In the international sphere, there have been leaks and accusations about Bangladesh as a refuge and even training ground for religious militants. While these have provoked vehement denials from Dhaka, the government has failed to deal effectively with the activities of several Islamic fundamentalist groups. Last year's bomb attacks targetting Sheikh Hasina killed scores of AL leaders, including S A M S Kibra, the former finance minister. The dramatic explosion of nearly 400 bombs going off throughout the country on 17 August this year cast still more worry on the coalition government's ability to tackle terrorist acts. Amidst this din, Dhaka has been largely unable to formulate cohesive, progressive foreign or regional policies.

While Bangladesh needs to lift its Indian relationship to a minimum level of maturity, a fair amount of responsibility in this regard rests on New Delhi.

The inevitable India

As a populous but relatively small country in terms of land area, Bangladesh needs to pay particular attention to relations with its regional neighbours. At the time of its independence, given the Cold War environment, the country had three options for its foreign policy. First, it could maintain a foreign policy that stood apart from all regional and international exigencies - perhaps an impossible order. Second, it could try to deepen its relations with those countries that had supported and helped in its fight for independence. Third, it could diversify and build relations with as many countries as possible, thereby reducing dependence on countries such as India, the Soviet Union and other socialist regimes.

It turned out to be practically impossible for the newborn state to follow the first or third options, given the destroyed political, economic and social infrastructure, coupled with the hostilities of both US President Richard Nixon's administration and those of Muslim countries in the Middle East. Dhaka's foreign policy naturally gravitated towards those countries that had helped it gain independence - the Soviet Union, Cuba, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany and, mostly significantly, the regional giant, India. But within a couple of years, the country's leadership, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had come to realise the limitations of such a policy. Even though New Delhi, Moscow and other friends did their best to help

to rebuild the devastated country, they could not provide the massive infusion of economic support that Bangladesh required.

As such, Sheikh Mujib started to nudge the country towards its third foreign policy option – diversification. Having being spurned by the US, this process pointed towards improving relations with other Muslim countries, which had become distanced from Bangladesh for having separated from Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib attended the 1973 summit in Algiers of the Non-Aligned Movement, where he discussed Bangladesh's situation with Arab leaders. Thereafter, he was able to convince the Kuwaiti government to deposit gold into Bangladesh's central bank to shore up the value of the *taka*. Sheikh Mujib was persuaded to join the Organisation of Muslim Conference (OIC) and attend its 1974 Islamic Summit, held in Lahore, but only after Pakistan had decided to recognise Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign state.

Even as Bangladesh initiated this new foreign policy path of diversification, however, Sheikh Mujib, along with most of his family, was killed in the military coup of 15 August 1975. However, the new policy was aggressively followed by Gen Ziaur Rahman, who was propelled to power the following November, after a series of coups and counter-coups. Even as Bangladesh thus adjusted its international relations, no leader in Dhaka – be it Sheikh Mujib and Gen Zia, or later Gen Hussain Mohammed Ershad, Begum Khaleda Zia or Sheikh Hasina Wajed – could forget the acute fact that history and geography bound Bangladesh to India. So, India became the power on whose perceived good- or ill-will the conduct of Bangaldeshi foreign affairs began to be organised. The ongoing separatist restlessness in India's Northeast, all of which bordered Bangladesh in the north and east, became an additional, complicating factor.

Dhaka continues to look at its relations with other regional countries as part of its diversification project.

Dhaka-New Delhi relations have been troubled by a litany of issues. Over the years, these have included a trade imbalance in India's favour; the sharing of river waters vis-à-vis a lower riparian Bangladesh; alleged Bangladeshi assistance to Northeast separatist movements; unending border disputes and skirmishes along the frontier; the flow of Bangladeshi economic migrants into India; the unwillingness of Dhaka to supply India from its natural gas reserves; the unwillingness of Dhaka to supply transit rights to India's Northeast through its territory; the difficulty that Bangladeshi manufactures and semi-manufactures have in entering the Indian market, despite talks of open markets in New Delhi; and the alleged Indian assistance to the Chittagong Hill Tracts insurgency. Such is the lack of trust, that even the recent spate of coordinated terrorist bombings throughout Bangladesh have emerged as a factor to mar Dhaka-New Delhi relations, with allegations made of Indian involvement.

It is critical that these thorny bilateral issues get addressed in an atmosphere of calm and logic. Some of India's accusations against Bangladesh have been out of touch with reality. Dhaka, for instance, has neither the intention nor capacity to provide material assistance to insurgencies across its borders. At the same time, Dhaka cannot maintain an ostrich-like mentality on other matters. Just to take one example, the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration is real and the proclivity of Bangladeshi officials in all but the most private of conversations to admit to this reality does public policy no good.

Bearing these factors in mind is important for leaders in both Dhaka and New Delhi, in order to come to reasonable terms with one another. This is particularly so in the face of ongoing separatist struggles in India's Northeast. Bangladesh cannot suspect that New Delhi is forever conspiring to diminish its image and calm. India, on the other hand, must be more than cognisant of the genuine insecurities of its smaller neighbour – from worries regarding the balance of trade, to the all-important matter of water-sharing. Indian officials and 'track two' participants alike do not give enough credence to Dhaka's fears regarding the reduction of water flows in either the Ganga – which is already taking place – or, in future, on the Brahmaputra (Jamuna). Bangladesh is a populous, riverine society, where water-flows mean just about everything; threats of withdrawal, such as through the projected river-linking scheme, go straight to the very heart of Bangladeshi survival. It is no wonder that Dhaka intellectuals and policymakers alike get exasperated when their Indian counterparts *just don't get the point.*

While Bangladesh needs to lift its Indian relationship to a minimum level of maturity, a fair

amount of responsibility in this regard rests on New Delhi. In regional relations, large neighbours will give rise to insecurity in their smaller neighbours. New Delhi needs to rise to the demands of its size and clout, and not be seen to be acting as a regional bully. More empathy towards the neighbour is certainly a requirement among New Delhi's policymakers and strategic analysts, whose general tendency is to show exasperation towards Dhaka's stance and attitude. On a regional level, India would also do well to maintain a relatively unassuming role within SAARC – similar to Indonesia's role within ASEAN – which would see an immediate improvement of relations all around, most importantly with Bangladesh.

Despite the increased polemics between New Delhi and Dhaka, however, there have been positive developments. The creation of Bangla-language private satellite channels are working to bring together Bangladeshi and Indian Bangla-speaking audiences; in the long run, this will affect attitudes and policies in Dhaka and New Delhi for the better. There is increasing interaction between intellectuals and 'track two' activists in both countries, which will also help to develop empathy and understanding. Perhaps the best example of the evolving scenario can be found in a trend towards increasing Indian private investment in Bangladesh, which shows a confidence that is not evident in official attitudes.

Dhaka has been ahead of the other Southasian capitals in recognising the need for subregional groupings

The highlight, of course, is the intention of the Tata Group to invest nearly USD 3 billion in several projects in the country, including in power generation and fertiliser production. These would be a strong vote of confidence in the Bangladeshi economy, and the hope is that current glitches towards the investment's fruition will be resolved before long (*see accompanying story*). Even as Indian investment increases in Bangladesh, however, it would be incongruous for New Delhi to continue with the direct and indirect trade barriers that it imposes on Bangladeshi production seeking to enter the Indian market. This, more than investments, will help to bring a certain balance to the trade between the two countries.

Looking back at Pakistan

As the country that originated the concept of SAARC in the time of Ziaur Rahman, it would be counterproductive for Bangladesh to ignore the rest of Southasia due to the need to 'tackle' India. Indeed, there is an urgent need to foster closer links with other Southasian countries; Dhaka, after all, continues to look at its relations with other regional countries as part of its diversification project. In this context, relations with Pakistan remain cordial, but two

Bihari camp, 1972.

issues remain stumbling blocks to any future deepening. The first of these is the question of repatriation of one lakh 'Biharis' who opted to be repatriated to Pakistan way back in 1971. These refugees have remained stranded in camps in Bangladesh for more than two decades now. The situation is unconscionable on humanitarian grounds, besides being a constant thorn in the side of Dhaka-Islamabad relations.

Second, and there is no getting around this, there remains the need for a formal apology by Pakistan for the brutal behaviour of its soldiers against Bengalis before and during the War of Liberation. Although some Pakistani national leaders from time to time express their sorrow over their military's behaviour in former East Pakistan, a formal apology from Islamabad would go a long way in strengthening Bangladesh-Pakistan relations. While the Bangladeshi people do not demand that Pakistani leaders kneel in repentance at the Savar National Monument outside Dhaka – as Willy Brandt did while visiting the former Jewish ghetto in Warsaw – an apology is in order. Instead, what we have had in the past is the boorish behaviour of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who, while visiting Savar, did not even remove his golf cap as a mark of respect.

These differences notwithstanding, Bangladesh and Pakistan can have more effective economic relations, which would be to both of their benefits. It is time for Bangladeshi businessmen to consider setting up linkages in Pakistan in order to enter the Central Asian markets. More attention should be paid to Pakistan-Bangladesh cooperation in multilateral bodies like the OIC and NAM. In particular, Dhaka must try to coordinate its diplomatic moves with Pakistan while ASEAN considers their applications for joining the Asean Regional Forum (ARF).

SAARC and Bangladesh

While India and Pakistan, for different reasons, form huge images in the Dhaka foreign policy radarscope,

Bangladesh is probably more SAARC-oriented than is either of these two countries and values its links with the other Southasian nations. Going beyond the Bangladeshi enthusiasm for the creation of SAARC two decades ago, Bangladesh also looks to developing relationships with its nearby neighbours, Nepal and Bhutan. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of SAARC in terms of the original expectations, Dhaka has also been ahead of the other Southasian capitals in recognising the need for subregional groupings. During the previous AL government, it was Dhaka that pushed for subregional cooperation that brought in Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand to discuss the specific concerns of the eastern Subcontinent and western ASEAN.

Development of Dhaka's relations with Kathmandu is crucial for both countries, which share so much in terms of their placement in the Southasian template – for the sake of bilateral trade, alternative transit and access for Nepal, tourism and cultural links, as well as to discuss geo-strategic and economic issues. Bangladesh and Nepal are also tied together in their needs to nudge India into a more cooperative attitude in terms of water resource sharing. The two Southasian neighbours, separated by but a sliver of land at India's Chicken's Neck at Siliguri, are in a position to collaborate on emerging opportunities for sharing. Bangladesh could use Nepal's hydropower energy; while Bangladeshi natural gas could do wonders for the Nepali economy and environment, without significantly depleting Dhaka's underground resources.

Development of Dhaka's relations with Kathmandu is crucial for both of these countries, which share so much in terms of their placement in the Southasian template.

The two countries could also collaborate in a whole range of social, cultural and development arenas, from the issue of arsenic poisoning to micro-credit, tackling of floods, and do on. For the moment, it is disheartening that, even though India allows Nepal use of its territory for access to Bangladesh's Mongla port, there has been little increase in the facility's use. The reasons ascribed are the continued ease of Calcutta's port for Nepali traders; bureaucratic hassles created by Indian and Bangladeshi officialdom; and infrastructural bottlenecks in both India and Bangladesh. Most importantly, on a regional plane, Bangladesh and Nepal can exchange notes on how best to improve relations with India.

Bhutan is another close neighbour of Bangladesh, and the primary linkages here would be in the tourism, hydropower and trade sectors. The export of Bhutanese processed fruits to Bangladesh has been a little-talked-about success story of how regional countries can make use of the theory of comparative advantage. In the future, one would hope, Bhutan's hydropower output would not only be exported to mainland India through the Chicken's Neck, but would also snake its way through power lines across nearby Assam into Bangladesh. Unfortunately, Druk Air's Dhaka-Paro flights have been "suspended due to low traffic between the sectors", according to an airline announcement. This is itself a poor reflection on the state of interregional Southasian links.

Bangladesh needs to look at the Indian Northeast through a separate lens from the rest of India, due to the region's proximity and prospects. The states of Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Assam, which border Bangladesh, as well as Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland are all Indian states with which, in the long term, Dhaka will have to build deep relationships. To begin with, the Chittagong port holds great promise for the benefit for these states. The port itself, it is said, would gain additional revenue of USD 2 billion for Bangladesh, were such relationships developed. Dhaka could also learn a lot from Sri Lanka in terms of developing Bangladesh's tourism industry, beside coordinating its policies with Colombo on a host of regional and international issues.

New Delhi is keen to be able to access its Northeast through Bangladeshi rail and road transport. The presently underused Bangabandhu Setu, the five kilometre state-of-art bridge over the Brahmaputra (Jamuna) near Dhaka, also has the potential to promote transit access into the northeastern states. Hopefully, when the larger India-Bangladesh relationships settle down and balance out, the links between the Northeast and Bangladesh will flower to their full, enormous potential.

Whether discussing Bangladesh's relationships with the SAARC region as a whole, India and other member countries specifically, or the Northeast in particular, Dhaka clearly needs to develop a better understanding of the role of trade, commerce and people-to-people contact that such dynamics entail. In this globalised world, the focus has to be on economics – not politics or geopolitics. The notion of sovereignty is no longer to be seen in absolute terms when, in the final analysis, the people at-large are to benefit.

A pragmatic understanding not only by Bangladeshi leaders, but by the Southasian leadership in totality, would certainly help revolutionise the political tapestry of the Subcontinent. As far as Bangladesh is concerned, the sooner this is realised by both the country's population and political elite, the better will be their ability to seize these new opportunities and their economic benefit.

The menfolk we revere

by | **Bhaskar Dasgupta**

This is an issue that has stayed with me for nearly three decades. When the first Indian nuclear device exploded at Pokhran, Rajasthan, back in May 1974, the scientists sent the coded message, "The Buddha has smiled" to the prime minister in New Delhi to indicate that the deed had been done. The Buddha – prophet of non-violence, self-sacrifice, renunciation, prayer and ultimate enlightenment – being associated with a nuclear explosion?

While I was carrying on about the injustice of it all, my long-suffering wife turned around and snapped: "Big deal, your 'prophet of enlightenment'. He abandoned his wife and young child while he went off to attain enlightenment. Same with Laxman, who went off for 14 years with Ram and Sita, leaving his wife Urmila behind."

Now this was an interesting angle. Buddha is venerated by all. Laxman's statue stands next to Ram and Sita as the model brother – he is worshipped by the Hindu millions. But the record seems to be clear on one thing: both Siddhartha Gautam and Laxman abandoned their wives for matters of 'higher principle'.

Siddhartha was the son of a Shakya chief, a warrior tribe. Born into a princely family, he grew up in the lap of luxury, got married at 16 to Yashodhara, and fathered Rahul. On visiting the city outside the palace one day, he saw a series of disturbing figures – a crippled old man, a corpse, a diseased man and, finally, a wandering monk. He was astounded and enlightened, the experience eventually giving rise to the concept of the 'eternal circle of life', encompassing death, disease, pain and age. Blinded by his new vision, Siddhartha decided to leave his wife and son, his position and riches, and stole away from Kapilvastu in the middle of the night.

With Siddhartha gone, the records follow him and forget Yashodhara back at the palace. The earliest Buddhist texts in the Pali canon are silent on the matter, with just one obscure Chinese translation mentioning Yashodhara – in a list of nuns known for their good deeds. It was only in the later stages of Buddhist scholarship, and the need perhaps to appeal to women, that Yashodhara emerged as a minor yet significant part of Buddhist theology. Even in the latter-day mythological treatments, however, Yashodhara spends years on her own, raising Rahul and unaware of what has happened to her husband.

Urmila

Onward to Laxman – brother of Ram, the incarnation of Vishnu the Preserver. For various reasons, Ram was asked to go from Ayodhya into exile for 14 years, along with his wife Sita. Laxman was married to Sita's sister, Urmila; but upon joining Ram in exile, he left her behind. Whatever Laxman really was, his persona has now morphed into divinity. Hindu gods usually represent natural or human forces; Laxman today stands for steadfast loyalty and/or brotherly love, maintained even at terrible personal cost. Ram-Laxman are the enduring role models for brothers-in-arms.

My research on Urmila, however, was difficult. There seems to be an Indian film actress who carries the same name. But in trying to locate books, papers or articles on the mythological Urmila, I consistently came up short. We know that, together with Sita, she is a personification of either the ideal wife or of Shakti. She spent 14 years in loneliness, but was expected to suffer in silence – and she did. The names of her brother-in-law, sister and husband are mouthed in millions of daily prayers, but she remains almost unknown.

You might consider all of this to be nothing more than a 'feminist' perspective, and perhaps it is. Abandoning your wife and child(ren) is clearly a drastic decision at which to arrive. Both of these women were royalty, and their situations can be assumed to have been reasonably comfortable. It is one thing to embark on a noble journey for your beliefs. But the fact remains: all faiths place significant importance on marriage and the family unit. The concept of love and responsibility towards your nearest and dearest – like parents, children and siblings – is ranked highly by all religions.

Rethinking the Buddha's story and that of Laxman from the perspective of the abandoned wife or child, my wife's reaction made more sense. ▲

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