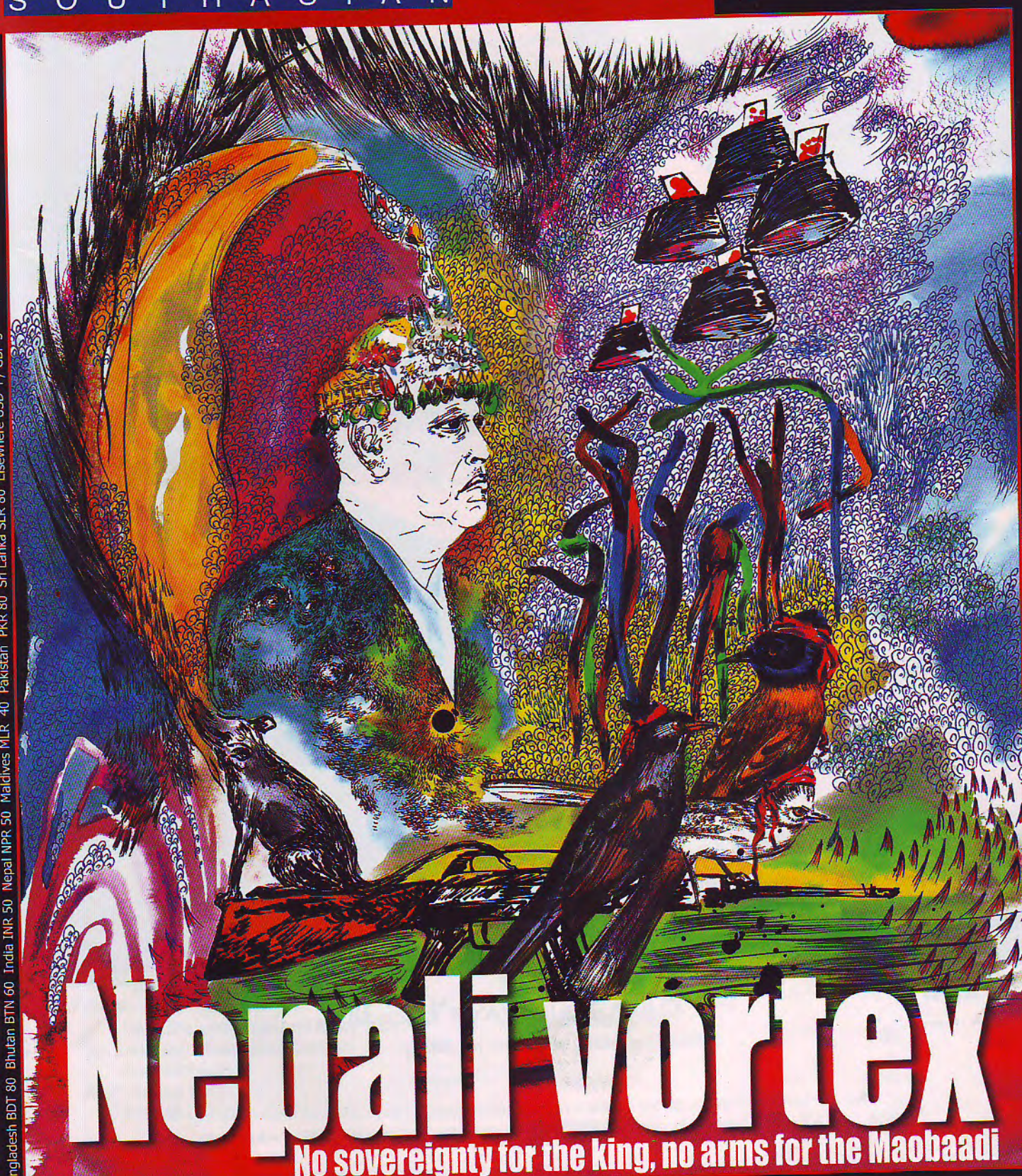
Mar-Apr 2006

HIMĀL

SOUTHASIAN

DARJEELING/SIKKIM, REGIONAL CINEMA, DALITS OF SOUTHASIA, GANDHI'S VIOLENCE, NEPALI REMITTANCE, SECURITY LEGISLATION, WAGNER'S BUDDHISM



Nepali vortex

No sovereignty for the king, no arms for the Maobaadi

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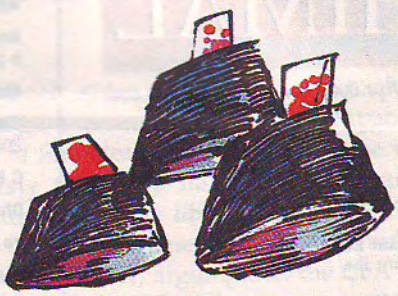
Himal Southasian magazine happens to be based in Kathmandu, from where with increasing horror we have watched the evolution of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal – and in the latest instance, the palace activism in particular following the royal takeover of 1 February 2005. Looking out over the Southasian landscape, we realise that a country that had made relatively good progress as a democracy following the People's Movement of 1990 is being forced backwards in time, by rebel and royalty alike. In the cover feature of this issue, we have charted the course of both of these forms of extremism, scrutinising the continuing warfare and sudden democratic deficit in the country where we happen to be based. We also believe that editors and reporters must stand up as citizens when a society's most basic values are under threat.



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Cover Image: "A thousand whirlwinds craving attention", by **Venantius J Pinto**

Sri Lanka

Back to 2002

February 2002 was the month of a miracle. A war that had seemed unstoppable was suddenly halted with the signing of the Norwegian-facilitated Ceasefire Agreement by the government and LTTE. The security checkpoints covering the country, particularly the northeast, were dismantled. Thousands of sightseers from the south flocked into previously out-of-bound regions, and thousands more flooded southwards to transact business in Colombo. But by January 2006, the situation had threatened to reverse itself completely, as violence again turned the northeast into a virtual battleground. This was the context in which the Geneva talks of 22-23 February 2006 took place.

When the media conference at the conclusion of the two-day Geneva session was delayed for three hours, speculation was rife that the government and LTTE had been unable to reach an agreement. Norwegian facilitator Erik Solheim had already warned of the need not to ratchet up expectations, because trust was low between the new team of government negotiators and the LTTE.

Indeed, the odds were clearly stacked against success. Government and LTTE representatives had not met in direct talks for three years. The Colombo delegation was new to peace talks; in the run-up to Geneva, its ministerial component had undergone a crash-course in negotiations. The lack of trust was not simply that of strangers, but of two sides who had directly or indirectly contributed to the loss of over 150 lives in the previous two months. Both showed up to the talks with extremely large support teams, attempting to bolster their individual strengths.

But when the two delegations, accompanied by the Norwegian facilitators, eventually arrived at the media session, the delay turned out to have been for a positive reason: to secure agreement. Best of all, they had agreed to meet again within two months, with the aim of reviewing and progressing the peace process at that time. In addition, the two sides had agreed to respect and uphold the February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA), and to ensure a cessation of the violence that had continuously eroded its credibility over the previous four years.

Tough talks

Those who participated in the talks say the negotiations were full of tough – but usefully honest – talk from both sides. This was particularly beneficial to a government delegation that spanned the spectrum of Sinhalese opinion, from those who had previously taken up nationalist Sinhalese positions, to those of more liberal disposition. The government's opening statement clearly reflected the nationalist Sinhalese view, arguing that the CFA was unconstitutional. The LTTE delegation responded that the Sri Lankan Supreme Court, in its verdict on the joint-tsunami mechanism that allowed international aid groups into rebel-held areas, had already accepted the CFA's legality.

In the end, both the government and the LTTE agreed to uphold the Ceasefire Agreement. The liberal element within the government delegation clearly would have pushed this decision; but it is to the credit of the nationalist contingent that they chose continuity in the peace process, rather than risk a sharp break that might have left the country without a ceasefire at all. This resulted in the removal of a major stumbling block to peace – President Mahinda Rajapakse's electoral pacts with the Sinhalese nationalist JVP and JHU, which had called for the abrogation of the CFA.

Both sides gained as a result of the two-day meet, albeit a very short time to address the problems that have cropped up over three years without talks. Both the government and LTTE were able to present their list of grievances against the other, as well as to put forward their own concerns. Each was able to achieve agreement on the two most important issues that had separated them, as well as to score other minor face-saving victories.

Mutual victory

In Geneva, the LTTE's position was that the government needed first to commit itself to the 2002 CFA. While that stance appears to have prevailed, the government's acceptance of it does not mean that the agreement cannot be amended as per the government's insistence. Indeed, the CFA contains provisions for its own amendment. Should the government wish to seek such changes, it would be allowed to do so only within the procedures laid down in the agreement.

But the biggest victory for the government was not only that it was able to bring the LTTE back to the negotiating table for the first time since March 2003, but that it has now kept them there until at least the

next round of talks, in April. The government was also successful in convincing the LTTE to back down from its insistence that the break-away rebel group of former LTTE commander 'Karuna' be described as a 'paramilitary' organisation. Instead, there was reference made to restrictions that would be placed on "armed groups".

What will count to the country and its people, however, is not who gained a face-saving victory or suffered a verbal defeat. What will matter is that the Ceasefire Agreement is respected and upheld in both word and deed, and that the violence that has threatened to plunge the country back into war is ended forever. This will be the acid test of the success of the Geneva talks. The agreement reached puts the responsibility for the continued peace on the shoulders of both the government and the LTTE.

In their opening statement, the Swiss government hosts had urged that human rights be a basic part of the new peace process, and that Sri Lanka find its political solution as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. The integration of these values has been necessary since February 2002, but that has not taken place; this time around, it must. In addition, civil-society groups that have been overly concerned with preserving the relations between the government and LTTE need to give more attention to the interests of the people. All involved can learn from past mistakes and experiences. The new beginning was positive in Geneva, but now it must be monitored carefully and seen through to a conclusion that will work for all Sri Lankans.

-Jehan Perera

Region

No, Mr President

As George W Bush embarks on a state visit to India and Pakistan, it would be instructive to analyse the evolving role of the US in Southasia. Washington DC has always been an active political participant in the region – supporting India against China in 1962, sponsoring military regimes in Pakistan, fighting wars in Afghanistan, having interventionist ambassadors in Nepal, castigating the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and pushing for specific economic policies in all of these countries. The 'war on terror' has ensured that the US not only has a diplomatic presence in the region, but a powerful military force, placed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, to back it up as well.

Considering that the US is the global hegemon, this active role in the Subcontinent is hardly surprising. But it is clearly undesirable. The United States has ignited intra- and inter-state conflicts, supported dictatorships, and directly and indirectly engineered anti-people policies. Such actions overwhelm the well-intentioned activities of the past, including support of scholarships, assistance through USAID, and placement of Peace Corps volunteers. In recent days, Washington has sought to actively project its power in a manner that will be extremely detrimental for the people of the region.

Heinous crime - US attack on Bajaur.

The darkest manifestation of this power occurred in Damadola in Bajaur Agency, a federally administered tribal area in Pakistan, in January. US missile attacks killed 18 villagers, including women and children, in an operation that was later claimed to have been designed to attack al-Qaeda leaders. The 'war on terror' is illegitimate and immoral, and the killing of innocent civilians, conveniently brushed aside as 'collateral damage', absolutely unacceptable. The compliant military regime in Pakistan should have stood up to that heinous crime, and President Bush, during his visit, must render an unqualified apology for the killings. A country that brags about its moral standing before the world must be held accountable for the innocent people its push-button warfare victimises.

Even as the US military kills people in Pakistan long-distance, Ambassador David Mulford in Delhi has been behaving as if India is just another state under the US federal government. In January and February, the diplomat publicly declared that Delhi must vote against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency; he also launched a sermon on how India should open its retail sector to foreign direct investment, and wrote a letter of remonstration to a chief minister of a province, seemingly violating diplomatic norms. The clear message sent by the liberal and left Indian political classes asking the ambassador to quiet down was important, for the entire Westphalian system of international politics is based on the principle of state sovereignty. While there are large areas where state sovereignty can now be challenged by others, in suggesting how India should go about framing its internal economic or strategic policies, Ambassador Mulford seems to have crossed the limits.

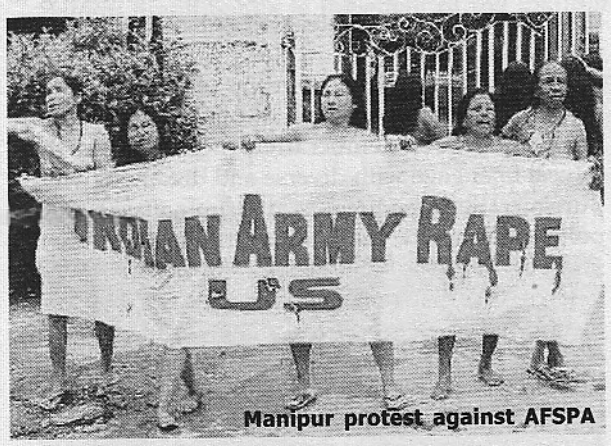
Another ambassador who seems to miss all-important nuances of local politics is James Moriarty in Kathmandu. His statements instructing veteran

political leaders – Girija Prasad Koirala was a politician when the US was still engaged in the second world war – on how to deal with Maoists is not only unwarranted, but could also potentially wreck prospects of peace in Nepal. The Maoists, for all the bravado indicated in several media interviews by their supremo lately, are seeking a 'safe landing', for they realise that capturing the Nepali state militarily is a pipedream. At a time when the mainstream parties and activists are seeking to assist the rebel leadership in this difficult task, albeit with due caution, Ambassador Moriarty has been like a bull in a china shop – raising fears of Maoist takeovers, and causing some distress to politicians being hounded by the king, who are bound to show some grace to an American ambassador. While caution with regard to Maoist intentions is warranted, the diplomat's excessively loud alarm bells serve to help continue the terrible domestic conflict in Nepal.

Its overwhelming power may allow the US to intervene in the domestic political processes of other countries, but this assertive intervention flouts established norms of inter-state relations, and creates a political divide between the world's superpower and the people of Southasia. President Bush would do well to reconsider his administration's policy and actions, if he wants this relationship back on track.

Region

Violence, structural and otherwise



Manipur protest against AFSPA

State structures must be based on popular will, and must work for the greatest good of the greatest number. This seemingly simple principle could provide a solution to some of the most intractable problems of the day. Unfortunately, it is a principle that has been observed more in breach than in practice, and nowhere more than in Southasia.

The country that pats itself on the back for being the largest democracy in the world suffers from selective amnesia when it comes to recollecting some of the actions of its 'democratic' state structure. On 2 January, tribal people were protesting in Kalinga Nagar village in Orissa against the government decision to forcibly acquire their land at throwaway prices and set up a factory complex that would only benefit the corporate-bureaucrat-political elite. The people were engaged in what was their constitutional right – to protest peacefully. The police clearly thought otherwise, and had a simple mechanism to deal with the problem. They opened fire, and shot dead 12 of the protestors.

Dissent is not the only way by which a citizen runs the risk of earning the wrath of the Indian republic, nor that of other states in Southasia (*see "The deserving and the undeserving", in this issue of Himal*). The establishment seems to have a particular fondness for killing apolitical, innocent people. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the Northeast empowers the army to 'shoot to kill' on the basis of mere suspicion. Last year, in Manipur, Manorama Devi – by all accounts, an innocent woman not associated with any militant outfit – was picked up by soldiers in the middle of the night, raped and killed. Despite the outrage that followed – middle-aged women stood naked in front of the army headquarters in Imphal to protest against the Act that allowed such violations – the government refused to budge. 47 years after it was first introduced, AFSPA, giving the state the license to kill, continues to operate in democratic India, in principle and in practice. Manorama Devi is a symbol for the many that are killed every year, all over the republic, by state violence.

It is not only in politically-troubled spots, be it the Northeast or Kashmir, that the Indian state shows its darkest manifestation. The economic policies pursued by successive governments, especially after the opening of the economy in 1991, is responsible for massive structural violence against the poor. The state establishment, with its reduced spending in rural areas and policy of leaving agriculture to the whims of global trade organisations, has manufactured an agrarian crisis in India. This has resulted in a sharp drop in the per capita food intake of the rural poor. The police brutality against workers

of an MNC who dared to strike last year in Gurgaon, in Delhi's outskirts, is yet another example of how vulnerable hard-earned labour rights are in 'socialist' India.

The liberal democratic set up in India at least provides some space for dissent, and opens up possibilities of reform, which is more than what can be said about some other places in the region. Under King Gyanendra's rule, the Nepali state has been completely militarised, and makes no pretence of being governed by the rule of law or respect for human rights. The list of abuses is long – killing peaceful protestors, arresting political leaders and civil-society activists, torturing innocent civilians merely on grounds of suspicion, and attacking the freedom of the press. In the decade-long conflict, which has seen its share of Maoist atrocities, the security forces have been responsible for more than 8000 of the 13,000 killings.

The problem is not merely the feudal regime in place in Kathmandu. The exclusivist and discriminatory nature of the Nepali national establishment, over the five decades of the modern era, has inflicted immense violence, seen and unseen, against marginalised groups, systematically keeping them out of the mainstream. And it is this structural violence that can partially explain why Nepal is in the throes of a political tsunami today.

One state that leaves all others behind in terms of structural discrimination is Bhutan. The Druk Yul has the dubious honour of expelling one-seventh of its population from the country. The Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas continue to languish in refugee camps, while the autocratic Bhutanese state seeks to disown the very people it considered its own till the late 1980s. Meanwhile, not enough is known or written about the Lhotshampa who remain behind in Bhutan.

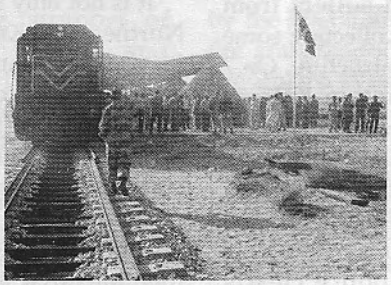
The Punjabi, and feudal, domination of the government in Pakistan has not helped in building an inclusive polity either. The suppression of basic democratic rights, the devastating impact of economic policies dictated by the IMF, the state's willing complicity in US air strikes that kill civilians, the patriarchal mindset of the establishment (amply demonstrated by General Musharraf's statement last year about women fabricating rape cases), and the discrimination against religious minorities – all of these have combined to create a state that cares little about its people. Pakistan is a state where even the faint light of dawn is not as visible as it is in some other places. Democracy is what is needed, after all, to seep into the nooks and crannies of society to prevent violence against innocent civilians.

Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century political philosopher, described life in the anarchic state of nature as "nasty, brutish, and short". It was then that people entered into a 'social contract', and surrendered their liberty to an all-powerful state in exchange for security. The nature of the state, as well as theories of its origin, has evolved over the centuries. The lives of countless people, however, continue to remain the same. And that may have something to do with the fact that states themselves have become nasty and brutal.

This, in turn, stems from the willingness of the political power elite in each of our countries to ride roughshod over democratic processes, and their refusal to engage with diverse and dissenting voices. Bureaucratic impediments, discriminatory policies, police inhumanity, and military ruthlessness are not unconnected dots, but a clear effort by establishments to force citizens to remain disengaged. For they know, the first step of a politically aware and assertive citizenry will be to question the state's actions. But that is exactly what is needed everywhere in Southasia today – an active, non-violent movement that challenges the brutality of the state. That will be enough to humanise it.

India-Pakistan

The Yar Express of Thar



There are many railway links from British days that crisscross the present frontier between India and Pakistan, and India and Bangladesh. For decades, these have been dead-end lines on each side, and the hope has been that some day these lifelines of yesteryear would be revived to generate people-to-people contact among common folks. Air travel clearly does not contribute so much to building confidence, as evident from stagnating relationships despite the decades-long existence of air links between Karachi, Bombay, Lahore and Delhi.

A train link has three benefits: the common people get the opportunity to travel into the other country; it revives the contiguous crossborder contact, which is all-important for building inter-country empathy; and lastly, the volume of travelers will be at a quantum level higher

with rail rather than with air (visa regimes permitting).

And so we were happy that on 17 February, the Thar Express began service between Munabao, in Rajasthan's Barmer District, and Khokrapar in Sindh. The master of ceremonies suggested that the service be called the 'Yar Express', which is a good idea because train services build friendships. The service had been halted with the 1965 war.

The existing Atari-Wagah rail crossing at the Punjab-Punjab point has always been seen as the minimalist contact point kept open by the two countries, grudgingly. The militaristic daily ritual at Atari-Wagah, with stomping boots and scowling sergeants, gives ample indication of this. Also, Atari-Wagah has always been seen as a nation-to-nation meeting point, whereas what the Munabao-Khokrapar line does is link up two secondary regions, away from the bilateral limelight. The fact that this line connects Sindh and Rajasthan shows the levels of confidence in New Delhi and Islamabad to allow linkages and contacts outside their strict control. This is extremely positive.

Hindu Singh Sodha is President of the Jodhpur-based Seemant Lok Sangathan (Border Peoples' Organisation). What he told a colleague at the train inaugural, we could not agree with more. He suggested that visas should be available locally rather than in New Delhi or Islamabad. He also emphasised the need to raise the frequency from the current once-a-week service (which is a travesty), and the starting of a *maalgaadi* (goods train) to promote trade between Sindh and Rajasthan.

The understandably enthusiastic employees of the North-Western Railways staged a Rajasthani dance drama in Munabao to mark the opening. They depicted a local folk hero, venerated by Hindus as Ramdev and by Muslims as Ram Shah Pir, which was followed by a recital of verses composed by Sindh's best-known Sufi bard, Shah Abdul Latif.

The vibes were good on the Munabao-Khokrapar line last month, and the trend towards upgrading this link through more trains, goods trains, more visas, more truncated lines opened – all this must happen. This is the least that can be done to undermine the undercurrents of distrust – which must, if possible, be kept stifled while the people make good.

"Sita forgiving Ravana"

by | **Venantius J Pinto**

Mixed-media print (drypoint, aquatint and iris ink-jet, with hand-colouring)

Editors' comment:

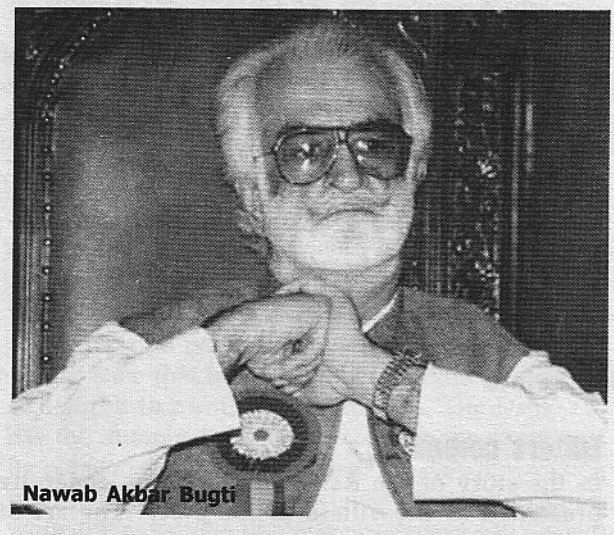
In the story of the Ramayan, Ravan is generally presented as the villain of the piece. The act of forgiveness depicted by artist Venantius Pinto follows this traditional reading, for Ravan would have committed misdeeds to an extent requiring absolution from the hands of Sita. These transgressions would have been, at the instigation of his sister Surpanakha, Ravan's abduction of Sita by taking on the guise of a chital deer, the transport to southern climes, and the holding incommunicado. But even amidst wickedness, some amount of decency, self-respect, a sense of valour, and an unwillingness to molest would have remained. The standard narrative has Ram as 'supreme human' Maryada Purushottam forgiving the demonic Ravan. We think perhaps Sita acted on her own, out of her innate sense of fair play and empathy. In those long days of captivity in the Garden of Lanka, there must have been some mind contact with Ravan – as Ram seems to have suspected – and Sita surely saw enough in Ravan to forgive him. Her forgiveness was based on empathy rather than compassion. Not only did Sita forgive Ravan – we suspect this was done before Ram forgave Ravan, and without Ram knowing anything about it.

This is the first in a regular series of Himal commentary on artwork by Venantius Pinto.

Flashpoint Balochistan

Pakistan's long line of dictatorships has left the country with little democracy and even less federalism, which is the cause of the troubles today in Balochistan.

by | **Suhas Chakma**



Nawab Akbar Bugti

Balochistan comprises 347,188 sq km, larger than the combined areas of Punjab and Sindh provinces, and constituting about 44 percent of Pakistan's total landmass. For many passive news-followers, Balochistan is a place were Pakistani security forces have been conducting operations against al-Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalist forces. The war in Pakistan's western province, however, is not simply another arena in the 'war on terror'.

In Southasia, it is common practice to blame the neighbours to hide the failures at home. In late December, President Pervez Musharraf placed some of the blame for the deteriorating Balochistan situation on foreign powers, for allegedly providing funds for arms and mercenaries in the province. On 9 January 2006, a Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson claimed that Islamabad had evidence of Indian involvement in the Baloch insurgency.

The current flare-up predates the Musharraf regime, with successive national governments often neglecting Balochistan and its problems. Upon becoming president in October 1999, Musharraf promised, among other things, to work towards "strengthening the federation, removing inter-provincial disharmony and restoring national cohesion". Six years later, his promises unfulfilled, Musharraf is following the example of his predecessors by seeking only a military solution in Balochistan. The ongoing military operation that started on 17 December 2005 is the fifth since 1947 and the second since Musharraf became president.

Baloch anger against the federal government has been brewing for some time. Initial signs of trouble in the present crisis arose when Islamabad unilaterally decided to launch several mega-projects and to build new army cantonments in the regions of Sui, Gwadar and Kohlu – all of which have been announced over Baloch protests. With one paramilitary post for every 500 people, Balochistan already has the highest military concentration in the country. Out of the three areas under consideration, the government has already acquired 400 acres of land in Sui Tehsil and started construction.

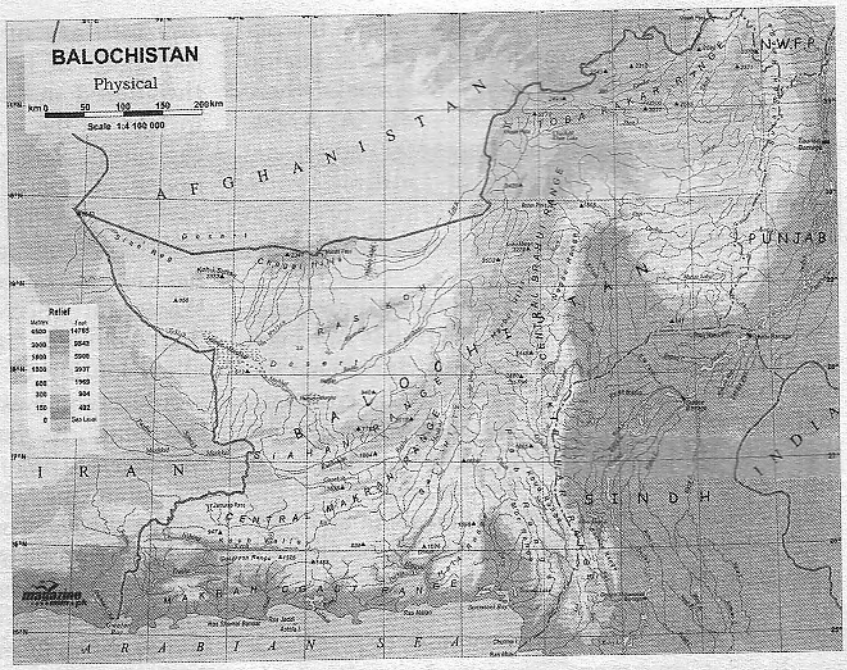
The crux of the problem in Balochistan is threefold: a lack of political autonomy, underdevelopment, and the exploitation of natural resources without benefiting the province's people. On 29 September 2004, a parliamentary committee headed by Pakistan Muslim League President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain was formed "to examine the current situation in Balochistan and make recommendations thereon" and divided into two subcommittees. One, headed by former-President Wasim Sajjad, was mandated to address the question of provincial autonomy. The second, headed by Senator Mushahid Hussein Sayed, was to address the immediate crisis in the province. Recommendations made by both subcommittees after six months of study remain almost completely unfulfilled one year later.

Autonomy and development

The denial of autonomy has been a major cause of the ongoing conflict. Pakistan's 1973 Constitution stipulated that the determination of the quantum of autonomy given to provinces would be revised every decade. This has never been done. Despite

Musharraf's election promises, the deployment of thousands of regular troops and paramilitary forces in parts of Balochistan and South and North Waziristan, adjacent to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, flies in the face of efforts towards "strengthening the federation".

Article 142 of the 1973 Constitution provides for the powers held by the national government, included in what are known as the Federal and Concurrent lists. The subsequent national supremacy held over the provinces has been a cause of significant resentment amongst the provinces, including Balochistan, with federal grant distribution being decided solely on provincial population numbers. Although Balochistan constitutes almost half of the country's total landmass, it is also the least populated province. Revenue awarded by the National Finance Commission to Balochistan is thus the lowest in the country, a fact that has long angered Balochs.



In March 2005, Wasim Sajjad's subcommittee recommended a complete revision of the Concurrent List; announcement of the National Finance Commission award before budget; and activation of a Council of Common Interests, a constitutional body for implementing provincial autonomy and distribution of federal resources on the basis of provincial poverty, backwardness, unemployment and development levels, rather than just on population size. That these recommendations have yet to be implemented compounds the impression that Islamabad is not serious about politically accommodating the Baloch people.

Six years after becoming president, his promises unfulfilled, Musharraf is following the example of his predecessors by seeking only a military solution.

Balochistan faces the twin problems of high illiteracy and high poverty. The average literacy rate of those over 10-years-old is only 36 percent. Its drought-stricken pastoral economy cannot provide enough food for even the small provincial population. This has been the situation since Independence, and the neglect has by now strengthened nationalist ranks. While Balochistan reportedly produces more than half of Pakistan's natural gas, which is a mainstay of the national economy, the province's people have benefited little from their land's reserves. It is said that the reserve will last no more than ten more years, which would mean that the Baloch people would have lost out on the possibilities of developing through their natural gas, which is transported through pipelines to the far corners of Pakistan.

In a March 2005 report, the Mushahid Hussain subcommittee's recommendations included: increasing gas royalties and surcharges; maximising provincial representation on the boards of oil and gas companies operating in the province; implementing job quotas; shifting the Gwadar Port Authority head office to Balochistan and funnelling seven percent of the port's revenue to the province; holding in abeyance the construction of cantonments at Gwadar, Dera Bugti and Kohlu; and a host of infrastructure-development and confidence-building strategies. A powerful committee formed to implement these recommendations was to meet monthly, but has done so just twice in its first eight months. Further complicating the process was the appointment of Major General Farooq Ahmed, a member of the implementation committee, as federal relief commissioner after the 8 October 2005 Kashmir Earthquake.

There are those who claim that Balochistan's leaders have used their region's backwardness opportunistically. President Musharraf recently stated that the government has pledged development projects worth PKR 130 billion for Balochistan, but blamed miscreants in the province for blocking Baloch progress. But is the package actually meant for the Balochs themselves? The suspicion is that the money is used simply to entrench the national government and security forces

further in the province. In 2004, the Federal Interior Ministry reportedly finalised a PKR 9.6 billion security plan to convert Federal 'B' Areas – where police do not have any control – into 'A' Areas, through the recruitment of almost 9900 additional personnel. The process of militarisation subsequently began in earnest with the proposal to establish cantonments at Gwadar, Dera Bugti and Kohlu.

Despite the government's claims of these large expenditures in the province, there has not been much change for the Baloch people, who remain the most backward in the country. Balochs complain that three-quarters of the land for the Gwadar seaport was acquired by serving military officers at throwaway prices, and that the proceeds from these projects will be siphoned off by Punjab, in any case. Most jobs at Gwadar and Saindak seaports have already been given to non-Balochs. The fear has grown in the province that if the number of non-Balochs – mainly Punjabis – continues to grow as a result of government mega-projects, Punjabi-speakers may soon outnumber and dominate the Balochs.

State of no-war

The latest turbulence began on 14 December 2005, when eight rockets were fired at a paramilitary base on the outskirts of the town of Kohlu, a stronghold of the Marri tribe. President Musharraf was visiting Kohlu at the time. The local leader, Sardar Khairbaksh Marri, is regarded as a close ally of the Baloch nationalist chief Nawab Akbar Bugti. Military authorities blamed tribal leaders for the attacks and launched a massive military operation three days later.

Over 200 Balochs have reportedly been killed since the operation began, while Akbar Bugti has alleged that up to 85 percent of those either killed or injured were women and children. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that as many as 53 people were killed and 132 injured in military operations in Dera Bugti from just the last week of December through 8 January. A Commission team visited the areas of Dera Bugti and reported that the fighting had caused widespread damage to buildings, and that 85 percent of the town's 25,000 people had been forced to flee. The town of Kohlu, meanwhile, has been under a state of siege. Entry to the area has been prohibited and the town's 12,000 or so residents have remained virtually cut off since the middle of December, with complaints of food shortages and an inability to deal with injured and sick townspeople.

Yet for the past months, Islamabad has consistently denied even the existence of any military operation. "There is no collateral damage" in Balochistan, President Musharraf thundered in early February, blaming the crisis instead on the local tribal chiefs. "I am telling you, the public pulse, the Marris are happy with the operation against their chiefs," Musharraf declared earlier, while criticising Akbar Bugti, Khairbaksh Marri and Sardar Ataullah Mengal, founder of the Balochistan National Party. On 18 January, Jamhoori Watan Party Secretary-General Agha Shahid Hasan Bugti retorted, "if the three tribal chiefs decided to allow looting of Balochistan resources, then they would become as pious as other pro-establishment chieftains". As the situation continues to deteriorate, Musharraf has found fewer tribal chiefs left for politicking.

The present conflict in Balochistan is not a law-and-order problem, but one of autonomy and sharing of resources. Pakistan's long line of one-man military dictators has left the country with little democracy and even less federalism. While the 1973 Constitution stipulated the re-evaluation of provincial autonomy every decade, it was Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Constitution's architect, who dismissed Balochistan's popular coalition government formed by the now-defunct National Awami Party and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam. With the arrest of NAP leaders, the seeds of dissent were planted. The 1973 Constitution was buried with Bhutto in 1979, after he was hanged by General Zia Ul-Haq.

In the wake of the attacks in the US of 11 September 2001, Islamabad has had greater latitude internationally to use indiscriminate force against the Balochs; but Balochistan cannot be roped together with the search for al-Qaeda, for its problems with the centre- state were long pre-existing. Besides, Balochistan is not another East Pakistan. Nor is it another Mohajir Quami movement. 95 percent of Balochistan is designated Federal 'B' Areas, where the Pakistani government's writ does not run. President Musharraf recently stated that the government would move for a political solution only if the local sardars were to give up arms and stop hampering hydrocarbon exploration activities and development projects in the province.

Apart from the inherent gun culture in Balochistan and South and North Waziristan, the experience of Southasia generally is that no major armed group has ever given up arms before sitting down for talks to find political solutions. Despite the stated plan of converting 14 of 28 districts into Federal 'A' Areas, President Musharraf must realise that there is no military solution to the crisis; he must descend from his pulpit and engage in dialogue with the Balochs before the situation in Balochistan gets out of hand.

Yet for the past months, Islamabad has consistently denied even the existence of any military operation.

Sacrifice of the pipeline

The myth that India needs a stronger nuclear deterrent fuels the search for a nuclear deal with the US, which kills the Iran gas pipeline project.

by | **Sukumar Muralidharan**

Ignoring serious political discord at home, the Indian government on 4 February chose to vote along with the United States in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), referring the Iranian nuclear research programme to the UN Security Council. Two weeks later, policymakers in New Delhi had no definite information on the status of an ambitious deal concluded early in 2005 for the import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Iran. Media reports had appeared of an Iranian intent to negotiate the deal afresh, but the Indian government had not received any official indication to this effect, said a senior official at the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

The minister who had concluded the deal for India, meanwhile, found himself rather abruptly supplanted. Since the Congress-led government assumed office in May 2004, Mani Shankar Aiyar had devoted himself for the most part to his assignment as Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas, which was merely a temporary charge. On 29 January, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, after months of barely-concealed discomfort with Aiyar's visionary enthusiasm, replaced him with Murli Deora, a Bombay politician known for his pro-US inclinations. It was termed a "routine reshuffle" of the union cabinet, but it left Aiyar with a badly shrunken profile, as minister for local self-government and youth affairs.

Most analysts believe that the IAEA vote and the ministry reshuffle have dealt a double blow to the energy security strategy that Aiyar had mapped out with great foresight during his tenure in the Ministry. The LNG import deal was the first major breakthrough achieved under his stewardship. Yet even this mammoth 25-year deal was dwarfed in every respect by the other project that Aiyar lent his considerable authority and enthusiasm to. It was an enterprise that many thought could "redirect the history of Southasia" – a gas pipeline that would bring the abundant energy resources of the world's largest natural gas fields just offshore of Iran, to the energy-hungry towns and villages of India (*See Himal cover story, Jul-Aug 2005*). The necessity of securing transit through Pakistan for vital energy supplies to India, it was thought, would act as a great confidence-building measure between the two antagonistic Southasian countries.

A special niche has been fashioned for India in the global nuclear imperium, as a "responsible state with advanced nuclear technology".

Robin Sayami

Slow burial

Manmohan Singh's first public display of disquiet came in Washington DC on 18 July 2005, shortly after he had clinched a deal – that remains contentious to this day – on civilian nuclear cooperation with the US. Asked specifically about the pipeline from Iran, he admitted rather casually that it might prove an impossible dream. Since finance for the project could well be impossible to organise, he indicated, he was not inclined to invest too much hope in the gas pipeline from Iran.

This debunking by the prime minister of a project that his colleague in the union cabinet had worked tirelessly to bring within the realm of possibility clearly took many aback – not merely diplomats and activists, but also officials in India's petroleum exploration and extraction industries. It was pointed out that the constraints on finance for the project were specific to the US and its rather whimsically defined notion of 'terrorism'. India had no reason to play by the same rules, since it has a different set of interests to pursue in its near neighbourhood.

Aware that he had seriously ruffled political sensibilities at home, Manmohan Singh sought to simulate at least a degree

of enthusiasm for the pipeline project, specifically mentioning it during his Independence Day address to the nation on 15 August 2005.

Despite this, it was clear that the Manmohan Singh government was unwilling to risk any of its newly earned political capital with the US. The collapse of interest in a project of potentially historic significance was inextricably tied to the new phase of the 'strategic partnership' that India has embarked on with the US.

The deal with the US in July 2005 revived long-dormant dreams of imperial glory within the Indian establishment. To have won the assent of the overlord of the global atomic imperium was a significant achievement, which put India's strategic nuclear deterrent on more stable foundations. And in opening up the prospect of civilian nuclear cooperation with other world powers – for the minor reciprocal concession of fencing off military facilities from the civilian sector – it seemed also to have opened up the pathway to energy security.

There have since been a number of reservations voiced in India about the agreement, all of them from the wrong side. Some have argued that the US is being unfair in insisting that India should immediately segregate civilian and military nuclear facilities, since that would confine India to an unacceptably small nuclear-deterrent force. Others have grumbled about the civilian nuclear sector being opened up to an unreasonable degree of scrutiny, rendering valuable intellectual property resources vulnerable to theft. On occasion, these two arguments have converged to create a climate of opinion for classifying research programmes on nuclear power – such as the fast breeder and the advanced heavy-water reactor – as military programmes.

In the process of seeking to reopen the door to nuclear energy, India seems resigned to the need to shut several others, including the gas pipeline from Iran.

Underlying the entire process has been the old game of 'threat inflation' – so familiar from the Cold War, when the US kept conjuring up dark visions of a Soviet empire that was rapidly outstripping it in nuclear capabilities and deployments. Sober analysts then showed, and have now confirmed, that all of this was self-serving fiction manufactured by the US nuclear establishment and the defence forces, eager to see sufficient lethal toys around to satisfy everybody's greed. India's Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) today has embarked upon the same path. Nobody from within its ranks – or for that matter, from the New Delhi strategic establishment – has come forward with a reasonable explanation of what would be a 'minimum credible deterrent' in terms of India's nuclear doctrine. But loyalists within India's fourth estate have started putting out the obvious fabrication that India has already yielded strategic pre-eminence to Pakistan, and will fall further behind unless a sufficiently large part of its nuclear R&D programme is placed within the military fence.

Toeing the line

The same alliance of the nuclear and strategic communities has driven India's policy on Iran since the US began ratcheting up the pressure on that front. Last September, India voted in favour of an IAEA resolution that noted that Iran's nuclear programme, as a threat to world peace, rightly belonged within the domain of the UN Security Council. This was followed by the February reference to the Security Council and the quite extraordinary demand placed on Iran that it should go beyond the formal stipulations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and all agreements concluded under its aegis, to adopt "transparency and confidence-building measures" that may at regular intervals be demanded of it.

The NPT, as it has existed until now, recognised two kinds of states – those with nuclear weapons and those without. India stayed out of the bargain because it viewed the NPT as a flawed and discriminatory treaty. But now a special niche has been fashioned for India in the global nuclear imperium, as a "responsible state with advanced nuclear technology". At the same time, another niche of a very different sort is being created for Iran: as a signatory to the NPT and a state without nuclear weapons, it would still be obliged to submit to greater rigours than the treaty dictates.

Partly because of the gross inconsistency in this approach, non-proliferation strategists in the US have begun mobilising Congressional opinion against the deal with India. This in turn has created a situation in which India is compelled to prove itself a loyal ally and acquiesce to all US demands. In case the message was not adequately clear, US Ambassador David Mulford, much to the outrage of the Indian intelligentsia and the embarrassment of the government, declared that the nuclear deal would "die" if India did not vote against Iran at the IAEA meeting in February.

Demands that Mulford's diplomatic credentials be cancelled have been rebuffed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for the moment, but his government has had a hard time seeking to justify its new accommodation with the US. In the bargain, two issues of vital importance for India's energy security have drifted back into the public limelight: the very real benefits that the gas pipeline from Iran could bring, and the consistent failure of the country's atomic-energy establishment to fulfil promises of an energy plenitude to come through nuclear fission.

Opening doors, shutting doors

Shortly after Independence, when nuclear fission seemed to promise a virtually inexhaustible abundance of energy, India committed itself to a three-stage programme. This went all the way from the first generation of reactors based on a moderated nuclear reaction, to 'fast reactors' that would breed fuel even as it generated heat, and then towards a design that would transform available deposits of a rare mineral into an unlimited source of energy.

The nuclear dream soon meandered into a succession of dead-ends. Grand plans to meet a fifth or even a fourth of the country's commercial electricity needs through the nuclear route failed to fructify. But it was only five decades after its three-stage perspective plan for nuclear energy was written, that India's atomic-energy establishment conceded that it did not have the resources to even establish the first stage on a sound basis. Uranium, the DAE admitted, was severely limited as an accessible resource for India. And to provide the necessary impetus to the nuclear-energy perspective plan, the doors needed to be opened to the import of uranium from overseas sources.

This was in the prevailing international regime of oversight and control, a forbidding prospect. India chose not to accede to the NPT when it was put up for signature in 1970, and as such, was dependent on contingent acts of goodwill by the overlords of the global nuclear trade for access to resources and technology. With the first of India's nuclear tests in 1974, and more so with the succession of explosions that followed almost a quarter-century afterwards, the doors were firmly closed on this source. In the process of seeking to reopen the door to nuclear energy, India seems resigned to the need to shut several others, including the gas pipeline from Iran.

Politics of energy

The clue to unravelling this policy muddle in India lies in understanding the complex geopolitics of energy. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan once merited the patronage of the US, because it held the key to tapping the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia for transportation to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. For Washington, the geopolitical compulsions behind the unseemly embrace of the Taliban remain unchanged. Central Asia and the Caspian Sea are believed potentially to be an enormously productive energy-exporting region. And every possibility must be found of avoiding the natural routes of egress for these resources – south through Iran or north through the Russian Republic. That would be contrary to the geopolitics of energy as the US conceives it.

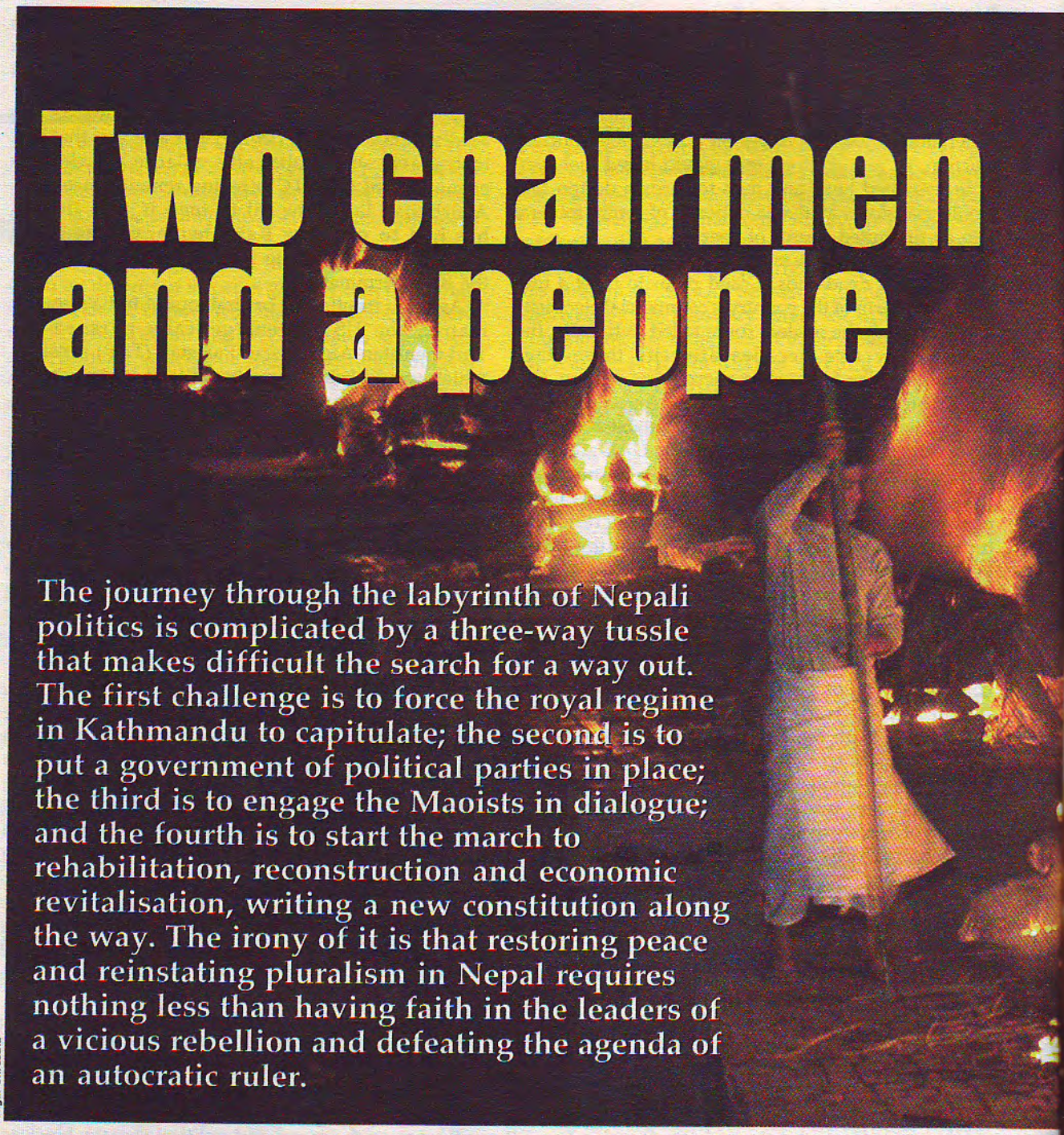
The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, the 1800 km-long crude-oil conduit – ten years in the making and inaugurated last September – is now the most visible symbol of this geopolitical intent. Beginning on the Caspian Sea coast just south of Azerbaijan's capital city of Baku, the pipeline snakes west until well after the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. It then plunges south, carefully skirting a secessionist province of Georgia on the Black Sea coast, before entering Turkey and delicately working its way through regions of Kurdish unrest towards the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. For a project that had to traverse such politically volatile terrain, the economics of the BTC pipeline remain uncertain. Azerbaijan lacks the oil to feed it, and the US has had to pressure Kazakhstan, on the other shore of the Caspian, to start pumping oil through the Baku terminal.

Again in its effort to cut Iran out of India's energy matrix, the US has energetically pursued the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) pipeline, which would bring some benefits at its tail-end to India. The Asian Development Bank has since long been the principal consultant for the project, but India's interest is limited by the perception that the gas fields of Turkmenistan do not have the abundance of Iran's. And curiously, all the problems cited as potentially fatal for the Iran pipeline – such as the secessionist movement in Balochistan – are applicable with greater force to both the BTC and TAP projects. The Iran project, however, has an advantage that the other two lack: its yield is not in question.

India's reticence to play the game the way it should be coincides with a series of aggressive moves by other majors in the trade, all intended in the years to come, to establish a dispersed locus of control in the global energy grid. Just last December, Russia concluded a deal with Germany to build a submarine pipeline under the Baltic, making landfall on the German coast and, in the process, bypassing the Ukraine and Poland. Signalling a new intent to use energy resources for maximum economic and political leverage, Russia also unilaterally terminated gas-supply deals with Ukraine and Georgia, indicating to them that their newfound political chumminess with the US was not without an economic price.

Viewed in this context, India's steadfast vigil over ancient nuclear shibboleths looks rather pathetic, designed to propel the country ever more rapidly into a state of chronic energy deficit. Apart from the economic calculus, energy options also exercise an influence on the moral and political climate. Nuclear energy, with its ever-intimate interface with weapons technology, feeds a mood of national chauvinism and hysteria. A natural-gas pipeline that connects neighbours, on the other hand, gives every country a vested interest in the security and stability of the other, in turn creating an atmosphere for deepening economic cooperation. After two successive votes in the IAEA that have rightly been perceived by Iran as hostile acts, India will now have to engage in serious damage-control if it wants to get back to the energy-security scenario that Mani Shankar Aiyar had so carefully crafted.

Two chairmen and a people



Sagar Shrestha

The journey through the labyrinth of Nepali politics is complicated by a three-way tussle that makes difficult the search for a way out. The first challenge is to force the royal regime in Kathmandu to capitulate; the second is to put a government of political parties in place; the third is to engage the Maoists in dialogue; and the fourth is to start the march to rehabilitation, reconstruction and economic revitalisation, writing a new constitution along the way. The irony of it is that restoring peace and reinstating pluralism in Nepal requires nothing less than having faith in the leaders of a vicious rebellion and defeating the agenda of an autocratic ruler.

by | **Kanak Mani Dixit**

It has not rained in Nepal for five months and the ground this spring is parched, the haze thicker for the dryness all around. Electricity production is so low that even the privileged of Kathmandu Valley are seeing 17 hours of load-shedding per week, and this has also affected drinking water distribution. The tourists have disappeared with the Maoist blockades and government curfews, and the five casinos of Kathmandu meant to trap them are filled instead with Nepalis betting their fortunes. Petroleum prices are suddenly up, and double-digit inflation is on its way. The political confusion on several fronts, however, is as yet preventing the accumulated frustrations from boiling over in a rash of spontaneous violence.

Everywhere in Nepal today there is listlessness, a waiting for something to happen. Potholes are not repaired, nor are buildings painted; and in the districts, the people have nearly forgotten the

Funaral pyres at Pashupati Ghat. Why the need for peace and democracy?

ubiquitous term of four decades' standing, 'development project'. There is a hope that the vortex of violence that has Nepal in its grip will be broken by the end of spring, before the monsoon sets in. Spring is historically the season of political change in Kathmandu, and something must give, or so people hope. That 'give' must come from the direction of the Narayanhiti royal palace, stuck in its militarist, undemocratic ways. As for the Maoist rebels in the jungle, they have already indicated in a variety of ways their desire – indeed their desperation – for a way to open, aboveground politics.

The polity is today at a stalemate awaiting release, either planned or forced, so that the 26 million people of this sizeable country can once again breathe the air of peace and freedom. That peace was wrested by the violence of the Maoist insurgency of ten years' standing, and the state security's response that has placed the country towards the top of the charts in numbers of tortured and 'disappeared'. The freedom was first stolen in the villages by the gun-toting rebels, who even today like to claim they have public support; and in the last three years by a newly crowned king-turned-despot, who shows contempt for the people at every turn and speaks in Orwellian doublespeak of democracy and constitutionalism while proceeding to demolish both.

Both of the chairmen – the Maoists' Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the royalty of Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev – hold the belief that the Nepali public is a peasantry more than willing to submit to their individual feudal dictates. They do not seem to recognise, or care to concede, that the citizens have developed a taste for democracy, and for what a modern-day pluralistic state can deliver in social and economic progress. They know that that future lies neither with king nor rebel – not in right-wing dictatorship, nor with ultra-left totalitarianism.

Over the autumn and winter, the insurgents have given ample indication of their desire to submit to the people's will. The Maoists must perforce be tested in their announced willingness to join multiparty politics, but today it is the royal chairman who is the stumbling block to peace and democracy: by not responding to the Maoist ceasefire of four months' standing last autumn, by continuing to snub the very parliament-abiding political parties who could save his throne and his dynasty, and – the unkindest cut of all – by militarising the Nepali state.

The entire national superstructure is crumbling around Chairman Gyanendra, and yet there is no indication that he understands the gravity of the situation. The destruction of the state structure and economy over a single year leads to the inescapable conclusion that Chairman Gyanendra has neither the aptitude nor acumen to be a head of government, which he has been since he appointed himself chairman of the Council of Ministers following the royal coup d'etat of 1 February 2005. It could even be that, having got himself into a jam, the chairman's arrogance does allow him to extricate himself. He has not reached for the lines that have been thrown to him in the past year.

The frustration with the head of government is exemplified by the anger of a soldier shouting into a phone at a public call booth in Nawalparasi District last month, after a devastating attack on an army convoy. Here is how he was overheard: "Sir, how many more of my boys have to die because of the

Prachanda in The Hindu interview of 8 February 2006

arrogance (*hath*) of one man?!" There is disillusionment in the police force with a king who insists on moving about in army combat attire, and increasing disquiet among the army officer corps who are unable to pass the message up the ranks. The police these days surrender at the first instance of attack, and the soldiers are fatigued without having really taken on the rebels – socially isolated and without inspiring leadership. They might well have put up a good fight for the sake of the citizenry, but not for the 'supreme commander-in-chief'.

A time for sanctions

If the knot lies in the obduracy of Chairman Gyanendra, then the question would be how to force his hand. International condemnation has not worked for someone who seems willing to operate under the isolationist junta model perfected by the generals of Rangoon. Neither is the chairman bothered that his failures are paraded before the people, with fiascos in governance, diplomacy, development, economic management, administration and warfare. The public, finally, got a flavour of what some diplomats had known earlier about the royal ability to misrepresent, with the televised address on the anniversary of the takeover. Looking straight to the camera, on the morning of 1 February 2006, Chairman Gyanendra claimed that the Maobaadi were reduced to indulging in "isolated incidents of petty crime", even while, at the moment of the taping, the guerrillas were destroying the Rana-era administrative centre of Palpa. He proposed that the national image and pride had been restored, when in fact the chairman cannot extract a single invitation for a state visit overseas, and foreign dignitaries shun the country like the bird flu. Chairman Gyanendra also, with a straight face, claimed that democracy had been strengthened during his year of royal rule.

Nor was that it. Having squandered numerous opportunities to build bridges to the political parties, in a Democracy Day message on 19 February, Chairman Gyanendra called on those "interested" parties to approach the royal person for discussions. He did this while scores of political leaders – including the topmost, such as Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) and Ram Chandra Poudel of the Nepali Congress – were in detention at his command. This was yet another exhibition of the chairman's contempt for the Nepali public, by now too numerous to list. It is part-and-parcel of a mindset that thinks the international community will believe his democratic credentials if he repeats the term 'democracy' several times in a speech.

Given the recalcitrance of Chairman Gyanendra and his royalist cohort, and the unwillingness of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) leadership to caution the chairman from this destructive path, the time has come for targeted international sanctions to check the anti-democratic, militarist royal agenda for the sake of the people of Nepal. As called for by several international human rights organisations, and increasingly by bold activists speaking out within Nepal, the sanctions would apply to the individuals of the royal regime – freezing the international bank accounts of members of the royal family including a nefarious son-in-law, and denial of visas for international travel by both that family and by the topmost handful of military generals and all the members of the royal Council of Ministers. The international community must also demand information from the RNA on officers implicated in violations of international humanitarian law, so that they can be prevented from going on the highly-regarded United Nations peacekeeping assignments. If the army does not supply those names to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as it is currently refusing to do, then the individual battalions implicated must be refused peacekeeping stints.

It is important to go for targeted, individualised sanctions because the Narayanhiti regime does not respond – as even minimally democratic governments would – to the kind of sanctions that directly and indirectly hurt the people at large, such as reduced or cancelled foreign assistance to development projects and the government budget. A personal targeting and shaming, on the other hand, might yield results. It would spread immediate panic among the royalists ranks and serve as a potent 'feudalist' pressure on the chairman to back down.

Chairman in fatigues

The deadlock of the moment is not of the Maobaadi's making, but of Chairman Gyanendra's, and an army

brass that was a willing accessory to the coup d'etat. Narayanhiti has rapidly converted Nepal into a militarised state, where military officers have sidelined the civilian administrators and police throughout the 75 districts. Every one of Chairman Gyanendra's actions over the past year of absolute rule must be overturned if Nepal is to return to a pluralistic state, including prejudicial appointments, illegal ordinances and numerous royal fiats. But most urgent is to undo the damage done to society by the politicisation and deployment of the RNA as de facto administrators. This illegitimate, unworkable diversion must be abandoned if social progress and economic advancement are to be guaranteed through an inclusive, democratic society. The people's future must not be compromised because one man, who happened to get to sit on the throne at age 56, did not care enough for what 'militarisation' could do to society.

The RNA must return to its professional position as a national army rather than serve as the master-monarch's bodyguard, and the professional officers who value their profession must make themselves heard by the generals currently locked in a feudal embrace with the royal palace. For now, the haughty generals have no humility to show for their force's lack of fighting spirit since it was deployed four full years ago, even though the number of soldiers has nearly doubled in that period. Are they proud to be part of an army that refuses to go on the offensive, which today mostly guards only the barrack's perimeter fence even as neighbouring police posts or district headquarters are razed to the ground? Can they take satisfaction in a force that carries out 'air offensives' by throwing mortars out of helicopter windows onto populated terrain? What will happen when human rights organisations investigate the reported large-scale executions at the Bhairabnath Battalion in downtown Kathmandu? And how is it that the officers guilty of the 2003 point-blank massacre of 19 people – 17 unarmed Maoist activists, and two innocent civilians – at Doramba village in Ramechhap District, during a ceasefire period, did not receive their deserved punishment?

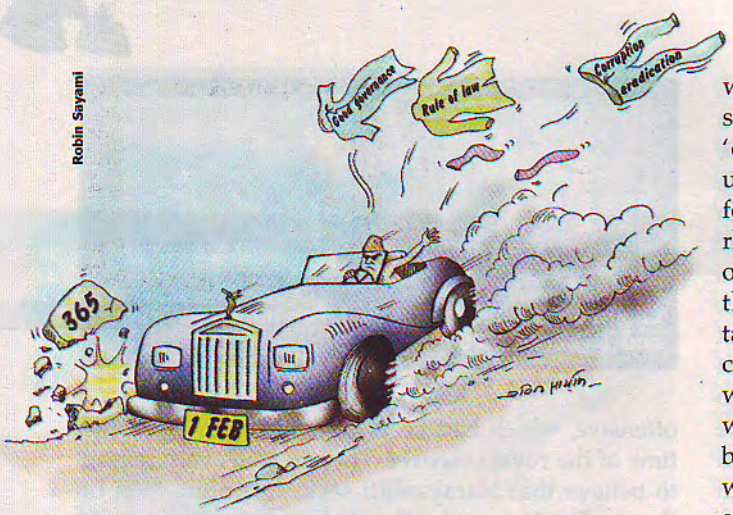
And how does one defend an army that has so little self-respect that, when challenged about human rights abuse, its topmost generals invariably reply, "Why do you not challenge the Maoists when they do the same thing?" This willingness to be judged at the same level as the renegade insurgents speaks of the quality of leadership with which the RNA is saddled – the same leadership that accepted Chairman Gyanendra's call to arms, not to fight the Maoists in the jungles, but to battle politicians, lawyers, journalists and human rights activists.

The supreme commander-in-chief is bent on destroying the Maoists militarily, even though the RNA has shown itself incapable of going on the offensive, which had been the hope of many at the time of the royal takeover. There is also every reason to believe that Narayanhiti seeks a continuation of the conflict. It provides the chairman with the excuse to continue to rule, and to distort the political process in such a manner over the next year or two that he will have created an irreversible process through a sham parliamentary election – a constitutional coup on the shoulders of a military coup – that leaves him with a quantum of power he would be satisfied with, but which was not sanctioned for the constitutional monarch by the 1990 Constitution of Nepal.

Chairman Gyanendra on TV 1 February 2005 (L) and 1 February 2006 (R)

It is difficult today to imagine Chairman Gyanendra reverting to being a 'constitutional' or 'ceremonial' king, so prejudiced are his views on pluralism and democracy, so public his contempt for the politicians and political parties, and so blatant and self-serving his agenda. It is not just the political activist that is reacting negatively – Narayanhiti would perhaps be taken aback by how the royalty has fallen in the public esteem. It is a surprise to find village elders scornful of Chairman Gyanendra, and the ability of the mainstream press to print 'full frontal' cartoons of the chairman is another indication of what has become acceptable. There is even a stirring of discontent palpable among Kathmandu Valley's urban middle class, who has given Narayanhiti the benefit of the doubt for this long. The destruction of the monarchy's image is not the Maoist's doing, it is the chairman's own.

And yet, it does not do to simply wish away monarchy in the arena of one's mind. Responsible politicians are required to seek out ways in which to pressure Narayanhiti to backtrack, 'because it is there', and with an army backing it. They also need to consider that the Maoists are not disarmed, even if their call has suddenly turned syrupy. Indeed, the need of the hour in Nepal is to find ways to force the chairman-king to back down, and to take it from there if he does not. While there are things that the international community can do (condemning the royal takeover, suspending arms assistance and contemplating 'smart sanctions'), the pressure on the palace must come from the Nepali people and their representatives – whatever it takes to get the palace with its back to the wall, and preferably in the form of an effective, well-organised, mass-based people's



movement. On the other hand, nobody need ever plan an anarchical revolution, after which it would be a question of picking up the pieces.

Even at this precarious and penultimate hour, it would be possible for Chairman Gyanendra to backtrack. He could still rescue his dynasty, if not his own rule, by surrendering to the public. This would happen through direct admission that sovereignty lies with the people and not in the crown, and in accordance with the Constitution of 1990. Following the royal climbdown, there must be guarantees of unquestioned control of the RNA by the civilian government; a rollback on all ordinances, orders and appointments of at least the last one year; an all-party government either by reinstatement of the Third Parliament (disbanded in 2002) or through an understanding among the political players; and the all-party government calling for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. This last is required to bring the Maoists in from the cold, given their process of reformation and given the past year's proof of Chairman Gyanendra's naked ambitions. Even to do away with the monarchy, the citizenry would have to be given a choice through a constituent assembly.

To believe or not to

And the Maoists do, very much, want to come in from the cold. The rebel change of heart is based on cool pragmatism or sheer desperation, depending on how you read it, but their recent pronouncements are credible enough to take them up on their offer. As the country is already at war, there is really nothing to lose in doing this. If the rebels are being manipulative and are found out, the state would simply be expected to return to war. To the plaintive question, "But can we believe the Maobaadi?" the answer is simple – there are reasons to believe that their resolve is genuine, and not because they are 'nice' people.

In August 2005, the Maoists held a plenum in their 'home district' of Rolpa and debated a resolution that was finally passed unanimously: the rebels would take a 180-degree turn (not announced as such), turn their ideology on its head, and enter 'competitive multiparty politics'. This was the untying of the most important and troublesome knot, for in one stroke the Maoists put behind them the rhetoric and agenda of 'people's war', on the basis of which, for ten long years, they have motivated their fighters and propagandised them on the takeover of Kathmandu Valley. There remains the challenge of how to tackle the rebels' gun-in-hand, which no longer has even the sanction of a 'people's war'. The violent inertia among the Maobaadi must be allowed to dissipate without further violence, which is why responsible politicians, society leaders and foreign diplomats should promote an engagement with the rebels, rather than go into naïve or self-serving denial.

It was after the Maoist plenum, on the basis of their willingness to move towards non-violent politics and on the rebound from Chairman Gyanendra's constant rebuffs, that the mainstream political parties decided to engage with the rebel chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal ('Prachanda'). The leaders of the alliance of the seven parliamentary parties agitating against 'royal regression' flew to Delhi and met with Mr Dahal and his ideologue-in-chief, Baburam Bhattarai. They emerged on 22 November with a 12-point understanding, the goal of which was to challenge the royal move and prepare for a constituent assembly as a way to address the Maoist bottom line. In early February, the Maoist leadership suddenly unleashed their leader, Chairman Dahal, on the national and international media with unrehearsed on-camera interviews.

In the interviews, the Maoists supremo was playing to diverse national, Subcontinental and world audiences, as well as to his own cadre; and so, while disarming, his statements contained their share of contradictions. At times full of uncompromising bluster, at other times sounding conciliatory, Chairman Dahal sought to convince of the Maoist decision to come into multiparty politics, laying it out as a magnanimous act of great proletarian wisdom. The chairman presented several scenarios of possible resolutions on a 'pick one' basis; but most importantly, he conceded that the Maoists' descent to 'multiparty politics' was dictated by the regional geopolitics, and the US and Indian support for the RNA that had made the fight difficult. The Maoist conclusion, he said, was that adjustments were required to Mao-Lenin's 20th century communism for implementation in the 21st century. The Maoists of Nepal were the vanguard for this, from whom even the Indian Naxalites could take a lesson or two, he said, such as the importance of parliamentary politics!

Sitting in a New Delhi safe-house during the

interviews the Maoist chieftain then proposed, with his chief ideologue and one-time rival Mr Bhattarai by his side, the specific '*nikas*' or way out of the quagmire. He suggested that the Maoists should stay out of the fight for democracy in the beginning, recognising perhaps the domestic and international difficulties if armed rebels were part of a democratic movement. At one point, Chairman Dahal suggested that the most practical nikas is a revival of the Third Parliament. This reinstatement was not to be through royal initiative, but something to be wrested from Narayanhiti through an energetic movement that would unilaterally announce the revival. The Parliament would garner international recognition, and appoint an all-party government that would negotiate with the Maoists and pave the way for a constituent assembly.

At several points in the interviews, given to Nepali and Indian dailies and the BBC World Service radio, the Maoist chief even indicated his willingness to accept a 'ceremonial' kingship if the constituent assembly outcome so warranted. On the run-up to the assembly elections, the rebels would need international supervision of the RNA and the rebel fighters. This is seen by their leadership both as a means to protect the cadre in the process of weapons decommissioning, as well as a sop to prove 'international recognition'. The greatest difficulty for the rebel commandants will be to convince battle-hardened fighters that the ten-year fight had been worth it. Besides the fact that Chairman Gyanendra will not hear of UN involvement, there is a problem in the Maoist projection here: all-powerful New Delhi too rejects the suggestion, for reasons of geopolitics quite different from the chairman's.

How does one believe the Maobaadi leadership, given their history of manipulative manoeuvring? Would they not take the political parties for a ride? Fortunately, the credibility of the insurgents' desire to jettison the 'people's war' and enter the world of competitive parliamentary politics does not depend on the 'Prachanda interviews', which are but attempts to make the act of climbdown convincing to the Kathmandu middle class, the Indian intelligentsia, and the world at large – not to forget their own cadre, who are all listening in on their FM and short-wave receivers. There are several reasons why Mr Dahal and Mr Bhattarai are convincing on this one, this time around. To begin with, the change of policy was the result of a unanimous decision of the rebels' expanded central committee meeting – called a plenum – which makes this reversal more than what is contained in polemical press releases that get faxed and emailed to Kathmandu. The fact that Chairman Dahal was openly on television and allowed himself to be photographed for the press indicates a desire to end underground life at age 52. Also significant is the fact that the chairman was committing himself before the Indian government and public opinion, which would have New Delhi breathing down his neck if there were to be a blatant backtracking.

Non-Maoist Maoists

Why did the August plenum take the decision it did? Obviously the Maoists had grown too big too quickly and were having to make adjustments to save their 'revolution' from internal corruption, this last being something Chairman Dahal has admitted. Having gotten to within fighting reach of political power-sharing in Kathmandu – which was never, perhaps, really expected – the leadership realised the need for a change in strategy. This is because no government in the world, including India's, would recognise Maoists as 'Maoists' in the seat of power in Kathmandu. There was only one way out: renounce the 'people's war' even if one did not say it out loud, and put your best face forward.

The violent politics of the Maobaadi had properly incensed the international community, and the post-9/11 'war on terror' was a set-back for a group that has used terrorist methods. American, British and Indian assistance began to flow in large volume to the RNA, and was suspended only as a result of Chairman Gyanendra's coup. But it was when India began to sense a danger to its own internal security from copycat insurgencies in its hinterland – due to the high-profile Nepali Maobaadi – that the ground shifted for the insurgents. It did not help that, during their rise and spread, the Maoists had made liberal use of anti-Indian rhetoric, based on an ultra-nationalist ideology actually devised by Gyanendra's father, Mahendra, back in the Panchayat era.

The Maoist vitriol against India, the bans on Indian vehicles and cinema, the targeting of Indian multinational property in the Nepal Tarai, and in the last instance, the whimsical preparation for an Indian attack through a campaign of digging trenches all over – none of this endeared the Maobaadi to the Indian state. When India decided it had had enough – and its foreign minister had termed them 'terrorist' even before Kathmandu did – it deployed its SSB paramilitary force along the open Nepal-India border to monitor movement. It nabbed two central Maoist leaders in Madras and Guwahati and set them on trial, and it prevented wounded Maoist fighters from being treated in nursing homes in towns like Lucknow or Gorakhpur. Proactive Indian displeasure, as well as the realisation

Narendra Shrestha

that New Delhi would never 'allow' a Maoist government in place in Kathmandu, have been possibly the most important factors for the rebels to want to come aboveground – it is a requirement of their very success that they abandon the 'people's war' that has brought them thus far. In addition, the role of the Indian left parties, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist), seems to have been important in influencing the Nepali Maoists to see sense.

No less important, perhaps, is the domestic challenge faced by the Maoists. Here, too, the rebels realised that they could spread thus far and no further in their goal of state takeover. While they have been able to make spectacular hit-and-run attacks in the hinterland, they never came close to taking over any of the 75 district headquarters, let alone Kathmandu Valley. The militia and guerrillas were thus confronted with the prospects of a never-ending fight, whereas joining aboveground politics would require laying down the gun and joining multiparty politics. In the early years, the rebels were able to motivate fighters with their run of assaults on police and army posts, and the promise of the prize of Kathmandu. Successful mass attacks on barracks and the looting of weapons also served to keep up morale. As the army acquired Belgian Minimi belt-driven guns, as well as more-efficient American M-16s in place of aging India-donated SLR rifles, and with the RNA learning to defend its barracks with mines and concertina wire, the insurgents had to turn to the 'lowly' task of destroying administrative offices, government infrastructure and poorly-armed police chowkis.

With the army refusing to engage them in the field, the Maoists could not hope for firefights and battles to show their fighting mettle. All in all, for the last few years the rebel fighters have been reduced to clandestine ambushes of security forces, laying down improvised explosive devices on public roads, as well as blockades and highway closures. Even as it was getting harder to motivate the cadre, the instances of banditry and wayward violence not sanctioned by the high command indicated disintegration of the fighting spirit. A sudden, deep and open ideological split between Chairman Dahal and Mr Bhattarai in the spring of 2005 divided the rank-and-file all the way down to the district level. It is not yet clear how that rift was patched up, but the leadership seems to have decided to seek a *surakshit abataran* (safe landing) while the movement was still united. The Maoists could continue to make the country ungovernable, and that was even easier with Chairman Gyanendra leading an unmotivated security force, but the goal of capturing Kathmandu was receding.

Due to domestic, regional and international considerations, therefore, the Maoist decision to come to a 'safe landing' is convincing to all players. All players, that is, other than some diehard members of Kathmandu's royalist elite and the American ambassador, who in mid-February conducted a frenzy of meetings, speeches and letters-to-the-editor trying to convince whoever would listen of an impending Maoist takeover of Kathmandu, and of the need to reject the Maoist siren calls that the 12-point understanding and the Maoist interviews represented. Lacking a nuanced understanding of the fast-changing Nepali political discourse, and obviously running to the dictates of his own administration's 'fight against terror', the ambassador managed – it is hoped momentarily – to deflect the debate and the search for peace. Whereas a civil cautionary note to alert the political class of the dangers of Maoist doubletalk would not have been untoward, the ambassador was acting very much the American cowboy in a Nepali china shop. As the royal regime's detainee, civil-society leader Devendra Raj Pandey said from jail on a mobile phone, "The ambassador's statements are designed to take the country back to civil war, more bloodshed, and away from a political solution."

Closure of the 'people's war'

If the Maobaadi are to be believed in their desire to bring the 'people's war' to a close, then it is Chairman Gyanendra, leading the RNA by the nose-ring, who is the obstacle for a return to both peace and democracy. And so, once again the question: how to bring Narayanhiti to heel? Today the regime seems to stands tall, but its bones are brittle. The king has with him no supporters, other than the quislings and opportunists who have joined the cabinet and leaders of mini-parties who want to make good under royal patronage. His plan is to ride it out through the spring of 2006 in the hope that the monsoon will defuse the political agitation, and a year from now he can organise a sham parliamentary election to gain sham legitimacy. But this is a plan concocted in a royal vacuum, by a man who believes in his ability to stay in power with the help of a dispirited RNA. In the towns and villages, there are very few opinion-

makers today who feel for the monarchy, and especially the current incumbent. Internationally, it is not likely that the players important to Nepal – India, the UK, China, Japan, the European Union, the UN Secretary General or the US (despite one odd plenipotentiary) – will come around to seeing things the way Chairman Gyanendra would like them to do.

But while the international community should stand ready to provide support in addition to what it has already done, peace and democracy are goals that Nepalis themselves must fight for. With the plethora of 'donors' willing to invest money in all kinds of conflict-resolution exercises, it will be the death of the 'fight for freedom' if the politicians too start accepting foreign assistance under the line-item 'restoration of peace and democracy'. There is no doubt, however, of the need for the politicians to ratchet up the battle, and their lethargy thus far is no proof of the lack of urgency in the situation. It is just that the rage against the royal takeover has not been translated into effective mass action.

Obviously, the contradictions between the political parties, the power centralisation within the parties – particularly around the person of Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress – and the copious lack of imagination and planning in the leadership ranks generally, have all been contributing factors to the inability to defeat the royal action more than a year after the takeover, even though the militarisation underway should have energised the political class. But it is also important to note that politicians better understand the challenges, particularly those who have held national office. This is something the firebrand members of civil society or impatient diplomats do not appreciate enough.

To take one example, the seniormost politicians are circumspect when it comes to the slogan for 'democratic republic', even though sections of civil society have already run with it. The goal of a democratic republic is not only compatible, but goes to the heart of the demand for a pluralistic state; but until recently, it was the battle cry of the Maoist rebels. Indeed, 'democratic republic' as a slogan to fight the royal agenda is compromised unless simultaneously the matter of the Maoist gun is addressed. The political parties have today come around to accepting the constituent assembly as the departure point for the post-Gyanendra evolution of Nepali democracy, and they did this only after the Maobaadi were able to convincingly project their about-turn on the 'people's war'. But they still hold arms, whereas the political parties never have.

It must be added that Chairman Gyanendra over the past few years has done more than the Maobaadi to destroy the image of monarchy, and likewise he has done more to give energy to 'democratic republic' than the rebels in the jungle. It has become difficult to conceive of the man with the crown functioning as a constitutional monarch, bound to a ceremonial throne, without residuary powers.

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Building democratic steam

It is already very late in the day to wrest democracy back from the grip of Narayanhiti. And it is the political parties – assisted by various branches of civil society, including the bar, the journalists, academia, human rights activists and independent citizens – who must rise to the occasion. What are they to do? Why, they must build steam in the movement to force the regime against the wall, for the sake of democracy and for peace through dialogue with the Maobaadi.

But what to do if the chairman refuses to budge? Many political players are reduced to waiting for a spark, some accident, which would act to release all the public's pent-up anger in a flood that would wash away the monarchy. But that would be to invite anarchy, which in this country can be savage, and the political actors as yet have no mechanism in place to manage such a destructive bout. A planned roadmap would have to be a mix of what is practical and desirable, given that the situation is complicated by the three-way tussle between the rebels, the royal regime and the political parties/civil society. The goal is a return to representative government, for which the rebels have to be brought into a safe landing, while the monarchy has at the very least to be constitutionally-neutered.

The great advance of the last half-year has been the convincing presentation of the Maoists that they do indeed want to come to a landing. The four-month-long ceasefire allowed the Maoists to recoup a large measure of their political capital, which had been lost in their heightened militarism of the past few years. The Maoists took back their ceasefire when it became difficult to sustain under the RNA's 'non-cooperation', and now they have gone back to attacking state security and destroying government property, and have announced an onerous period of nationwide closures in the coming two months. The rebel leadership must have its compulsions, but they surely realise that their return to violence weakens the very political parties whose help they need to come aboveground.

Min Bajracharya

Members of the Third Parliament hold a street session.

Their continuing violence strengthens no one but Narayanhiti and the RNA, and makes the already-sceptical international community nervous.

The Maobaadi must unilaterally call for a cessation of hostility and do their bit, even if the state security fails to respond as before. They must do this to allow politics to revive in a country where it has almost died, and to give peace a chance. Meanwhile, the political parties do not have a choice of building a people's movement. At the moment, they are waiting for international pressure, the public shaming, and desires for continuity of dynasty to force Chairman Gyanendra to backtrack. His record thus far points against such a possibility. There is no alternative to an energetic political movement.

The mainstream political parties are united today on the political fight for a constituent assembly, which would also carry along those who seek a democratic republic. The constituent assembly is thus a widely recognised roadmap to peace in Nepal today – it has the intelligentsia and the political class united, the international community on board. Ironically, in one of his interviews, Chairman Dahal has even spelt out how this is to be done: as mentioned previously, this would be through the revival of the Third Parliament, followed by the formation of an all-party government, which would hold dialogue with the rebels and organise the elections for the assembly.

The brave new world that would suddenly unfold with the revival of Parliament – or another way in which an all-party government could be formed, if that were possible – is tantalising for anyone with some political imagination. The all-party government would start a dialogue with the Maoists. Simultaneously, the army would come under the Parliament and the all-party government of the day, for which the existing National Security Council, which ensures civilian control of the military, would be activated. The nature of the constituent assembly would have to be worked out.

This is how the ground has shifted in Nepal – before the August plenum, it would have been premature to propose the constituent assembly as the roadmap, because the Maoists were steadfast in their violence agenda and the 'people's war'. With the rebels having made a credible departure, the constituent assembly, as a means of giving the people their ultimate right to choose their system of government, suddenly comes onto the centre stage. This, then, would be the slogan with which to challenge Narayanhiti. Chairman Gyanendra is by now the only powerful player opposed to the constituent assembly, and he would certainly try and sabotage every move to restore democracy through a revived Parliament.

It would be a welcome thing if Parliament were to be revived through a Supreme Court verdict on a long-pending case, as some politicians seem to be hoping for, so they can be saved the trouble of organising a movement. It is even possible that the concerted show of national and international solidarity might shake the moorings of Narayanhiti, its cohort and the military leadership, forcing them to capitulate without further fight. That seems unlikely to happen, however. Besides, almost by definition, a democracy that has not been fought for is bound to have within it elements of anti-people compromise. There is no way around it: a people's agitation is required to push back the autocratic agenda of Narayanhiti, supported by an international community willing to place individualised sanctions against the royalty, the military top brass and the ministers.

It is just possible that the Spring of 2006 will bring such a political tsunami of sheer people power. But it is also possible that the chairman-king will continue to bleed the people, making it into the monsoon period and getting himself a respite. If that happens, there are no alternatives but to continue the non-violent fight for peace and democracy – through the next monsoon, and the next and the next.

But the best will be if the Spring of 2006 yields a people's movement that vanquishes Chairman Gyanendra, at which point Nepal can then start on the long-delayed process of reconstruction and rehabilitation – and the revival of a democracy better than that experienced between 1990 and 2002. There are too many young widows, too many orphans, too many displaced, too many young fighters in the land. The long haul will begin once Chairman Gyanendra's agenda is defeated, and the Maoists are taken along on the march of peaceful, aboveground, multiparty parliamentary politics. The last time democracy was ushered in was the people's movement in the Spring of 1990 – the Jana Andolan 2046, according to the Nepali calendar year. What the people await this spring is Jana Andolan 2062, not expecting the chairman-king to give up without a fight.

Interview

"They are keen to leave violent politics"

Girija Prasad Koirala of the Nepali Congress party and Madhav Kumar Nepal of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) are the two pre-eminent leaders challenging the royal takeover of 1 February 2005. *Himal Southasian* spoke to Koirala, 80, as he was recuperating from an extended illness. Mr Nepal, meanwhile, has been in house arrest under orders from King Gyanendra since 20 January 2006.

What is the fate of the 12-point understanding of the parties with the Maoists?
Our stand remains firm on the understanding. We will not deviate despite pressure from some quarters because it holds out the hope for peace and democracy.

What about the Democracy Day invitation by the palace for 'interested' parties to come for dialogue?
That only added insult to injury at a time when so many of us are in detention, including Madhav Kumar Nepal Ji of the UML.

What about the international community?
The king is completely isolated. Everyone opposes his takeover, even those he thought would support him.

The American ambassador expresses alarm over the parties-Maoist relationship.
His pronouncements are like a safety line thrown to the king. We shall see if the king uses it to retreat or to reinforce his autocratic grip. I have my doubts and am watching this closely.

You know the Maoists are continuing with their violence.
They do have a problem with controlling their far-flung cadre. Plus, the security forces have been instigating a return to warfare, like during the ceasefire period.

The rebels give contradictory statements and interviews.
These things will happen, because they also have their activists to consider. I have met them, and I will rely on what they have said to me in person. *Maobaadiko kura malai chodidinus* (Leave the Maoist matter to me). It is our responsibility to bring them in – no one else can do that.

These are the same Maoists who regarded you as the arch-enemy as prime minister.
They are keen to leave violent politics at long last. We are working for a political solution, which is possible now because the Maobaadi no longer believe they can achieve a military victory.

On the political front, what should the palace do?
The king must issue a proclamation conceding that state sovereignty (*rajakiya satta*) lies with the people. He has to do that.

Thereafter?
The Parliament must be reinstated. Everything else will flow from there. I have been steadfast on reinstatement because it remains the proper as well as practical way out. This has not changed, even though the political scenario has changed so much.

What will the Parliament do?
You will be surprised at how many layers of problems will be solved the day Parliament is restored. First and foremost, it will guarantee peace with the Maoists. We will also have democracy. The restoration of Parliament will be decisive.

The Maoist chairman says he will not agree to restoration done by the palace.
There are several ways to do this, and we can proceed without sidelining Maoist interests.

Does this mean you are committed to a constituent assembly, which the Maoists want?
Absolutely, this will happen after the Parliament is returned.

Why have the parties been so weak in opposing the royal takeover?
In the beginning, we did have problems within ourselves, and also some lack of clarity. This prevented us from going to the people. Remember also that we have been harassed continuously, detentions, house arrests. Even today, our most effective organisers are being picked up one by one.

How strong is the seven-party alliance in resisting the palace?
Forever they said we could not unite against the royal agenda, but we have held together all this while. The roadmap for peace and democracy is there in the seven-point all-party programme, which has now been strengthened by the 12-point agreement. That agreement, too, was not an end in itself, but a building block.

How will the movement play itself out do you think?
We have to energise our agitation in the next two months. We must finish it off before the monsoon.

Would you take the position of prime minister if offered?
I am at that stage in life where I want to see peace and democracy restored before I leave the scene. I know the clock is ticking. Fortunately my health has improved somewhat; I will now be traveling to energise the *andolan*.

What if the collapse of the royalist state led to anarchy?
I do not think we have come close to that stage. And if the palace relents, we may not be faced with such a situation. However, if it does arise, the political parties will be able to rise to the occasion and take charge.

Have you been in touch with the Narayanhiti royal palace?
It has been fourteen months, I have not had any contact.

What should the king do?
I am one who believes in giving continuity to history as much as possible, because that will help achieve permanent peace. This is the reason for the goodwill towards the monarchy as an institution, but the king must understand how precarious the situation has become now. If he reaches out, of course we can help. If he does not, who can take responsibility for what happens next?

An international pariah

by | **Irene Khan**

The human rights catastrophe in Nepal has been a decade in the making. Thousands of people have been killed. Hundreds of thousands have been uprooted. Women have been attacked and raped. Farmers walking home from their fields face bombs and ambushes. Children are abducted and forced to join the fighting. A population already living in dire poverty has been further impoverished by conflict, insecurity and *bandhs*. Critics of the regime have been locked up or killed or 'disappeared'. Over 1000 activists, lawyers, journalists and politicians were arrested for taking part in peaceful protests in January and February alone. Despite these draconian measures, the vitality and dynamism of Nepal's civil society and media have not been blunted.

A year ago, shortly after King Gyanendra imposed a state of emergency and cracked down on political activists, I visited Nepal to assess the situation in the country. I met with the king, who assured me that he would uphold human rights and address impunity. He has patently failed to do either.

The king assured me that he would uphold human rights and address impunity. He has patently failed to do either.

At the end of the visit, Amnesty International called on all governments to stop arms sales to Nepal, and for the UN to deploy human rights observers urgently. India, the United Kingdom and the United States suspended military aid to the Nepal army. In my recent meetings with senior Indian government officials, they reiterated their intention to continue the ban. However, the impact of the suspension has been marred by the fact that the Nepal government has been able to purchase weapons from China and elsewhere.

The UN Commission for Human Rights adopted a tough resolution on Nepal in April 2005, which was followed by the deployment of UN human rights monitors in Nepal. The first report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights indicated that, despite these measures, the situation continues to deteriorate.

King Gyanendra's government seems impervious to the suffering of the people, and defiant in the face of international disapproval. The failed elections, the ending of the unilateral ceasefire by the Maoists, and the recent escalation of violence bode ill for the future.

Ratchet up pressure

The time has come for the international community to ratchet up the pressure so that the government in Kathmandu is forced to open political dialogue, and end human rights violations. Three key measures are now urgent.

First, the United Nations must take a tough stand against the deployment of the RNA to UN peacekeeping operations abroad. The RNA has committed flagrant violations of human rights – killing civilians, torturing detainees and 'disappearing' people. The UN cannot, on the one hand, deploy human rights observers to monitor the violations by Nepali troops and, on the other hand, allow the same soldiers who have been perpetrators in their own country to become protectors and peacekeepers in other parts of the world. The UN Peacekeeping Department must

screen Nepali troops and refuse to deploy those who are alleged to have been implicated in human rights violations. Such action will hurt the army, as participation in UN peace operations is considered to be prestigious and financially rewarding.

Secondly, the time has come for the UN to consider targeted sanctions against the government of Nepal. The sanctions must be 'smart' enough to target those who are in power and responsible for the human rights violations, but leave untouched humanitarian aid and economic activities of the population at large that is already suffering from the harsh consequences of conflict and insecurity. Measures such as travel restrictions on government officials and the seizure of assets overseas would help bring home the message that the regime is an international pariah, and will not be allowed to continue its business as usual.

The time has come for the UN to consider targeted sanctions against the government of Nepal.

Thirdly, there is widespread feeling that the presence of the UN human rights monitors has been beneficial. The mandate of the monitoring mission must be extended and its capacity expanded. The monitors should establish their presence outside Kathmandu, in the provinces where the population is most vulnerable. The international community should make sure that they have the necessary support and resources to do so, and that the government and Maoists give them full, free and safe access. It is in the interests of all parties to the conflict that international monitoring takes place to build confidence and curb the worst abuses.

The Maoists too have been responsible for widespread human rights abuses, including civilian killings, abductions, and recruitment of child soldiers. With the end of the ceasefire, there are dangers of an escalation of abuses. If the Maoists want to be taken as a serious player in the political process, they must make a clear, public commitment to respect human rights and humanitarian obligations. All those who have influence on the Maoists – including Nepalis, and other opinion-formers and politicians who may be seeking to negotiate with them – must send them this message.

The real solution to the human rights crisis in Nepal lies in the ending of conflict and the opening of political dialogue. However, without a real commitment on all sides to respect human rights, the space for political dialogue will be limited. Concerted and intensified international pressure can help build that commitment to human rights.

The rise and fall of the Maobaadi

Regional geopolitics and international balance of power have forced the rebels to a crossroads – compromise or be defeated.

by | **Puskar Gautam**

Min Bajracharya

In its tenth year, the Maoist rebellion in Nepal has not become any less complex. Its analysis requires not just an understanding of the historical evolution of conflict in Nepal, the nature of conflict in Southasia and, in particular, the southern watershed of the Himalaya. All of this must also be done against the backdrop of Maoist rebellion in other countries and continents. On the political side, there are three layers that must be analysed: the left-democratic movement of Nepal, the Maobaadi activities in the context of international and Southasian politics, and the international communist movement. Neither can we study the Maoist phenomenon in the absence of an understanding of caste-ethnic inter-linkages in the Himalayan midhills, the specificities of the Nepali economy, and the attempts of Nepali feudalism to countenance globalisation. Finally, the respective national security preoccupations of *Maha-Bharat* and *Maha-Chin* to the south and north also have a bearing on the rise and fall of the 10-year-old Maoist war.

War and the Maobaadi

The Nepali state was born of the political, strategic and diplomatic experiences gained during the 75 years that started in the 1760s with the victorious unification process. This was followed by the expansionary war that subjugated the territory between the Teesta and Sutlej rivers, and the phase of defeat that concluded with the humbling Treaty of Sugauli with the Company Bahadur in 1816.

The strategy of the conquering chieftain of the principality of Gorkha, Prithvinarayan, was to bring the various principalities of the Himalayan midhills consecutively into his axis, even while seeking to stop the spread of the British Empire. Many of his tactics resemble those of the Nepali Maoists of today – keeping at bay the foreigners who wished to help the Valley's kings, building their fighting force from among the people, and waging an efficient guerrilla war. It took King Prithvinarayan 15 years of fighting to take Kathmandu Valley after leaving Gorkha, and

he succeeded only after imposing an economic blockade and takeover of a fortress to the south.

The Maoists, for their part, have on occasion sought to block the highways into Kathmandu according to their 'surround and conquer' slogan. Prithvinarayan had found it easier to conquer the territories of the west, and for the east he had to use a combination of pacts and deceit. Today's insurgents have similarly found it easier to spread in western Nepal, which has become their stronghold, while they remain weaker in the east.

The Sugauli Treaty denoted the end of Nepal's feudo-nationalist interregnum, marking the capitulation of the state and relinquishing of large parts of territory. Decades of court intrigues followed, ending with a massacre of the Kathmandu nobility that left Jang Bahadur as the ruler. He became a puppet of the British, going to their aid during the Sepoy Mutiny in late 1857. Years later, that submission before imperial Britain was followed by the deployment of Nepali troops, in the service of the overseas Crown, into Waziristan and the two world wars. Indian experts subsequently helped to organise the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and provided it support in its development and expansion. As such, the RNA has been little more than a unit set up with imperialist support to prop up feudal authoritarianism.

The respective national security preoccupations of *Maha-Bharat* and *Maha-Chin* have a bearing on the rise and fall of the 10-year-old Maoist war.

Revising strategies

The Maoist rebellion that developed to challenge the Kathmandu state evolved as a carbon copy of Mao Tse-Tung's own war. The rebels managed to achieve extensive success by following Mao's dictates and turning the Nepali terrain to their advantage. Perhaps their very success was the beginning of their downfall, however, as geopolitical and national factors would not let them expand further. As a result, putting a brave face to their turnaround, the Maoists who started on the road to building a communist state have been reduced to saying that all they want now is a 'competitive *janabad*'. Thus, even an ideology as strong as Maobaad was not able to stand up to geopolitical ground-reality.

The abandonment of the earlier strategy of 'surrounding the cities' to what is today called 'linking the villages to the cities', is also the result of newfound geopolitical pragmatism. The Maoist leadership has not yet been able to decide whether it should respond to the 1 February takeover by King Gyanendra through a peaceful movement, a combination of armed and unarmed action, or an all-out military assault on the state. The reason behind this is the slow understanding that the 'people's war' is not practical against the prism of Southasian geopolitics and international balance of power. The fact that the Maoists have swung from one extreme to the other with regard to their positions on India and the monarchy stems from this geopolitical situation.

The rebels started their movement in 1996 with a boycott of Indian movies, and until not long ago were urging their cadre to build bunkers to resist an impending Indian invasion. Today, those same rebels are wise to New Delhi's geopolitical weight in their affairs, and have gone suddenly quiet. They have made extended stays in the Indian capital to meet with the Nepali political party leadership, where they also signed the 12-point understanding and gave interviews to Nepali, Indian and international media. They have even persuaded themselves to delete the line 'Indian expansionism' from the document of their central committee 'plenum', which met in August 2005. The very Maoists who claimed that the republic was at hand at the time of the royal palace massacre of June 2001 today seem willing to allow a ceremonial king to stay on, if need be. The 12-point agreement outlines a situation wherein only 'authoritarian kingship' is eliminated.

What becomes clear is that, while the Maoists may have amassed military might over the last decade, their political capital is very small. The future Maoist road can now lead in one of two directions: compromise or defeat.

Southasia and the Maobaadi

The continuous collaboration of the Rana and Shah clans in Nepal was supported by the national security interests of China and India, both of which sought a stable kingdom in the central Himalaya, no matter the ruling feudocracy. While both New Delhi and Beijing have now come to realise that stability in Nepal must come from a post-feudal set-up, the Maoists seem to have missed this significant shift in regional geopolitics. Indeed, at the end of the feudal and colonial eras, it is difficult for an armed rebellion to gain legitimacy, internally or externally. The Maoists also failed to include in their calculations that a rebellion within Nepal would surely make the neighbours nervous in this age of globalisation.

The Indian victory against colonialism was the result of a struggle that was linked to the Subcontinent's civilisational values, including its philosophical, religious and cultural traditions. To this day, the Communist Party of India (CPI), established in 1920, has not been able to evolve as a national party due to its inability to understand

Indian specificities and evolve a relevant ideology. Even the Naxalite movement, which began in the 1970s, failed to learn from the experience of the CPI. Likewise, the Maobaadi of Nepal failed to connect with the cultural diversity and belief systems of the central Himalayan region.

Wars can be just and unjust – and one can term all Maoist 'people's wars' as just wars, the same as national liberation movements. But it becomes a matter of concern whether the rebellion puts the gun or the people at the forefront of its strategy. The Maobaadi forgot Mao's dictum that while guns are important, it is the people who are decisive. Instead, the Maobaadi put the gun before the people, militarism before politics.

Having thus conducted a 'people's war' while seeking to understand neither the civilisational values of the Subcontinent of which Nepal is part, nor the economic realities and rules of social interrelationships, the Maoists were seeking nothing less than magic in attempting a proletarian revolution. Today, their only possibilities are capitalist democratisation, or the rapid destruction of their amassed energy. There can be no other end.

Other wars

The end of India's Naxalite movement of the 1970s, as well as that of the Maoists of Peru and Colombia in the 1990s, were considered major setbacks for the global Maoist movement. Mao's Great Leap Forward had failed while he was still alive, and the Cultural Revolution ended with his departure. In the 1990s, when the communists of the world were happy just to maintain their existence, Nepal's Maoists proceeded to make 'revolution', giving renewed hope to many revolutionary brothers and sisters across the globe.

Much to the distress of those who had applauded the distant revolution without realising its inner philosophical weaknesses, after a decade of military victories and exciting propaganda, the Maobaadi suddenly seem willing to push Lenin and Mao into the dustbin. They are calling for 'competitive politics', promising to give up the gun under international supervision, and even saying that Nepal is not yet ready for total revolution. Incidentally, the 'competitive communism' of Prachanda has not been explained in terms of economic policy, nor how this novel ideology will survive amidst globalisation. This failure to specifically outline differences between Prachanda's newfound political stand and the multiparty people's democracy envisaged by mainstream communists in 1990 has produced a severe ideological, political and strategic crisis among the rebels. Clearly, the Maoist leaders are in a difficult spot today, having to sound placatory internationally even while maintaining the standard rhetoric for internal use among the cadre.

Though one does not have to designate the failures of contemporary communism as indicating 'the end of history', the fact is that the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Chinese Revolution of 1948 have come full circle in the hills and plains of Nepal, with the Maoists going back on their promise of 'people's war'. And so, here we have the Maoist leader willing to attach Maoism to capitalist democracy, which previously he himself had ridiculed as a 'transvestite multiparty system'. At a time when the legacies of Mao and Lenin are being questioned and the followers of Peru's revolutionary leader Gonzalo have been abandoned, the hope has been belied that Comrade Prachanda may be keeping the flame burning in the hills of Nepal.

Prachanda and his chief ideologue, Baburam Bhattarai, took their organisational model from Stalin and their slogans from Mao's Cultural Revolution. The about-face that the two and their plenum have taken in seeking an entry into multiparty politics will hardly help the proletariat they claim to champion, but will instead aid the forces of imperialism. Even if the anti-imperialist models applied in Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile and to some extent Brazil are not able to provide complete 'liberation' to their respective peoples, at least they are providing some comfort. Nevertheless, such fighters are derided by Maoists like Prachanda and Baburam as revisionists and reactionaries.

During their rise, all political movements in Nepal have used the gun, but they have also always been transformed into peaceful movements.

Perhaps the very nature of intercommunity relationships in Nepal promotes the resolution of conflicts in a peaceful manner. Whether of the left or centre, during their rise, all political movements in Nepal have used the gun, but they have also always been transformed into peaceful movements. This is perhaps a Nepali speciality, as seen in the past movements started by the Prachanda Gurkha, the Praja Parishad, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist). All eventually gave up their guns and entered unarmed politics, and none continued the fight underground. Compared to the others, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) may have conducted the most vehement and extended military action, but it looks as if they too are ready to emulate this legacy of Nepal's modern era, which began with the fall of the Ranas in 1950. After ten years of insurgency, the Maoists are intent on jettisoning their ultra-traditionalist communist values and coming to the mainstream, in order to keep their identity alive. This is a good move, and it should be supported.

DFID Department for International Development

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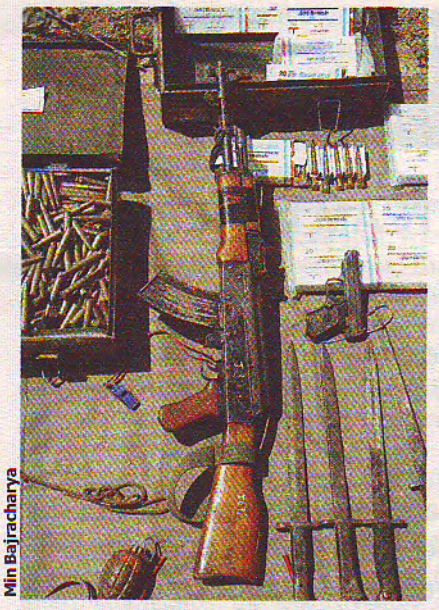


Min Bajracharya

Nepal's two WARS

There is strategic stalemate and no possibility of military victory for either side in Nepal's domestic conflict, but only the Maoists have publicly acknowledged that they accept this reality.

by | **Sam Cowan**

What is war? This short, profound question is posed by Clausewitz, the 18th century Prussian military philosopher, at the start of his monumental book *On War*. Later, he concludes a brief analysis of warfare through the ages by saying that all warring parties "conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims".

Despite this conclusion, Clausewitz's great work is to some extent time-bound due to his obvious belief that Napoleon and revolutionary France had succeeded in bringing warfare to its ultimate level; they had "liberated war, due to the people's new share in these great affairs of state". Bringing in "the people" was novel for his day, and prescient about the conditions of modern conflict. But the quote indicates his unquestioning acceptance of the prevailing concept of his day: that war is the exclusive province of states; that only the state has the legitimate right to use force; and that warfare consists of the uniformed soldiers of states clashing on a battlefield to determine whose interests should prevail. For Clausewitz, "everything is governed by a supreme law, a decision by force of arms."

Even in Europe, however, this concept only made sense as an explanation of war after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which concluded the chaos of the Thirty Years War. It is a concept that makes even less sense now. Today the armed forces of states are being challenged, in many cases successfully, by the fighters of non-state forces, who are bound by none of the norms of conventional war and who operate in a way that neutralises a large percentage of the expensive and sophisticated equipment and armaments of state forces. This may not be the 'people's war', as Nepal's Maoists designate their struggle, but it is certainly war about the people, amongst them, and against them. There is no specific battlefield; military engagements can take place anywhere. This new style of warfare also starkly reveals the limitation of military force to achieve desired political outcomes, even for the most powerful of states.

All of this is well exemplified by what is happening in Nepal. The Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and the Maoists' self-styled People's Liberation Army (PLA) are fighting two very different wars, where even such basic concepts as combat success and failure are at variance, as are their respective estimates of what constitutes military strength and weakness.

The RNA's war

The RNA is fighting a conventional war of attrition, in which the emphasis is on the control of key territory, and the engagement of the enemy to inflict casualties, thereby weakening his will to resist. Clausewitz would recognise the approach. For him, "wearing down the enemy means using the duration of the war to bring about a gradual exhaustion of his physical and moral resistance" – an idea that well describes the RNA's current intent, though it is publicly expressed differently. In a February interview, King Gyanendra explained his views on the possibilities of winning the current war. "It's not a question of winning or not winning," the king said. "It's a question of taming." The government studiously ignored a recent four-month Maoist unilateral ceasefire; this, coupled with recent official statements that there will be no talks until the Maoists disarm, indicates that the government is firmly committed to seeking a solution by arms.

So can the RNA achieve this mission? Can it "tame" the Maoists? More conventionally, can the RNA wear down insurgents to the point that their

morale collapses, they hand over their weapons and abandon all military efforts to achieve their stated objectives? All recent counterinsurgency experience indicates that the way they are going about the task makes it almost certain that they cannot do so. Military textbooks state that the key to success is gaining the support of the people, and the way to do this is to treat the people with respect, give them security, *and* integrate military efforts with development projects, social programmes and reforms aimed at tackling the underlying sources of discontent.

Such an approach is rooted in the strategy recommended by Sun Tsu, who 2500 years ago drew on an existing corpus of Chinese war experience to write what is generally regarded as the other great book on war, *The Art of War*. "What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy," he wrote, "next best is to attack his alliances; next best is to attack his army." In other words, if the enemy's strategy is to gain control over the people, denial of this must be the main thrust of any response. But the RNA's task in this battle for hearts and minds is the more difficult one, because ultimately the Maoists do not need the support of the people to stop effective governance in rural areas. All they need is for the people not actively to support the state. It is the state that needs the people's support, and numerous intelligence failures, manifest in the number of times the RNA has been surprised by large-scale Maoist attacks, indicate a deficiency in this key area.

There are various factors that contribute to this. For example, apart from the moral and legal imperatives, there is a human rights link to military effectiveness. The most committed Maoists – those seething with resentment against the state – can invariably relate stories of family members killed in cold blood by the army and police. Intimidation from the Maoists is also a factor, as is the RNA's inability to provide continuous security to villagers. Here the RNA is faced with the oldest tactical dilemma of all: how much effort should be applied to hitting the enemy, and how much to stopping him from landing his blows? Doubling in just the past five years, RNA strength is now nearing 100,000, but a very large proportion of this number is devoted to protecting major towns, the 75 far-flung district headquarters and other vital static locations, particularly the Kathmandu Valley. Even an additional doubling of troops to 200,000, as has been discussed, would not enable the army to provide a permanent presence across countryside that is ideal for guerrilla warfare, and such wide deployment would open up another range of targets for Maoist attacks. The recent rapid expansion in RNA strength also inevitably leaves a leadership vacuum at senior levels. The significant issue of how this huge expansion is being funded, as well as its impact on other parts of the Nepali economy, both merit separate study.

The RNA reaction to this challenge is to ignore the Maoist strategy, as well as much of what is found in military textbooks. Their concept of operations is based on the third-best of Sun Tsu's options. All effort is focused on attacking the PLA – including those perceived as giving them succour and support – to inflict the maximum number of casualties and thus wear them down until their morale collapses. But there is limited operational capacity to pursue this objective, and absolutely no guarantee that a greater capacity would greatly increase the chances of success. Periodic 'sweeps' do take place in areas designated as Maoist heartlands, with predictable results – the Maoists who appear to fade away, return when the soldiers leave a couple of weeks later. Undercover operations are also clearly being carried out by Special Forces and related units, with results manifest from time to time by the killing of alleged Maoists in isolated locations, usually publicly designated as 'encounters'. Many of these incidents have given rise to allegations of human rights abuse, which are invariably denied. The main RNA offensive capability – greatly feared by the Maoists when they concentrate in a particular area for any purpose – is the use of helicopters, from which mounted machine guns are fired or 81mm mortar bombs are thrown out, two techniques that have given rise to many civilian casualties.

To date, the RNA military effort has led to the death of many thousands of Maoists, as well as many more civilians. Whatever the numbers, there is little evidence of any collapse of Maoist motivation. To understand why it is holding up so well, it is necessary to examine what *morale* is and what contributes to it, both in general and in specific relation to the Maoists.

Maoist morale

British military doctrine usefully defines 'fighting power' or 'military effectiveness' as having two components. One is the physical component – the means to fight, consisting of manpower, equipment and logistics. The other is the moral component, the ability to get people to fight, and this is fundamentally about leadership and motivation. This neatly reflects Clausewitz's description of war as both a trial of strength and a clash of wills, "two factors that can never be separated". His emphasis on the crucial nature of the moral component, however, is clear: "the physical factors seem little more that the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade."

The simple point is that, in assessing military strength, full weight must be given to that which cannot be measured – the unquantifiable but eternal martial qualities of leadership, discipline, courage, tenacity, endurance, and willingness to sacrifice one's life. Without these, numbers and equipment mean little; and, whatever their other failings, Nepal's Maoists have shown that they are not short on the

qualities or the motivation needed to fight.

To appreciate the basis of the high morale in this poorly armed force, it is necessary first to understand the war that the Maoists are fighting, which is guided by a fundamentally different concept of conflict, as set down in the writings of Mao Tse-Tung. Mao's basic ideas about tactics are well known: "Ours are guerrilla tactics. Divide our forces to arouse the masses, concentrate our forces to deal with the enemy. The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."

At the strategic level, Mao's concept of 'protracted war' is his most enduring legacy. He stressed that at all times the revolutionary army must stay unified with the people among which it fights. The people can thus supply the recruits, supplies and information that the army needs, and can be politicised at the same time. In this way, the cultural and political structure of society can be transformed step-by-step with military success. Revolution thus comes about not after and as a result of victory, but through the process of war itself. Hence, Mao's best-known slogan, with its very distinct but often-misunderstood meaning: "Power flows out of the barrel of a gun."

This is the strategy being followed by the Maoists in Nepal. For an armed force that probably has only between 4000 and 5000 effective personal weapons, including about 1500 fifty-year-old .303 rifles of limited utility, it has brought them remarkable success. Such a deficiency in the physical component of military effectiveness indicates that there must be a very strong moral component to compensate. The factors that contribute to this have been inadequately assessed in military terms.

One example of this is the little-understood sociology of the Nepali Maoist movement, aspects of which contribute powerfully to the qualities needed to get people to fight and to sustain their commitment whatever the hardship and danger. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine wrote in the February 2004 *Anthropology Today*: "The movement offers to its members a new ideology which provides an understanding of reality for those who have not succeeded educationally or economically as much as they may have wished: in particular it offers them the possibility of fighting against their situation, and a new understanding of their oppression and exploitation. The Maoists have been able to develop a genuine mystique ... which combines violence and the bonds of brotherhood; this produces a very high degree of cohesion inside the movement and terror outside it."

Call to sacrifice

Perhaps the most complex aspect of Maoist morale strength to grasp, particularly for Westerners, is the cult of sacrifice. Anne de Sales, in the *European Bulletin of Human Research* (*EBHR*, v24), discusses this aspect in a way that brilliantly conveys its strength and centrality as a motivating force for Maoist fighters. In 1997, writing about preparations for launching the 'people's war', Prachanda noted that, "New definitions of life and death were brought forward. The physical death for the sake of people and revolution was accepted as the great revolutionary ideal for oneself as it gave true meaning to life."

Revolutionary songs are an important part of Maoist culture, with cassettes and song-sheets widely distributed. The melodies are based on evocative Nepali folk songs and have an immediate appeal. The first part of the lyrics depicts the struggle for existence and the pain of exploitation and poverty, instantly relatable sentiments. During the second part, however, the tone changes, conveying the challenge: "The night is gone: this is the morning of a new day. The bugle of freedom is blowing ... The oppressor can be crushed." The message to the listener is that *you* are required to fight, shed *your* blood, sacrifice *your* life, "so that the people can be made one, and triumph".

Anne de Sales points out that this is not the conventional Hindu view of the sacrifice of a substitute for personal gain. Rather, this is "the self-sacrifice of the martyr who gives his life so that he can benefit by living on, if only in the memory of the people of which he is part, and for whose better future he sheds his blood." Given the high number of woman combatants, *she* and *her* can be freely substituted.

This belief of what 'death in action for the cause' means is clearly an extraordinarily powerful motivating force when facing extreme danger. It must be fully integrated with the other factors contributing to Maoist morale in any assessment of the likelihood of RNA success through its current approach of simply killing as many Maoists as possible. For the RNA, such a policy carries with it the clear danger of measuring operational success and campaign progress by that most misleading of yardsticks – the body count.

The attack of Beni

A brief look at the largest-ever Maoist military operation offers a good insight into their military capabilities. This was an attack on the evening of 20 March 2004 against the headquarters of Myagdi District, a western Nepali town called Beni. The aim was to overrun all security forces in the town and hold it for the night. After an all-night battle, one RNA battalion continued to hold their barracks on the edge of town. But the Maoists captured the town itself before withdrawing the following morning, having destroyed all government buildings and taking with them some 40 prisoners, including the chief of police and the Chief District Officer. Weeks later, all were released to the International Committee of the Red Cross. While the operation was not a complete success tactically, it was a major psychological blow to both the government and the RNA, who, not for the last time, had been proclaiming that the

Maoists were finished.

A Kathmandu-based Japanese journalist, Kiyoko Ogura, has published some exhaustive research on the attack in *EBHR* (v27). Altogether, 3800 fighters and 2000 unarmed Maoist volunteers marched for about twenty days to an assembly area around two days away by foot. While there, they were able to advance the attack by 48 hours due to worries that their intention had leaked to the RNA. Equally impressive was the security they imposed on such a large-scale operation and the total surprise they achieved. Their medical support and evacuation arrangements were detailed, and indeed textbook, in both planning and execution. The local people of Beni commented specifically on the very young age of the fighters, the bravery of the wounded, that one-third of the fighters were women, and their particular agility and commitment in the attack.

Since Beni, the Maoists have been sparing with such large-scale attacks against defended RNA positions. They have carried out some, however, including a large assault on 1 February 2006, the one-year anniversary of King Gyanendra's royal coup. During that attack, on the district headquarters of Palpa District, every government installation except the army barracks was destroyed, 130 prisoners from the local jail were set free, and millions of rupees were looted from the local banks. As at Beni, both the CDO and the chief of police were taken prisoner and later released. Again, it was clearly an impressively planned and well-conducted operation, having achieved total surprise despite the large numbers involved. The Maoists risk heavy casualties with such attacks, but they have an acute awareness of the psychological and political impacts of military action. In Palpa, they received an unexpected bonus when, a few hours later, in an address to the nation to mark the first anniversary of his takeover, King Gyanendra claimed that "acts of terrorism are now limited to petty crimes".

How much effort should be applied to hitting the enemy, and how much to stopping him from landing his blows?

No military solution

Although in conventional military terms the Maoists appear a pathetic armed force, when the vital morale component of military strength is taken into account, they are by no means weak. They have a proven strategy, favourable terrain, immense dedication, and an absolute willingness to sacrifice their lives for the cause. All of this gives them the capacity to make large areas of Nepal ungovernable in any meaningful sense for many years.

Their critical deficiency is the inadequacy of their means to fight. However strong Maoist will and motivation might be, the vast superiority the RNA enjoy in weapons and equipment have forced the Maoists to acknowledge publicly that they cannot seize and hold anything in the face of RNA action. That the military path they had originally set to their objectives is doomed has been particularly acknowledged through statements in late 2005 and early 2006. It is also manifest in the 12-point agreement signed with the agitating political parties in November 2005, which signals their willingness to shift (given certain vague conditions) to a multiparty political track.

In this conflict of 'two wars' there is no possibility of a solution by arms. Each side can demonstrate that it is making progress according to its own criteria of success. By the same logic, however, notwithstanding tactical gains, neither will be able to deliver a decisive strategic result that will end in the capitulation of the other. Thus, there is strategic stalemate, in both the general and literal meanings of the term. Claims about the Maoists that "their back is broken" are both misleading and meaningless. War is not metaphor. War is death, destruction, ruined lives, communities torn apart, children orphaned, women widowed and much, much more. All decisions and discussions about its utility should be guided solely by awareness of these harsh consequences, not by mind-sets inured from reality by soft words and platitudes.

The history of the last fifty years of counterinsurgency operations the world over is littered with optimistic predictions about imminent victory that have proved consistently and hopelessly illusory. Similarly, in Nepal before the end of the last ceasefire, there were claims that "the RNA can finish them off in six months". The country is now into its fifth or sixth such 'six-month' period; while the Maoists have been weakened, they are a very long way from being finished.

Unless there is a ceasefire and the start of a peace process to which both sides are committed – not just to the cessation of hostilities, but to finding, through negotiations and compromise, a political solution – Nepal faces the prospect of war without end. The key lesson from other conflicts is that the start of such a process, and indeed the precondition for any hope of success, is when both sides come to the conclusion and publicly acknowledge that they cannot achieve their aims by military means. The Maoists have already done so. Recent statements by officials, however, indicate that the government is still firmly committed to seeking a solution by force.

Finally, and most obviously, both of Nepal's wars are having a devastating impact on the lives of its rural people. Caught in the no-man's land of a nasty and brutish conflict, they yearn desperately for peace. This can only be achieved by following the well-established pattern of people sitting around a table and negotiating a political way out. In Nepal, as elsewhere, all will have to compromise. The only questions are: When? and, how many young Nepalis will die in the interim? Far too many have died already.

Kiran Pandey

The 'Royal' Nepal Army

by | **Dhruba Kumar**

The basic principles of state administration include gathering power and developing the ability to utilise that power. Correct use of power adds to the state's strength, but misuse can lead to its failure. The Nepal of today is a burning example of the misuse of power – a situation made all the more grievous by the use of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) as a political weapon. The deployment of the military took place when the Maoist rebellion was already in full swing; with the RNA's failures, the numbers of those who kill and are killed have increased relentlessly.

The country today is caught in an unimaginably complex web due to the misuse of state authority. Even while the society is mired in violence, however, the state establishment remains unconcerned. Consider the fact that in extending its land battle to airborne attacks, the RNA has little reluctance to lob mortar shells out of helicopters in the direction of the enemy, destroying dwellings and killing innocents.

After having sat out the initial six years of the insurgency watching the under-equipped civilian Nepal police system bear the brunt, the army was forced to deploy in 2001 only after its barracks in Dang were destroyed in a surprise rebel attack. The democratic government of the day originally called for the deployment in order to control the violence, but killings actually escalated thereafter, a trend that continued during the subsequent four years.

The army, which is efficient in providing statistics, lists 14,000 citizens as having died as a result of the 'people's war'. In the first six months of 2005, the RNA says that the Maoists abducted 10,725 individuals, killed 72, and carried out 65 destructive explosions. The report also suggests that over the course of the insurgency, 1825 village administration

buildings have been destroyed, as well as 35 telecommunication transmission towers, 420 post offices, 297 police posts and six hydropower stations. After the second ceasefire period ended on 27 August 2003, the toll has been 5361 Maoists and 581 army men killed until 29 January 2006.

Meanwhile, even as the army has been unable to succeed in subduing the insurgents, it has been used to crush the democratic movement. As a result of the past four years' of army deployment and the last year of its use against democratic forces, today it is not the kingship but the RNA that is the country's most powerful institution. The kingship currently functions neither under the support of the people, nor is it backed by the Constitution – rather, it stands solely on the army's support. It is subsequently appropriate to ask: Does the king lead the army, or does the army lead the king?

The Royal Nepal Army has always stood behind the traditional establishment, and following the fall of the Ranas it shifted its allegiance to the Shah dynasty. One reason the RNA has never been people-oriented is because its leadership has historically been the monopoly of the elite clans, a situation that remains incongruously true to this day. In the democratic period after 1990, both the generals and politicians failed in building a relationship between the RNA and the civilian government. The 1990 Constitution did provide for a National Security Council through which the government would direct the military, but it was hastily activated only towards the end of the democratic period as a means to deploy the army. The politicians never made the effort to bring the officers into their advisory circles, and the RNA was rarely discussed in the Parliament. The politicians were wary of the army because the senior-most generals made no secret of their distrust for the political parties, nor their anxiousness to remain within the royal umbrella.

Does the king lead the army, or does the army lead the king?

Even as the RNA has evolved as the most powerful institution in the country, its image has been drastically weakened. Today, the army's actions are criticised nationally and internationally, with its war-fighting capabilities and morals questioned; even its right to go on UN peacekeeping operations has been challenged. The reasons for this loss of image are twofold: weaknesses in command and control, and the fact that it is propping up an illegitimate regime.

Armed impunity

In order to understand its present failure, one has to study the nature of the RNA's attitudes towards democratic governments of the past, for they show the generals to be regularly out of step with modern-day thinking about the role of the military. There were two incidents of insubordination by the then-commander-in-chief (with the support of the king as 'supreme commander-in-chief') when the government of the day sought to deploy the RNA. There was the forced resignation of a home minister after the Maoist attack on the district headquarters of Dunai in 2000, and the resignation of a prime minister when the top brass imposed conditions for its deployment in Holeri. Then-PM Girija Prasad Koirala was checkmated when the army demanded an all-party consensus as a precondition to deployment, as well as an announcement of a state of emergency and enactment of an anti-terrorism law.

The required legislation was passed as per the army's demands, and Article 20 of the Terrorism and Destructive Activities (TADA) act provided the RNA with extensive freedom in its anti-terrorist activities. Under this article, the government tacitly granted impunity to all the security forces. Not only was the RNA placed outside the rule of law, it was also taken outside the purview of the 1959 Military Act, which defines the military's organisational and deployment parameters. This might have been the reason why a brigadier, who headed the RNA's Legal Department, was reported as stating categorically that without the TADA provisions, the army could never have been deployed.

The retired generals who, five years ago, would claim that the Maoists would be decimated within a few weeks of the army's deployment have been proven wrong. This itself exemplifies the type of leadership the RNA has been saddled with in the past, and which has brought the force to its present situation. The inability of the army to mount effective counterinsurgency operations is now confirmed, even though its entire training over the decades has concentrated on mountain guerrilla warfare and conducting hit-and-run counteroffensives. RNA soldiers have not been able to show their fighting ability at the ground level against the Maoists rebels, nor has the army headquarters in Kathmandu shown an ability to introspect on how it has arrived at this stage.

Unified command

There is also the failure of the concept of 'unified command', which is an American idea foisted on Nepal's security forces. Under it, the anti-Maoist activities of both the civilian Nepal Police and the new armed police are conducted under RNA leadership. A complex chain of command has been created that gives the soldiers authority while depriving the other forces of morale. The RNA has little to show for its new powers. Not only does it command the entire security apparatus; it also has an unfettered ability to use all of the government's administrative, economic, political and diplomatic capital, as well as access to governmental

information and communication facilities.

A capable army would be one that carefully prepares for a possible conflict, has intelligence capabilities at the ready, and learns from its mistakes once the fighting has started. The RNA has been incapable on all three of these fronts. As such, what should have been the government's anti-rebellion trump card – deployment of soldiers – has ended up a damp squib. The army gives every indication of having been caught unawares when it was forced to the field in 2001, even though it had been watching from the sidelines for six years as the civilian police, with its antiquated weaponry, had responded to the 'people's war'. Nor do we get a sense the soldiers studied the other conflicts in the neighbourhood, including in Kashmir, Northeast India and the Naxalite rebellions in the contiguous regions of Bihar and West Bengal. Lately, RNA troops have preferred to stay secure within the barbed wire and landmined perimeter of their barracks; when nearby government offices or police posts are attacked, they protect themselves until it is safe to emerge.

As far as the 'unified command' concept is concerned, the RNA should have realised that just because the Americans used this method in Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq, does not mean that it would work in Nepal. To begin with, the Nepali army and police have historically worked in completely different spheres and with some amount of hostility. The armed police force, meanwhile, is as yet an infant organisation, without a history of its own. It is also interesting that the US Army has evolved into the main training supporters of the Nepali military; lately, after all, the US military has concentrated on push-button warfare in which more innocent civilians die than actual rebels – not that the American generals or administration seem overly worried about that. While taking advice from the US Pacific Command, the RNA seems to have failed to keep in mind that it was fighting in its own country, in highly populated territory, against a well-motivated rebel army in overwhelmingly guerrilla-friendly terrain. Focused on annihilating the rebels, the American instruction is not practical, which is why there are questions about the abilities of the US-supported fast-action Ranger Battalion that has been set up as an elite force within the RNA.

In recent days, perhaps following American prescription, the RNA has become increasingly reliant on air attacks – shooting from helicopters and heaving mortars from hovering aircraft. This has resulted in appalling and indiscriminate destruction of life and property. The level of panic on the ground during air attacks is also something about which RNA commanders seem to worry little. In principle, the RNA entered the villages to win the 'hearts and minds' of the populace, but in reality it has not been able to mix with the people. Soldiers have always remained wary of civilians, and have been unable to provide protection for them in the face of Maoist harshness.

The effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations is judged not from the bullets expended, but from the ability to generate public support for actions in the field. The RNA has failed to understand that treating the public like the enemy rebounds on its own effectiveness in the field. The trust required between the populace and the security forces in tackling a rural-based insurgency is just not present in Nepal today. Perhaps the RNA's greatest weakness in this sense is its complete failure in gathering human intelligence. Often the RNA either does not have the required intelligence, or is not able to act on available intelligence. The failure in intelligence is one more example that, despite the army command's willingness to talk big, it retains a predilection to make critical mistakes with its eyes wide open.

The army's insensitivity can also be seen in the numerous killings of innocent civilians throughout the country, as well as the torture of detainees and the large number of disappearances. Meanwhile, human rights activists have been termed 'communists' and 'Maoists', while journalists are harassed and politicians treated with contempt. There is a conviction within the RNA that covering up mistakes is better than coming clean, based on a misplaced fear that a full airing would weaken troop morale. Meanwhile, the Maoists' ability to conduct war continues apace – now overwhelmingly reliant on arms looted from the police and army, as one retired general has admitted. The army has confessed to being unable to repossess more than 15 percent of those arms captured by Maoist forces.

Strategic charade

Overall, the political and military objectives of the RNA's deployment have become confused. Previously, the goal of deployment had been political, to the extent that it was meant to force the rebel leadership to come to talks. It was the army itself, however, that then carried out the Doramba massacre in August 2003, destroying the talks that had been progressing between the civilian government and the Maoists. The subsequent policy driving the RNA seems to be one of subjugation, but this has not been successful due to soldiers operating defensively rather than offensively. Even while claiming over 9000 rebels dead so far in the rebellion, the RNA has not been able to control insurgents' abilities to attack.

Since 1 February 2005, the army's deployment has become both more confusing and more thoroughly politicised, as the top brass have agreed to use the RNA rank-and-file to support the royal coup d'etat. Thus, the army became part of the conspiracy to wrest away the citizens' fundamental rights, on the excuse

of battling terrorism. Soldiers have been used to jail the intelligentsia, political and civil-society leaders, as well as journalists and members of the general public. Rather than conducting search operations against Maoists, soldiers have been deployed in editorial rooms and radio studios.

RNA brass thus made a conscious decision to fight on two fronts: one against the rebels, the other against those unarmed politicians, activists and members of civil society who were fighting for democracy. In essence, the military today is fronting for an authoritarian kingship that does not have public approval and seems to find the peaceful democratic movement more intolerable than the Maoist war. The RNA has been swayed from its mission. Together with the army, the security force as a whole is increasingly perceived as the enemy of the people, which bodes poorly for the nation's prospects as a whole.

The result of unquestioningly serving as King Gyanendra's 'sepoys' against democratic forces has meant that countries both friendly and supportive of Nepal have not only condemned the royal takeover, but have turned against the army. In the three years of its deployment leading up to 1 February 2005, the RNA had received more than NRS 8 billion in international assistance. Now that support has completely dried up.

All in all, the blame for the RNA's loss of strategic direction, its inability to fight an effective counterinsurgency, and its deployment against the peaceful movement for democracy must be put in two places: the doors of the royal palace, and with the top brass at the RNA headquarters at Bhadrakali. The elite clans who have defined the RNA's functioning from the past to the present – and who themselves feel significantly more loyal to the crown than to the people – have allowed the officers and rank-and-file to show neither their sensitivity to modern-day demands, nor their fighting acumen.

Today, the RNA is a force that has been diverted from its mission of evolving into a professional army due to a misguided leadership that wants to maintain it as an appendage to the feudal monarchy. It is because of this prejudiced position that military leaders not only failed to reciprocate the four-month unilateral Maoist ceasefire of autumn 2005, but actively forced the rebels to return to hostilities by carrying out actions in the mid-western hills. Most ironic of all, today the army is more eager to engage unarmed pro-democracy protestors than to fight the Maoists, which means that it has already lost the moral battle and the people's trust. By not being able to engage the Maoists militarily, for having willingly been used as a royal tool, it can be said that, thus far, the Royal Nepal Army has failed the people of Nepal.

Negotiating Peace

Now is the time to decide on how Nepal's eventual negotiations can be structured, to maximise both effectiveness – and the hope of success.

by | **Liz Philipson**

Deependra Bajracharya

In April, Nepal will once again be debated at the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. The Nepal Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) has made its report to the Commission public in mid-February and it gives indications of the increasing misery in the rural areas of the country. This is matched by an increasing political impatience in the urban areas, as well as among the political players nationally and internationally. However, any armed conflict that continues as long as the Nepali Maoist conflict will demonstrate the complexities of intractability. Intractable conflicts require patience and collaboration in the search for a solution.

Since the start of the conflict, there have been changes in power relationships within and between the major political forces in Nepal. For instance, at the start of the conflict, the Maoists were ignored and dismissed – something that could not be contemplated now. The actions taken by the king on 1 February 2005 appear to have pushed the political parties and the Maoists closer and catalysed greater coordination between important donors and diplomats. However, for the people of Nepal there have been new problems. The issues of structured social alienation, economic inequality and regional disparity, which have contributed to the success of the Maoist revolution in rural Nepal, still persist. But those who have become more powerful or wealthy through the use of the gun are not about to meekly return to serfdom or penury. In addition, there are new problems associated with displacement.

Economically active people have left the country; seasonal workers have not returned from India; and there are sharp increases in female-headed households and bereaved dependents. People are moving to the urban areas, either to the district headquarters or, when they can, to Kathmandu. Those with more money and opportunity are leaving the country altogether. The loss of social capital from war-torn areas is always much harder to replace than the infrastructure.

None of these problems will be addressed by a simple 'power agreement' in Kathmandu, but such an agreement is necessary for this to take place. A complex negotiations process is needed but, sadly, even a simple political deal remains elusive. The path to an agreement requires political will on the part of all the parties – the will to come to the negotiating table and the will to remain there despite the inevitable obstacles. Political will was singularly missing from previous negotiations in Nepal. Although it was the Maoists that broke both the 2001 and 2003 ceasefires, the king never directly put his political weight behind those negotiating on his behalf. This weakened the process. The parties to the conflict have gone to the negotiating table on their own terms, whereas they have to be prepared to consider the positions of others. As of today, the government remains committed to King Gyanendra's three-year roadmap, which he announced at the time of the royal takeover on 1 February 2005, and it has not publicly shown any inclination for a negotiation of that plan. The other two sides to the conflict, the political parties and the Maoists, while they may have indicated non-negotiable bottom lines, have recently indicated some flexibility.

A more comprehensive peace process will require a concentration on political processes, not decisive moments or endgames

The November 2005 12-point understanding between the rebels and the political parties indicated a step in this direction, even though both remain fundamentally distrustful of each other. The people of Nepal understood that the four-month-long unilateral ceasefire called by the Maoists last autumn was a demonstration of a willingness to negotiate. Both the 12-point understanding and the ceasefire were popular.

Awaiting the decisive moment

The political parties are focused on a re-enactment of the Jana Andolan of 1990, a people's movement that will mark the decisive moment. However, the democratic struggle in which they are engaged today against the palace is taking place in somewhat different conditions, as this democratic struggle cannot be settled in isolation from the ten-year-old Maoist armed rebellion. The understanding the political parties have reached with the Maoists is a recognition of that. A more comprehensive peace process will require a concentration on political processes, not decisive moments or endgames. Processes are the 'how' rather than the 'what' or 'who' of negotiations. According to Henry Kissinger in 1969, "the way negotiations are carried out is almost as important as what is negotiated. The choreography of how one enters negotiations, what is settled first and in what manner, is inseparable from the substance of the issues."

'Process' encompasses a wide range of activities by various actors that form a web of support for negotiations, as well as the interactions through which the protagonists approach and maintain talks. This includes initiatives in the public domain by civil society. Good process is critical for the direct interactions between the parties, where it creates a learning environment and builds confidence through inclusivity, predictability and reliability. It should be iterative and have shared ownership. It is initially easier to build trust in the processes and procedures of negotiation than between the warring parties themselves. They build confidence with each other over time within the support of a strong process. This is the ideal; the reality is usually rather more based on the art of the possible, but attention to process makes negotiations possible and helps to sustain them.

In order to build confidence between parties in negotiations, it is important to incorporate a 360-degree sweep of perceptions, so that the points-of-view of all parties are included. There are times when it does not matter if something is true. If a powerful force believes it to be so and will act upon it, it is relevant. Above all, analysis that feeds negotiations must be timely, because the position of the parties will be constantly changing and affecting the trends in the conflict. Only through thorough analysis can one determine whether the 'conflict glass' is half-empty or half-full – in other words, Are the parties intent upon war or genuinely seeking a position to negotiate? In 1998, P Saravanamuttu, a Sri Lankan analyst commenting on his own country, stated: "We are in a surrealist situation, the rumour of war and about war has greater credence than the reporting of war. We are blundering, vainly hopeful, whilst the other side has a better grip on its agenda."

The previous negotiations in Nepal have tended to revolve around zero-sum negotiating tactics, rather than process-oriented dialogue. There have also been reports about the lack of preparation and lack of professionalism in the approach to those negotiations. An inadequate analytical approach and the lack of an information strategy – both inward

and outward – should also be added to the critique. It is important to keep in mind, however, that nothing substitutes for political will, as stated earlier.

Ceasefires and negotiations

Ceasefires are often seen as a signal that the parties are ready to negotiate. They provide a humanitarian pause and clear the political space to enable negotiations to take place. However, this is not always true – talking or even full-blown negotiations may precede a ceasefire and a ceasefire can be maintained after negotiations stall. Nevertheless, what we saw in Nepal in both 2001 and 2003 was the pattern of ceasefire, followed by negotiations, followed by a concurrent breaking of negotiations and then the ceasefire. Obviously, that a ceasefire was declared indicated some prior interaction between the parties; but for the future in Nepal, it may be useful to engage in rather more substantive talks about talks, combined with de-escalation. This would give some space for some principles and parameters to be discussed, and perhaps agreed upon, before the pressure and public spotlight of a ceasefire added its own tensions for the parties.

For the future in Nepal, it may be useful to engage in rather more substantive talks about talks, combined with de-escalation.

Ceasefires and negotiations are intimately connected but very different activities and agreements. Ceasefires based on agreements between the armed parties will include separation-of-forces agreements, pre-agreed monitoring mandates, investigation and adjudication mechanisms. Negotiations, on the other hand, are about finding a new political compact for the country. It is entirely suitable, indeed desirable, that ceasefires should not be seen as inclusive processes, but rather should be based on technical agreements with a narrow focus.

It is essential that peace negotiations be politically and socially inclusive. This is not simply a liberal aspiration. Those who are excluded almost invariably turn into peace-spoilers – Sri Lanka offers several examples of this, which has contributed to the undermining of the stalled process there. Nevertheless, once the channels of communication are established between armed parties for the purposes of agreeing to a ceasefire, it is not unusual for those channels to continue in the same manner in respect to peace negotiations; thus, utilising the trust and environment already created, and limiting the interaction to those who held the weapons, as has previously happened in Nepal.

A negotiation that purports to deliver a democratic peace requires a democratic process. The parties that have fuelled the war should not be left alone in charge of the peace. In Nepal, the diversity of population and history of exclusion make an inclusive peace process even more important than it might be elsewhere. This does not necessarily mean that there should be a plethora of organisations and parties at the main negotiating table. Peace processes take many forms and each is unique. A Nepali design that is suitable for Nepali conditions needs to be created, and there are many examples for reference.

Peace processes are of necessity complex. They will feature layers of consultation and layered decision-making and recommendations. At different stages, there may be public 'validation' of decisions, or elections to decision-making bodies. Due to the nature of Nepali society, inclusivity must be designed into the process. As the making of a new Constitution seems likely to be required, the manner in which it is made would be an outcome of the negotiations process and not necessarily a precondition of negotiations. It would be decided at the negotiating table whether a new Constitution would be created by a newly-elected Parliament or by a different assembly. If it is the latter, then who would it consist of, and in what numbers? Would they all be elected, or would some be appointed – if so, by whom? What would be the limits of the remit of the assembly or the Parliament in this respect? Would all aspects be entirely within their control? Or would they be required to consult interest groups – for instance caste groups – on particular aspects? Would there be preconditions? Negotiations need to set clear parameters for all of these questions and many others in order to ensure a stable basis for the Constitution-making process. Public information and education would also be an essential part of preparations for Constitution-making and all other aspects of the negotiation process.

Third-party assistance

Is there a Nepali solution? Most emphatically, yes. The complex conflicts of Nepal can only be ended by a political agreement among Nepalis. Whether Nepal can find solutions without assistance is doubtful, however. At the moment, there appears to be polarisation between the Nepalis who unrealistically seek the 'white charger' upon which the international community will save them, and other Nepalis who see only the Trojan Horse of India, trying to sneak into Nepal in the guise of third-party assistance. The negative 'big brother' image of India inhibits support for any international intervention, lest India be part of it or influence the process.

In fact, India's influence has increased since 1 February 2005. Both the US and UK have recognised that it is India alone who can directly pressurise the monarchy; and since all three support a democratic outcome in Nepal, they have largely followed India's

lead over the last 12 months. Many Nepalis point to the safe haven enjoyed by Nepali Maoist leaders as being evidence of duplicity and a desire to foment the conflict. Realistically, however, given India's own Naxalite problems, this is unlikely. A stable Nepal must be more attractive to India.

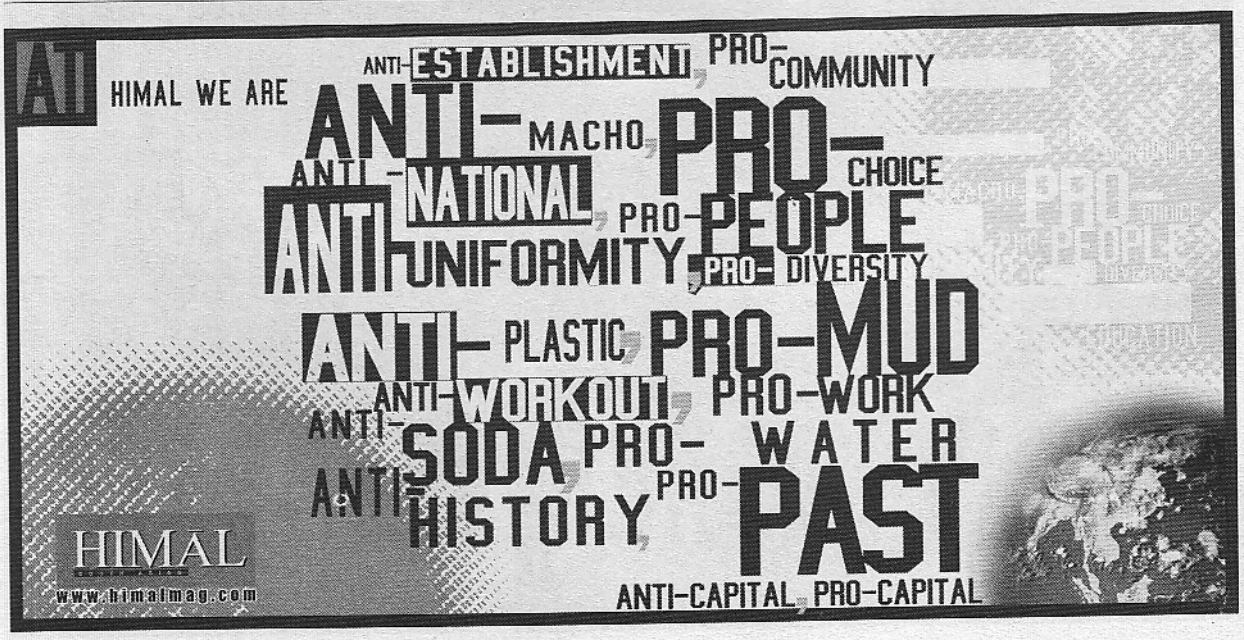
Nevertheless, the evidence of previous Nepali experience is that there is a need for greater expertise and advice to any negotiation process. This could include mediation or facilitation and ceasefire monitoring. No intractable war has reached a negotiated end without assistance, including in South Africa. For, though there was no formal external mediation in South Africa, they received immense technical assistance and training before, during and after the negotiations. South Africa was able to cope without direct mediation because the parties were able to agree on senior judges, acceptable to all, to chair the negotiations. That, combined with the quality of leadership of both the African National Congress and the National Party, led to a successful conclusion. Peace processes in every continent, including those in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and East Timor, have benefited from third-party assistance.

It is essential that peace negotiations be politically and socially inclusive. This is not simply a liberal aspiration. Those who are excluded almost invariably turn into peace-spoilers.

Both the Maoists and the political parties are currently seeking external third-party mediation. Their motivation is driven by the need for a witness and possibly a moral guarantor but, for all the reasons demonstrated by the 2001 and 2003 negotiations processes, external assistance is also needed at both a technical and 'process' level for ceasefire monitoring and negotiations. However, this does not mean that the solution should be external. The object of the negotiations must be a political agreement between Nepalis, and Nepalis should also be intimately involved with the facilitation or mediation of the process.

The United Nations has been mentioned as a possible mediator, and it has the experience to provide comprehensive and complex negotiation support. Secretary General Kofi Annan has taken interest in Nepal, and the UN's understanding of the situation is deepened by the presence of the OHCHR mission in Kathmandu. The Indian government and the current government of King Gyanendra are opposed to any external assistance. Given relations with Western diplomats since the 1 February 2005 takeover, the reluctance of the royal government is perhaps understandable. India certainly has its own regional and geopolitical concerns, but continuing to block external facilitation may backfire with an increasingly unstable Nepal on India's border.

Even the most perfect and perfectly facilitated process, however, cannot overcome an absence of political will. In Nepal, the political parties (the only unarmed political force) desperately need and want a peace process. The Maoists have given strong indications that they want to negotiate entry into the political mainstream in order to end their violence. The Royal Palace alone appears to be unenlightened as to the damage this war is inflicting on the Nepali people and, indeed, the country itself.



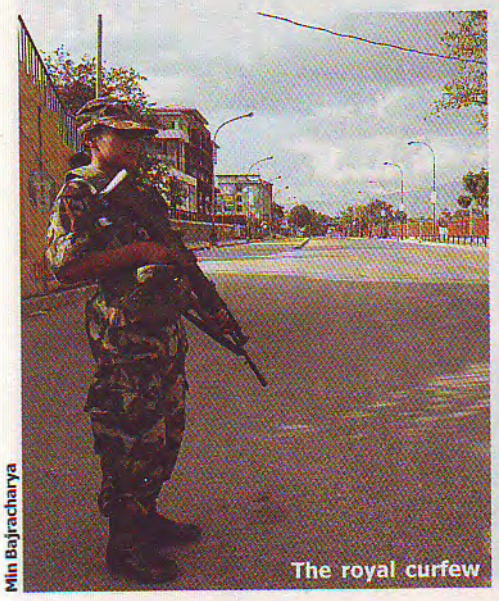
Jana Andolan 2062
जन आन्दोलन २०६२

There is a political movement underway in Nepal today that has not yet become a People's Movement, such as the one that overthrew the Panchayati Raj in the spring of 1990 (Nepali calendar 2046). The fight against the royal regime, backed by the Royal Nepal Army, has not been easy. As one political leader of the Nepali Congress put it, "We have been used to fighting the police, whereas here we are confronted with the soldiers and their M-16s." The ultra-left rebels, with their guns at the ready, have not helped the cause of a non-violent struggle for democracy either. The ebb and flow of the movement coincides with the public's conviction of the parties' ability to deliver peace. This is the season for political change in Nepal, and there must be a transformation. As one leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) argues, if we get into the monsoon, it might just be too late.

Presented here are pictures of a movement that seeks to be a People's Movement – Jana Andolan 2062.

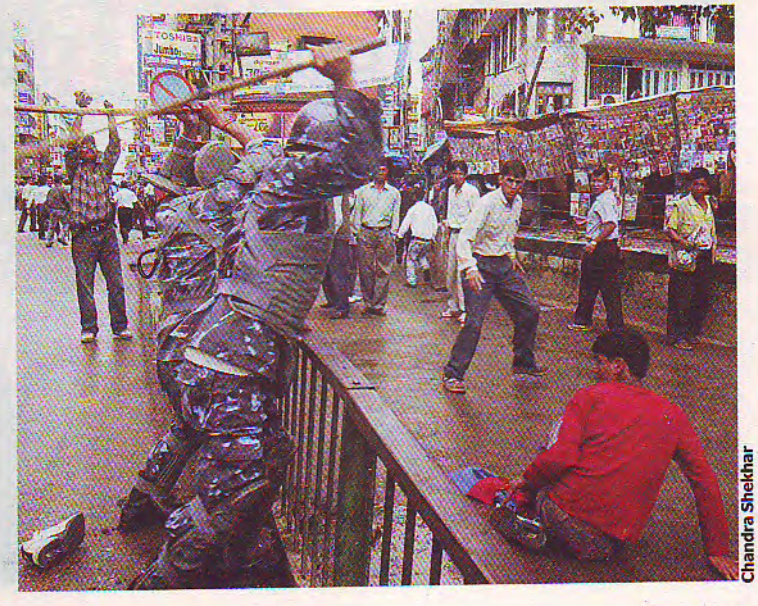
Min Bajracharya

Deependra Bajracharya



Min Bajracharya

The royal curfew



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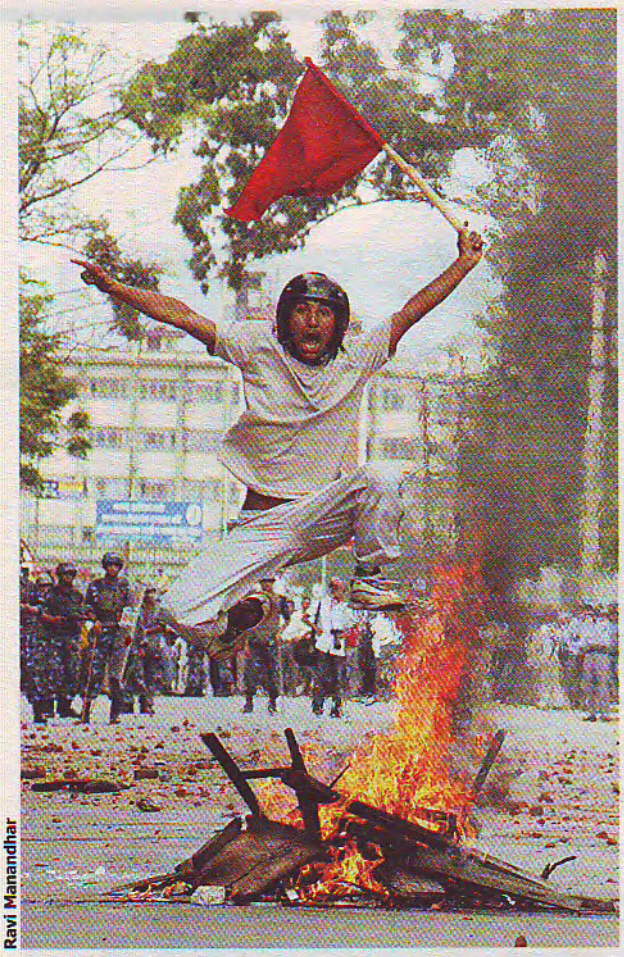


Ravi Manandhar

Sagar Shrestha

Min Bajracharya

Kiran Pandey

'Full press freedom'

Kiran Pandey

Min Bajracharya

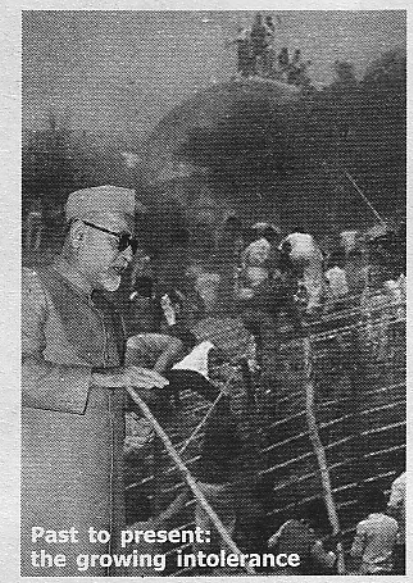
The age of entanglements

by | **Samina Mishra**

I suppose the first signs of my awareness of being Muslim must lie in a story my parents often repeat at family gatherings. I must have been three or four and was at a children's birthday party, the table loaded with goodies. And then a plate of sausages came around and I loudly proclaimed that I did not eat "piggy-wiggy"! Being Muslim then was about food. That, and my name.

What does identity really mean? And how do we get a sense of it?

When I think of my childhood, I do remember a very strong sense of being Indian. The kind of nationalistic feeling bred at schools through *Sara Jahan Se Achcha*. I knew Iqbal had written it, and I remember feeling sort of sorry that he ended up on what we thought of as the wrong side of the border. This sense of being Indian also came from the fact that my great-grandfather had been President of India, Dr Zakir Husain. But feeling Indian is not the only thing I remember. I also remember feeling not too rich or too poor – because we didn't own an air conditioner but did own a car. I remember feeling smarter than many in my class – because I could speak better English. I remember feeling like a girl – because I wore skirts and wanted to prove that I could do anything I wanted to. In my everyday life, these feelings were much more frequent and so, much more important to me. For strangers that I encountered, though, these strands of my identity were not as important as my name. That was what the first question was almost always about. Samina is so obviously a Muslim name, and Mishra a Hindu caste name. It is rare for this to be treated casually in India.



Past to present: the growing intolerance

My mother was uncomfortable with the idea of her children growing up as non-Muslims. And my father was comfortable with the idea of his children growing up as Muslims.

The Maithil-Muslim

I grew up as a Muslim but my father came from a Maithil Brahmin family from Bihar. It was a fairly orthodox family, but not orthodox enough to have transmitted a sense of brahminical legacy to him. And so, when my father fell in love with my mother, he wasn't about to stop himself because she wasn't Hindu. His background was upper-class landed feudal, but he had been to a residential missionary school in Patna. In the 1960s, what mattered most to people like my father were Western liberal principles.

My mother came from a feudal landed family as well. She had also studied in English-medium public and convent schools. The everyday landscape of my father's life was not unfamiliar to her. But her belief in Islam made it impossible for her to consider a marriage that was not Islamic. Intertwined with that, perhaps, was also the assumption that it was the woman's place to subsume her identity. Since most women take on their husband's surname and most children carry only their father's surname, it is assumed that children of mixed marriages will also be identified with the father's religion. But my mother was uncomfortable with the idea of her children growing up as non-Muslims. And my father was comfortable with the idea of his children growing up as Muslims. So, he converted to Islam to marry my mother and to bring up their children as Muslims.

For my father, the choice was less about religion and more about familial relationships. My father's family, perhaps, felt that rejection of Hinduism much more than he did. But they did not allow their grief to overwhelm

them. They exhibited grace and restraint, and after a period of time, those relationships were recovered. Changed in form, perhaps, but strong enough to sustain my father through his life. And so, as a child, I remember my father's eldest brother making sure that we visited him, my grandmother, and my cousins. I remember feeling a sense of family not just because my uncle looked so much like my father, but because he also smelt like him when we hugged him, and because my grandmother also told us the same stories of my father's childhood that we'd heard from my father.

I wanted to condemn the demolition as an individual, a citizen. But that condemnation wasn't always seen as coming from just a citizen.

And yet, I knew there was a difference. When my sister and I went to celebrate Diwali at my uncle's and arrived while the Laxmi *puja* was still being done, we did not become part of the puja. I didn't know if it was because we were Muslim and couldn't worship idols or because they were Brahmins and couldn't have Muslims in the puja. That was sensitive territory to tread on and no one ventured there. After the puja, however, we were all one big family.

We followed my older cousins in much of what they did, including going to the same colleges, reading the same books and watching the same movies. Those shared experiences defined us in similar ways, even as not sharing the puja separated us. But while we could speak of what brought us together, we couldn't speak of what separated us. Regardless of India's constitutional longing for 'Unity in Diversity', somehow difference is always seen as a threat to belonging.

The border

In the mid-1980s, I moved with my parents to an apartment building complex called Zakir Bagh. Named after my great-grandfather, Zakir Bagh is located in an area sometimes referred to as the "border". The border between South Delhi's Friends Colony and Okhla. Between houses that mostly display names like Singh and Sehgal and those that mostly display names like Zaidi and Khan.

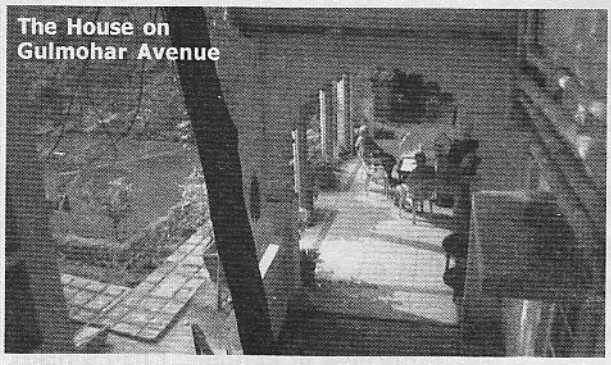
Zakir Bagh had come up as a cooperative housing society and its members were mostly – but not wholly – Muslim. It was the first time that I was living with so many Muslim families as neighbours. I remember when friends came over and gushed over the flat or the building, it would always be followed with a question about it being a "Mohammedan colony". That was always a little dissonant for me because I didn't think I was like most of my neighbours. My years in Zakir Bagh saw me finish school, join an elite college like St Stephens and finish my professional training. They saw me try on make up, argue with my parents about party deadlines, acquire a boyfriend. They were also the years in which I began to be critical of religious identities. I remember being very determined about not using *Hindu* or *Muslim* as descriptive terms, as if those terms would obliterate all the other descriptions of identity.

In 1991, we moved to the old house that my great-grandfather had built, in Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia University. I was captivated by the exoticness of heritage. I had already formed some kind of a connection with the neighbourhood in my two years of being an MA student at Jamia. Living there made it possible to be both liberal-progressive and exotic. I was privileged enough to not feel oppressed by the comparative lack of civic amenities or the profusion of burkha-clad women in the neighbourhood. And then in 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished and suddenly, a part of my identity that I wasn't sure meant anything to me, often became the defining part. In a confusing sort of way. I wanted to condemn the demolition as an individual, a citizen. But that condemnation wasn't always seen as coming from just a citizen. It was a package deal and being Muslim was part of the package, whether I practised Islam or not.

While I was still unsure about all this, I decided to get married to Kunal who was not Muslim and we decided to not have a religious ceremony. It made perfect sense to us, since neither of us were religious. But it was rare for even this to be treated casually. Suddenly, this act of marrying a non-Muslim was to become the defining marker of my identity. To be interpreted variously as a rejection of Islam or an embracing of Hinduism or a sign of India's 'composite culture'. I was uncomfortable with all of these perceptions. But it was difficult to find the words to explain why. And I think I muddled through it all – getting married, having a son, giving him a 'Muslim' name.

Documentary film

The growing polarisation in India, the Gujarat riots, my personal life and the discomfort with these essentialised understandings – all of these led me to make a documentary film, *The House on Gulmohar Avenue*. The film was intended to be a personal exploration of what Home and Identity can mean in the context of being Muslim in India today. Making the film was a struggle, not just because it was about my life, but because those terms continued to elude me. The descriptions that were available seemed self-conscious, limiting and antiseptic. Culturally Muslim, non-practising Muslim, hybrid Muslim. The qualifications seemed necessary as if Muslim (or Hindu) was a bad word to own as an identity. Yes, I



The House on Gulmohar Avenue

was not the stereotype of a Muslim woman. But neither was I the stereotype of India's 'composite culture'? Stereotypes are singular in nature and I did not want to choose a singular identity.

In the last few months, I have been showing my film to different kinds of audiences. The responses have been vast and varied. In the old city of Hyderabad, a teacher at a college attended mostly by young women in burkha claimed that by showing that I'd married a non-Muslim, the film said that it was possible to maintain communal harmony only by giving up a Muslim identity. For him, I was not Muslim enough, and the film posed a threat to preserving what he thought was Muslim identity. A woman in a more diverse audience felt that the film did not show enough of multiple identities. For her, I think I was too Muslim and the film a rejection of what she thought was multiplicity.

Then there are those in the audience who have had close contact with neighbourhoods that are inhabited by poor Muslims in North India. Some of them have felt that the experiences that the film recounts are not the 'real' experiences of 'real' Muslims. For them, perhaps, my voice is not disempowered enough to speak of being Muslim in India. At a college in Delhi, one young man felt that I was "Othering the Other" by, for example, choosing to name my son Imran instead of a name that was culturally more ambiguous, like Aftab. For him, perhaps, the film threatened an amorphous notion of India's composite culture.

Again and again, I encounter the desire to fit people into categories, whether it's a category defined by religion or whether it's one defined by secularism. We all own many words as our identities. I am: woman, Indian, upper middle-class, parent, book-lover, filmmaker. I am also: Muslim. The lines between these words are not rigid and straight. They crisscross, overlap, fade or grow bolder, as we move through our lives. Our identities are complex and entangled. Who is to decide which strand is more definitive? Who is to choose that one defining act to mark our identities? My history may be an obviously entangled one, but is there a history in which religion isn't entangled with class, or political ideology entangled with personal politics, or caste with language politics? Is there a history that is simple?

In the name of security

How security laws categorise citizens in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Ever heard of AFSPA, PTA, TADO, ATA?

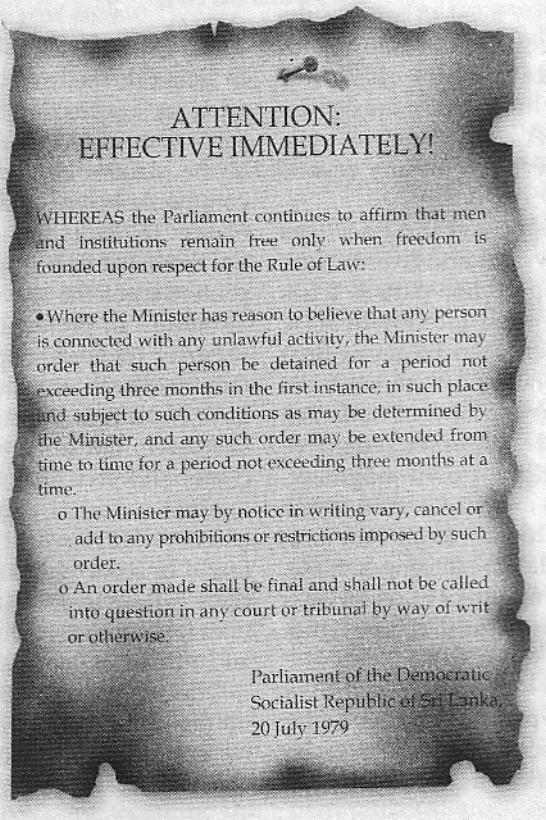
by | **Kaushiki Rao**

Are security laws inherently undemocratic? Such laws violate fundamental rights as enshrined in both national and international statutes, including those as significant as right to life and bodily safety, representation before the law, and the prevention of arbitrary detention. Yet democracies continue to support and endorse security legislation, which in Southasia functions by dividing each country's citizens into the deserving and the undeserving. Those in the former category merit the trust and protection of the state, while those in the latter do not. It is this systematic segregation of citizens that allows for the targeting of particular groups, curtails civil liberties and infringes on individual rights.

In a democracy, an elected government is supposed to be representative of its citizens' interests, and everything done by a democratic government is done in the name of the electorate. Correspondingly, any law that a democratic government legislates in its own interest is in fact legislated in the interest of the state's citizens. Security laws promulgated within a democratic state are no exception to this rule; governments explicitly declare that such laws are necessary for the safety of citizens.

Nonetheless, security laws often go against citizen interests, and are problematic in two ways. First, they give immunity to the arbitrary actions of the police and armed forces, contravening basic legal principles. Second, they are selectively applicable, either in particular areas or to particular groups of citizens. It is these citizens who face the arbitrary abrogation of their human rights and civil liberties.

How these citizen categories are created can be explored through security laws from four Southasian countries – India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It is important to note that each of these laws was initially enacted in democratic situations, although they continue to be applied in the currently undemocratic states of Pakistan and Nepal. Moreover, these laws have been widely used in each country, even while domestic and international human rights organisations denounce them as contributing to human rights abuses.


ATTENTION:
EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY!

WHEREAS the Parliament continues to affirm that men and institutions remain free only when freedom is founded upon respect for the Rule of Law:

- Where the Minister has reason to believe that any person is connected with any unlawful activity, the Minister may order that such person be detained for a period not exceeding three months in the first instance, in such place and subject to such conditions as may be determined by the Minister, and any such order may be extended from time to time for a period not exceeding three months at a time.
  - o The Minister may by notice in writing vary, cancel or add to any prohibitions or restrictions imposed by such order.
  - o An order made shall be final and shall not be called into question in any court or tribunal by way of writ or otherwise.

Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 20 July 1979

Four laws

One of Southasia's earliest security laws, India's Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was legislated in 1958 in order to protect citizens against separatist militants in Assam and Manipur. Applicable to those areas that the central government declares 'disturbed', it is currently operational in several areas in Northeast India. No emergency needs to be declared for this law to be in force, which contravenes provisions of the International Convent on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The AFSPA empowers the armed forces – including the navy and the air force – to arrest, detain

and search any "suspicious person". Security forces are not obliged to explain the grounds of the detention to anyone, nor is there an advisory board in place to review such arrests. Moreover, the AFSPA empowers the armed forces to shoot-to-kill "suspicious" persons. Finally, without permission from the central government, no legal proceedings can be initiated against anyone in the armed forces acting under AFSPA.

Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was legislated in July 1979 to empower the security forces to combat anti-state forces. In 1984, the International Commission of Jurists had said, "No legislation conferring even remotely comparable powers is in force in any other free democracy operating under the Rule of Law." The law, however, continues to be in force. Applicable throughout the country, the Ministry of Defence has the power to declare specific regions as security areas. The PTA is in direct contravention of the ICCPR, as it can be instituted outside of a state of emergency and applied retrospectively. It was also deliberated at the Sri Lankan Supreme Court, which declared that while fundamental rights may be restricted through security laws, they cannot be completely denied.

The PTA empowers the police to search or arrest reasonably suspicious persons without a warrant, who can then be detained by the Ministry of Defence in three-month increments for up to 18 months without access to lawyers or relatives. Moreover, the process does not need to involve the judiciary at all, and detainees are not allowed to petition any court. The Defence Secretary can issue a Rehabilitation Order, by which a person can be detained indefinitely. The PTA also guarantees state officials immunity from prosecution for any actions taken under the Act.

Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) was legislated in 1997 by the Nawaz Sharif government, despite strong protests from opposition parties. It has been amended several times, most recently in 2004. The legislation has often been used to act against opposition party members. The ATA authorises the government to declare any group or association of people unlawful, and overrides all other protective legal provisions. Based upon their own judgment, both police and army officials are empowered to use "necessary force" and "shoot to kill" to prevent anti-state activities, which include threatening actions, use of arms or explosives, disruption of mass services like electricity, as well as rape and trespassing. Pakistan is not a signatory to the ICCPR.

Only anti-terrorism courts – specially established by the government – can try people indicted under the ATA. Such trials must be conducted within seven days, while appeals must be filed and heard within additional seven-day periods. Judges are enjoined to serve the maximum sentence – if a shorter sentence is passed, they are required to explain the rationale for the judgement. Anyone suspected of conducting anti-state activities must sign a bond allowing the police to search not just the suspect's property, but also that of his family. Under the ATA, both police and army are immune to prosecution, so long as they have conducted their acts in "good faith".

In Nepal, several similar laws were in place before the Terrorist and Destructive Activities (Control and Punishment) Ordinance (TADO) was promulgated in 2001. The ordinance ran for six months before being extended into a two-year act (TADA) by the Parliament. Since then, TADO has been reintroduced in Nepal every half-year. TADO is to be applied either to select groups or to select areas by government declaration. Although both the police and army are empowered to act under this ordinance, it is only the police who are allowed to hold detainees in custody. TADO allows for six months of preventive detention without trial, which can be extended for another six months with the approval of the Home Ministry, rather than from the judiciary. TADO cases are tried by special courts set up by the government, and there is no statute of limitations for such cases. The police and army are again given immunity for any actions carried out under this law. Moreover, security personnel injured in any way while enforcing TADO are entitled to government compensation.

State selectivity

In general, security laws are legislated in order to address aggression against the state, such as by separatists in Northeast India, the LTTE in Sri Lanka or the Maoists in Nepal. Pakistan's security laws are commonly believed to have been created and used in order to consolidate political power. While governments justify security laws as essential for the protection of the state, they also claim that the laws are meant to protect the citizens. But the fact is that security legislation pits the state against its own citizens. Both nationally and internationally, the laws of the four countries listed above are considered excessive, not only because they abrogate human rights and civil liberties, but also because they go against national constitutions and international treaties. Moreover, the vague wording generally found in security legislation poses a further threat to civil liberties, with Amnesty International maintaining that such laws are "broadly formulated, and extend beyond legitimate security concerns."

The selective application of security laws opens up the space for discrimination. The AFSPA in India, for example, applies only to the Northeast; the PTA in Sri Lanka is applicable only to the north and east

of the country. Although not all citizens in these areas experience preventive detention or search without warrant, they do experience the law's threat to a much greater extent than do citizens elsewhere. During legislative debates in India, the AFSPA was justified as a means of maintaining the territorial and cultural unity of the country. Those who opposed the act, on the other hand, argued that the means by which it attempts national integration is a violent one.

Citizen distrust

Security legislation also discriminates between particular groups of citizens – pitting those who act to maintain the status quo against those who push for change. Citizens who are categorised by the state as a possible threat to security are obviously more likely to have their civil liberties curtailed by these laws. There are two ways in which security laws discriminate between groups of citizens.

First, security laws allow police and armed forces to act with impunity. That such personnel cannot be brought before the court for their actions indicates that the state encourages and protects them at the expense of other citizens. Vague words such as *appropriate grounds, reasonable suspicion, reasonable apprehension, convinced, suspicious persons, due warning, appropriate force* and the like are rife in security legislation and have the effect of allowing security forces excessive discretion. Moreover, the motives of the armed forces or police are rarely questioned. Acts done in *good faith* cannot be judicially investigated – even while human rights organisations claim that such powers are regularly abused, with immunity clauses (which breach UN recommendations) often used to detain and torture suspects. In Sri Lanka, for example, those detained under the PTA are often kept beyond the maximum period through a Rehabilitation Order; many who have been detained in this manner have made allegations of police torture. When the Indian army soldiers raped and killed a woman in Manipur last year, they took shelter under the AFSPA. Despite widespread protests, the Act remains in force. State agents subsequently enjoy not just the state's full trust, but are essentially treated as citizens more equal than others.

As greatly as the state trusts its security personnel, so little does it trust or protect the rest of its citizens.

The second way in which security laws discriminate between groups of people is by questioning the reasons, motives and actions of selected segments of the citizenry. Through the provision of preventive detention, authorities can detain and search some citizens without warrant; refuse them access to courts, lawyers or family; and can even shoot to kill. Moreover, preventive detention means that these citizens are always assumed to be guilty until proven innocent, contravening the ICCPR. As greatly as the state trusts its security personnel, so little does it trust or protect the rest of its citizens.

It is important to note that the degree to which each citizen is questioned depends on his social position with respect to the state. This leads to a systematic segregation of those citizens who deserve the protection of the state and those who need less of it. For example, a Tamil in Sri Lanka will more easily acquire a 'suspicious' status in the eyes of the government than will a Sinhalese. In Nepal, a person from a Maoist-influenced district such as Rolpa or Rukum will be more 'suspect' than one from elsewhere. In Pakistan, a person who sympathises with a particular political party would have been more likely to be considered 'suspicious' when an opposing party was in power; and now under the military regime, all members of independent political parties are more suspect.

India's AFSPA bill, for instance, appears to have been introduced not just to give authority to and to protect the army, but also to protect the people of Assam and Manipur. During the AFSPA debates in the Indian Parliament, MP Rungsung Suisa said: "In order to save the Nagas themselves from the hostile and ruinous actions of their own brethren, it becomes necessary for the government to arm themselves with powers." Such a statement groups the citizens of Assam and Manipur into two types – compliant civilians who require the protection of the Indian government, and non-compliant militants who deserve punishment from the Indian government. This dichotomy helps New Delhi legitimise the act of taking unconstitutional action against those citizens they term militants; since such groups are understood to endanger other citizens, the state can claim to have the responsibility to quell them. Moreover, throughout the parliamentary debates around AFSPA, militants were described with the use of infantilising adjectives such as *mischievous, irresponsible, unreasonable* and *wanton*. Such rhetoric serves to give the state patrimonial authority over those who are considered militants, and continues to differentiate between those citizens who are deserving of protection and those who are not.

Security laws, then, only ostensibly protect citizens. Those citizens deemed 'trusted' are given impunity for their actions or are unlikely to be affected by security laws. The 'untrustworthy', on the other hand, are affected to varying degrees by security legislation. The injustice in these laws lies not only in the arbitrary and excessive derogation of human rights and civil liberties, but also in this systematic segregation of a democratic state's own citizens.

Seeking the tribe

Ethno-politics in Darjeeling and Sikkim

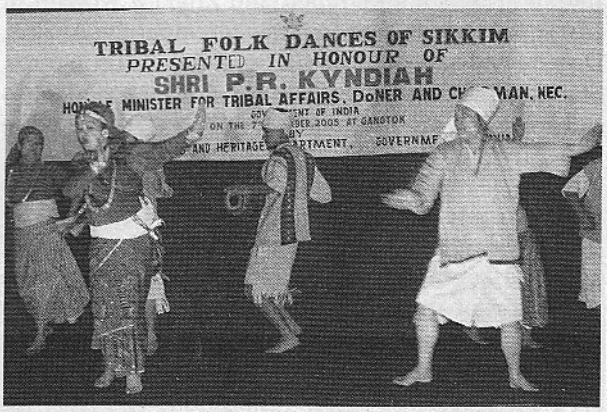
by | **Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin**

"We must learn how to be tribal. This is difficult for us, but very, very important," said Mr Mukhia in his lilting boarding-school English. Wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses, a neatly starched handkerchief folded into the breast pocket of his tweed jacket, and a bowler hat cocked rakishly to one side, the 70-year-old leader of Darjeeling's Mukhia/Sunuwar Rai ethno-political organisation looked more like a colonial caricature than a radical indigenous activist agitating for his people's place as one of India's Scheduled Tribes. While Mukhia cut an amusing figure, the fight for tribal status in which his group is currently engaged – alongside other ethnic organisations representing Indian citizens of Nepali origin in Darjeeling and Sikkim – is no laughing matter. The struggle for recognition as a distinct tribal entity, a classification that can entitle a community to educational and economic benefits from the state on the basis of their unique cultural history and language, is one of the most critical political issues in this region today.

In the early 19th century, the British Raj encouraged migrant labourers from Nepal to cultivate the fertile hills that now make up the state of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Besides working on tea plantations, the migrants also toiled on road-building projects, in holiday resorts and as menial staff supporting the colonial administration and its military. Although some of these labourers quickly returned home satisfied with cash in hand – in waves of seasonal migration that continue to this day – others chose to settle permanently in this booming region, where a level of economic success and social mobility appeared within reach that would be unimaginable in Nepal's caste-constrained midhills.

Most of the permanent settlers in Darjeeling and Sikkim were members of Nepal's ethnic groups, now commonly referred to as *janajati*, such as the Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Tamang or Thami. As is often the case in diaspora situations, these discrete ethnic identities were initially subsumed under a broader 'national' identity. Beginning in the immediate aftermath of Indian Independence, the unifying struggle for recognition as Indian citizens of Nepali origin, with full linguistic and cultural rights, reached its apex in the 1980s with the violent Darjeeling-based Gorkhaland movement, which agitated for a separate state. Led by Subhas Ghising, a Tamang, one of the movement's demands was that 'Gorkhaland' be recognised as a tribal state under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Such a move would have ensured tribal benefits for all of Darjeeling's people of Nepali origin, regardless of their specific caste or ethnicity. As it was, Gorkhaland never became a state, and in 1989, Ghising settled for chairmanship of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), which remains under Calcutta's jurisdiction as part of West Bengal.

At around the same time, thanks largely to pressure from the Mandal Commission, the Indian government set about revamping the country's stagnant reservation policy. Released in 1980, B P Mandal's report revitalised the practice of setting aside a certain percentage of government jobs and seats in public



Sara Shneiderman

Thami Welfare Association members perform for the Union Minister of Tribal Affairs in Gangtok

Himal Stylebook: *Nepali or Nepalese*

What to call a person from Nepal, or whose origins reach back to Nepal? The term 'Nepalese', with the anglicised *–ese*, has found favour since colonial times and remains in extensive use, including in the official titles accepted by the government of Nepal. However, there is also an increasing trend towards 'Nepali' while writing in English, which is also part of *Himal Southasian*'s style. We would be willing to go along with 'Nepalese' if there was a hard-and-fast rule of English grammar that insisted on *-ese* to be added to the name of a country or region ending with *-l*. But a person from Bengal is not 'Bengalese', nor is a citizen of Israel 'Israelese'.

We believe that, where possible, the local-language 'adjectification' must be preferred when English grammar rules are not clear-cut. Such is the case with 'Nepali', which is also the proper term used in the parent language to refer to any person or thing from or of Nepal. There have been attempts to categorise 'Nepalese' as denoting the people of Nepal, to distinguish this from 'Nepali' as a broader descriptive term. But that would be usage limited to discourse in the English language, and hence inadequate.

There is some genuine confusion when one leaves the borders of Nepal, because Indian citizens of Nepali origin face a political problem by being identified as 'Nepali'. Given that the term 'Nepali' is not about to change in its reference to the citizens of Nepal, however, the Nepali-speaking Indian citizens of the Indian Northeast, as well as Darjeeling/Sikkim, have tried to come up with alternative formulations by which they would prefer to be called. These include the term 'Gorkha', propagated by Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling, which has not found significant acceptance elsewhere in India; as well as the more recent 'Bharpali' and 'Nepamul'. The experiment continues.

universities for disadvantaged communities. Even though such a system had existed since 1950, only when the government introduced a new benefit schedule in the 1990s did concrete benefits begin to trickle down to those classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backwards Classes (OBC).

For the first time, being a member of a Scheduled Tribe or Caste could actually alter one's educational or professional chances for the better. The race had begun. For many Darjeeling residents of Nepali ancestry, disillusioned with the failure of the Gorkhaland movement to gain any special status for the Nepali language and its speakers, the search for classification as a Scheduled Tribe presented an alternative option for demanding benefits from New Delhi. But this also meant dismantling the sacred cow of pan-Nepali identity in favour of many discrete 'tribal' identities, and this presented an obstacle. Most Darjeeling citizens who had grown up in the post-Independence era had little idea of how to be culturally Tamang or to speak Limbu, for example, much less how such identities might be 'marketed'.

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With the exception of more substantial Bhutia and Lepcha communities, Sikkim's demography is almost identical to that of Darjeeling. However, the state's unique political history has led to a great prioritisation of tribal issues at the policy level. Sikkim remained a sovereign kingdom until 1975, after which it was incorporated into India as a separate state. Darjeeling, however, is only a provincial district of the state of West Bengal. This means that important decisions that are made in Gangtok for Sikkim by its local political leadership are made in Calcutta for Darjeeling by largely Bengali politicians. The sensitive geopolitical location of Sikkim has meant that it wields a political clout at the national level disproportionate to its size and population. For example, it was only after concerted political pressure from Sikkim that the Nepali language, also known as Gorkhali in India, was admitted as an official language to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

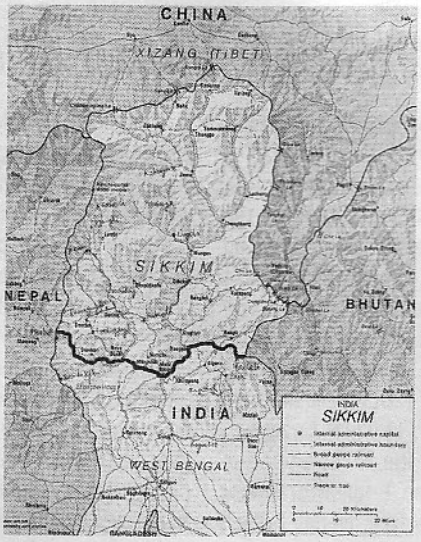
Homeland to performance hall

The homogenising influence of Nepali diasporic life over two centuries in Darjeeling meant that specific ethnic, linguistic and regional identities were jettisoned in favour of a common sense of Nepaliness (based primarily on use of the Nepali language). As the cultural capital of tribal distinctiveness increased in the 1990s, however, members of Darjeeling- and Sikkim-based groups of Nepali origin sought to reconnect with a largely alien ancestral identity. And where better to turn than to Nepal itself, the very place that their oppressed forefathers had abandoned to try their luck with the Raj? Scouting parties from Darjeeling made forays into Nepal's midhills, retracing the steps of their migrant ancestors, in the hope of collecting the necessary cultural ammunition to launch successful campaigns for tribal status in India.

At the same time, members of ethnic organisations in Darjeeling and Sikkim began connecting with seasonal labourers from their own communities who still traveled back and forth to Nepal. At times, these

interactions can be almost farcical, with cash-strapped *janajati* men and women from Nepal's hills taking time out from their portering or dish-washing duties to perform songs and dances, which their Indian cousins then record on video for eventual presentation to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in New Delhi.

At one such event in Gangtok in November 2005, members of ethnic organisations in the process of applying for tribal status performed 'traditional' dances in honour of Shri P R Kyndiah, the Tribal Affairs minister. In a rehearsal before the official event, the director of Sikkim's Department of Culture instructed the performing troupes to smile nicely and exaggerate their movements to mimic a Bollywood act, as this would increase their chance of a positive reaction from the audience. His advice was not misguided: the Magar association's presentation of a subtle and slow-moving traditional dance, performed by two old men to the beat of a single *madal* was booed, while the hip-gyrating antics of Rai and Thami youths set to Hindi-inflected 'indigenous' pop tunes generated thunderous applause. From such stage-managed productions, it becomes clear that the battle for tribal status rests as much on a group's ability to recast cultural practices appropriated from the homeland in crowd-pleasing Indian performative styles as it does on any alleged indigeneity.



Tribal competition

Why did this event in honour of the Minister of Tribal Affairs take place in Sikkim and not in Darjeeling? In terms of tribal policy, not to mention central-government subsidies, Sikkim is the envy of its neighbours. According to official statistics from the 2001 Census of India, of a total population of little more than five lakh, 20 percent of Sikkim's residents have secured Scheduled Tribe status. The Lepchas, Sikkim's indigenous ethnic community, and the Bhutias, descendants of eastern Tibetans who settled in Sikkim beginning in the 13th century, together form a fairly unified tribal political unit. Popularly known as the 'B-L Block', they continue to exercise a disproportionate level of economic and political power, even as their population share drops. The reservation of 12 seats in the State Legislative Assembly for Lepchas and Bhutias is but one example of the implementation of Sikkim's tribal policy.

The battle for tribal status rests as much on a group's ability to recast cultural practices in crowd-pleasing Indian performative styles as it does on any alleged indigeneity.

A symbiotic, if sometimes tense, relationship exists between Sikkimese and Darjeeling-based ethno-political organisations. In Sikkim, such groups have easier access to sympathetic politicians at the state level, but they represent much smaller populations than do the Darjeeling associations, and so have less manpower for organising large-scale conventions and demonstrations. In short, while Darjeeling organisations are eager to pursue their agendas through the apparatus of the Sikkimese state – where they have an ally in Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling – Sikkimese organisations need the resources and hard-won cultural knowledge of their Darjeeling counterparts to make a compelling case.

As much as the 'pro-tribal' policy advanced by Chamling in Sikkim pleases those who are included, it can frustrate those who remain on the outside. With the accession of the Tamang and Limbu communities of Sikkim to the much-coveted level of Scheduled Tribe in 2002, the remaining numerically dominant and politically active citizens of Nepali ancestry were deprived of two of their most prominent allies in the struggle for ethnic recognition. But such is the currency of tribalism in India: once a group penetrates the glass ceiling, it rarely looks back.

From the diverse nature of the campaigns mounted by ethnic communities for recognition as Scheduled Tribes over the past decade, it has become clear that no standardised checklist exists for a successful application. Every state has its own criteria, and New Delhi appears to judge each case on its own merits. Groups must first be recognised at the state level, with the state government then forwarding a recommendation to the Centre. Tribal recognition in one state does not guarantee it in other states, nor at the national level. The Tamang and Limbu, for example, are still waiting to hear about their accession to nationwide tribal status, despite having already received it within Sikkim and West Bengal.

While aspiring tribes hope for tips from the recently recognised, the leadership of the groups who have already attained tribal status are reluctant to divulge their hard-won strategies, for fear of further weakening an already much-diluted tribal stew. In some cases, members of competing communities have even come to blows over access to political connections and selection criteria. After all, the scant

pickings of reserved seats in governmental and educational institutions will only be subject to more-intense competition as the number of Scheduled Tribes grows.

There are several ways of potentially minimising these nascent rivalries, and preventing the Balkanisation that many fear. In Sikkim, there is a movement to avoid inter-tribal competition by allocating a specific set of reservations to each tribal group, rather than pooling them all together. In Darjeeling, a recently established group calling itself Bharatiya Gorkha Janajati Manyata Samiti has revived the old Gorkhaland platform, but in the new tribal idiom: they argue that all people of Nepali origin should be recognised by the central government as a Scheduled Tribe en masse, rather than as individual groups. Some ethnic activists scoff that this Bahun-led organisation is simply an attempt by those excluded by the definition of *janajati* current in Nepal – namely, Bahuns (hill Brahmins) and Chhetris – to cash in on the benefits of tribal identification in India. Yet thanks to generations of intermarriage, there is some validity to the argument that no Indian group of Nepali ancestry is more 'tribal' than any other, and that the uneven recognition of individual groups may eventually lead to a social dissonance far more violent than the Gorkhaland agitation.

The groups who have already attained tribal status are reluctant to divulge their hard-won strategies, for fear of further weakening an already much-diluted tribal stew.

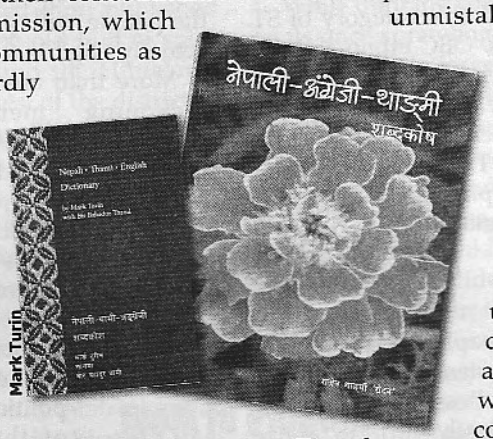
Sacred scripts

A curious feature of the tribal discourse in Darjeeling and Sikkim is that aspiring communities are convinced that their language needs a unique script in order to be taken seriously. Anthropological evidence from around the world points rather to an inverse correlation between tribe and script: small-scale, kin-based ethnic communities – or 'tribes' in the most traditional sense – are more likely to be groups without a distinct written tradition. In fact, it is precisely their distance from centres of state learning and 'civilisation', and their concomitant reliance on oral cultural transmission, which historically has marked these communities as 'tribes'. Why, then, are the upwardly mobile ethnic organisations of Darjeeling and Sikkim so eager to rediscover their 'lost' scripts?

The answer lies in a clearer understanding of the term 'tribal' in the political context of modern India. In Darjeeling and Sikkim, the claim for a tribal identity has less to do with primitivism, indigeneity and autochthony than it does with ethnic discreteness and cultural distinctiveness. A tribe, in its politically-charged modern incarnation as used in India, is a bounded ethnic community held together by a tidy catalogue of cultural, dietary, linguistic and religious habits distinct from those held by its neighbours.

Dictionaries of endangered languages have become valuable commodities for the ethnic communities of Darjeeling and Sikkim, and are frequently used as political tools. One of the writers of this article, for example, recently published a word list of Thami, a Tibeto-Burman language indigenous to the Himalaya, together with a member of the community from the Nepali homeland area. Since the aim was to document the endangered native lexicon of this mother tongue, loan words from Nepali and other languages were excluded, resulting in a thin, pocket-sized volume. While the book is in circulation in Thami villages in Nepal, it did not serve the purposes of the expatriate ethnic community in India, who found it too small to help their claims for Scheduled Tribe status. The same year, in fact, a more substantial Thami-English dictionary was published by a member of the Indian Thami community, bolstered by a high number of Nepali loan words. This served the ethno-political agenda far better: the more words that could be included, the heavier the book, and therefore a more appropriate component of a tribal portfolio *(see photo)*.

While a unique language is a must, a distinct script is a valuable bonus. A peculiar consequence of such scriptophilia, compounded by the recognition of tribal tongues as official languages of state communication, is that the *Sikkim Herald* – the Sikkimese government weekly – is published in thirteen official state languages, each in their own script *(see photo)*. Whether members of tribal groups can, and actually do, read the newspaper in their ancestral mother tongue rather than in English or Nepali is largely beside the point. Even though many 'tribal scripts' are of dubious antiquity and unmistakeably derived from Nagari characters also used by Nepali, this is no hindrance to the ethno-activist agenda, since their importance is more symbolic than practical. For the leadership of most ethnic organisations in Darjeeling and Sikkim, then, the primary value of a unique script is its emblematic distinctiveness; use in schools and administration, and widespread adoption by community members, are only secondary concerns.



Little and large, two Thami dictionaries published in 2004

Out-tribed

On 29 January 2005, the State Cabinet of Sikkim approved a proposal recognising the Lepcha community as Sikkim's 'Most Primitive Tribe' (MPT). In this anti-caste hierarchy, in which the degree of a group's connection to the earth raises rather than lowers its standing, the previously unassailable category of Scheduled Tribe had just been upstaged with the new category of Most Primitive Tribe.

Mark Turin

Issues of the Sikkim Herald in 11 different languages - and scripts!

Yet even the most disadvantaged Lepcha settlements in Sikkim maintain a relatively high standard of living. Dzongu, an officially demarcated Lepcha reservation in north Sikkim, is remote by Indian standards, but still boasts electrified villages, well-run schools, and Community Information Centres with battery-powered computers and broadband satellite connections. Rather fittingly, the Indian reservation system has indeed created a 'reservation' – a discrete homeland territory where only members of Sikkim's Most Primitive Tribe may settle and own land. Indeed, the Lepcha reservation of Dzongu appears to offer a fairly sustainable livelihood for its inhabitants.

What, then, are the benefits of the existing Scheduled Tribe category, and why has it been deemed necessary to create yet another grouping, the MPT? Economically, members of Scheduled Tribes and Castes stand to gain through low-interest loan schemes and reserved posts in government agencies. Educationally, they benefit from a lowering in the marks required to pass their board exams and exclusive access to reserved positions in universities and vocational schools. Members of Other Backwards Classes have access to a smaller number of reserved seats, but do not qualify for the direct financial support available to ST and SC individuals. This has created a situation where those groups currently classified as OBC – such as the Magar, Rai and Thami – see their position as only a temporary stepping-stone to the more desirable category of ST. Summing up their frustrations, OBC ethno-activists commonly use the Nepali phrase: *na jat, na bhat* – no tribe, no rice. Similarly, as more groups penetrate the ST category, its benefits are perceived to diminish. In turn, Scheduled Tribe may become just another stepping-stone on the way to the new pinnacle of Most Primitive Tribe.

Purity paradox

Still, for a sizeable number of people the benefits of the reservation system remain conceptual, since regardless of whether their ethnicity is currently classified as OBC, ST or MPT, each individual must apply for a personal certificate in order to qualify for special treatment. This process entails presenting one's credentials to the district magistrate or block officer, and then appearing for a one-on-one hearing in front of a judge who assesses the application's validity. Aspiring individuals must present an official letter from the appropriate ethnic organisation, attesting to their status as a 'genuine' member of the group in question, as well as reference letters from two male relatives of the same group who have already obtained the certificate. Depending on the case, school transcripts, employment records or proof of residence may also be requested. This lengthy and complicated process means that only a small percentage of the population who are in theory eligible for ST, SC or OBC classifications have actually applied for and subsequently received their certificate.

One of the primary problems with the current certification procedure is its reliance on patriarchal definitions of descent and ethnic identity. A person can only claim membership of a given ethnicity through his or her father. There is no legal way to claim ethnicity through the mother, nor are female relatives accepted as legitimate references. Given the high rates of inter-group marriage in Darjeeling and Sikkim – approximately 75 percent of couples come from mixed ethnic backgrounds, according to an informal survey conducted by the authors – this creates problems for people who have been raised with their mother's cultural identity and wish to claim OBC or ST status through maternal ancestry. Furthermore, the policy of requiring references from two male relatives *of the same group* means that only paternal relatives can be called upon. For those people who happen to have no uncles or male cousins on their father's side, or who are not in touch with their father's family, it is particularly difficult to enter the system. Ultimately, only around half of the people with genetic ties to an ethnic group are actually eligible for legal membership in it.

The previously unassailable category of Scheduled Tribe had just been upstaged with the new category of Most Primitive Tribe.

More than anything else, such archaic rules of reckoning membership demonstrate the impossibility of claiming ethnic purity in India's melting pot. For the moment, this paradox is overshadowed by the thrill of cultural performances and mass meetings that dominate the region's day-to-day ethno-political life. But the more complicated realities of mixed cultural identities will continue to pose personal and political challenges for the descendants of those now desperately seeking tribal status.

Imagining Darjeeling and Sikkim

Two populations who prefer to look the other way when they pass on the street, because they are really the same people.

by | **Tanka B Subba**

Any visitor to Sikkim's capital Gangtok, with some idea about the area through which he passes, would wonder why Sikkim and Darjeeling are separate territories. That is not a politically correct issue to raise at any forum, however, not even in academic ones. If a Sikkimi raises this issue, he is identified as an ideologue pushing 'Greater Sikkim' and if a Darjeelinge does it, he will be very unwelcome in Sikkim indeed. The psychological cleavage between Darjeeling and Sikkim is deeper than the rivers that flow between them, forcing them to accept the political boundaries of 'Smaller Sikkim'. It will not be surprising if, at some point in the future, the Nepali-speakers of Darjeeling call themselves 'Gorkhas' and the Gorkhas in Sikkim call themselves 'Nepalis', just to differentiate between themselves.

What is most striking when one thinks about Darjeeling and Sikkim is the physical, social and cultural contiguity of these two regions. If someone wants to know why Darjeeling is in West Bengal and not in Sikkim, there is no clear answer available in the history of the region. One always thought that Darjeeling was a 'gift' of the Sikkim Maharaja to the British so that they could build a sanatorium for their ailing soldiers. That was until Fred Pinn published his *Road to Destiny*. Kalimpong, the old hub of spies and spooks working in and around the Himalaya, was too a part of Sikkim, like the rest of the district of Darjeeling, but it had to go under Bhutani rule for almost a century-and-a-half. The way it all ended, the people of Sikkim today need to cross a subdivision of Darjeeling before they can ford the Malli Bridge to go to west Sikkim, or travel along the banks of the Teesta until they arrive at Rangpo, the brewery headquarters of Sikkim.

In an arena where politics has assumed the centre stage above everything else, all that should have served to bind the people and administrations of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Instead, the kinship ties, matrimonial alliances, literary ventures, religious congregations, and the shared predicaments of the peasantry amount to little. The people of Darjeeling and Sikkim share the same mythologies, rituals, festivals, dances and other cultural events, and yet for a region that relies heavily on tourism, there is nothing collaborative. They share the waters of the Teesta and Rangit, but they cannot develop river-rafting together. They commercially grow the same flowers, like gladioli and orchids, but they do not market them together.

There is no difference between Darjeeling and Sikkim except in the mind-sets of the contemporary population. They are divided by two different kinds of fixations: the people of Darjeeling have an economic and political complex vis-à-vis the Sikkimese, while the latter have a cultural and demographic complex vis-à-vis the former. And they are unwilling to discuss any of these. They are ready to sink separately, but unwilling to swim together. They meet at the Teesta and Rangit to perform their annual rites or to participate in the annual fairs, but do not welcome those from across the river to their homes. Obviously, this is because they do not want to be confronted by the fact of how similar they really are.

While thinking about the region, I must rest briefly on its once-sprawling tea gardens. At one point, they were the single largest employment avenue for the illiterate and semi-literate people of these hills. But today, the tea bushes are old and the pickings are decreasing by the year. Together with the yield, the number of tea gardens has also been decreasing. The abandoned gardens have been plundered in both Darjeeling and Sikkim, and overtaken by rampant construction on slide-prone hillsides.

I hope that from the debris of destruction, a new people will be born – one who will not differentiate between Darjeeling and Sikkim, whose hearts are as pure as the glaciers on their northern horizon, and whose priorities are different from those of the people in the region today. Amen.

The imaginary orient of Richard Wagner
Patan and the European understanding of Buddhism

by | **Ted Riccardi**

On a rain- and snow-filled night in early November 1868, a young student of classical philology named Friedrich Nietzsche, wrapped in an old coat that barely kept him warm, walked to the Theatre Café in Leipzig. There he met his friend Ernst Windisch, a fellow student at the university who was studying classical Indology, the science of ancient Indian texts. The two proceeded to the home of Windisch's teacher, Hermann Brockhaus, a professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Leipzig and one of the most celebrated Sanskritists in Europe. The most important family member, the one whom Nietzsche had come expressly to meet, was the composer Richard Wagner, who was visiting his sister, Frau Ottilie Brockhaus, the wife of Hermann Brockhaus.


Richard Wagner

Wagner, then 56, was captivated by the young Nietzsche's brilliance and flattered by his knowledge of his work. The friendship that began that evening was to last many years, finally ending with the creation of *Parsifal*, Wagner's last work. But all that really mattered to them in the world of civilisation was there that evening: India, Greece and Germany – joined, interconnected, and even (to them) identified by the science of philology, the study of ancient texts and languages.

Nietzsche was to become one of the most influential European philosophers of the 19th century and Wagner one of its most celebrated composers. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Wagner was also a political revolutionary and ideologue – one who saw in the Orient, particularly India, the roots of German civilisation and culture. He was subsequently instrumental in bringing these ideas into wider circulation in Germany and Europe.

Behind the oriental pseudo-profundities of a dramatically distorted Buddhism – suffering, renunciation and redemption – lay the banalities of Wagner's racism, nurtured from childhood and fed intellectually by the philological thought of the day.

Wagner's concepts of the Orient and his use of them were not merely ornamental spiritual exotica, as some have supposed. Rather, they were crucial elements of his ideology – one that was articulated as he developed as an artist and was later echoed by some of the 20th century's most controversial figures, including Adolf Hitler. Behind the oriental pseudo-profundities of a dramatically distorted Buddhism – suffering, renunciation and redemption – lay the banalities of Wagner's racism, nurtured from childhood and fed intellectually by the philological thought of the day.

On the face of it, it is hard to see what one might mean by Wagner's 'Orient' or his Orientalism. There is no Lakmé, no Madama Butterfly, no Turandot in his completed works. Rather, they are based on Shakespeare, Italian, and Germanic material. Where is the Orient? Simply put, there are three orients in Wagner's life and work, all textual and all imagined. The first is the Biblical, or, as he probably would have called it, the Jewish Orient. The second is the Islamic Orient, the near horizon for many of his music dramas, the orient of the Crusades, against which the medieval Germanic knights waged holy war. Finally, there is the Orient of ancient Iran and India, the far horizon for his works, the birthplace of Brahmanism and Buddhism. According to Wagner, the latter were the two highest forms of human thought and their geography was the site of his utopic, imaginary land of beginnings.

For Wagner, there was also an orient from which

he borrowed a conceptual vocabulary. This was primarily India, with whose philosophy and literature he had fair familiarity. The concepts were Sanskrit – ideas such as samsara, nirvana, karma, ahimsa. These ideas occurred frequently in his conversations and writings and were part of the everyday talk of his inner circle. Throughout his life and artistic success, ideas for two Oriental operatic works remained particularly important for Wagner: one entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, the other called *Die Sieger* (The Victors), a Buddhist opera. It is these two uncompleted works that obsessed his later years.

Indian beginnings

Much of the eastern fascination on the part of Wagner and his circle arose from some odd points of identification between Germany and India, the supposed similarities between the systems of thought of Germany and ancient India. These were specifically the major tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism, as well as a convoluted reading of the linguistic terms *Indo-Germanic* or *Indo-Aryan*. Through these, early Indian thought came to be seen as the first manifestation of German thought – its ancestor and earliest statement. However bizarre such an idea might appear today, it was taken by people like Richard Wagner as certain.

Wagner's views were not dependent on his artitrary interpretation, but were based upon what he considered to be the real historical link between the early Indian thinkers and their descendants, the medieval and modern Germans. From the sages of the Rig Veda and the Upanishads, through Martin Luther, Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer, this history and development of German thought was believed to be found. Wagner saw the ideas enunciated by these thinkers as outwardly different but conceptually identical. This identity was reached through a process of uprooting and decontextualising major tenets of both the German and Indian traditions. For Wagner himself, the ideas of karma and rebirth were not only true on the individual level, but were the operative theories of history: German thought and civilisation had been reborn in different stages of history, beginning with the Indian, then Greco-Roman, and finally German, medieval and modern. Each stage surpassed the previous, in a kind of Hegelian-Karmic-Hindu dialectic.

The rebirth relationship between these three cultures leaves unanswered questions. But for Wagner, the main question was that of Christianity. While Christianity had its first appearance during the Greco-Roman period, it was also a religion that had been, in Wagner's judgement, perverted by its association with Judaism. In a letter to the composer Franz Liszt, he proffered that "uncontaminated Christianity is ... a branch of that venerable Buddhist religion which, following Alexander's Indian campaign, found its way, among other places, to the shores of the Mediterranean." Christianity, in short, has nothing to do with Judaism in terms of its teachings or origins. It is Buddhist in origin, Hellenic in its manifestation of Jesus, and German in its medieval and modern appearances.

While Wagner found the identification of the Buddha and Jesus free of difficulty, his writings allude to some of the problems he was having with this intellectual progression. In attempting to reconcile the Buddha's "gentle, pure renunciation" with Luther's "monkish impossibility", Wagner notes that in cold Germany, "our life is so plagued, that without 'Wine, Women, and Song' we could not possibly hold out, or serve the old God himself." Accompanying these ponderings is the sketch of the Buddhist work that Wagner had entitled *Die Sieger*. The composer found this story of "the Buddha on his last journey" in Eugene Burnouf's *Introduction a l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*. The story occupied Wagner's mind possibly longer than any of his other sketches – until his death, in fact, at which time his wife writes of the composer telling her from his bed, "If you look after me well, clothe me well, feed me well, then I shall still compose *Die Sieger*."

Despite his attraction to the text, Wagner did not complete *Die Sieger*. Instead, he took much of the conceptual material for that opera and incorporated it into *Parsifal* – his final work, his "last card", as he called it. This was his ultimate attempt to Aryanise and 'Buddhicise' Christianity, transforming it into a truly German religion. What was the source that enabled him to do this?

Wagner's source

The scene is now 22 May 1873, Richard Wagner's 60th birthday. His wife Cosima, together with their children, has prepared a surprise party for him. She records some of the presents in her diaries:

... Danielle carried in the Laurana Gallery etchings of Raphael, drawings which R. had once seen and admired at the home of the painter Hubner; Blandine, l'Histoire du Bouddhisme, *by Burnouf; and the two little girls* Le Roman de Douze Pairs *from R.'s former library ... Something curious occurred early in the day: R. dreamed about bookbindings and that he had told the bookbinder that it would look well if the titles were printed in black on a light background instead of gold. Now it so happened that, when I sent Burnouf's book to be bound, I had the idea of getting the author's name and the date of the work done in black. This little coincidence gives us much delight.*

Much is made by the couple of this book by the French Orientalist Eugene Burnouf, now bound in leather with black lettering. Since Wagner first discovered it, the book had been an almost sacred scripture for him, made even more so by the coincidence of his dream with Cosima's decision.

What is this book? Wagner and Cosima constantly

refer to it as the *Introduction a l'Histoire du Bouddhisme*, but the complete title contains one more word, always left out: the word *indien*, or Indian. Burnouf, in his own introduction to the work, makes it very clear that the materials used in his magnum opus were not from India, even as it was generally understood at the time to encompass the Subcontinent. Rather, Burnouf emphasises that the material came from Nepal – 88 manuscripts in all, some older ones written on palm leaf. Here is the juxtaposition of two terms relating to the kind of Buddhism under discussion: *indien* and *nepalais*. Does the distinction matter? Does the place of origin affect the nature of the Buddhism described?

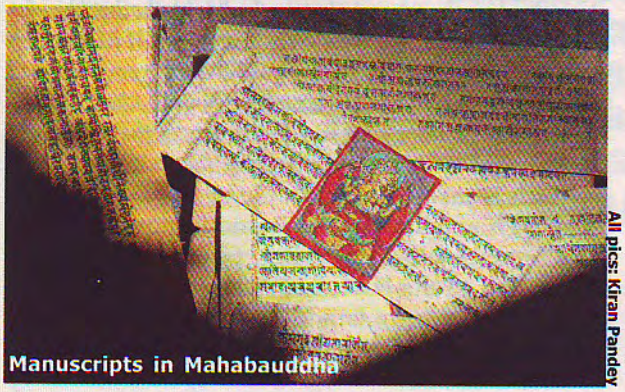
Burnouf's source materials were mostly paper manuscripts, and relatively recent. Some were copies of unobtainable originals. Their language was Sanskrit, with some translations and commentaries in the local language of the Nepal Valley, Newari. The Sanskrit was difficult in places, quite opaque in others. Most importantly, however, almost all of them were acquired through just one particular source – a Newar priest, whom Burnouf described as "*un bouddhiste nepalais*". Who is this unnamed Nepali Buddhist? What kind of Nepali priest is he?

Burnouf spent ten years of his life on the *l'Histoire du Bouddhisme* project – reading, analysing, and presenting these manuscripts. The young Burnouf had also been one of a handful of students to sit at the feet of the English Sanskritist H H Wilson, while in London. At the time that he undertook the Buddhism project, Burnouf was already known for his decipherment of the Persian cuneiform inscriptions at Perseopolis.

He had given up other opportunities for the *Bouddhisme* project, including the editing of the Rig Veda itself, which he turned over to Max Mueller. The Nepali manuscripts were fraught with difficulties, but he persevered in their examination. Within the mass of manuscripts was one entitled the *Divyavadana*, a work that relates the various rebirths of the Buddha. Within these folios were themes that were later elevated into immortality in Wagner's *Parsifal*, through which he redefined the origins of Christianity.


Entrance to home of Amritananda


Mahabauddha


Manuscripts in Mahabauddha

All pics: Kiran Pandey

Burnouf's source

Burnouf published his great work in 1844. For all of the manuscripts, he is indebted to one man, the one who collected them and sent them to France. 'Brian Hodgson' is a name still well known in Orientalist circles as a scholar and facilitator of Orientalist research. So cognisant was Burnouf of his obligation to Hodgson that he proposed his name to the French government for the awarding of the Legion of Honour.

Brian Hodgson was the British Resident at the Court of Nepal, in Kathmandu as the direct result of war. The victory of the East India Company over the Nepali army and the signing of the subsequent Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 had carried behind its diplomatic language the Company's clear command: you must accept permanently our agent in your territory. The Nepalis acquiesced with ill-disguised loathing. To them the British were *phirangi buwasa*, or 'foreign hyenas'; the permanent presence of one of them in the sacred Valley was anathema to the ultra-orthodox Hindus who ruled it.

Hodgson was not a scholar, but one of the young Englishmen who decided in the early 19th century to seek his fortune as an employee of the East India Company. Arriving in Calcutta in his early twenties, he fell ill almost immediately and was sent to the mountain town of Almora to recover. Because of his delicate health, the Company decided that he should remain in the high country. Hodgson arrived in Kathmandu in 1821 and remained there until 1843, during which time he was the official representative of the Company to the Court of Nepal.

But there was little business to transact between the Company and the Nepali government, so Hodgson had little official work. He was not allowed to roam the country at will, but was confined to the Valley. He subsequently redirected his waking hours to scholarly investigations. Nepal the Unknown needed to become known: flora, fauna, geography, commerce, languages, religions, ethnicity, caste – a spate of articles flowed from his pen into the learned journals of Europe. Hodgson's investigations were those of a novice, of one who knows no other language and who obviously must rely on others. But he wrote

seamlessly, objectively, scientifically, as if he were the sole source, only occasionally referring to the system of pundits and scouts that he had developed.

Hodgson's source

At some point, Hodgson realised that despite the Hindu orthodoxy of Nepal's rulers, he was also in a country of Buddhists. Buddhism subsequently became the focus of much of his research, in particular its texts. The towns of the Valley bulged with libraries of manuscripts and Hodgson began not only to acquire information, but the books themselves. He located a Buddhist priest who, unlike his experience with much of the rest of the populace, proved both friendly and immensely helpful. Hodgson's "old Buddhist friend" helped him to locate, copy, trade, buy and record as many manuscripts as he desired. In 1837, Hodgson began shipping these artefacts to London, Paris and Calcutta. Here began the wholesale transference of Buddhist texts out of Nepal. Here, also, the manufacture of European Buddhism was given its first large shipment of raw materials.

Portrait of Brian Hodgson at Kaiser Mahal, Kathmandu

Here began the wholesale transference of Buddhist texts out of Nepal. Here, also, the manufacture of European Buddhism was given its first large shipment of raw materials.

Hodgson's old Buddhist friend is Burnouf's *bouddhiste nepalais*, a man whose identity was rarely recorded by Hodgson, but often enough. His name was Amritananda, a Newar priest, famous in his country during his lifetime for having completed the last cantos of Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, one of the earliest and most famous accounts of the life of the Buddha. He was also the author of a Buddhist history of the Nepal Valley. He lived in the city of Patan, in an area known as Mahabauddha; it was out of the countless almyrahs of this city that Burnouf's manuscripts came. Amritananda and the Newars were a conquered people, oppressed by a Hindu military population from Gorkha. The Newars had nothing in common with the rude soldiers, and their suffering was largely unknown and unrelieved. Amritananda's acts of friendship and help to Hodgson may have in fact been a subversive plea for recognition – a silent cry of a people in torment. Either way, they were barely understood by the Englishman, if at all.

The parts played in this process by Amritananda, Hodgson and Burnouf embody a transformative ritual that later made Richard Wagner's ideology possible. It is not that Wagner misused or even misunderstood the Buddhism that resulted from these transformations. Richard Wagner sought to define himself and his culture. For him, Buddhism was a way of answering his three most fundamental questions: What does it mean to be German? What does it mean to be Christian? What is art?

Parsifal, Wagner's final work, is his answer to these three questions. The answers are inextricably linked, for in this work his revolutionary and political ambitions come together with his art. *Parsifal* is a ritual meant to define the German community as racially pure; to redefine Christianity through the transformation of the Mass into the celebration of the Holy Grail, thereby redeeming the blood of the Redeemer himself from its negative moment; and to make these changes real through his art at Bayreuth, the German city that houses the Wagner Theatre. The work is his transformation of all values and his eternal recurrence of the same – a transformation that had begun many years before in the atelier of Pundit Amritananda Shakya.

Coda

A final note on ritual. On the afternoon of 13 February 1883, in his study in the Palazzo Vendramin in Venice, Richard Wagner felt a stab of pain in his chest and pulled the cord that was there for such occasions. Cosima rushed to his side, but a few minutes later, he died in his wife's arms.

The cult of Wagner spread over Europe and America in the years after his death. Some years later, a novelist writing at the beginning of the next century recalled the funeral:

The body was there, shut in its crystal coffin, and standing beside it was the woman with the face of snow. The second coffin of burnished metal shone open on the pavement. All were gazing fixedly at the chosen one of Life and Death; an infinite smile illuminated the face of the prostrate hero – a smile as distant and infinite as the rainbow of a glacier, as the gleam of the sea, as the halo of a star. They could not bear to see it, but their hearts, with a wondering fear that made them religious, felt as if they were receiving the revelation of a divine secret ...

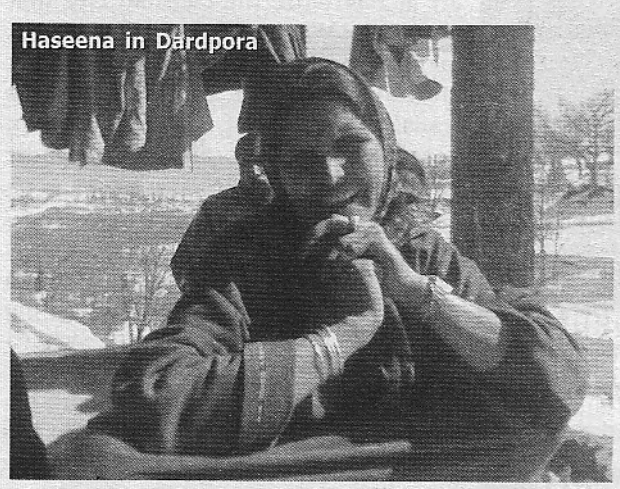
The great silence was worthy of Him who had transformed the forces of the Universe for man's worship into infinite song.

The words are those of one of the annunciatory angels of the new century, Gabriele d'Annunzio, one of the prophets of the new fascism. Cosima, the woman with the face of snow, was to live for many years after her husband's death, and was to hear 'the infinite song' that was to nearly destroy Europe.

THE PAIN *of* DARDPORA

A village near the line of control in Kashmir epitomises the violence the people of the region have suffered in silence all these years.

by | **Peerzada Arshad Hamid**


Haseena in Dardpora

The widows of Dardpora are a grim reminder of the brutal violence that has characterised the Kashmir conflict. Located 120 kilometres from Srinagar in Kupwara District, life in this village lives up to its name, for *dard* means pain, and *pora*, a hamlet. Out of 1000 households in Dardpora, as many as 300 families have lost their bread-earners in the ongoing turmoil. While the majority of them were militants killed in encounters with the Indian Army, the remaining were killed by militants, either in inter-group clashes or after being branded as informants for the Indian Army.

The 8 October Kashmir Earthquake ruined much of what death had left untouched. "After Uri and Tangdhar on this side of Kashmir, Dardpora is worst affected," says Ghulam Nabi Mir, the village *sarpanch*. "120 houses have been completely destroyed and the remaining 800 are partially damaged. It is risky to go inside a cracked house." While some people have erected makeshift hutments in the premises of their houses, those who cannot afford to do so share space with other neighbourhood families. But it is the women of the village, particularly the widows, who have had to bear the brunt of this twin tragedy.

State's gun

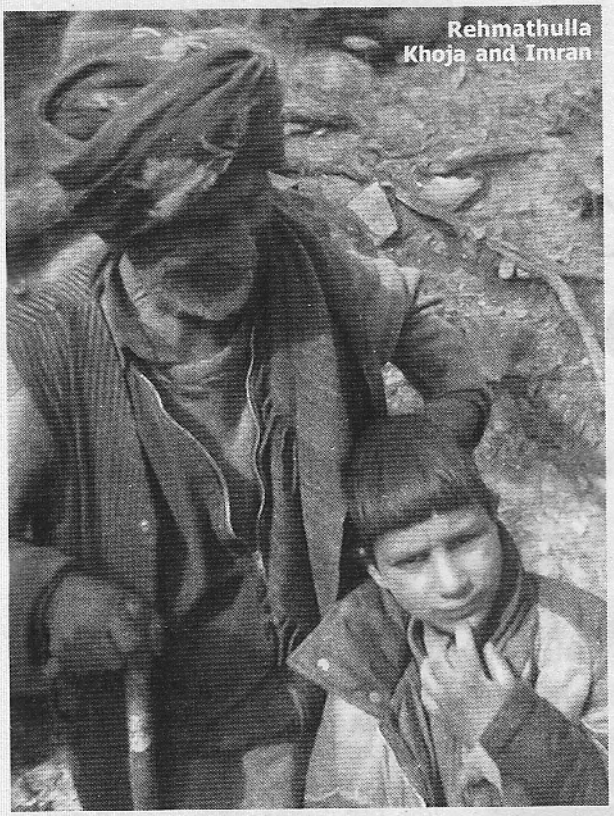
37-year-old Haseena has been a widow for the last 13 years, since her husband, a militant with the Hizbul Mujahideen, was killed in an encounter with the Indian Army. With three sons and one daughter, Haseena struggles to make ends meet. "To feed my family, I first took a loan for buying a cow; then I borrowed money to educate my children; and finally a loan for agricultural purposes," she sighs. "Being a defaulter, bank officials do come to my house, but where will I bring the money to repay their loan?"

Unfortunately, the tragedies have continues to pile up. Two of her children suffer from chronic illness – 14-year-old Zahid suffers from epilepsy and 17-year-old Saima is a cancer patient. Last year, Haseena sold her family's land in order to treat them. The earthquake devastated them further – the family's house was rendered uninhabitable, and she and her children now sleep at the house of Begum Jan, another widow.

"For me, both India and Pakistan are guilty," she says. "Being a militant, my husband died an unsung death. Living in an Indian-controlled state has made me an untouchable, because no government office takes responsibility for militant families." While the government does provide compensation and employment opportunities to family members of those killed in militant violence, this is not available to relatives of killed militants.

40-year-old Begum Jan's story is not very different, except that she has never received proof of her husband's death. In 1992, she was told that her husband, Shamsudin Poswal, had been killed along the Line of Control during a fierce encounter with Indian security forces. Poswal's body was never brought to the village for burial, nor is there any other record of his death. "Initially, I too was sceptical about his death," she recalls, "but he has not returned for years, so I have begun to believe the rumours."

In the absence of any aid from the government or non-government agencies, widows like Haseena and Begum Jan are completely disillusioned. "People come, take notes, click photos and go back," Begum Jan complains. "If you cannot do anything, why do you make us recall our agonies?"



Rehmathulla Khoja and Imran

Three families

Meet 50-year-old Shaha, whose husband, Abdullah Bhat, was labelled an informer working with the Indian Army. She says he was fired upon as he was coming back from a day's work in the fields. For Shaha, this was not the end of her sorrows. Her son Mudasir, whom Shaha sent to Punjab to earn a livelihood for the sake of his mother and three sisters, went missing there. Since then, there has been no news of him.

Fatima, 60, lost her husband Villayat Shah in crossfire between militants and soldiers while grazing cattle. His son Maroof, a militant, was killed a year later, and Fatima now lives with Maroof's widow, Salema. Both widows are reconciled to a life of misery and pain. "We were five sisters and among them only I was married. How can I go back to my father? I prefer to stay here taking the sufferings as my destiny," says Salema.

The consequences of these widespread killings are not limited to surviving female family members. 70-year-old Rehmatullah Khoja, a former farmer, is now a destitute beggar. His son Ghulam Qadir Khoja – a militant killed by the Indian Army – left behind three small children and a wife. His daughter-in-law remarried, leaving the children with Rehmatullah and his wife. Now, he goes door-to-door in Dardpora begging for alms, at times accompanied by Qadir's son Imran. Another grandson has been sent to an orphanage outside of Kashmir. "Whatever I bring from the day's begging, we cook in the evening," says Rehmatullah. "I was not a beggar. I too had expectations from my son, but destiny had all this in store for me."

Last village

The humanitarian catastrophe is coupled with the backwardness of the village as a whole, which makes life extremely difficult for the survivors. Half of Dardpora is devoid of electricity or drinking water. Difficult terrain makes the village highly inaccessible. Agriculture is the main source of income, but the area almost always remains drought-affected.

Mir Ghulam Rasool, a social worker and retired teacher in Dardpora, has a sound explanation for the disproportionate number of widows in the village. "Dardpora is the last village along LOC," he says. "Earlier, when Kashmiri youth used to cross the border for arms training, our village fell on the most-used track. Locals from this village too got involved, with some straightaway joining the militant ranks and others acting as guides to facilitate the cross-over. Later, in the gun battles between the Indian Army and militants, naturally this village was to suffer, and it did."

On the pathetic condition of the widows, Mir says that community support has not been feasible because of the widespread poverty. "When villagers do not have enough themselves, how can they support or help anyone else?" he asks. The local MLA, he says, rarely visits the village and has not ensured support to violence-affected families.

The actions of higher levels of government have not been of much greater help. The issue pertaining to the rehabilitation of widows of militants was enshrined in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP) reached by two ruling-coalition partners in the state government, the Congress and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), in 2002. It is yet to be implemented. On the contrary, during a council meeting of the Rehabilitation Council in October 2005, the Ministry of Home Affairs is reported to have spurned the decision taken by ex-Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed to rehabilitate the dependents of killed militants.

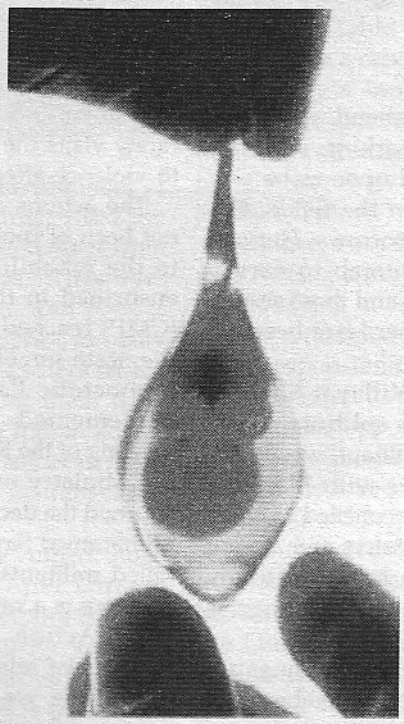
There is a ray of hope, however, since the activist NGO Action Aid selected Dardpora for post-earthquake relief and rehabilitation. "In a survey of this village, we found hardly any house that was not damaged," recalls Action Aid project officer Abdul Jaleel Lone. "We then saw the destitute households run by widows and the overall backwardness of the area. There was no question about not running a project here." The organisation has donated roofing sheets to the families for making hutments and distributed food. "We are trying to focus on the permanent rehabilitation of the families here," Lone adds.

An intriguing absence of outrage

Why isn't abortion in India the explosive social issue it is elsewhere?

by | **Andrew Nash**

For all the contrasts that might be drawn between American and Indian politics, one of the sharpest could be the differing role that abortion plays in the two systems. The United States is, of course, famously obsessed with abortion – leading to perennial political brawls when it is time to choose new government officials. In India, on the other hand, politicians appear generally indifferent to the subject. Why is this so?



This Indian apathy or ambivalence towards abortion holds true through the pre- and post-Independence period till the present day. During the colonial period, discussions of abortion appeared occasionally in the writings of Indian social critics, but only in order to draw attention to its perceived relation with a social 'evil'. Tarabai Shinde, the late-19th century Marathi woman who rallied against gender norms, cited abortion as evidence of men's hypocritical sexual moralities. Another Marathi writer, the iconoclast and educationalist Jotirao Phule, viewed abortion as an outcome of unjust gender and caste practices. "These [widower] Arya brahmans unashamedly make advances on the weak defenceless widows in their household and greedily seduce them," he wrote. "When these widows become pregnant they are forced to abort. This is quite a common practice." Vidyasagar, a contemporary of Phule's in Bengal, voiced similar complaints. However, while identifying abortion with some social problem, these writers and other public intellectuals of their time seem to have done little to explore the morality concerning the subject, or whether a foetus should be considered 'alive'.

Modern Indian law is based on the colonial Indian Penal Code (IPC), originally drafted in 1837 and enacted in the early-1860s. After 1947, IPC sections 312-316 remained in effect, which detailed criminal penalties and terms of imprisonment for both persons who perform and women who receive abortions. But in 1971, the Indian Parliament passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) bill, which effectively legalised abortion by creating loopholes in the event of birth control failure or maternal mental distress. Government records suggest that this shift in the abortion legal framework came about in response to legal trends in other countries and, more importantly, from concerns about overpopulation.

In any event, comments by several members of Parliament at the time indicated that there had been little legal enforcement of abortion penalties for decades and that the 1971 change in policy was fairly uncontroversial. One parliamentarian cited the figure of 6.5 million annual abortions in India in the years leading up to the law's amendment. A member of the Rajya Sabha lamented that the bill had "not received the publicity it deserves." Indeed, although committees in both houses had mulled the legislation's provisions since its 1969 introduction, the Rajya Sabha debated the MTP bill for only two days and the Lok Sabha for only one.

In the years since 1971, abortion has remained on the fringe of Indian public awareness – occasionally popping up in policy debates and discussions of public morality, but almost always indirectly. Significant discussion has taken place, for instance, about the use of amniocentesis (used to determine a foetus's gender) in procuring sex-selective abortions in North India. While a 2004 census report on skewed child gender ratios in several North Indian states provoked the most recent round of op-ed debates on the topic, participants again did not concern themselves with discussions of the morality of abortion. It is also noteworthy that Hindutva-leaning politicians, despite voicing concerns about the alleged growth of the Muslim community in India, have taken no dramatic steps to curtail Hindu women's access to abortion facilities. This stands in stark contrast to 19th century America, for instance, where Protestant beliefs about the 'prodigious' reproductive habits of Catholic immigrants contributed to a tightening of abortion laws in order to 'preserve' the Anglo-Saxon population.

In 1971, the Indian Parliament passed the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) bill, which effectively legalised abortion by creating loopholes in the event of birth control failure or maternal mental distress.

The near-absence of rigorous intellectual exploration of abortion by Indian social thinkers and politicians is mirrored in contemporary scholarship. While there are a handful of scholarly articles on the history of abortion and abortion law in India by historians such as Supriya Guha and Ranajit Guha, most writing on the subject is limited to studies of population policy. Feminist historians in particular have done important studies on topics at the intersection of colonial law, gender and social power – particularly *sati*, widow remarriage, female infanticide, and age of consent. But despite the conviction of hundreds of Indian women in colonial courts under abortion penal provisions, there has been little scholarly interest in the topic as a whole. The Sanskrit scholar Julius Lipner, in an article on classical Hindu views of abortion, argues that "issues relating to the moral status of the unborn and abortion have neither been aired or even properly identified, in general, in Indian minds and literature."

Subject for speculation

Based solely on their respective foundational texts, it is somewhat ironic that modern-day Hindus are less concerned with abortion than are many non-Indian Christians and Muslims. After all, the Christian Bible contains no references to abortion; official Christian interest in the practice dates largely to the 19th century, when the development of modern medicine allowed for the procedure to be conducted in the open and made subject to regulation. For its part, Islamic tradition contains some explicitly permissive commentary on abortion. Several *hadith* attributed to the Prophet Mohammed state that a foetus is 'ensouled' – and thus gains personhood – only after around 120 days of development. In some Islamic traditions, early-term abortion was subsequently permitted.

On the other hand, Lipner points out that Hindu tradition was relatively clear in its prohibition of abortion. Based on condemnatory references to abortion in both *shruti* and *smriti* texts, Lipner writes that between 600 BC and 600 CE, "the definitive Hindu view on the moral status of the unborn in connection with abortion was developed and established." Still, while some classical religious texts may have condemned the practice, it is nearly impossible to reconstruct the actual operation of pre-modern law throughout the Subcontinent – notwithstanding Jotirao Phule's assertion that there had been no abortion during the Vedic age.

However, we do know that in the mid-eighteenth century, when the East India Company displaced the remnants of the Mughal state in Bengal, abortion, along with adultery, was punishable as a moral offence. The Company instituted a new judicial system in Bengal in 1772, three decades before the criminalisation of abortion in England. Two legal principles could have influenced Company attitudes towards abortion in the 18th century. On the one hand, the Company initially desired to dissociate itself from moral regulation; on the other hand, it wanted to claim the sole legitimate right to take life. Hence, seeing abortion as a question of sexual morality would lead to non-regulation, whereas seeing abortion as a matter of life-taking could lead to prohibition.

This distinction, while neat in theoretical terms, allows for only the most general understanding of English and Indian attitudes during the era. Initially, in 1772, the Company decided to do away with the Mughal system of penalties for offences against morality, including those for abortion. This would appear to suggest that, to the English administrative mind of the early 1770s (at least insofar as it thought appropriate for eastern India), abortion was more an issue of morality than of murder. In time, however, the Company reinstated penalties for abortion, adultery and other 'moral crimes' – apparently in response to fears that Indians would see Company rule as immoral and, hence, undesirable.

More importantly, because the Company initially condoned *sati*, and then backed its way into regulating widow immolation before instituting a legal ban in 1829, the desire to create a state that enjoyed a monopoly over the taking of life was unrealised in the early years of colonial rule. Regardless, it is largely impossible to discern 18th century Indian and English attitudes towards abortion with any precision. "An interesting subject of speculation," the historian Radhika Singha writes, "is whether abortion and infanticide were considered heinous in themselves or investigated in the community for the proof they gave of the more disgraceful offence of prohibited relationships."

It is also noteworthy that Hindutva-leaning politicians, despite voicing concerns about the alleged growth of the Muslim community in India, have taken no dramatic steps to curtail Hindu women's access to abortion facilities.

Control of reproduction

Indian attitudes towards abortion in the early modern period can be further discerned by considering the broader contexts of reproductive and birth practices and their interactions with the law. Here, the most obvious parallel is infanticide. Colonial officials commented on female infanticide among certain North Indian caste groups as early as the late 18th century, although the most concentrated administrative effort to combat the problem did not come until a century later. (Colonial officials in South India reported that sex-selective infanticide did not occur there.) In any event, the similarity between infanticide and abortion is only general: How far will public morality and state power go to protect forms of life that may not be deemed to possess personhood?

19th century female infanticide can be seen as a precursor to late 20th century sex-selective abortion. In places like present-day Haryana, where around two in five female foetuses are aborted, amniocentesis has simply taken the place of examining a child's reproductive organs at birth. If the classical religious prohibition on abortion identified by Julius Lipner appears at odds with contemporary popular morality, a better place to trace modern notions of foetal life is 19th century North India. It should come as no surprise that the Indian Penal Code sections on infanticide follow immediately after those on abortion, or that some colonial administrators did not bother to distinguish between the practices in judicial reports.

The history of sati regulation also provides some guidance on Indian conceptions of foetal life. At the insistence of socio-religious reformer Rammohan Roy, the English banned sati in 1829. Just two decades earlier, however, the British had issued circulars calling for the prevention of the burning of specifically pregnant widows. Thus, at least formally, regardless of whether the foetus itself was considered a person, its mere existence could determine the life or death of its mother during the second decade of the 19th century. According to this peculiar bureaucratic logic, the foetus depended on its mother for survival no less than the mother depended on the foetus for hers. While it is difficult to determine how often pregnancy actually won a widow respite from the pyre, the recognition of a pregnant woman's special status signified the (potential) human value of the foetus.

More commonly, of course, abortion was simply another tool to control reproduction. For a young woman – widowed at an early age, dependent on in-laws, not permitted by law or social custom to remarry – a pregnancy stemming from either a consensual or non-consensual sexual encounter could have had devastating social consequences. Given the relative lack of freedom of, say, high-caste women in northern and eastern India, particularly later in the 19th century, the morality of terminating foetal life needs to be weighed against the social consequences of the pregnancy for the woman and potential child. By aborting the foetus, a mother could, in a sense, 'undo' the pregnancy – erasing the evidence of the sexual act that had led to it, and escape society's vehement disapproval. While recognising the immense diversity in social practices throughout India, and hence the impossibility of calibrating with exactness the tension between the moral value of a foetus and the social consequences of an unwanted pregnancy, it seems that moral investment in foetal life was limited by the oftentimes harsh social realities of illegitimacy and poverty.

A non-controversy

Even while formal colonialism ended in 1947, the Indian Penal Code remains the foundation of noted Indian law. In 1948, the noted sociologist M N Srinivas spent a year in a small village in modern-

day Karnataka. In his memoir, he narrates a confrontation between an abandoned pregnant woman and a village powerbroker, who "advised her against going to an abortionist but she said she had no alternative. She left us soon after." Srinivas writes that the powerbroker "found her story and her life revolting," but there is no indication that anyone in the incident knew or cared that abortion was formally illegal.

Srinivas's research coincided with the holocaust of Partition, in which thousands of women were abducted by men from both in and out of their native religious communities. In 1948, the newly independent Indian and Pakistani states agreed to conduct an 'exchange' of women abducted after March 1947, when the first widespread violence had been reported in the Punjab.

Recent studies by activist-writers Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin show that the Indian state provided – against its own laws – abortions to many of the women 'recovered' from Pakistan. Administering abortions to women brought back to India, sometimes against their will, is probably the first example of state-led family planning in India.

By the early 1970s, abortion was frequently discussed as a procedure to be carried out in government hospitals, in part in order to control population growth. In the 1971 parliamentary debates on the MTP bill, speakers addressed questions involving women's autonomy over their bodies, and, less commonly, the moral implications of a legal regime that sanctioned abortion. Most of the time, however, the legislative debate tied abortion to symbolic props like 'progress' and 'religion', whose importance would supposedly either be affirmed or debased by the bill's passage.

"Many other countries in the world have already passed the Bill legalising abortion," one MP noted in support of the legislation. An opponent declared that it would "destroy the great human values cherished by this country for the last thousands of years and also ... will mark the end of all moral values." Several speakers referred to scenes from the *Mahabharta* to demonstrate the alleged moral damage caused by abortion, but the opponents primarily chose to denounce abortion as running counter to a general, undefined Indian tradition. Regardless, with the Congress party's support, the bill passed easily.

Why is the moral dilemma over abortion not a subject of public debate in India? The 1990s witnessed the swift rise of a socially conservative, religiously grounded political formation, which would seem to have laid the groundwork for a cultural battle on the issue. Indeed, two decades earlier, the handful of opponents to the MTP bill had come from the ranks of the Jan Sangh, the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Leaders of the Hindu right often voice concern over the alleged proportional decline of Hindus in India, and the Hindutva movement has demonstrated its power to control women. Considering these factors, it would seem logical if abortion were currently a symbolic issue as important to the Hindu right-wing as temple construction in Ayodhya – as much of a flashpoint issue in India as it is in the US and elsewhere.

But the fact is that the rise of the Hindu right has not led to any surge towards fighting abortion. The reasons behind this non-concern could be two-fold. First, the country's legislation was instituted on a resoundingly solid basis. India liberalised its abortion law only two years before the US did, but the MTP bill overwhelmingly passed a Parliament full of Congressmen, Communists, Socialists and Jan Sangh politicians. No one could claim that a court had acted arbitrarily or against the democratic consensus, as is still being argued in the US by opponents hoping to have the legislation overturned. In India, the democratic process had done its work.

Since the prevailing attitude largely associated population growth with economic weakness and social backwardness, the desire for Hindu reproductive strength was diminished by fear of reproduction itself.

But why were so many politicians willing to support the bill in the first place? The second part of this explanation involves the special significance of population anxiety in Indian politics. Although the 1971 passage of the MTP bill was a few years before the coercive family planning policies of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, it still took place at a time when controlling population growth had become a central concern of the Indian state. Because the prevailing attitude largely associated population growth with economic weakness and social backwardness, the desire for Hindu reproductive strength was diminished by a fear of reproduction itself. Regardless of ideology, those involved in the 1971 debate argued that population growth should be reduced – so how could anyone oppose a measure that would likely lead to exactly such a reduction? In the realm of private morality, a politician might resolutely reject the idea that his wife or daughter would ever exercise their right to abortion. Simultaneously, however, he could hope that other women in similar situations would be able to make exactly that choice.

Cold feet in the atoll

Even if the Maldives' president has had second thoughts about democratic reforms, the country's people have not.

by | **Carey L Biron**

In January 2005, the Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom promised his country a new Constitution by the beginning of the following year. At that time, President Gayoom had ruled the Maldives since 1978 – seventy percent of the country's years of independence – but had been increasingly pressured into initiating an agenda of democratic reform. Not only is the new Constitution nowhere to be seen, but the country now seems more mired in political stagnation than anytime in recent years. The impasse comes after 2005 saw a significant swell in opposition to the president. Observers are warning that the archipelago could see grave socio-political crises, if promised democratic reforms are not delivered immediately.

Last year's momentum initially crested with the Parliament's unanimous decision to officially register political parties. Within months of the June vote green-lighting the move towards multi-party democracy, however, the government began to backtrack – particularly with regard to the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the first to gain the numbers necessary to register. Incidents from that period continue to reverberate six months later. On 5 August 2005, the newly-official MDP submitted to government officials and Commonwealth mediators a plan on how to move the Maldives towards democratisation. The MDP memorandum began with the warning that the country was "on the verge of a popular uprising that can turn events either way: violent or peaceful." Among its demands were moves to increase governmental transparency, and a more equitable composition of the Parliament and Constitutional Assembly (the People's Majlis and People's Special Majlis, respectively), thereby decreasing President Gayoom's personal power over these assemblies' machinations and decisions. The given timeframe was within 30 to 60 days from 12 August.

Just one week later, 12 August was the one-year anniversary of what has become known as 'Black Friday', when security forces had confronted a record-sized public gathering in Male, arresting hundreds for calling on the president to resign. To commemorate the date the following year, MDP Chairman Mohamed Nasheed held a vigil in the capital; there, he was quickly arrested by riot police, a move initially explained as being for his own safety. After hundreds more were imprisoned while condemning the detention, Nasheed – who had returned from exile only months earlier – was eventually charged with sedition and terrorism.

On 30 January 2006, the Criminal Court again re-extended Nasheed's detention, as it had done at regular monthly intervals since his arrest. Along with the 10-year sentence handed down to fellow MDP councillor (and daughter of the self-exiled MDP founder) Jennifer Latheef in mid-October, Nasheed's name has become a rallying cry for the islands' masses, and a litmus test for the official opposition. The court ruled on Nasheed's detention less than a week after an MDP-scheduled capital demonstration to call for his release on 24 January reportedly drew threats of government-sponsored violence. Despite such security worries, the rally drew an estimated 4000 protesters that day – a large number for Male, especially considering the tense atmosphere. The government placed participation numbers at exactly 382, handed the MDP a stiff MVR 50,000 fine for contravening regulations governing the actions of political parties, and announced that they would be charging individuals for participating.

Immediately following the 30 January court ruling,

the MDP pulled out of long-awaited all-party talks scheduled for 5 February. To be held with Commonwealth mediation, the talks were to have covered ways to bring about constitutional reforms in line with Commonwealth conventions. The MDP explained their refusal to participate by citing that they had originally agreed to the talks on the condition that President Gayoom "demonstrates a commitment to reform by freeing internationally recognised political prisoners." These included Nasheed and Latheef, as well as Ahmed Didi, who ran an anti-government website, and artist Naushad Waheed, brother of MDP shadow cabinet minister Mohamed Waheed; both Didi and Waheed were eventually pardoned on 22 February. This same demand on the part of the MDP had also stalled the first round of Commonwealth-mediated all-party talks, however, originally scheduled for September 2005.

Despite the pullout by the main opposition, Commonwealth representatives did receive input from other political parties. On 9 February, a government spokesperson confirmed that, given the "slow pace" of the Special Majlis, Commonwealth officials would be taking on the responsibility of drafting the new Constitution, due by April. Confusion has since arisen as to whether Maldivian law actually allows for this Commonwealth intervention. While the Constitutional Assembly is allowed to use expert advisors, the request legally needs to come from the newly-elected Research and Drafting Committee – from within the Special Majlis, and not from the government.

Foot-dragging

Reform has been slow in the Maldives, with the People's Special Majlis (the Constitutional Assembly created in 2004 to oversee democratic changes to the Constitution) taking more than a year to decide on its own procedural rules, a task that is still not completely finished. The official displeasure with the Assembly's sluggishness is at odds with the overriding sense by many in the Maldives that President Gayoom himself, despite his assurances to the contrary, is successfully attempting to slow – or even reverse – the pace at which his regime is taking on promised reforms. In the face of his government's landmark recognition of the country's political parties, for instance, President Gayoom barred candidates from implying party affiliations during Constitutional Assembly elections held in December. After Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed went on state television the day before the 24 January demonstration and lauded a recent trip abroad by suggesting that "the international community is very pleased with the way [the] reform agenda is going", the European Union issued an unusually sharp rebuttal, calling for President Gayoom's administration to speed up the implementation of overdue reform measures. The statement echoed near-universal condemnation on the part of the international community for the lethargy perceived in Male's governmental corridors.

President Gayoom's response to the criticism was indirect. Two days after the 27 January EU statement, the first weekly session of the Special Majlis was again forced to cancel due to a lack of quorum, when only two of President Gayoom's unelected appointees to the Assembly showed up for work. The agenda item waiting for discussion that day was exactly this powerful loophole in the Special Majlis composition, which allows the President himself to appoint 30 percent of the Assembly's members and also gives him veto power over any legislation the Assembly passes. Indeed, in a major reform speech in 2004, President Gayoom himself had originally proposed that both assemblies be made more equitable, subsequently including these elements in a list of reforms that he later presented to the Special Majlis. Since then, however, the president appears to have become worried about losing his influence in both assemblies, and changed his mind. Pending opposition proposals could now have stripped those abilities, with the MDP having long argued that only those who have been democratically elected should be allowed to debate constitutional changes; the issue was given more space than any other in the 5 August memorandum.

The previous day, a petition signed by 61 of the 113 Special Majlis members (allegedly initiated by the President himself) had called to drop from the agenda those items dealing with the amendments relating to the Special Majlis composition. Even as the Special Majlis Deputy Speaker suspended the Assembly for a week to mull over the matter, around 200 protestors outside of the Majlis House reacted animatedly to the news of the petition, jeering at officials leaving the grounds. At the end of that week, on 5 February, the government indefinitely suspended the Special Majlis due to security concerns, in response to the petition-related demonstrations. Both the People's Majlis and the People's Special Majlis would reconvene only "after strengthening security" in the area, a government press release

stated, blaming "MDP activists ... in what is widely believed to be a calculated plan to block the constitutional reform process." When the Special Majlis was set to convene on 19 February, the 29 unelected members, along with 16 other presidential appointees, again failed to show up to a session that was slated to debate their potential removal from the Assembly. The lack of quorum cancelled the Special Majlis for a third session in a row.

Media reform

Until just a few years ago, public demonstrations in the Maldives were very rare. Even while public sentiment has moved into the streets, however, the Maldivian press is still labouring under repressive conditions. In their 2005 report, the press freedoms watchdog Reporters Sans Frontiers ranked the Maldives 148th out of 167 countries – the same position occupied the previous year by Iraq. The past year saw scores of Maldivian journalists being arrested, intimidated or violently harassed for being vocal against the government, which also reportedly attempted recently to cancel a BBC media-training course due to worries that it was "too political". In 2005 the government did decide to open electronic media regulations to potential private broadcasters, but the single state-owned television and radio broadcasts still dominate the market. The few licenses that the government has granted prohibit broadcasting news other than from the state-owned stations.

In late December, the government even reached beyond its borders in an attempt to silence an MDP-run radio and news organisation based in Colombo. Acting on false accusations of arms dealing made by authorities in Male (alleged to have been the Maldivian chief of police), Sri Lankan police officers raided the radio and print offices of Minivan, a press group started in July 2005; finding no evidence supporting the claims, however, Sri Lankan officials announced the case closed. Nonetheless, the action scared two journalists in Sri Lanka enough to leave the country, and Radio Minivan temporarily ceased broadcasting. The action was not unprecedented, however, with Reporters Sans Frontiers accusing Male of "repeatedly manipulating" the international policing organisation Interpol, with similar baseless accusations against critical journalists and activists in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

A new media reform bill is scheduled to go before the Majlis in early March. Government officials emphasise that the new legislation would entrench press freedoms, standardise access to information, allow the Ministry of Information no oversight over media workers, and "ensure nothing stops journalists as long as they comply with Article 25 of the Constitution." Article 25 ensures citizens freedoms of expression, unless prohibited "in the interest of protecting the sovereignty of the Maldives, of maintaining public order and of protecting the basic tenets of Islam." The new bill would also allow for transgressors to be penalised only through the judicial system – which critics have attacked as offering scant comfort, with the courts still under the thumb of the president.

Fragile economy

As recently as 2004, the Maldives was the fastest-growing economy in the region. The 26 December 2004 tsunami dealt a huge blow to the economy and crippled the country's infrastructure, however, with damage equivalent to more than 60 percent of the country's GDP. Accounting for a third of total GDP, the tourism industry was hurt not just by the loss of a quarter of the 87 resorts that dot the archipelago, but also by the intangible dent in tourist confidence. By early October, President Gayoom reported that tourism numbers were down by 600,000 – a nearly forty percent drop that translated to a loss of more than USD 40 million. By September the economy was in a recession, having gone from an 8 percent growth rate in 2004 to shrinking by 2 percent in 2005, with government officials ruing the economy's worst situation in decades.

Rebuilding and attempts to soothe tourist jitters have been met with some success, with arrival numbers soaring unexpectedly and reports of resorts being over-filled. Utilising the recent scare, however, one Maldivian human rights group is now focusing specifically on that economic vulnerability. On 10 December 2005, World Human Rights Day, a UK-based group called for a boycott of 23 of the country's resorts, which they claimed had links to President Gayoom or his supporters. Due to the "fragile" nature of the Maldives' tourism-based economy, the group emphasises that they are not advocating for tourists to stay away from the country. Rather, the boycott "has been developed by Maldivians who feel that tourism to these specific resorts has enabled President Gayoom to maintain his power base and stranglehold over the Maldivian people."

Despite the recent tourism jump, the government claims that the tsunami set back development in the Maldives by two decades. With focused international campaigns targeting the already-weakened economy and popular sentiment spilling out into the country's public spaces, the worry now must be that the current economic fragility and political instability will continue to build upon one another. In mid-February, the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI) sent the government a post-tsunami proposal package aimed at restarting and ensuring continued tourism revenue. In the communication, MATI urged the Tourism Ministry to engage in research on why markets that have long had good relations with the Maldives are now searching for alternative destinations. Were such a trend to continue, it would not only be painful for the citizens of Southasia's smallest country, but potentially disastrous for its government.

Remittance Economy

Nepal's evolution towards accepting and incorporating the labour of its overseas workers.

by | **Pranab M Singh**

If you ever take an international flight from or to Nepal, it is nearly impossible to avoid running into groups of Nepali workers, with light bags and bewildered looks. With 300-500 Nepali workers leaving the country every day, this is hardly surprising. Yet, these hardworking and honest people are an invaluable resource to Nepal's ailing economy. Statistics from Nepal Rastra Bank, the country's central bank, reveal that the Nepali economy in 2004/05 earned over USD 922 million in remittances from overseas workers – accounting for 12.4 percent of national GDP. With 30 to 50 percent of these remittances being transferred through informal channels, total remittances for that year could easily top USD 1.5 billion. More importantly, however, this money is spread throughout the country, providing significantly greater security against a potential economic crisis. In explaining the value of remittances to Nepal, the representative of the Asian Development Bank, Sultan Hafeez Rahman, recently noted: "Remittances are one of the great equalisers in otherwise inequitable economies. People who go abroad are randomly and evenly distributed from across "the country."

Min Bajracharya

Leaving Kathmandu for the Gulf

Migration for employment has long played a crucial role in shaping Southasia. With over 40 percent of the regional population still living on less than a dollar a day, migration to meet basic needs and improve standards of living will continue to play an important role in the region. During the oil boom in the 1970s, the labour-surplus economies of Southasia were able to supply cheap labour to meet the growing labour demands in the Middle East. These labour markets, including those in East Asia, proved vital for Southasian economies. According to the World Bank, by 2004 remittances were injecting USD 3.4 billion into the Bangladeshi economy, USD 4.1 billion into Pakistan, and a staggering USD 23 billion into India – accounting for over 5 percent of the GDP in all three countries.

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Although Nepal was a late entry in taking advantage of Middle Eastern labour demands, the country has a long history of job migration. With the drawing of Nepal's borders in 1816 through the Sugauli Treaty with British India, the Gorkhali hero Bal Bhadra Kuwar left Nepal to join the army of the Punjabi Sikh King Ranjit Singh. Subsequently, an 1839 treaty allowed Punjab to undertake large-scale recruitment within Nepal. Although Bal Bhadra Kuwar was the country's most famous expat worker, he was not the first. The British East India Company had already started recruiting Gorkhali warriors in 1815 from their Nepali prisoners of war, while major recruitment started following the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. During the two world wars, over 300,000 Nepali men fought for the British, suffering over 45,000 casualties.

This massive migration of able-bodied men had a disastrous effect on the traditional agricultural economy. Having seen the outside world, most of those who left did not return.

According to historian K Mojumdar, only 3838 Nepali soldiers returned home upon being discharged after World War I. With little to no economic development occurring in Nepal under the autocratic Rana regime, a significant number of Nepali workers proceeded to migrate to India. With the establishment of the tea estates in northeastern India, a considerable number of Nepali workers immigrated and established communities of their own in the region.

Nepali migration to India is a topic of significant importance to both nations, yet has been largely ignored. The open border and lack of passport requirements makes the task of keeping tabs on Nepali workers in India or Indian workers in Nepal extremely difficult. The Nepali census of 1952-54 recorded more than 157,000 Nepali migrant workers in India. By 1991 the numbers had almost tripled to 589,000, accounting for more than 90 percent of the entire migrant work force. However, a mid-1980s report by P P Karan estimated anywhere from 1.8 to 3 million Nepali workers in India. Remittances from those working in the public sector in India alone contributed USD 98 million in 1996. Although remittances from India have declined from 33 percent in 1996 to 23 percent in 2004, they still amounted to USD 161 million for 2003/04.

With around 300,000 Nepali youths entering the job market each year and real GDP growth barely averaging 3 percent annually from 1990 to 2005, the Nepali economy cannot produce enough jobs. The logical step for the unemployed lay beyond Nepali borders. With the advent of democracy in 1990 and the liberalisation of passport distribution, the Nepali people were able to obtain passports at their district headquarters. This opened the door for job migration beyond India. The higher wages and ever-increasing demand for labour in the Middle East soon made it a popular destination. The progressively deteriorating economic situation in Nepal has only encouraged migration, with over 180,000 Nepali workers departing in 2005, up from 123,000 in 2004 and leading to a 12 percent increase in remittance flows.

In the past, most Nepali workers who went abroad beyond India were employed in the armed forces, stationed in East Asian countries like Hong Kong, Singapore, Brunei and Macau. This early presence and need for a quick and effective money transfer system gave rise to informal *hundi* systems. However, job migration to the Middle East and Malaysia are comparatively new phenomena. The presence of formal remittance channels and the lack of a tradition in using informal systems by Nepali workers in these regions have helped to increase the use of the formal sector.

Informal transfers

Hundi (in East or Southasia) or *hawala* (in the Middle East) are informal money transfer systems that differ only in local nomenclature. They are largely based on trust, and used mainly by expatriate communities or migrant workers to send money back to family members in the country of origin. No records are kept of these transfers, and they lie outside all official channels. The attractiveness of the hundi system is both economic and cultural. Economically, these networks tend to be cheaper than banks or money-transfer companies. They also are faster, more versatile, and have a wider reach compared to most financial institutions. The hundi-wallahs, or *hawaldars*, generally make money through a minimal service-charge or by taking advantage of exchange rate spreads. These operators are generally members of the community they serve, with bonds of kinship, ethnic ties, or personal relations making them appear worthy of trust.

A hundi system works by developing a credit between two agents, which is used either in reverse-hundi transactions or tagged onto import-export deals. For instance, a USD 10,000 hundi credit is attached to a USD 100,000 export bill, saving some import-tax expenses. A simple transaction works as follows: a Nepali labourer working in, for instance, Malaysia, gives his money in Malaysian Ringgits to a hundi agent in Malaysia. That agent then informs his counterpart in Nepal, while the labourer meanwhile tells his family that he has sent them money, and may even give them a remittance code for verification purposes. The agent in Nepal contacts the labourer's family and delivers an equivalent sum of money in Nepali rupees.

As hundi systems are entirely dependent on the trust of the labourers and their families, they make exceptional efforts to keep the worker and the worker's family happy.

Nepali workers in India and East Asia use the hundi system extensively due to its wide reach into rural Nepal. There are an estimated 26,000 British army pensioners and over 105,000 Indian Gurkha pensioners. Until the 1970s, money sent home by the Gurkhas was Nepal's largest source of foreign currency. In *The New Lahures*, a book on foreign employment and the Nepali remittance economy, the authors claim that in the mid-1980s, Nepal was gaining nearly USD 47 million annually in foreign exchange from the British Gurkhas and over USD 100 million from the Indian armed forces. Of this, an estimated 90 percent arrived through informal channels. With an oblivious formal sector, hundi systems were easy to form and maintain. Further, illegal Nepali workers in countries like Japan, Hong Kong and Thailand are entirely dependent on the informal sector for sending money back home.

Little research has been conducted on issues dealing with Nepali migrant workers and

remittances. Misplaced nationalistic pride could be at fault, as such workers are often dismissed for the 'unpatriotic' act of leaving the country in search of work. Journalist Rajendra Dahal first brought the issue of Nepali remittance into the public eye in 1997, around the same time as a British Department for International Development (DFID)-supported project was being conducted on the effects of remittance in rural Nepal. This project was an offshoot of research done in 1996 on the rural economy of western Nepal, which showed an increasing reliance on remittances. Presented in 1998, the preliminary findings of the DFID research suggested that the actual volume and importance of remittances to the Nepali economy had been significantly understated, a finding confirmed by subsequent research.

The number of Nepali households receiving remittances has increased from 23 to 53 percent between 1995 and 2004.

The Nepali informal sector developed and flourished due to an ineffective commercial system. Recent awareness of the value of remittances have increased investment and interest in the area, with major manufacturing houses like Chaudhary Group and Golchha Organisation entering the money-transfer business. Recent scandals and reports of fraud by hundi agents have meanwhile undermined the levels of trust necessary for these operations. In one case, a hundi agent reportedly swindled over NPR 40 million from 70 Gurkhas with whom he had been working for years. Though rare, stories like these have severely dented the credibility of the hundi system, and have encouraged more people to explore formal options.

Most, however, continue to use the informal methods with which they are comfortable. According to Kalpana Shah, whose husband works in Korea, her family prefers to use hundi versus formal channels due to the former's economy and efficiency. She says that to transfer NPR 100,000 through hundi costs them less than NPR 500, whereas an official service like Western Union would charge NPR 2000 for the same amount. Banks have charged her as much as NPR 3800, and Shah also complains about the indifferent treatment she has received at large financial institutions. Hundi-wallahs, she notes, are friendly and courteous. Sita Vaidya, whose husband works in the Gulf, explains that her inability to read and write disallows her from using the commercial channels. Rajan Ghimire, whose son works in Qatar, says that he stopped using banks when they hassled him for not having the proper papers, after he had traveled a significant distance to Kathmandu to collect his money.

A 1999 World Bank report further suggests that remittances might actually be *more* effective than direct foreign aid.

Hundi networks have three major advantages: speed, access and personal service. As hundi systems are entirely dependent on the trust of the labourers and their families, they make exceptional efforts to keep the worker and the worker's family happy. Because a hundi agent that no one trusts has no business, the development of personal relations and bonds are integral to any hundi network. Users report agents to be personable, helpful and friendly; those same users often find the bureaucracy and the institutional depersonalisation of major financial institutes to be frightening and cold. There is a growing awareness within the formal sector about such complaints, while a growing realisation of the amount of money involved has been a source of renewed motivation.

Formal catch-up

The formal sector is comprised of banks, postal services, and money-transfer companies like Western Union, MoneyGram and International Money Exchange (IME). Unlike the informal sector, there is an actual transfer of currency between nations, and the amount is recorded by the central banks of both countries. In order to develop commercial money-transfer markets and services, Nepal Rastra Bank official Bhuwanesh Pant explains that the bank had begun granting licenses to private-sector organisations in March 2002. According to Pant, as of 31 January 2006, 29 firms excluding commercial banks are operating money-transfer businesses, and that a letter of intent has been granted to 69 other firms to begin money-transfer businesses.

According to Pradyman Pokharel, the head of business development at Nabil Bank, a premier Nepali Bank, financial institutions that were playing catch up to the Hundi networks have finally levelled the playing field. Money has traditionally been transferred between financial institutions through the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system established in the early 1970s. SWIFT transactions work through a series of language-independent data-code messages, piped through multinational banks like Citibank, Bank of America and Credit Suisse. Here, a labourer in one country gives his money to a bank, which then informs a third-party bank, usually a major US or European bank. The third-party bank then transfers an amount equal to the deposit from the first bank to a second and informs the second bank of the deposit. The SWIFT network is exclusively for established financial institutes and has a network of 7400 user banks in 199 countries worldwide. Due to its extended network and the time differentials between member banks, the transaction can take anywhere from one to four days to process.

Naresh Newar

Nepali workers at the embassy in Malaysia

The other formal channels used by workers sending remittances are retail transfer systems like Western Union, MoneyGram and IME. According to Pralad Neaupane of Annapurna Travels and Tours in Kathmandu, a Western Union agent, these systems offer a match for the hundi networks. All transactions are conducted digitally, Neaupane says, allowing these systems to rival the speed and efficiency of the informal sector. After receiving a labourer's money in one country, a retail transfer agent enters the transaction into the network; in a matter of hours, the money is available at a company agent in the receiving country. With five principle agents in Nepal, Western Union is the largest money-transfer system in the country. Business has been so lucrative that a Nepali firm, IME, established in May 2000 as a foreign-currency exchanger, decided in 2002 to begin repatriating the income of Nepali workers in Malaysia.

One of the largest advantages the hundi networks in Nepal have long held over the formal sector has been their access and reach into rural areas. In May 2005, Nabil Bank made an agreement with the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB) to act as sub-agents for Western Union in rural Nepal. With over 400 branches in rural Nepal, the ADB's extensive coverage dramatically increases the formal sector's reach and accessibility. Further, to encourage migrant workers to use these official channels, Nabil Bank now allows for special remittance accounts – available only to those who send or receive remittance transfers, and which can be opened for as little as one rupee. According to those working within the formal sector, the biggest reason that people are still using informal remittance methods is simply a lack of awareness. Often, migrant workers have never dealt with financial institutions; they do not have accounts in them, and are unaware as to how they work. Banks believe they are now succeeding in attracting more workers partially due to awareness and marketing campaigns, but also due to the perceived unreliability of the hundi networks.

Due to the lack of established hundi networks in the Middle East, an estimated 70 to 80 percent of remittances are coming through formal channels. This dynamic has also been increased in Malaysia, due to the presence and recognition in that country of Western Union and IME; the latter alone boasts a customer base of over 120,000 Nepali workers in Malaysia. Since 1999, up to forty percent more workers were using the formal sector in 2003/04. Bhuwanesh Pant emphasises that in order to encourage local financial institutes to take on the remittance business, Nepal Rastra Bank provides 15 paisa per US dollar as commission to licensed private firms, in addition to the prevailing buying rate. With Western Union taking 50 percent of the profits in each transaction, keeping this profit in Nepal is a lucrative deal for both Nepali businesses and the country's economy. Along with IME, the Himalayan Bank has also started its own transfer system.

Larger effect

With a steady increase in Nepali migrant workers and a corresponding increase in remittances, Nepal Rastra Bank has come to realise the value of both remittance and a more liberal monetary policy. Part of the reason this importance remained hidden for so long was simply due to the inherent difficulty in documenting the process. During the 1990s, the Rastra Bank maintained tight control on foreign currency circulation; this increased the demand for foreign currency and led to a rampant black market for these currencies. As such, both the remitter and operator stood to gain by carrying out transactions at a rate higher than the official exchange. In an attempt to divert more remittance-flow through official channels, the Rastra Bank loosened its monetary policy in 2002 by granting manpower agencies the right to open foreign-currency accounts in commercial Nepali banks. It also gradually slackened its grip on foreign currency supplies for Nepali citizens leaving the country. This has reduced the importance of the foreign-currency black market and has had a positive effect in bringing more remittances through formal channels.

"Remittances can generate a beneficial impact on the economy through various channels, such as savings, investment, growth, consumption and income distribution," Pant explains. "Remittances have relaxed the foreign-exchange constraints of the country and strengthened its balance of payments position." Bringing more remittance money through formal channels is critical, as there is no actual flow of currency through informal channels. There is, however, more money being circulated in the receiving country, but without any increase in foreign reserves to balance it out. Depending on the volume, this increase in cash circulation without an increase in foreign reserves can cause inflation. Economists also point out that remittance money can create real-estate bubbles and tends to prop up overvalued exchange rates. Furthermore, when the informal

sector is utilised, any direct or indirect tax revenues the government would gain from these transactions are lost.

The informal sector can never be entirely eliminated. With the majority of those working in India using informal channels or coming home seasonally with their earnings, formalising money transfers from India will remain extremely difficult. However, considerable provisions can be made to formalise money from other countries; considering their volume, these would lead to a greater impact. Although disrupting the informal channels would have an adverse effect on those who rely on hundi networks for their income, formalising money transfers will benefit the country in the long run through investments and the multiplier effect.

The number of Nepali households receiving remittances has increased from 23 to 53 percent between 1995 and 2004. The amount received per household has also gone up from NPR 15,000 to NPR 35,000 per year. Remittances have been crucial in reducing poverty levels in rural Nepal, and a significant amount of this money is invested in educating the children of the remitter. Shankar Sharma, vice-chair of Nepal's National Planning Commission, suggests that the reduction in poverty in Nepal from 42 to 31 percent between 1995 and 2004 was a direct result of remittance flows to the poorest sections of society. Experts still argue, however, that remittance money only supports direct consumption – that very little is actually diverted to development-oriented, job-creating investments. But a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies claims that remittances in Bangladesh have had a multiplier effect of 3.3 on GNP, 2.8 on consumption, and 0.4 on investments. An International Labour Organisation (ILO) report in 1999 also suggests that micro-level social development projects could steer remittances towards more development-oriented channels, thereby making their effects even more profound.

Informal integration

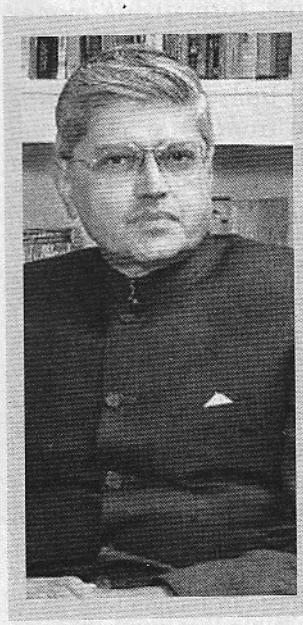
The advantage of migrant workers goes beyond the immediate monetary gains. Some scholars suggest that returning migrants increase social capital through exposure to new technology, ideas, languages and people, and produce intangible but important benefits to societies. A 1999 World Bank report further suggests that remittances might actually be *more* effective than direct foreign aid. This is a stance supported by many others: given the opportunity to earn, a worker will utilise the money he has in the most beneficial way within his means. Remittance money represents the most essential of family values: hard work, thrift, sacrifice and hope for a better future – values that need to be reinforced and propounded. However, social mobilisation and awareness are necessary requisites for effective use of remittance money. A 2002 ILO report on *Maximising Remittances for Development* recommended that governments and international organisations enhance coordination and implement innovative micro-credit programs and incentives to increase migrants' investments in local community-development projects. Matching funds for migrant investments and creating migrant investment funds might be best suited to Nepal.

Stopping migration is neither feasible nor desirable. The government instead needs to play a supporting role for those seeking foreign employment and for those migrants seeking to invest in their homelands. In a World Bank paper, economist David Ellerman wrote on what development could mean for a community receiving remittance: "In a community now largely dependent on income from migrant remittances, development would mean building local enterprises that would not live off remittances directly or indirectly (via the multiplier) so that local jobs could be sustained without continuing migration and remittances." Similarly, in a 2005 report for the International Peace Research Institute, researcher Jorgen Carling claims that if most of today's remittances are spent on consumption, future consumption will need future remittances. He outlines a simple model to direct some of today's remittances into investments and savings to finance future consumption. In line with the ILO report, he claims that community development is only possible through collective investments with the government and other development-oriented organisations.

The task for Nepal therefore remains two-fold. First, the government needs to take a more proactive role in securing the safety and rights of its citizens who go abroad to find work. Kathmandu needs to face the economic reality of the country and realise that it cannot currently produce enough jobs; the government needs to find and research markets where Nepali workers can work. Upon finding such opportune markets, work needs to be done to protect workers internally from exploitative manpower agencies, as well as to take on the burden of increasing awareness of their rights among the migrating population. Second, the government must ensure that the money the workers earn reaches the right places. A standardised transfer system would allow workers to directly realise the advantages of their work, while simultaneously protecting them from an unreliable informal sector. Once such a structured system is in place, the government could turn to ensuring that labourers' monies are being directed to processes that can stimulate economic development and growth, instead of being used to purchase fixed assets, as is currently taking place. The government could also consider opening a pension fund for workers using formal transfer methods, by deducting a small percentage from each transfer. In these ways, not only can Nepali remittance revenue be spread throughout the country, but so too can their benefits.

Gandhi *in the grip of* violence

by | **Gopalkrishna Gandhi**



In the Ashutosh Mookerjee Memorial Oration delivered in Calcutta on 4 July 2005, the Governor of West Bengal and grandson of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Gopalkrishna Gandhi – diplomat, bureaucrat and thinker – spoke on the Mahatma's experience at the giving and receiving end of violence.

There is almost a practice with us, of putting our good and great, including our unorthodox reformers, on a pedestal, enshrining them, and thereby creating new orthodoxies. In India, iconoclasts become icons themselves and idol-breakers become idols. Atheists have temple-like shrines built to them, non-conformists want conformism among their followers, dissenters seek assenters. As a people we take to praising when appreciation would do, adulating, deifying and worshipping when honest, sincere acknowledgement is all that is needed. Cults are wrong; they obscure the human being in the aura of veneration.

Among those who have suffered iconisation is Gandhi. While he will always be hailed the world over as 'Mahatma Gandhi', the fact remains that he was never comfortable with that description. And, in Bombay in 1921 when he was greeted by crowds comprising both Hindus and Muslims with '*Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*', he said the word 'Mahatma' grated on his ears for the very same crowd had been violent, looting and humiliating the microscopically minority communities – Parsis, Eurasians – for not joining the Congress-led boycott of the Prince of Wales and had even killed some policemen on duty. "I must refuse to eat or drink anything but water till the Hindus and Mussalmans of Bombay have made peace with the Parsis, Christians and Jews," he said. Boycotting the Prince of Wales was a political duty. But turning that boycott into violent action aimed at vulnerable innocents was despicable.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the man who felt, who agonised, who could be angry and enraged, who could err but never lie, was infinitely more real than the idolised and logo-ised Mahatma. Infinitely more than the one we see in statues, on stamps and – incongruously for an *anâsakta* with a revulsion for Mammon – imprinted on currency notes. Gandhi is farthest from the thoughts and deeds of economic offenders – who personify a kind of aggression – but he lies in stack upon stack of notes undisclosed in the vaults of those offenders.

The receiving end

Let me share some instances – in Gandhi's own words – when he was at the *giving* end of physical force – yes! at the giving end, like any unredeemed mortal might be.

Sheikh Mehtab was three years older than Gandhi. This swashbuckling childhood friend from Rajkot had introduced teenaged Mohandas to smoking, to meat and even tried taking him to a brothel. Mehtab was, to put it bluntly, unworthy of the future Mahatma's friendship but the friendship was retained. Two years after he arrived in South Africa, Gandhi invited Mehtab to join him there and stay in the Gandhi household, an opportunity that was readily seized by Mehtab until one day…

Durban, 1895

"I saw it all. I knocked at the door. No reply! I knocked heavily so as to make the very walls shake. The door was opened. I saw a prostitute inside. I asked her to leave the house, never to return".

MKG (turning to Mehtab): Is this how you requit my trust in you? From this moment I cease to have anything to do with you. I have been thoroughly deceived and have made a fool of myself. You cannot stay here any more …

(Reconstructed from Pyarelal's *Mahatma Gandhi: Early Phase*, p 492-493.)

Kasturba and Mohandas were, in his memorable description, 'a couple out of the ordinary'. But not because they were similar-minded. Gandhi has recorded:

Durban, 1898

When I was practicing in Durban, my office clerks often stayed with me ... One of the clerks was a Christian, born of panchama *parents.*

The house was built after the Western model and the rooms rightly had no outlets for dirty water. Each room had therefore chamber-pots. Rather than have these cleaned by a servant or a sweeper, my wife or I attended to them. The clerks who made themselves completely at home would naturally clean their own pots, but the Christian clerk was a newcomer, and it was our duty to attend to his bedroom. My wife managed the pots of the others, but to clean those used by one who had been a panchama seemed to her to be the limit, and we fell out. She could not bear the pots being cleaned by me, neither did she like doing it herself. Even today I can recall the picture of her chiding me, her eyes red with anger, and pearl drops streaming down her cheeks, as she descended the ladder, pot in hand...I was far from being satisfied by her merely carrying the pot. I would (also) have her do it cheerfully. So I said, raising my voice: I will not stand this nonsense in my house.

The words pierced her like an arrow.

She shouted back: Keep your house to yourself and let me go. I forgot myself. I caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate, which was just opposite the ladder, and proceeded to open it with the intention of pushing her out. The tears were running down her cheeks in torrents, and she cried: Have you no sense of shame? Must you forget yourself? Where am I to go? I have no parents or relatives here to harbour me ...

I put on a brave face, but was really ashamed and shut the gate. If my wife could not leave me, neither could I leave her.

(*Autobiography*, p 168-169)

What distinguishes a fast from a hunger-strike?

Sonja Schlesin (1887-1956) joined Gandhi's Johannesburg office as a steno-typist in 1903, and served him and the cause of Indian South Africans with rare zeal. But she was her own person. Gandhi writes:

Johannesburg, 1903

Miss Schlesin in her folly started smoking a cigarette in my presence. I slapped her and threw away the cigarette ... (She) wrote to me afterwards saying that she would never do such a thing again and that she had recognized my love.

(CWMG Vol LXXXIV, p 295)

In all these episodes we see Gandhi employing force, the personal force of his mind-actuated body. We see a Gandhi who is putting his hands to a use we did not quite associate with him. He is no different here from the rest of us who have used or do use force in one form or the other when outraged, disdained or insubordinated by those we feel we are somehow in charge of. And it is significant that it is not Mehtab, or Kasturba, or Schlesin who have complained to the world about their experience. It is Gandhi himself who has recorded the incidents as being part of those experiments which made up the sum-total of his evolving personality.

Gandhi's openness to public scrutiny was unique, perhaps unprecedented. It was startlingly different from the concealment we see the world over today. And his ability to see his errors – as in the episode with Kasturba – and to own it in writing was extraordinary.

His use of force on Mehtab was, in my view, not only justifiable but in fact too lenient; on Kasturba, totally and self-admittedly misapplied; on Sonja Schlesin, disproportionate and of the kind that, today, would attract civil ire. But in each of these cases, it was used for stressing a norm – abusing hospitality was wrong, even by a friend; engendering caste discrimination was wrong, even by the person closest to you; smoking was harmful, and to be curbed, especially in the young. When Gandhi used the strength of his arms and of his personality, it was because something affecting his values was outraged. But lest it be thought that Gandhi stood for the use of physical force in those or similar circumstances, let me say that Gandhi, as he evolved over the years, did not advocate it. He was constantly making new tools for his satyagrahic intervention, tools which used his sense of outrage but sublimated it into something other than rage, into a greater and more potent energy, a capacity to turn the arrow of hurt into himself, to bear the resultant pain and use that pain to transform people and circumstances.

There were also episodes when Gandhi was at the receiving end, in his own words, of course. The first of these is celebrated.

31 May 1893

The train reached Maritzburg, the capital of Natal, at about 9 p.m. Beddings used to be provided at this station ... (an) official came to me and said, 'Come along, you must go to the van compartment.'

'But I have a first class ticket,' said I.

'That doesn't matter. You must leave this compartment, or else I shall have to call a police constable to push you out.'

'Yes, you may. I refuse to get out voluntarily.'

The constable came. He took me by the hand and pushed me out. My luggage was also taken out. I refused to go to the other compartment and the train steamed away ...

I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insults, and return to India after finishing

the case? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial – only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice.

So I decided to take the next available train to Pretoria.

(*Autobiography*, p 67)

Let us consider Gandhi's reaction. He was humiliated. He could have turned resentful, glowered, vowed vengeance. But no. His thoughts turned to a larger issue. He must root out the cause of the disease which led to his experience. Root out the cause. But the story continues. Let us follow his journey.

1 June 1893

The train reached Charlestown in the morning. There was no railway, in those days, between Charlestown and Johannesburg, but only a stage-coach ...

At about three o'clock the coach reached Pardekoph. Now the leader (the white man in charge of the coach) desired to sit where I was seated, as he wanted to smoke and possibly to have some fresh air. So he took a piece of dirty sack-cloth from the driver, spread it on the footboard and, addressing me, said, 'Sami, you sit on this, I want to sit near the driver.' The insult was more than I could bear. In fear and trembling I said to him, 'It was you who seated me here, though I should have been accommodated inside. I put up with the insult. Now that you want to sit outside and smoke, you would have me sit at your feet. I will not do so, but I am prepared to sit inside'.

As I was struggling through these sentences, the man came down upon me and began heavily to box my ears. He seized me by the arm and tried to drag me down. I clung to the brass rails of the coachbox and was determined to keep my hold even at the risk of breaking my wrist bones. The passengers were witnessing the scene, - the man swearing at me, dragging and belabouring me, and I remaining still. He was strong and I was weak.

(*Autobiography*, p 68)

In an interview to Dr John Mott, an American missionary, *Harijan*, December 1938, Gandhi said, "My active non-violence began from that date."

The next episode, too, is known widely.

Durban

13 January 1897

Reuters' representative in England had sent a brief cablegram to South Africa containing an exaggerated summary of my speeches in India ... When Europeans in Natal read the distorted summary they were greatly exasperated against me ... Some youngsters recognized me and shouted 'Gandhi, Gandhi' ... Then they pelted me with stones, brickbats and rotten eggs. Someone snatched away my turban, whilst others began to batter and kick me.

A burly fellow came up to me, slapped me in the face and then kicked me. I was about to fall down unconscious when I held on to the railings of a house nearby. I took breath for a while and when the fainting was over, proceeded on my way. But I remember well that even then my heart did not arraign my assailants.

(*Autobiography*, p 117 and *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p 54)

The following episode is not that well-known. It relates to the time when, controversially, Gandhi asked Indian South Africans to voluntarily register as Asiatics with the government.

Johannesburg

10 February 1908

When at a quarter to ten on Monday morning I set out towards the Registration Office ... I did feel that there might be an attack on me. In fact, I had spotted two of the assailants near the office. They walked alongside of us. I then became surer. But I decided that I should not, as I had declared earlier, mind being assaulted by my own brethren.

Some way ahead, one of the men asked, "Where are you all going?" ... "I am going [to the Registration Office] to give my finger-impressions. The others, too, will do the same. If you want to give your thumb-impressions [only], you can do that." My only recollection of what followed is that I received very severe blows.

I took severe blows on my left ribs. Even now I find breathing difficult. My upper lip has a cut on one side. I have a bruise above the left eye and a wound on the forehead. In addition, there are minor injuries on my right hand and left knee. I do not remember the manner of the assault, but people say that I fell down unconscious with the first blow which was delivered with a stick. Then my assailants struck me with an iron pipe and a stick, and they also kicked me. Thinking me dead, they stopped. I only remember having been beaten up. I have an impression that, as the blows started, I uttered the words He Rama! ...

(*Indian Opinion*, 22.2.1908; CWMG Vol VIII, pp 93-94)

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When I regained consciousness, I saw Mr. Doke bending over me. 'How do you feel?' he asked me.

'I am all right,' I replied, 'but there is pain in the teeth and the ribs. Where is Mir Alam?'

'He has been arrested along with the rest.'

'They should be released'.

(*Satyagraha in South Africa*, p 153-154)

And this following episode is hardly known at all. It deals with a jail experience, the first for Gandhi.

Johannesburg

1908

I had one further unpleasant experience in the Johannesburg Gaol. In this gaol, there are two different kinds of wards. One ward is for prisoners sentenced to hard labour. The other is for prisoners who are called as witnesses and those

who have been sentenced to imprisonment in civil proceedings. Prisoners sentenced to hard labour have no right to go into this second ward ... I was told by the warder that there would be no harm in my using a lavatory in the second ward. I therefore went to one of the lavatories in this ward. At these lavatories, too, there is usually a crowd. Moreover, the lavatories have open access. There are no doors. As soon as I had occupied one of them, there came along a strong, heavily-built, fearful-looking African prisoner. He asked me to get out and started abusing me. I said I would leave very soon. Instantly he lifted me up in his arms and threw me out. Fortunately, I caught hold of the door-frame, and saved myself from a fall. I was not in the least frightened by this. I smiled and walked away; but one or two Indian prisoners who saw what had happened started weeping. Since they could not offer any help in gaol, they felt helpless and miserable.

(CWMG Vol IX, p 161)

The Calcutta fast

Gandhi, it needs to be noted, was at the receiving end in South Africa from men of all three predominant sections – White, Black and – most lethally – his own, Brown. In the three decades, from 1915 to 1947, during the Mahatma's epic struggle in India, attempts were made on his life, but he did not suffer direct bodily injury. But here, in the city of Kolkata, a fortnight after India became free, violence came to his very doorstep. Riots had torn the city apart. A mob of youths brought on 31 August, 1947, to his Beliaghata lodgings a bandaged man and said he had been attacked by some Muslims.

Gandhi writes : *This was about 10 p.m. Calcutta time. They began to shout at the top of their voices. My sleep was disturbed but I tried to lie quiet, not knowing what was happening. I heard the window-panes being smashed. I had on either side of me two very brave girls. They would not sleep but without my knowledge, for my eyes were closed, they went among the small crowd and tried to pacify them. Thank God, the crowd did not do any harm to them. The old Muslim lady in the house endearingly called Bi Amma and a young Muslim stood near my matting, I suppose, to protect me from harm.*

The noise continued to swell. Some had entered the central hall, and began to knock open the many doors. I felt that I must get up and face the angry crowd. I stood at the threshold of one of the doors. Friendly faces surrounded me and would not let me move forward. My vow of silence admitted of my breaking it on many occasions and I broke it and began to appeal to the angry young men to be quiet. I asked the Bengali grandniece-in-law to translate my few words into Bengali. All to no purpose. Their ears were closed against reason.

I clasped my hands in the Hindu fashion. Nothing doing. More window-panes began to crack. The friendly ones in the crowd tried to pacify the crowd. There were police officers. Be it said to their credit that they did not try to exercise authority. They too clasped their hands in appeal. A lathi blow missed me and everybody round me. A brick aimed at me hurt a Muslim friend standing by. The two girls would not leave me and held on to me to the last. Meanwhile the Police Superintendent and his officers came in. They too did not use force. They appealed to me to retire. Then there was chance of their stilling the young men. After a time the crowd melted.

This led Gandhi to start his historic Calcutta fast. He did not call it 'a fast unto death'. He simply said "I therefore begin fasting from 8.15 p.m. tonight to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta". How his fast had an electrifying effect on the city, bringing calm to commotion, sanity to mayhem is well-known. The fast which began at 8.15 p.m. on 1 September began almost at once to have affect. Hindus and Muslims met and together took out marches for peace. Remarkably, about 500 members of the North Calcutta police force, including Britons and Anglo-Indians, themselves went on a 24-hour sympathy fast while remaining on duty. A Peace Brigade, or Shanti Sena, came into being, comprising young men undertaking, at great risk to their lives, to personally intervene in clashes.

A professor later recalled that university students came up and said if anybody had to suffer for the continued killing and betrayal in the city, it was not Gandhiji. Rammanohar Lohia, the Socialist leader, brought to the fasting Gandhi a group of Hindu youths who admitted to complicity in the violence and proceeded to surrender a small arsenal of arms. Many, including the then-Governor had said the riots were the work of goondas and Gandhi should not fast against goondas. Now a gang of goondas followed and asked for "whatever penalty you may impose," only "you should now end your fast." Gandhi asked them to go "immediately among the Muslims and assure them full protection."

At 6 pm on 4 September a deputation of Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and Sikh leaders came, led by Suhrawardy, whose name will ever be linked with the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946, to Beliaghata. Give up your fast, they pleaded. Gandhi asked them if they would risk their lives to prevent a recurrence of communal killings. The deputation fell silent, withdrew to another room, conferred, and returned to say yes, they would. After reminding them that "above all, there is God, our witness," Gandhi broke his fast, which had lasted 73 hours.

Not forgetting to thank the people of Calcutta and acknowledge the extraordinary martyrdom of two young men – Sachin Mitra, killed on 1 September while defending Muslims, and Smritish Banerjee – killed on 3 September while protecting a peace procession – Gandhi boarded, on 7 September, the train that took him to Delhi. As the train steamed, Suhrawardy sobbed like a child. He was grateful – as every resident of Calcutta was – to Gandhi for having saved Calcutta from disaster, and to God for enabling Gandhi to leave this city alive.

Delhi

What happened subsequently in Delhi, we all know. To quote from Rajmohan Gandhi's masterly account of it (*The Good Boatman*, Viking, 1996):

Gandhi stood up to go to the southern end of the Birla House grounds where he had held prayers every evening since his arrival in Delhi the previous September. Hurrying his feet into his chappals, he placed his hands on the shoulders of Abha, who was on his right, and Manu, to his left, and advanced for the prayers about 170 yards away.

'Your watch must feel very neglected. You would not look at it,' Abha said to Gandhi as he quickened their pace. 'Why should I when I have two timekeepers?' he replied. 'But you don't look at the timekeepers either,' said one of the girls. Gandhi laughed but said, 'It is your fault that I am ten minutes late. It is the duty of nurses to carry on their work even if God himself should be present there. If it is time to give medicine to a patient and you hesitate, the poor patient may die. I hate it if I am late for prayers even by a minute.'

With this the three and those walking behind them fell into complete silence, for they had reached the five curved steps that gently led up to the open prayer ground. It was Gandhi's stipulation that small talk and laughter had to cease, and all thoughts turn to their sacred purpose, before they put their feet on the prayer site.

The final walk

Behind their backs the winter sun was setting. A 32-yard path lay between the steps and the platform where Gandhi used to sit for the prayers. The women and men who had come for the prayers lined the path on both sides. Removing his hands from the shoulders of the girls, Gandhi brought them together to acknowledge the greetings of the congregation.

From the side to the left of Gandhi, Nathuram Godse of Pune roughly elbowed his way towards him. Godse had been on the scene ten days earlier for the abortive attempt to kill Gandhi, had slipped away, travelled to Bombay, and returned with a fresh plan of assassination. Thinking that Godse intended to touch Gandhi's feet, Manu asked Godse not to interrupt Gandhi, added that they were late already, and tried to thrust back Godse's hand.

Godse violently pushed Manu aside, causing the Book of Ashram Prayer Songs and Gandhi's rosary that she was carrying to fall to the ground. As she bent down to pick the things up, Godse planted himself in front of Gandhi, pulled out a pistol and fired three shots in rapid succession, one into Gandhi's stomach and two into his chest.

The sound 'Rama' escaped twice from Gandhi's throat, crimson spread across his white clothes, the hands raised in the gesture or greeting which was also the gesture of prayer and of goodwill dropped down, and the limp body sank softly to the ground. As he fell, Abha caught Gandhi's head in her hands and sat down with it ...

A haste to pray. A hush on entering holy ground. A sense of the Eternal. Lines of fellow-worshippers. A gesture of goodwill. Rude elbows. A smell of attack. The ring of three bullets. 'God! God!' Possibly a silent, 'God! Forgive them.' Loving hands underneath. Earth, moisture, grass. The open sky. Rays from the dipping sun. A perfect death.

The satyagrahic method

Facing violence, dealing with violence in his own life, and in the world around him and becoming, from a barrister to a Mahatma, and then Father of the Nation, he was and remained Mohandas. Human as human can be. Given to anger, even to rage, he strove to rein that trait in. But more, to sublimate it. Aware that fasting had a moral impact, he undertook it to further public causes, never a personal grievance. And if he resorted to a fast for a non-public end, it was for his own self-purification.

Gandhi's practice of the satyagrahic method is often used by agitating groups today. When I pointed out to some youths recently the difference between Gandhi's method and theirs, the earnest young men said, "Ours was not a fast, Sir; it was a hunger-strike." I appreciated their frankness. What distinguishes a fast from a hunger-strike? I put this apparent divergence to the Sarvodaya leader, Narayan Desai, for elucidation. Narayanbhai said the following in Hindi (I quote from memory): "The point is a fine one. A fast is meant to change the heart-mind of the other side, and is undertaken as a final resort after all other steps have been exhausted. It is persuasive, rather than coercive and does not permit even a trace of enmity towards the person or persons at whom it is directed. A hunger-strike is meant to obtain a favourable decision in the course of a countdown."

"The way of peace is the way of truth," Gandhi had once said. The same can be said of justice, of equity. The end must be right and just; in other words, true. And so must the means. If either – ends or means – are flawed, then honest reparation can unflaw them. The Gandhian thing to do, as I see it, would be for both sides to a dispute to own up errors of aim or method and proceed without recrimination or suspicion towards a solution, force or coercion being eschewed by both.

Today the issues that confront us in India are complex. Truth is not one glowing piece of crystal; if it were, our choice would have been easy. In South Africa, for Gandhi, the problem was clear: racism was wrong; it was evil. Even when fighting the British Raj, the broad issue at least was clear. Today, we grope in a vast zone of grey. India is free; it is a democracy with institutions that are available for redressing public and private grievances – there is the judiciary, so well-respected, and the media so free and vibrant. And yet, we see movements, underground and on the streets, agitations, protests,

satyagrahas. At one level, this is the hallmark of an open society. At another, does it show some other problem? Are we as a society and a polity equal to the volume of aspirations, the quantum of grievances, the mass of mutually conflicting human sentiments that are spiralling around us? Or are our preoccupations with limited goals, narrow aims, restricted affinities, blinding us to the larger human conditions in India?

Enforcers of law and order are under great pressure; they have a strong sense of decorum and discipline. But civil society is also under pressure – the pressure of its burgeoning needs; it has a sense of hurt, many hurts. Both, or either, may go beyond optimal lines of action and re-action. Both or either may need to introspect. These are the fracturings of truth. Gandhi once said with an economy of words he was master of: "Those that seek justice must come with clean hands." No sooner is justice sought today than there arises, at once, a demand for another counter-justice. There is no dearth of hands raised in protest. But how clean are those hands?

Naxalite violence saw, among other things, Gandhi statues and pictures being defaced in many parts of India, not just Bengal. This is not surprising. If, instead of iconising Gandhi, those who wanted to follow his path had addressed the problems of India's immiserated peasantry, perhaps Naxalism would not have arisen – at least not in the virulent form it did. And it must be said here that, as an individual, Jayaprakash Narayan tried the most in this respect.

Gandhi took the law into his own hands. So did Naxalites – and do. But one should not miss the difference: Gandhi's hands were unsullied by blood – innocent or guilty. They were ready to clasp other hands in friendship, understanding, accommodation. And they were never raised violently against the enforcers of the law, even in self-defence.

There are today many individuals and organisations belonging to what is called the 'Left'. Many of these see themselves as standing to the Left of our main Communist Parties, the CPI(M) and the CPI. But there is one position even to the left of these, beyond which there can be no further Left. And that is the 'truth'. That is not a point on a latitudinal scale, but a position that can be seen and reached from anywhere or everywhere – north or south, left or right.

Current concerns

The dissolution of violence – the horrendous *asuric* violence of 1947 in the city of Calcutta – was by the action of *one* man who 'took charge' without a single political agenda to serve, a personal score to settle or an ego to nurse. "Gandhiji has achieved many things," Governor Chakravarti Rajagopalachari had said on 5 September 1947, "but in my considered opinion there has been nothing, *not even independence*, which is so truly wonderful as his victory over evil in Calcutta."

There are seven issues in which, today, I believe Gandhi would have intervened non-violently. These are (1) quelling communal violence when and where it occurs; (2) furthering dialogue with Pakistan; (3) tackling extremist violence; (4) protecting women's rights and honour as a national priority; (5) addressing looming ecological crises, particularly over water; (6) countering economic offences against the poor; and (7) opposing commercialism and corruption. His protest would not only have been totally non-violent, but would have warded off all co-opters. And it would have had no personal ego driving it.

The absence of ego, but, equally, the absence of false modesty, in Gandhi was beautifully demonstrated when he declined to deliver the Kamala Lecture endowed by Sir Asutosh in 1928, saying he did not have the credentials for it. He wrote, from the Sabarmati Ashram on 1 May 1928, to Dr B C Roy who had extended the invitation to him:

Dear Dr. Bidhan,
Your letter flatters me, but I must not succumb to my pride. Apart from the fact that as a non-co-operator I may have nothing to do with the University that is in any way connected with Government, I do not consider myself to be a fit and proper person to deliver Kamala lectures. I do not possess the literary attainment which Sir Ashutosh undoubtedly contemplated for the lecturers.

You are asking me to shoulder a responsibility which my shoulders cannot bear. I am keeping fairly fit. I am biding my time and you will find me leading the country in the field of politics when the country is ready. I have no false modesty about me. I am undoubtedly a politician in my own way, and I have a scheme for the country's freedom. But my time is not yet and may never come to me in this life. If it does not, I shall not shed a single tear. We are all in the hands of God. I therefore await His guidance.

"My time is not yet". What a remarkable utterance that is! Few know of that letter to a great son of Bengal in the context of the Kamala Lectures. When Gandhi wrote that letter, Beliaghata was 20 years away, freedom was 20 years away. His time did arrive in Calcutta in 1947. And then in Delhi. He had said, had he not, that he would oppose what he called the "vivisection" of India with his life. He wanted to die with the dying in that communal frenzy, if he could not stop it. And so, with the words "I hate it if I am late," he rushed to join those who had died – innocents, all of them.

But his real time is yet to come, in terms of a national consensus on ends and means. "Gandhi in the Grip of Violence", is how I have titled this oration. But in the end it was violence that came into Gandhi's grip. He will always be ahead of us, ahead of the violence in and around us, there, on the margent of truth, where North and South, Left and Right converge and a pure light alone remains.

Tagore's great song has the line, *jodi alo na dhare* ... Gandhi has held out that *alo* for all time to light the path for the true.

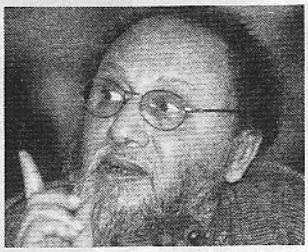
The ambivilance about Gandhi

Southasia's difficulties with Gandhi's legacy

by | **Ashis Nandy**

Nobody calls Gautam Buddha a Nepali, even though he was born at Lumbini in Nepal. If the Buddha seems too august or distant, neither is Rabindranath Tagore's citizenship taken very seriously. If it were, there would have been at least some scattered demands for changing the Bangladeshi national anthem, now that the country has both a well-developed Muslim nationalism and a budding fundamentalist movement.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's case is different. Although much of the rest of the world may not emphasise his Indian origins, many Southasians do – and they do so in a particular fashion. Southasians constantly offset his ideas against his political practices, which they find contaminated by his Indian-ness and Hinduism, and find him wanting. After Gandhi's assassination, no less than Albert Einstein said that future generations would find it hard to believe that such a person had walked the earth. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, however, mourned his death only as that of a great Hindu leader. Parts of Southasia are more ambivalent towards Gandhi than even the modern West – his avowed target – has ever been.



Gandhism – not as an ideology, but as a reasonably well-integrated normative position in public life, and a particular kind of social vision – is greater than Gandhi the man.

This ambivalence has to do not only with Gandhi's politics, but also with the fact that he was a political figure. In recent times, Southasians have come to believe that the term *ethical politics* is an oxymoron; that politicians talking about ethics have to be either hypocrites, romantic visionaries, or irrelevant to the 'real' stuff of politics. When applied to the likes of Gandhi, in India too (despite its pretensions to the contrary) this belief is certainly not confined to a small section of Hindu nationalists or xenophobes: it includes a large number of radicals, liberals and globalisers. Gandhi tried to disinherit and decentre the middle class; the memory of that still hurts.

Southasia has lost something in the process. I am not a Gandhian, but as a psychologist and political analyst, I have worked off-and-on with Gandhian principles for many years. It has paid me rich dividends. I did not come to Gandhi willingly. Like most Bengalis, I maintained a healthy distance, and my discomfort with him was tinged with a touch of hostility. This unease was aggravated by my parents' admiration for Gandhi: in my childhood, Gandhi represented authority. How many other Southasians may have a similar story?

The reluctant way

Like many others, I was pushed towards the maverick politician and indigestible thinker during the Emergency of 1975-77, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties. While looking for clues to political authoritarianism in India (which I thought was not possible), I discovered in Gandhi a thinker who had dared to defy some of the basic tenets of the worldview that had powered the European Enlightenment and modernity – as well as their wholesale dealers and retailers in Asia and Africa. This opened up for me a number of pathways to what I can only call dissenting visions and baselines for political and social criticism. Gandhi was never politically and academically correct; he also demanded the right, on behalf of the Southern hemisphere, to envision and to experiment with alternative human futures.

I never became a Gandhian. Indeed, as I moved into new studies and got more deeply entangled with public concerns and social movements, I became increasingly convinced that my earlier discomfort with Gandhi was fully justified. He was not only a negation of the core tenets of Southasian modernity and the region's contemporary elite; he also invited everyone living with the certitudes of middle-class life in a modern Southasian metropolis to set up an anti-self as a critique and a warning. At every step, he reminded me of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno's belief that one moves closer to truth when one's intellectual work hurts one's own interests and those of one's class.

Around that same time, I also concluded that any thinker operating from within Southasia is doubly handicapped. Southasian thinkers not only have the disadvantage of location, but are at all times expected to be fully correct, both politically and academically. People wonder, "If he is really that good, why is he working in Nepal, rather than at Harvard or Oxford or in the United Nations?" When dealing with a Southasian activist-scholar, they also refuse to separate the wheat from the chaff. In Southasia, Plato gets away with his blatant advocacy for buggery of children; Emmanuel Kant and Karl Marx, with their open and unalloyed racism; and Milton, with child abuse. The

public, after all, has other aspects of these works upon which they can concentrate. This cannot happen in the case of a Southasian activist-scholar, however, because the aim is ultimately to disvalue his or her contributions.

Beyond the trees

It is from a vantage point marked out by these considerations that I enunciate the following propositions, for the sakes of those young Southasians who have kept away from Gandhi on the grounds of his specific policy choices and political acts, or for his occasionally puritanical personal life.

Gandhism – not as an ideology, but as a reasonably well-integrated normative position in public life, and a particular kind of social vision – is greater than Gandhi the man. Gandhi himself would have happily admitted this: he believed that the ideas he espoused, particularly non-violence, were as old as the hills.

Nor was Gandhi a perfect Gandhian; it was not possible for him to be so. He was an active politician, a fact that he never forgot. Indeed, he could be credited with creating both the centrality of politics in British India, by taking mass politics to the villages, and with establishing militant non-violence as a viable global political force. This emphasis on politics guaranteed that he would make mistakes. If politics is the art of the possible rather than a sure science, assessments of the range of those possibilities can at times go drastically wrong. Gandhi himself discussed some of his blunders, and I am sure that future generations will talk about many others.

That is why the three greatest Gandhians today are neither Indians nor Hindus: Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama.

However, this also means that Gandhi cannot be shelved as a dreamy-eyed spiritual leader who occasionally strayed into public life as a hobby or pastime. That is why his name is still invoked, in admiration and in hatred, nearly sixty years after his death. I cannot resist the temptation of citing once again what was arguably the finest obituary of him – not the one by Albert Einstein, but the one by the British economic historian Arnold Toynbee. After Gandhi, Toynbee wrote, humankind would expect its prophets to live in the slum of politics. I remember I first heard that from the poet Umashankar Joshi, who used the quote to explain to the philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi that saints were a dime a dozen in Southasia. Gandhi's ability to politically empower his vision was what was so unique, and which ensured the long-term survival of his ideas.

Beyond the borders

That vision transcends the boundaries of the nation state called India. That is why the three greatest Gandhians today are neither Indians nor Hindus: Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama. Incidentally, the first two of these started as radical social democrats. They turned to Gandhi only after people started referring to their politics as Gandhian. A combination of long-term moral vision and practical politics brought them to Gandhi. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand, does not have to call himself a Gandhian, even though he says that Gandhi has inspired him ever since he was a small boy in Tibet. Like Gandhi's, his life is his message, and that message happens to be Gandhian.

In any case, I do not see the reason to impute to Gandhi superhuman visionary powers, nor a saintly status. Doing so would only make him less relevant and accessible to contemporary times by elevating him beyond mundane, day-to-day politics and everyday life. That is the line the Indian state has already taken. It has hijacked him and turned him into an official symbol and a totem of the Indian state – 'the father of the nation', as the officialese goes. The less the Indian state has to do with Gandhi and his ideas, the more it becomes a conventional, hard, hyper-masculine nation state, by rejecting one-by-one all of the elements of Gandhian thought. In so doing, the more it is forced to talk of the beautiful legacy of the nation's 'father'.

That thousands of political and social activists have begun to walk the path of Gandhi – while neither knowing the man, nor claiming to be Gandhians – is a tribute to a person who rejected the hyper-individualist and consumerist certitudes of our times. Virtually every major modern dissenting movement has drawn inspiration from Gandhi. The movements for environment, alternative science and technology, eco-feminism, human rights, anti-consumerism, and resistance to nuclearism and globalisation – they have all directly or indirectly, knowingly or unwittingly, drawn upon Gandhi's legacy.

I am told that 14 states in the world today do not have armies. Not that they have all turned Gandhian, of course – few would likely even know Gandhi's famous line that armed nationalism is no different than imperialism. Gandhi's political vision, after all, was not a by-product of British liberalism and its tacit theory of colonialism-with-a-humane-face. Rather, it was forged in the crucible of an undeniably racist regime – the authoritarian police-state called South Africa. Gandhi's vision bears the imprint of its origins.

Does militant non-violence work in situations where one confronts an antagonist or combatant who is completely dehumanised, who can only laugh at such 'comical', 'effeminate', 'impractical' counter-modernist protest movements? Can it work when one of the parties to a conflict considers the other infrahuman, no different from a lifeless object, to be manipulated, exploited or kicked around? There can be no final answer to this question. However, militant non-violence did work the one time that it was tried in Nazi Germany. Nathan Stolzfus writes about the Rosenstrasse protest in *Resistance of the Heart* – a book that does not mention Gandhi even once. He would have liked that.

Southasiasphere by CK Lal

The primacy of POLITICS

The solution, as the Mahatma suggested, lies in recognising the primacy of religion and then subjecting it to the supremacy of politics.

Though (we) know the reality of heaven;
As an emotional diversion,
It's an alluring notion.

For a poet, Mirza Ghalib was remarkably pragmatic. He knew that in the realm of faith, fact and fiction were inextricably intertwined. To be rigorously religious, a person must begin by suspending disbelief. So what if the heaven is merely a vision, a believer must accept its authenticity in order to endure everyday reality. But such is the power of unreason that the faithful need not show patience till the judgement day; he must become the police, the prosecutor and the judge to make the impious face the fire of hell. There is nothing else that can explain the Muslim rage in the wake of the blasphemous cartoons published by the rabidly right-wing Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*.

The offending cartoons first appeared in September 2005, but the full force of its reverberations began to be felt only in February. The question to ask is: why now? For the believers, it's never too late to hit back, even though they are the ones to suffer most in the process. Who did the protestors hurt in Gwalior, Islamabad, Karachi, Srinagar, Lahore, Lucknow and Peshawar? In an atmosphere so charged with emotion, nobody dare ask such questions, but they will continue to haunt the conscience of the Muslims of Southasia for a long time. But first things first: how many of the agitators shouting "Death to West" knew about the state of the Kingdom of Denmark?

The landmass of Denmark is smaller than Bhutan or the state of Haryana. In terms of population, it is half the size of Dhaka or Karachi. Of course, its economic presence is much bigger, but that is of little consequence to the Southasian public. Unlike Norway, Denmark is not a Peace Superpower; and, in absolute terms, it is not much of an aid-giver either. The country is not a favourite destination of students or job-seekers from Southasia. While ignorance can breed hostility, a certain degree of familiarity is necessary to nurture enmity. The fact is that most of us do not know Denmark well enough to hate it. For example, we did not know that so many Danish politicians and the media were openly racist,

Rajesh KC

particularly against their Muslim minority, even though the European Network against Racism had mentioned it in its Shadow Report in 2004.

None of the Southasian media ever cared to mention that most Danes lived in a state of denial as, "...most politicians, media, and the common man in the street, not only express their racist opinions openly, but at the same time believe that there is no racism in Denmark." In this supposedly tolerant country of Scandinavia, Muslims are neither allowed to build mosques nor permitted to have separate cemeteries. Had we known that something was as rotten as this in the state of Denmark, we would have probably been better prepared for the nastiness of a cruel cartoonist. And that brings the matter of freedom of expression into focus.

Political lampoon

While it is true that freedom of expression has no meaning unless that freedom is unconditional and absolute, every society sets limits upon it to protect the dignity of the individual, respect for minorities, and harmony between communities. Those are broad terms, but not too difficult to keep in mind while exercising the inalienable right of freedom of expression. Unless the intention is to instigate, inflame or insult, there is no reason why one would need to draw a prophet into a contemporary political duel. Despite their belated apologies, the concerned cartoonist, editor, and the government stand guilty of intentionally hurting the sentiments of Muslims,

and there are Muslims all over the globe. But is that act punishable by death in this day and age? Such a suggestion itself would be outrageous in any civilised society. Alas, there is no dearth of lunatics in our midst.

Haji Yaqub Qureshi, a minister in the 'socialist' Mulayam Singh Yadav cabinet in Uttar Pradesh, announced that he would pay INR 5100 million to the killer of the offending cartoonist. A Peshawar cleric, Maulana Yousaf, was more modest in his offer – PKR 7.5 million and a car for the aspiring assassin. Such shocking suggestions are not just disgraceful; they strengthen the mistaken image in the West that most Muslims are fanatics.

A string of causative factors have since been paraded to justify the rage of the Ummah: suppression of Palestine, subjugation of Afghanistan, occupation of Iraq, humiliation of Abu Ghraib, the degradation of Guantanamo Bay ... the list goes on. Under the rubric of War on Terror, the neo-conservative regime of the United States of America is conducting an all-out 'crusade' against Muslims all over the world, we are told. The hounding of regimes in Syria and Iran is evidently part of a plan to keep the Ummah trembling, and resistance against the neo-empire has become the moral imperative of the Muslim world.

The fact is, however, that the War on Terror and the threats to Damascus and Teheran have more to do with political contestation based on spheres of influence and energy security. Islam or Christianity have a peripheral role in this confrontation, and it is important to realise this. Despite the ring of self-fulfilling prophecy to it, this isn't what Samuel Huntington called the 'clash of civilisation'. If lampooning the Prophet was uncivilised, the call for lynching the offender is barbaric.

Mango cart

Southasians like to believe that evil colonialists from across the seas introduced religious politics in the Subcontinent where otherwise there was and would have been broadmindedness and coexistence. The reality, however, is a little less sanguine. This is the region where Parashuram once wielded the axe to decimate all kshetriyas from the face of the earth. The conversion drive of Emperor Ashoka was unquestionably backed by the force of 'or else'. It is a little hard to believe that the once-flourishing Buddhist and Jain empires of the region passed into oblivion solely due to the scholarship of various Shankaracharyas. Akbar did think of *Din-i-lahi* to assimilate the faiths of his subjects into a new whole, but Islam too was essentially a court religion that spread on the basis of sword and reward of the Mughal Empire. Religious strife is in fact as Southasian as Masala Curry and Mango Chutney. But so have been the attempts to synthesise the immense diversity of this region.

In a region as rife with unreason, intolerance, fanaticism, hatred, intransigence and despair as they found in India, the British colonialists would have failed miserably had they applied their bible-for-land policy so successfully applied elsewhere in Asia, Africa and Latin America. To tackle the diversity and complexity of their Indian dominion, the British devised their failsafe 'don't-disturb-the-mango-cart' policy that was based on the secular idea of separation of religion from politics. Perhaps that was one of the reasons that antagonism arose among Muslims and Hindus alike, leading to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 – both the communities were equally enraged by the non-religious character of their new masters, who did not differentiate between the meat of holy cows and unclean pigs.

The secular piety of the Sikhs and ritualistic obscurantism of the Gurkhas were accepted as ingredients of corps camaraderie.

When the soldiers of Awadh, Bengal and Bihar refused to bite the bullet believed to have been greased with the tallow of beef and/or pork, the British promptly had the people of these areas declared as non-martial races unfit for recruitment into imperial forces. Religiosity of the political variety was a disqualification, while the secular piety of the Sikhs and ritualistic obscurantism of the Gurkhas were accepted as ingredients of corps camaraderie. Ironically, politics of religion started to vitiate the atmosphere of unity with the expression of Hindu solidarity to the Caliphate. The Khilafat Movement of the 1920s, spearheaded by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and opposed by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, was the perhaps the first instance that sowed the seeds of suspicion towards each other in the minds of Hindu and Muslim Congress leaders.

Much has been written about the secular outlook of Jinnah and the religiosity of Gandhi, but what is often ignored is that neither wanted an Islamic or a Hindu state. What Jinnah had in mind was a Muslim-majority state where citizens of all beliefs would live together amicably, and Gandhi envisioned a Ram Rajya where justice for all would be the supreme goal of the state. As it happened, both of them failed. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan bears no resemblance to the Muslim country of Jinnah's dreams, and the irreligious rather than secular Indian state is not what the Mahatma worked for throughout his life.

Both the Quaid and the Mahatma would have been horrified to see the overwhelming role of religion in the politics of the Subcontinent. An Islamic state is based on the Shariat, whereas all that the Muslims

of British India wanted was a country safe for their beliefs, a Muslim-majority state. The Indian republic is based on a denial of religion in daily life, which breeds resentment among the majority for various minorities, leading to occasional eruptions. None of these models are truly sustainable.

The fact is that most of us do not know Denmark well enough to hate it.

Nepal is a 'Hindu kingdom' and Bangladesh an 'Islamic state', but a very vicious religious-cultural separatism hit Sri Lanka, a Buddhist majority country that was supposed to be most multi-cultural and tolerant towards minorities. The Danish cartoon controversy has created devastating effects, but brawls of smaller intensity keeps hitting India whenever M F Hussain paints Saraswati in the nude or depicts Bharat Mata in unconventional ways. In Pakistan, the Ahmadiayas have been at the receiving end of Sunni chauvinists for a long time.

The Taliban destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan and made Hindus wear yellow armbands. Who only knows what the generals of Burma are doing to their religious minorities as they change the location of headquarters to suit the numerological charts of the ruling clique. It is easy to dismiss West Asia as a hotbed of fundamentalism; the fact is, Southasia looks milder because we are better at hiding our hostility towards each other.

After all the agitations and destructions, there has been at least one positive outcome of the unfortunate cartoon controversy: a realisation seems to have dawned among the ruling classes of the region that if ideological contestations are not allowed to their space, religious confrontations will edge out politics from national life. Another lesson that must be remembered from the heady pre-Partition days concerns the importance of religion in the lives of the people. No matter how secular the regime, it cannot make all citizens irreligious in public affairs. The solution, as the Mahatma suggested, lies in recognising the primacy of religion and then subjecting it to the supremacy of politics.

Politicians of post-modern societies have to accept that religious beliefs of the people are too deep-rooted and fragile to be handled on the basis of written and secular constitutions alone. An understanding of religious sensitivities is essential to establish the primacy of politics: the civilised way of settling disputes, building solidarity and laying the foundations of a better society. That is the way Gandhi would have preferred and Jinnah would have accepted after having endured the horrors of religious hatred.

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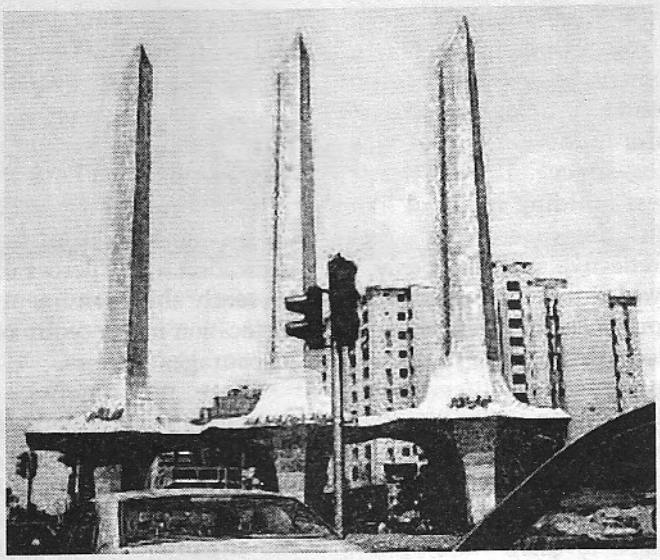


Monuments to what?

Virtually all Pakistan's national monuments have no presence in the nation's consciousness. If only, the stakeholders were allowed to define a monument's objectives.

by | **Niilofur Farrukh**

Wherever we have witnessed major conflicts in the last century, we also see art today in the shape of public monuments. This artistic intervention is increasingly becoming a social tool to heal national wounds inflicted by social discord and war.

Why does a nation need these tangible reminders, and how do 'brick and mortar' acquire a symbolic meaning that sometimes transcends the very event or person that they honour? While the answers to these questions have changed with time, the very act of monument-building remains intrinsic to national identity.

Recorded history reveals that most early monuments were built by conquerors to commemorate victories and heroism. In the 20th century, the pivotal role of civil society has bestowed a greater responsibility on the artist of the monument to reflect the ethos of a nation. The monument, as a repository of a nation's memory today, is expected to emerge from the sensibility and sentiments of the people and not be imposed upon them through the edict of its ruling elite.

In a rapidly changing world, artists are seen to evolve new symbols as old ones lose their vitality and relevance. Amin Gulgee's monument in Karachi, with its reference to donkey-cart racing, a popular sport among the coastal communities, is an important precedent in its acknowledgement of folk culture. The very grammar of monument design has embraced participation and reflection through different means. The vertical scale, once symbolic

of power and glory, is giving way to a more organic horizontal sprawl that allows the visitor to enter the architecture at different levels of his/her being.

In Berlin, the recently completed monument Field of Stelae, a memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe by Peter Eisenmen, is being hailed as a contemporary memorial that, according to a press release, "quite intentionally refrains from imposing a clearly 'readable' symbolic statement."

Pivotal to this monument's design is spatial innovation, which explores the emotional and physical responses to space. The concept successfully turns modest building material like concrete and its simple forms into an experience that can be provocative and reflective simultaneously.

The process through which this monument was achieved is equally important, as it is reflective of the country's passage to a participatory society. Since the time the idea was introduced by a journalist, it has taken the German nation decades of social and political negotiations, and the very location in the prime administrative core of the city is indicative of how, in the end, all the stakeholders were unified in favour of the project. People's representatives at all levels of government came together with members of civil society and families of the victims to chalk out the goals for the memorial, which include not only to honour the murdered Jews and keep their memory alive, but also "to admonish all future generations never again to violate human rights." Other objectives were to defend the democratic constitutional state at all times, to secure equality before the law for all people, and to resist all forms of dictatorship and regimes based on violence.

These are objectives that many regimes in the world since World War II have failed to uphold, and even the history of Pakistan, a young nation of 57 years, is marked by two violent social and political ruptures – the first marked its birth and the second the loss of its eastern wing. Despite these highly traumatic experiences, nowhere in the country has there been an artistic intervention that reflects the nation's anguish and addresses issues of failure and loss.

In the country's largest city, Karachi, that is host to the greatest number of displaced persons from these ruptures, we encounter two monuments on the main Clifton Road. Popularly known as the *Teen Talwar* (Three Swords) and the *Do Talwar* (Two Swords), both are connected to the history of 1947. Since they were probably born on a civil engineer's drafting table, to term them as artistic interventions would be a travesty.

No one seems to care that the redundant symbolism of a sword is in direct contradiction to the Quaid's democratic ideals of Unity, Faith and Discipline, which are so blatantly tattooed on the surface of the drab marble of the Teen Talwar. Perched on a small island of grass in the centre of a busy intersection, the only way it can be viewed is while waiting for a traffic light to turn green. Its scale can be best appreciated from the top of the Clifton Bridge, from where it looks more like an arched gateway than a monument.

Downstream is located the Do Talwar. This name has been given to it by the 'man on the street', mainly to mark the different bus stops on the long Clifton Road. The main structure is an abstract form with sloping sides that have been sliced into two equal parts and can be read as two stylised swords. Built on an elevated platform, it also has a small dedication to the heroes of the Freedom Movement. Presently this monument has been fenced off and its location in the centre of the heavy flow of traffic discourages visitors.

These monuments, despite their tangible presence, are strangely 'silent' sites and have no presence in the nation's consciousness. This has largely to do with the fact they were neither built for an interface nor conceptualised with the input of the citizenry, but were the product of a ruler's arbitrary whim. Maybe if the stakeholders were allowed to take ownership through a dialogue that not only identifies the objectives of the monument but uses this democratic mechanism for the participation of multiple voices, only then can a nation negotiate an outcome that belongs to all.

An artist who was part of such a process would be better aware of his/her responsibility towards the aspirations of a people, and all the aesthetic decisions would then be tempered with the shared sensitivity and sensibility.

As I write this piece, the legacy of Quaid-e-Azam is, once again, under discussion on the electronic media to commemorate his birth anniversary celebrations. The main difference this year is that there is a more progressive interpretation of the social implications of his philosophy. There is both a need for soul-searching and a growing will in civil society not to repeat its past mistakes.

Perhaps the monument of the future can prove to be the catalyst at this time to facilitate national cohesion. What better way than to seek inspiration from the Founder of the Nation's fervent belief that all Pakistanis are equal, irrespective of their caste, creed or religion. Similar to the German initiative that brought the nation together over a contentious issue, we too may be able to build a monument that can bury bigotry and discord in an artist's vision of the nation's future.

'Elsewhere' is a section where Himal features articles from other sources that the editors would like to present to our readers. This article appeared in Newsline, *January 2006.*

A quick jab

Bangladesh's renowned vaccination programme turns its focus to measles, and provides an example for the rest of Southasia.

by | **Louise Russell**

Three months ago, Fatema Khatun's son Hossain died in her arms. Hossain was one of the nearly 20,000 Bangladeshi children who die every year from measles, the fifth-leading cause of death for children under five-years-old in Bangladesh.

Hossain was also just three months short of being vaccinated through the Measles Catch Up Campaign (MCUC), one of the largest public-health campaigns ever conducted. On 25 February, Bangladesh began the three-week vaccination campaign, in which an estimated 33.5 million children, aged nine months to 10 years, will get their 'catch up' measles vaccine, regardless of whether they have had the disease or the vaccine before. Another 1.5 million were vaccinated in the campaign's first phase, in September last year. About one-in-four children miss out on routine measles vaccines in Bangladesh. About 40 percent of children in each age group are left vulnerable to measles, because the vaccine only has an 85 percent efficacy when given to children aged nine months.

Hossain had been out playing as usual, Fatema says, when he first got sick with a fever that lasted three days. When it started, she took him to a doctor who prescribed paracetamol and rest. After the third day, when the measles rash came, Fatema's neighbours said there was no need to go to the doctor again. "Then he got a bit better, and the rash went down for three days," she says. Fatema had left for work early the morning that Hossain died. She earns between BDT 500-600 per month sorting rubbish and recycling, which is about the same as the rent for the family's small bamboo hut in their Dhaka slum. The family relies on the eldest daughter Khadeza's monthly earnings of BDT 700 as a child domestic worker to survive.

When Fatema arrived home, she found Hossain lying on the floor of their hut. "I came back and held him in my lap to give him a little bit of water," she recalls. "He drank one sip and died. I was holding him when he died." Hossain was one of the 15 percent for whom the vaccine proved useless. But the MCUC safety net, the 'catch up', could save other children from a similar fate. Fatema is certainly making sure her three under-10 children are getting their catch up vaccination. She is also alerting her neighbours in the slum – many of whom had children infected in the outbreak that took Hossain – about the service that is arriving on their doorsteps.

Government success

In order to reach those children excluded from mainstream centres through their extreme poverty, the Measles Catch Up Campaign is going beyond its springboard of the government's expanded programme on immunisation (EPI). Rather than simply working from schools and the government EPI sites, MCUC vaccination teams are also visiting railway and bus stations, parks, jails and slums to reach as many excluded children as possible.

The campaign's estimated USD 15 million cost has been donated by the American Red Cross (ARC). The Bangladeshi government itself is contributing 25 percent of operating costs. However, the MCUC is largely the government's baby, with ministry staff organising and implementing the campaign through the EPI networks. Additional partners include a host of international and national organisations from around the world. Logistically, the campaign has required 40 million vaccines, 40 million syringes, 50,000 skilled vaccinators, 750,000 volunteers, 100,000 schools and 150,000 EPI fixed sites. The vaccines themselves, which need to be kept in cold storage at all times, have been procured by UNICEF with the ARC funds.

The government's work on the measles campaign has been buoyed by its previous success with the EPI programme, through which an estimated 4 million children are saved every year. It has been largely thanks to EPI that coverage against the six preventable childhood diseases – diphtheria, tetanus,

tuberculosis, whooping cough, polio and measles – increased from 2 percent in 1971 to 73 percent in 2005.

If not building on past EPI successes, the new campaign is at least filling in the gaps, says Dr Zahid Hossain, the dean of Dhaka University's medical faculty and secretary-general of the Bangladesh Medical Association. Over the past two decades, EPI successes have paved the way for the Bangladeshi focus to shift now to measles. Despite EPI's original focus, measles had largely dropped off the parental radar as the country tackled the more-lethal whooping cough and the more-crippling polio. The last case of polio was recorded in August 2000. "We had to address our primary issues first," Dr Hossain says, "and now we're addressing our secondary issues and have started the measles and hepatitis vaccines. For measles, though, we haven't had this type of mass mobilisation before."

Fighting measles has the extra benefit of combating pneumonia. Measles is a respiratory disease and it can lead to pneumonia, the second-biggest killer of children aged 1 to 17 years, according to the 2004 Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey. "If we can control measles, through this one campaign, we will be able to control the incidence of pneumonia," Dr Hossain explains. "Pneumonia takes a lot of lives in our country, especially in the rural areas and for those that are living under the poverty line."

Logistically, the campaign has required 40 million vaccines, 40 million syringes, 50,000 skilled vaccinators, 750,000 volunteers, 100,000 schools and 150,000 EPI fixed sites.

The MCUC's ripple effects in advocacy will also save lives, says Dr Hossain. At a minimum, it will jumpstart more than an estimated 10 million caregivers into talking about the free measles vaccines. And if caregivers can be made aware of the vaccine's availability, he says, "hopefully for the next few years this country will remain free of measles." Realistically, while the MCUC is hoping to control measles, eradicating the disease is still a long way off.

In fact, for this reason, the second MCUC has already been pencilled in for 2009. Because the vaccine has an 85 percent efficacy only when given to children at nine months, when combined with the number of Bangladeshi children already missing out on the vaccine, this leaves about two-in-five children vulnerable to measles. Given this dropping rate in efficacy and those newborns that will miss their nine-month dose, the need for a second catch up is already evident. Still, this first MCUC will be the most concerted swipe at measles in Bangladesh yet. Those involved hope that success in this campaign will mean the next one will only need to target children aged nine months to five years.

Above politics

For its resounding 70 percent jump in vaccination coverage, Bangladesh's EPI programme is now seen as an international success story for universal childhood immunisation. In addition, however, Dr Hossain believes that the programme itself has also broken ground in the Bangladeshi political arena. The politics of measles might seem incongruous at a time when national headlines scream about the country's security situation and upcoming elections. But the consistent political support EPI has enjoyed over its 20-year lifespan has made it a beacon for other areas of Bangladesh's turbulent political life.

"If we see the history of the last 30 years of Bangladesh, we will see a lot of difference in opinion regarding national issues," Dr Hossain says modestly. "But regarding the EPI programme, all the political parties, all the governments have shown their keen interest, as the programme has a very good relation with the local people, the rural people." It is those levels of trust on local, national and international levels that now allow many to be optimistic that the MCUC measles effort will see success similar to past vaccination drives. The most prominent of these drives, the polio National Immunisation Days, ended in 2004. Every six months, as 18 million children and parents line up for Vitamin A supplements across the country, many still say they are coming for their "polio medicine". Such is the level of recognition, and adoption, of the vaccination campaigns by the people.

That critical local support has been particularly bolstered by EPI's identity-blind approach and high visibility. Seeing their local MP at a vaccination site leads people to assume that that person – regardless of politics – is responsible for saving their child's life, Dr Hossain says. Rather than kissing babies in election campaigns, it is the life-saving EPI jabs that have won the people's support, for the politicians as well.

While the visibility of vaccinations helps in attracting aid money, Dr Hossain also emphasises that Bangladesh cannot stay reliant on aid forever. He says that the level of responsibility the government has taken in running the measles campaign is just one positive sign of such change; he expects Bangladesh will shoulder more of these costs in the future. As a region, the rate of routine measles vaccinations in Southasia is the second-worst in the world – at 61 percent, it is ahead of only western and central Africa. On this matter, Bangladesh is no longer a basket-case, and is providing an anti-measles template for its neighbours.

Hindi cinema, Indian cinema

Will Bollywood's globalising success smother Indian cinema as a whole? It will unless we get wise to the power and potential of regional-language film.

by | **Utpal Borpujari**

Bilash

Hindi cinema is now 'Bollywood' cinema, although many in the Bombay film industry find the term derogatory. After all, Bombay cinema is the only film culture in the world that has been able to withstand, and even thwart, the global juggernaut called Hollywood. Working in a manner that hardly befits its so-called industry status (never mind the recent efforts at corporatisation), Bombay cinema has achieved what even the proud French have failed at – prevent Hollywood from bringing the national film industry to its knees.

But the same Bombay cinema – often described as the opiate of the masses in the Hindi-speaking world, and increasingly an addiction even in the non-Hindi regions of the globe – is doing to India itself exactly what Hollywood has so effectively done to so many countries. Aided by an ever-willing and ever-expanding media, Bollywood has emerged as a threat to the entirety of India's venerable 'regional' film industries.

In a country as diverse as India, cinema has long been a tool to tell the stories of different peoples across the vastly diverse regions. Hindi cinema has been the fulcrum of this phenomenon. However, the regional cinema has also had a powerful role as an entertainment medium that chronicles the concerns, cultural richness and contradictions of India's many societies. In fact, it was regional cinema that initially catapulted Indian film to the global stage.

As Bollywood now becomes a familiar term across the world – associated with colourful songs and dances even while telling the most conscientious stories in parallel – the space for regional film, including even the non-Bollywood Hindi cinema, is rapidly shrinking. But it is cinema in the various parts and languages that have been hit the hardest in the widely applauded rise of Hindi Bollywood. This could sound like a paradox when regional-language films, such as Amol Palekar's Marathi *Anahat*, Rituparno Ghose's Bengali *Chokher Bali* and Rajeev Menon's Tamil *Kandukondain Kandukondai*, are being released in multiplexes even in a hardcore Bollywood film market such as Delhi. But these are exceptions, which do not reflect the broader trend.

'Language cinema'

The Indian government, particularly since the time of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, has given legitimacy to the term 'Bollywood', heavily promoting its brand at major film festivals throughout the world. The entertainment committees of the leading but rival industry bodies – the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), packed with filmmakers from Bombay – are playing the willing conspirators, organising regular conferences that discuss the dynamics of only the Bollywood industry, and rarely allowing space for discussion of regional cinema cultures. These groups also collaborate with the government in setting up stalls about Indian cinema (read: 'commercial Hindi movies') at global film festivals. With Bollywood cinema being relentlessly promoted as 'Indian' cinema, many new converts abroad have come to believe that it is only the former that comprises the latter.

Even the state-owned television broadcaster, Doordarshan, the only terrestrial TV channel in India, has turned away from the 'language cinema'. It has drastically reduced screening regional cinema, a role it used to perform quite well. Understandably, in this era of globalisation and the resultant mushrooming of private TV channels, it does not make business sense for Doordarshan to devote so much time to regional cinema. But then, it is the country's public-service broadcaster whose mandated duty it is to reflect the country's diversity, and regional cinema is undoubtedly a powerful platform for such depictions.

It is not only government patronage that has given a boost to Bombay cinema. The rise of the Bollywood

phenomenon internationally coincides with the ushering in of economic liberalisation in India in the early 1990s. Multinationals were quick to see Bollywood for what it is – an unmatched marketing platform to reach the 'masses' in the best sense of the term. The increasing product placements and brandings in Bollywood films, and the cosy nexus between corporate leaders and Bombay film producers, are only reflections of this strategy.

Even the multiplex boom in the larger metros of India, which many had hoped would create space for cinema beyond Bollywood, has largely failed to aid regional films, barring a few exceptions. Undoubtedly, the multiplexes have helped to create a genre of low-budget Hindi films that deal with subjects outside of the usual Bollywood formula. These movies are released in multiplexes, but are pushed out the minute big-budget Hindi 'masala' movies require the space.

The lack of awareness, and interest, in the rich repository of celluloid treasure that lies beyond Bombay is also due to the role of the mainstream media. Rarely giving space to regional cinema, the media ceaselessly reviews standard and mediocre Bollywood fare alike. Stoking the constant gossip about the film stars of Bombay, the press and television keep the focus on Bollywood and help it consolidate the grip on the film industry as a whole. Last year a prominent Hindi news channel even invited the film characters (not the actors, mind you, but the characters) of a popular Hindi film, *Bunty Aur Bubli*, to 'present' the news. There have also been repeated instances when national newspapers and channels have misled readers and viewers by reporting that particular Hindi films have won the National Film Award for the Best Feature Film – when in reality, those films had won in less-prestigious categories, while regional-language films have taken the top honours.

Beyond Bombay

There is nothing inherently wrong with the attention and support Bollywood receives. Nor can its popularity be contested. The Bombay film industry has attained humongous proportions, and its prospects seem to be staggering. Some forecasts speculate that Bollywood could grow three-fold in less than a decade, to become a INR 60,000 crore behemoth. Obviously, it makes good sense to do business in a field that is growing beyond the domestic and even regional markets. Hindi films are being dubbed into European languages, attracting newer audiences and greater revenue. But then, cinema has proven itself over the years to be more than mere business. It is first and foremost an art form, but one that by its nature has to involve huge sums of money. Cinema has perforce a role to play much beyond just its commercial aspects, and this is where the importance of regional-language cinema is so obvious – other than to those who are so glamorised by Bollywood as to be blind to reality.

Indeed, does Bollywood reflect the real India? Its literary and cultural heritage, its vastly diverse cultures and societies, its repertoire of over 2500 languages and dialects, the political and social conflicts inevitable in the world's largest democracy?

Rather than the fast-globalising Hindi films, it is, in fact, regional productions that have been able to bring out the essence and contradictions of India. It is the other cinema, this 'independent' cinema, in Hindi and in a huge variety of regional languages (more recently including English) that gives true voice to India's 1.1 billion population. And let us not forget that it is these regional film cultures that first gave face to Indian cinema globally. Be it Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Shyam Benegal, or Jahnu Barua, Girish Kasaravalli and Shaji N Karun, regional filmmakers have long earned accolades for being uniquely able to capture distinct Indian social and cultural realities.

Contemporary Bollywood cinema is actually very different from the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, when directors like Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt had been able to marry commercial needs with aesthetic sensibilities, to great effect. But while modern Bollywood has attracted attention for its fantasy-like nature, regional films have brought to light the diversities of the 'real' India. This cinema comes from a band of filmmakers whose creativity is driven by sheer zeal and love for the mesmeric images of the big screen, and despite the fact that they live a life mostly shorn of glamour and money.

In the last decade or so, it has become increasingly difficult for regional filmmakers to market their films – not only on a pan-Indian scale, but even in their own regions, where imitations of the standard Bollywood fare have become extremely popular. The South Indian film industries have been able to combat the Bombay bandwagon only because they have learnt to produce equally escapist fare – more of the same stuff in their own languages. The small-moneyed producers and directors of regional film, out to present a realistic cinematic paradigm, are unable to challenge the Bombay behemoth.

As Hindi films witness an unprecedented wave of popularity, some have been euphoric with expectation as to how this will boost all 'Indian' cinema. Unfortunately, the growing hegemony of the Bombay film industry has only diminished prospects for the various regional-language industries. A severe resource crunch, lack of government support, and an audience grown fat and lethargic on the Bollywood diet has meant that quality regional cinema – portraying the diversity of India with hard-hitting, at times difficult social realism – is struggling to find space. To preserve this diversity, and for the sake of cinema itself, it is crucial that a 'new wave' of cinema from Calcutta, Madras, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram and Patna steps up to the challenge from Bombay.

Joymoti :
The first radical film of India

by | **Altaf Mazid**

In the history of Indian cinema are a few filmmakers who, by virtue of their creative ability, intense labour and extraordinary perseverance, have come to be considered genius. D G Phalke, V Shantaram, Pramathes Barua, Himansu Roy, Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray are some such figures. Traveling through the little roads of Assam, we find another member of that pantheon: Jyotiprasad Agarwalla (1903-51), one of the greatest cultural figures to have been produced by the state. He made only two films, far less than other filmmakers, yet with his first film alone he could be distinguished as a radical auteur of all India. Nevertheless, he is little known.

Joymoti, released in 1935, added a new chapter in the chronicles of Indian cinema, primarily in the discourse of realism. Further, Jyotiprasad was the only political filmmaker of pre-independent India, though there were many in post-independent India, starting with Ritwik Ghatak. Above all else, *Joymoti* is a nationalist film in its attempts to create a cultural world using the elements of Assamese society. It is the only work of its kind of that period.

Biographers of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla are often mystified with the diversity of his interests. From a playwright in his mid-teens, to a popular dramatist, to a newspaper editor; first a student of law, then of music; composing tunes originally by blending local and Western music, later writing revolutionary poems and songs; writing children's literature, then art criticism, then intellectual essays. Jyotiprasad established a makeshift studio to make the first Assamese feature film, and later transformed the space into a cultural centre dedicated to the causes of the people. He organised a volunteer force for M K Gandhi's Salt March; he was labelled by the imperial government as an absconder, surrendered, and was imprisoned twice. He joined in the Communist-led uprising of 1942; he resigned from a government body in order to protest the compulsory contribution by the government to the World War II effort; he was president of the first India People's Theatre Association conference in Assam. The list is endless. One constant remains throughout, however: politics was inseparable from Jyotiprasad's works, whether in poetry or drama, dance or theatre, music or moving image. Throughout his varied career, we see the same conscientious artist striving to express himself in aesthetic terms – with a worldview of his own, immersed in deep love for Assamese literature and culture.

The making of the film *Joymoti* is remarkable on many counts, yet two things are particularly striking.

First was the form of the constructed imagery that discarded norms of Indian cinema (read: 'faded photocopy of spicy Hollywood') that had been prevalent since its birth in 1912. Second was the director's inflexible determination in achieving the concept of that form in the truest possible way. These two intertwined, complimentary aspects cannot be discussed separately. For revealing the natural life of a particular region of Assam, Jyotiprasad decided he would have to develop his own style rather than import elements from elsewhere. Established actors are far removed from the types of characters essential for a lifelike portrayal; studios based in other parts of the country are either too busy producing films for mass consumption, or too incapable of feeling the pulse of the alien concepts espoused by Jyotiprasad.

Jyotiprasad wished to follow the doctrine of cinematic realism as expressed by the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov (although back then, the term in vogue was 'innovative cinema'). Kuleshov demanded that all things theatrical be banished from films, so as to make way for the aesthetic value of documentary truth, montage and real-life material. His ideas of a new film culture were founded as per changes that had occurred in the Soviet Union after the revolution in 1917. Jyotiprasad came across these ideas while studying in London: He was a visitor to the German government-founded UFA studio in Berlin for six months. There, he took up the idea of 'innovative cinema', as something capable of embracing the spirit of anti-colonial uprising in India. For his active role in the non-cooperation movement against the British, he had been officially declared an absconder prior to his journey to the West. For him, there was no question: only now could a new culture begin.


Jyotiprasad Agarwalla

The content of *Joymoti* is also innovative: a widely popular legend of a 17th century princess of the Ahom dynasty who died of the torture meted out by a puppet king. Joymoti had remained silent about her husband, who had fled the state and whom the king had wanted to kill as a competitor of the throne. The oppression and passive resistance of the film's story paralleled the situations prevalent in India during 1930s British rule. Thus, the realistic depiction in the film was a political approach, contradicting the theatrical style of acting, costume and sets, which at the time were the dominant features of Indian films. Cinematic content of productions in other Indian regions were also overtly religious, based on mythology. Contrary to such films, *Joymoti* was based on real historical materials – although history books are silent about a particular lady named Joymoti.

Assamese studio

While Jyotiprasad pursued Kuleshov's ideas on filmmaking, he increasingly wanted the culture of film to take hold in Assam. He was perfectly capable of organising financing that could have allowed him to shoot his film in any major studio in Calcutta or Pune, but his ideology barred him from doing so. The idea subsequently arose of establishing his own studio in Assam. Jyotiprasad was deeply sceptical about any misrepresentation of the traditional culture of his land. He also felt that, as cinema had already attained worldwide popularity, without a filmmaking centre the people of Assam would lag behind culturally.

The studio in Bholaguri was a large concrete platform, with open-air enclosures of bamboo mats and banana plants. It used the sun as its only source of light. Jyotiprasad floated newspaper advertisements for actors and actresses, mentioning brief outlines of the film and descriptions of the characters. His idea was to get 'types' for his characters, not seasoned artists, even offering remunerations for successful candidates. One of his preconditions was that potential actors needed to be from 'respectable' family backgrounds, as opposed to those from red-light areas that had been used during the 1930s in Calcutta. After a prolonged search and detailed interviews, he brought together the chosen ones to acquaint them with his characters as well as with the techniques of filmmaking, with an eye towards establishing a film industry in Assam. Few of them had ever even seen a film. He sought out a trio, Bhupal Shankar Mehta and the Faizi Brothers, from Lahore as cameraman and sound-recordists. He brought to Guwahati those individuals who were still fresh and yet to be weighed down by the commercially-dominant *Hindustani cinema* (the term Jyotiprasad used in his writings), whose hub at that time was in Lahore, across the expanse of the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Indus plains, in Punjab.

Jyotiprasad designed the set using bamboo hats and mats, deer and buffalo horns, Naga spears, and other traditional materials. A museum-like property room was also created, where the director culled traditional costumes, ornaments and handicrafts for the set's decor. For developing film, ice was brought from Calcutta by steamer, train and automobile.

Joymoti might have allowed Jyotiprasad to project the political values of the 'Assamese' screen-images. But compared to the works of other filmmaking regions of undivided India, it was a disaster in terms of technical quality – particularly sound. The cheap battery-operated sound-recording system chartered

from Lahore turned out to be quite inadequate, which he found out only at the editing table in Lahore during 'post-production'. With limited money, he could not return to Assam for re-recording. In that part of then-India, there was no possibility of getting another Assamese-speaking person. Finding no other option, Jyotiprasad accepted the default output and dubbed about thirty characters with his own voice, including those of the female characters.

A museum-like property room was created, where the director culled traditional costumes, ornaments and handicrafts for the set's decor.

Back home, there existed just two cinema houses in the then-undivided Assam, in Guwahati and Shillong. These were highly inadequate to ensure a return on his investments. He proceeded to build a movie theatre for himself in Tezpur, and arranged a number of itinerant shows around the state. People turned out in large numbers to witness the marvel of Assamese moving images, besides paying homage to the legendary protagonist namesake. Nonetheless, the audience failed to appreciate its merits, partially due to naiveté in recognising the film's realistic approach.

Although he had been an heir to his family fortune, *Joymoti* left Jyotiprasad bankrupt. Despite his pre-eminence, he was never a representative of the film trade, nor was he able to change the course of mainstream filmmaking. Four years later, in 1939, he made his second and last film, *Indramalati*. It was shot in a Calcutta studio with an eye towards the box-office. Although he was able to recoup his original productions costs, proceeds from *Joymoti* never materialised, and Jyotiprasad shuttered his studio thereafter.

Regional realism

Discussions about realism in Indian cinema (here confined to 'nationalist' and socially conscious films that have been regarded as landmark Indian works) usually start with four films made within a four-year period prior to 1947. They are Bimal Roy's *Udayer Pathe* (1944) and its remake, *Humrahi* (1945), Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* (1945), and K A Abbas' *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946). After Independence, this list would include Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) and Satyajit Ray's *Pather Pachali* (1955), this last of which opened a new discourse on 'regional reality'.

With the exception of *Pather Pachali*, this list includes several dominant themes and oppositions: the struggles between the haves and have-nots, the country and the city, and the tenant or peasant and the landlord or moneylender. In format, the films are characteristic in turning to Hollywood as a model – although this dynamic still takes place within the Bombay mode of production. There are no radical stylistic departures in demand for realism. The actors in these films were mostly established stars, although studios tried to refashion them as 'common' men and women.

Jyotiprasad Agarwalla's *Joymoti* has yet to figure in discussions related to realism and Indian cinema. This oversight may be partly due to the film having been made in a marginal-language area, and partly due to non-circulation of the film since its release in 1935. When compared with those films listed above, *Joymoti* appears as perhaps the most pioneering work in depicting realism in Indian cinema – both in concept, and in the persistence in realising that concept. Even the phrase 'regional reality', which has been used for *Pather Pachali*, perhaps could be redefined by going back to this work of Jyotiprasad's.

Joymoti may also be seen as India's first feminist film. Three of the film's female characters – Joymoti herself, her close friend Seuti, and the king's mother – were against the royal court's politics. Although they were not vocal in their disagreement, their tactical and silent protests are quite noteworthy. Furthermore, viewers see a host of women joining them, all of which are unusually realistic female depictions. Indian cinematic women were otherwise painted as mother, goddess, vamp, prostitute, *hunterwali*, et al – full of grace, beauty and seduction (*See Himal Nov-Dec 2005, "'She' and the Silver Screen"*). Jyotiprasad's care in his depictions of his female protagonists can be traced from his very first play, written at the age of 14. Throughout his subsequent decades of playwriting, there is one binding commonality through his plays: the critical hand that the female characters have in determining the stories' major events. After *Joymoti*, however, the Indian woman would have to wait until the 1950s to appear in her full, real form on movie screens of the Subcontinent.

It is not appropriate to say that Jyotiprasad Agarwalla of Assam needs to be *re*-discovered by the world of Southasian cinema, because he was never discovered in the first place. It is time, in the rush of today's Hindi/Hindustani film world to embrace the world market, to look back at an unsung director who was a true pioneer of realism. It is even possible that digging so far into the past will inform current media practitioners in a way that their own future works may steer closer to reality, and away from the frivolity to which many seem to have succumbed.

Above all else, *Joymoti* is a nationalist film in its attempts to create a cultural world using the elements of Assamese society.

INTERVIEW

Restoring *Joymoti*

In 2005, the government of Assam celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Assamese film industry. At the same time, the film that had started it all, *Joymoti*, was getting its own septuagenarian birthday present – a new life. 25 years ago, Altaf Mazid, a Guwahati-based filmmaker, saw a documentary on Jyotiprasad Agarwalla. Researching further on the film over the next couple of years, Mazid increasingly began to look at *Joymoti* as not just an interesting state artefact, but also a nationally significant piece of Indian culture. That convinced him that Joymoti had to be made available to a wider audience. In an interview with *Himal Southasian*, he said that the film itself had been in very bad shape; if digitally restored and nationally distributed, however, he feels it is capable of adding a new chapter in the history of Indian cinema – particularly on the subject of 'regional reality'.

Where were the original reels found?

In the early 1970s, Hridayananda Agarwalla, Jyotiprasad's youngest brother, found seven reels of the lone print of *Joymoti* while cleaning the junk out of his garage. Jyotiprasad's film venture had cost his family's tea garden huge losses. The other brothers (except Hridayananda, he was too young then) as well as his greater family did not give a damn about the artist-philosopher. The condition of the reels was one of near-depletion, but Hridayananda Agarwalla made an extremely timely and wise decision. He engaged Bhupen Hazarika – another one of the other great cultural figures that Assam has produced – as director for a long documentary, *Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad aru Joymoti* (1976), in which the reels were incorporated. That way the reels were saved.

How did you go about restoring the reels?

I attended my first International Film Festival of India in 1986, in Hyderabad. There, I saw a restored old French film, and started thinking about the restoration of *Joymoti*. I tried several times to persuade the related people, as well as the government. In 2000, when I had my own editing set up, I began thinking about making a subtitled copy of *Joymoti*. I got a video copy of Bhupen Hazarika's documentary and pulled the Joymoti portion into my computer. The reels were disorganised and in an as-they-were-found condition. Furthermore, several portions of the film were made to freeze, in order to accommodate extra voiceovers. Most of these are from Bhupen Hazarika's voice. I deleted those patches, and re-edited the pieces back into order. The subtitling part took the most time. Pradip Acharya, a professor of English, did the English translation of the dialogue and songs. We spent many weeks of sleepless nights – the dialogues were quite inaudible.

What part of the process did you enjoy the most?

The song at the end, *Flow on you water of Luit...* Jyotiprasad Agarwalla memorialises Joymoti's death with a sequence on the river 'Luit' (later changed to 'Brahmaputra' by New Delhi) and a background song. I found that portion the most memorable. While editing, and still when I see the film, I feel a great sense of excitement. What a remarkable sequence it is!

Is the entirety of the film now restored?

Just the seven reels, or 60 minutes – a shorter version of the two-hour-plus original. But that is sufficient to know the film completely. I am happy that the reels were found that way.

How much money did the process take? Did you have assistants?

Just INR 16,000. It was solely a labour of love. Only I, my wife Zabeen, and Pradip Acharya, who did the translations, are involved.

What has been the reaction to the new restoration?

The ice has not yet melted. The people of Assam have been long deprived of seeing Joymoti, and the subtitled version will help Assamese and non-Assamese people understand the dialogues and songs. But as usual, the government has little interest in works that do not serve their immediate political agenda. I even offered our local TV station, Guwahati Doordarshan, a free telecast of the subtitled version, but they have no place for programmes that cannot generate commercial sponsorship. The only public showing until now was held in Delhi on 20 January 2004, the birthday of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla.

What would you hope to be able to do with *Joymoti*?

A digitally-corrected print is required for any international release, the estimated cost of which is INR 3.5 million. The art-house circuit is always interested in seeing such old marvels. I have sent copies of the restored version to the Berlin and Cannes film festivals, but they have found it very difficult to judge the film from the video copy. Over the last 25 years, *Joymoti* has become a fulltime obsession for me. In each viewing, I discover something else. Now that obsession has turned to obtaining a full 35mm restored version, so that the film can be appreciated everywhere.

Write to Altaf Mazid at ***tayaba@sancharnet.in***

Affirmative action for a shared India

Positive discrimination in government jobs and in education has helped the Dalit progress, despite continuing discrimination elsewhere. But when will leaders of Indian industry understand that the empowered Dalit means an economy that is vibrant?

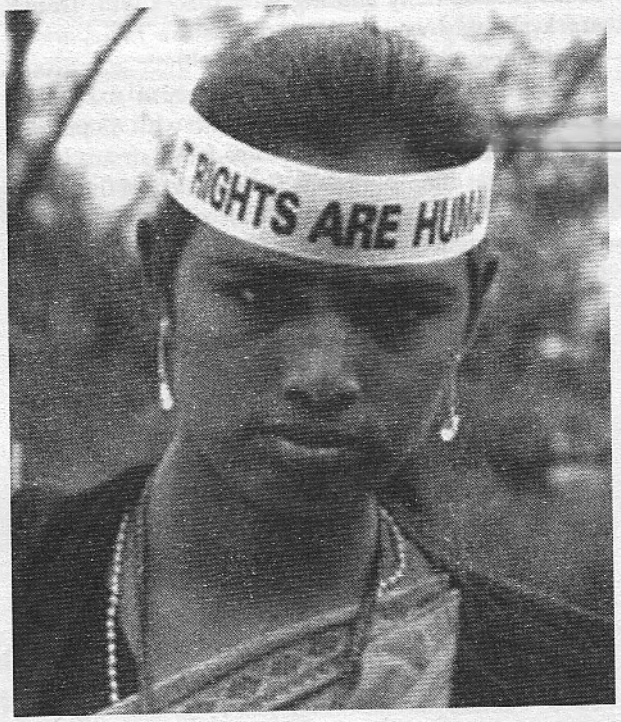
by | **Chandra Bhan Prasad**

Regulated by its caste and outcaste quintessence, 'Caste India' continues to be apprehensive of the idea of a shared India. Its soul trapped in the quagmire of the past, India refuses to emancipate itself from that unhealthy state. At 166 million, Untouchables currently make up around 16.2 percent of the population; tribals, at around 84 million, comprise about 8.2 percent. Despite encompassing nearly a quarter of the population, to the mind of Caste India, both these Dalit groups are social aliens, and must remain where they have been for ages. In other words, Dalits are entitled to neither dignity, nor any partnership in whatever happiness India as a society generates.

When the veteran journalist B N Uniyal wrote the groundbreaking 1996 article "In Search of a Dalit Journalist", in which he showed that there was not a single Dalit journalist working in Delhi's mainstream media, the larger society remained unmoved, undisturbed. The media is generally seen as among the more humane, forward-looking, and contemplative of institutions. Yet despite India's 4890 daily newspapers, it is not possible to this day to name even four mainstream Dalit journalists. As far as the electronic media is concerned, there are no Dalits in the newsroom – either as anchors, producers, cameramen or correspondents.

If that mindset continues to govern the 'progressive' media, it is easier to understand the attitude of the larger Hindu society toward Dalits. As a central feature of the caste society, the regime of hierarchy does not even spare beasts. In the Tamil village of Tuticorin, non-Dalits had imposed a ban on Dalit-owned dogs, worried they would stray into non-Dalit areas. The social ideology of hierarchy would simply not allow Dalit dogs to mingle with non-Dalit dogs.

The December 2004 tsunami devastated fisherfolk families in Nagapattinam, but even in such trying



times, the non-Dalits in the village refused to share makeshift shelters with Dalit survivors. Similar tales of discrimination were reported when the massive earthquake of January 2001 struck Gujarat, killing thousands. Like Nagapattinam, Dalit survivors in Kutch were thrown out of emergency shelters, in full view of national media.

It is in the face of this systemic discrimination that Dalit groups have sought to assert themselves politically. Under the growing pressure of Dalit aspirations, the United Progressive Alliance government has sought in recent years to debate the question of extending affirmative action to the private sector. Leading captains of industry, however, would have none of it (*see box*). Despite the fact that many of

these men have attended prestigious European or US institutions, they remain oddly similar to temple priests in India, who have long believed that Hindu gods and goddesses must be stringently protected from polluting Dalit shadows.

Such viewpoints raise some important questions: Is there any actual proof, by survey or research, showing that Dalits recruited under reservation systems under-perform? Or any proof of the supposed non-performance of such industries, which can be traced to the presence of Dalit engineers or professionals?

Despite encompassing nearly a quarter of the population, untouchables and tribals are entitled to neither dignity, nor any partnership in whatever happiness India as a society generates.

Ignominy of merit

There is some 'proof', deployed more to insult and deny sharing workplaces with Dalits: mark-sheets in examinations. Prima facie, merit ideologues would appear right in their assertions. Why should a Dalit with 55 percent marks be preferred over a non-Dalit candidate with 65 percent marks? The intrinsically jaundiced Indian academia has made no attempt to decode the fallacy of the mark-sheet-driven ignominy of merit. No one has explained the phenomenon of non-Dalit children receiving 95 percent and greater in Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) high-school examinations, but then failing to retain those performance levels at the post-graduation level.

If we were to compare, at random, the mark-sheets of ten Dalit and ten non-Dalit researchers from high school to post-graduation, a graph would indicate the following. *Dalits*: High School – 50 percent, Intermediate – 55 percent, Under-Graduation – 58 percent, Post-Graduation – 61 percent. While the marks of Dalits would generally increase throughout the schooling, similarly ordered statistics for the non-Dalits would generally decrease: 95, 90, 70, 68. What if there were two more stages included in postgraduate levels: PG-I and PG-1+? The results of a similar comparative graph would stun us all. Dalit mark-sheets generally show a progressive rise as Dalit students climb to higher levels of education, while non-Dalit mark-sheets show a progressive decline.

In public discourse, however, it is *proponents* of merit who use mark-sheet data to argue their case. If so, should we not suggest that, with growing age, the non-Dalit becomes dumber, and the Dalit sharper? What actually happens is that upper-level education systems have a standard pattern – more equalising, treating each more similarly, irrespective of school education. Higher education also acts to remove Dalit students from their family environment, which often lack rich legacies of learning or teaching. In a more equal university or college context, Dalits tend to do better. The same equalising environment, however, becomes disadvantageous for non-Dalits.

Lower-level school systems are entirely different, with a huge gap between government-run language schools and the private-run, English-medium public schools. The journey of a non-Dalit child often begins from play- or pre-school. Taught by already-educated parents, a non-Dalit student grows with a tutor and a significant helping of extra reading materials. Hardly any student can score 90 percent-plus in high school without tuitions. That system of extra tuitions, extra coaching and extra literature, however, disappears in upper-level academia.

School examination results therefore present a highly exaggerated mirror of non-Dalit talents, which works negatively for Dalit students, whose mark-sheets would often understate their talents. The non-Dalits' merits can be likened to a certain variety of watermelons grown in Rajasthan. This variety grows faster and bigger – and hence cheaper – but remains pink inside. Retailers have to compensate by injecting the pale melons with a chemical that turns their insides red. The customers are thus fooled by the merit of the red watermelon. This is how 'merit' is manufactured and used against Dalits as well. In that sense, the ideology of merit is not remotely related to an urge for excellence or competence. Rather, it is a social ideology of segregation and hierarchies, and one that is central to Caste India.

For its part, urban India wants to share neither classrooms nor workplaces with Dalits. As such,

Reservation reservations

- *The concept of reservation without reference to merit could have a distorting effect on the operations of the private sector.* - Anand Mahindra, President of Confederation of Indian Industries
- *It will have far-reaching impact on the industry, as it may completely destroy the meritocracy in such units and bring inefficiency.* - Mahendra K Sanghi, President of the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India
- *We oppose it as the move is against industrialisation and will lead to job reduction.* - Y K Modi, President of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
- *It will completely destroy meritocracy in the private sector.* - Kiran Karnik, President of the National Association of Software and Services Companies
- *If I employ a thousand staff, five percent reservation would mean I have to recruit 50 people I may not need.* - Satis Tondon, Managing Director of Alfa Laval India

whenever the question of affirmative action comes up for debate, *merit* is deployed to assert segregation. The response is a willing, but completely inaccurate, assumption that Dalits are incompetent, and non-Dalits, predestined for excellence.

Reservation hypocrisy

The more India argues for its inherent hierarchical order, including the exclusion of Dalits, the funnier it becomes. Some would suggest offhandedly that 'reservations haven't helped Dalits', while in fact reservations have been the only social policy that has given Dalits any breathing space. There are some 3.5 million Dalits in government jobs, about 125 Members of Parliament, and hundreds of MLAs. There are about 68,000 Dalits in Group A services, living in bungalows and riding in white Ambassadors. There has been a Dalit head of state, a Dalit deputy prime minister, two Dalit Lok Sabha Speakers, at least half-a-dozen chief ministers, and hundreds of ministers. There have been Dalit judges in the higher judiciary, and currently a number of Dalits are serving as vice chancellors of universities.

Some would suggest offhandedly that 'reservations haven't helped Dalits', while in fact reservations have been the only social policy that has given Dalits any breathing space.

Outside the regime of reservations, say in the private sector, there are hardly any known Dalits in corporate boardrooms, acting in Bollywood, or speculating markets at stock exchanges – to say nothing of a publicly traded Dalit-owned company.

With reservations, a Dalit could, for instance, become CEO of ONGC, one of the world's most successful oil companies. Without reservations, a Dalit could rarely become even a typist at a private oil company. With reservations, a Dalit could head the police force in a state like Uttar Pradesh. Without reservations, a Dalit would have difficulty becoming a guard at a private-sector company. Caste India understands all of that. Thanks to the intellectual situation created by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, as well as due to an evolving sense of modernity, Caste India would generally refrain from saying that it 'hates' Dalits. What it would suggest, however, is that reservations have not helped Dalits.

Once cornered on such rhetoric, Caste India would change its tack: "Well, the benefits of reservations are cornered by a creamy layer of Dalits." That would be amusing. Where is the cream among Dalits? From a population of over 250 million people, less than 100,000 Dalits have managed to get into Group A services. Do they become a layer at all, creamy or otherwise? Or do their children seek positions under Group III or IV services?

Outside the regime of reservations, say in the private sector, there are hardly any known Dalits in corporate boardrooms, acting in Bollywood, or speculating markets at stock exchanges.

Whether Dalit or non-Dalit, those who join government service generally belong to the relatively advanced sections of their respective classes. There are far fewer cases, however – in fact, the rarest of the rare – where parents of a Dalit bureaucrat, administrator or diplomat have been IAS/IPS/IRS/IFS officers themselves. In the case of non-Dalits, such examples are easily found. So why does Caste India not talk about the creamy layers within itself? There is actually the unstated hope that children of such Dalit professionals will not follow in their parents' footsteps. In other words, this India does not want to see a creamy layer – a middle class – emerge from within Dalit ranks. In battles for emancipation around the world, after all, the middle class has nearly always played a crucial role.

Particularly telling was the 12 August 2005 Supreme Court judgement (later annulled by Parliament), which ended reservations in the private universities. For decades, the argument has been thus: "Give them the best of education and end the quota system." At times, these statements would even sound pleasant to the ears. But when the Supreme Court decision came, Caste India did not condemn the judgement, and was instead on the bleachers cheering wildly.

That means that whatever has been said for decades about the 'best of education' was false. Not that many did not already doubt the honesty of such statements, but a Supreme Court judgment was needed to nail the lies. In the wake of economic reforms, the government has withdrawn from opening new colleges and universities, and instead has encouraged the private sector to undertake the task. The private sector, however, has different ideas about embracing Dalits in the student workforce.

Captains of Indian industry often send their children to US universities for degrees in management and business, often buying seats for thousands of dollars. There, they study alongside African-American and other minority students, many of whom attend school under affirmative-action programmes. Similarly, most top-level Indian companies trade or collaborate with US corporations, conveniently forgetting that most US corporations practice workforce diversity programmes by law, and file

annual returns to the national Equal Employment Opportunity Commission about the demographic makeup of their workforce. Back home, however, they continue to complain: "Nowhere else in the world do companies practice reservation." Well, as a matter of fact, nowhere else in the world is there a caste system. Where there is racism, there are ways to correct race relations.

More Dalits empowered could then mean greater economic growth, but even this potential dynamism goes unappreciated by Caste India.

A market languishing

With the caste order as its life and blood, the evolution of civilisation in India has been highly problematic. So profound are these problems that even at the dawn of the 21st century, the country has not been able to produce a socially secular elite. Worse still, the country has not been able to produce an authentic bourgeoisie. No wonder that the villagers of Tuticorin, the fisherfolk of Nagapattinam, Harvard-educated industrialists, Oxford-trained newspaper editors, and temple priests – each so professionally dissimilar – would react so similarly should a Dalit reference occur.

Thus, even if it were to be definitively proven that a shared India is better than a segregated India, Caste India would remain unmoved, refusing to emancipate itself from its antiquated social institutions. To an industrialist, there can be nothing more tempting than making profits. The Indian industrialist, however, would still seem to prefer prejudice to profit.

This India is therefore unwilling to even consider the argument that reservations in government jobs have in fact helped Indian industry more than they have helped the Dalit beneficiaries. Dalits working in state institutions spend an estimated INR 300 billion annually – whatever Dalits earn as first- or, at best, second-generation consumers is said to be spent completely by the third week of the month. One can speculate, then, that if the private sector opens up to Dalits, their earnings would quickly be returned to the market. Dalits tend to spend more on movable assets than on immovable assets – in other words, they do not usually block currency circulation. In any successful market economy, money needs to remain in circulation as much as possible. More Dalits empowered could then mean greater economic growth, but even this potential dynamism goes unappreciated by Caste India.

Indian industrialists could do well to look at a similar situation in the US, where African-Americans are now considered to be among the strongest of consumers. Like Dalits, African-Americans historically lacked inherited assets and goods, so whatever they earned they have returned to the market.

Unlike in the past, the American economy has seen shorter periods of recession, at longer intervals, since the mid-1980s. In fact, there was a lull in the business cycle for less than one-tenth of the time between 1991 and 2005, ensuring that the economy continued to grow rapidly. This was a period of aggressive affirmative action in the US, which created a new class of consumers. African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics amassed a disposable income of about USD 1.9 trillion annually, more than the combined GDP of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. As a result, American retail sales ballooned, thereby boosting production. The impact of these new entrants into the middle class on the American economy is beyond debate. It is no wonder, then, that the American bourgeoisie is not averse to affirmative action.

Perhaps Caste India, which increasingly admires the American model, remains unaware of this link between Dalit empowerment and economic upswing.

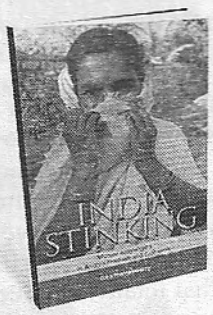
Caste India remains a highly problematic society, nearly as problematic as South Africa once was. Without global support, Nelson Mandela's journey may never have seen the light of day. Likewise, without global support, the Dalit battle for a shared India may remain in the shadows.

Stinking filth:
The political economy of scavenging

by | **Vijay Prashad**

In late January 2006, the sewer ran over. Our well-heeled street in Chennai pulsated with excreted lava. A work crew arrived to lift the manholes and break the pavement. By mid-morning, they had put pipes into the sewer and had begun pumping out as much of the sludge as possible. The smell overpowered everyone. Then a few of the men and women put plastic bags over their hair, lifted up their lungis and saris, and descended into the sewer.

They stood in the black treacle of shit, piss and other assorted matter, using bamboo sticks as oars to move the sewage around, and then buckets to pass it out to be deposited on the street. A little later, they left the holes to wash their feet and hands with water from a white plastic container. One man gave me a big smile and said, "dirty," in English.



Gita Ramaswamy, *India Stinking: Manual Scavengers in Andhra Pradesh and their Work* by Gita Ramaswamy Chennai: Navayana, 2005.

I do not speak Telugu, the language of these contracted labourers from Andhra Pradesh. The municipality does not hire them directly, because the work they must do is illegal according to 1993 national legislation. Nonetheless, there are now about 10,000 such workers in Chennai, most of whom live in one of the 150 slums within the city's precincts. The contract labourer said *dirty*, and even as the word was nowhere near sufficient to describe what he had experienced, it sufficed. It was dirty. The whole thing was dirty: the sewage, the job, and the coexistence between humans as technology-saving devices and technology to save labour. Why does the municipality use human labour, when it could turn to machines to clear the drains? It took Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to India in 1952 to introduce the long broom for street-sweepers.

Why does Indian civil society tolerate such a reduction of the human being?

Gandhi, for all his limitations, raised the question of scavenging and cleanliness onto the platform of Indian nationalism back in 1901. Over the next four decades, his timid approach to scavenging and untouchability nonetheless confirmed the outrageousness of the practice within the ambit of the vision for a republican India.

***Endless Filth: The Saga of the Bhangis* by Mari Marcel Thekaekara Bangalore: Books for Change, 3rd Edition, 2005.**

Between 1949 and 1976, five state-commissioned reports came to the same conclusions: scavenging continues; it is barbaric; and the state must act to end it.

The 1949 Barve Commission ended with a final word to the scavengers themselves. The practice continues, it argued, "because the scavengers have submissively put up with its dirty nature and never raised their voices against it, as if it were ordained for them by birth." History was thus cheapened when India's first commission on the problem – chaired by a Brahmin no less – turned the onus of scavenging onto the scavenger. *It is your problem*, the government suggested, *because you do not refuse to do this job*. The silence on the millennia of struggle against Brahmanism, and the obliviousness to the political economy of scavenging, dramatically reduced the Barve Commission's recommendations. From on high, the commission propounded: "But they should know that, as human beings and as equal citizens of free India, they have a right to insist that the condition of scavenging work shall be such, that it should be capable of being done by any self-respecting person."

Organising labour

The 'right to insist' has been claimed by *safai karamcharis* (manual scavengers) ever since the Barve Commission's findings, whether through the medium of caste associations, trade unions, political parties, or newly created abolitionist groups. These last have received some attention in the past few years, before and after the World Conference against Racism at Durban in 2001. The Navsarjan Trust (NST) in Gujarat and the more militant Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA) in Andhra Pradesh are both committed to various forms of direct action to end the use of pit latrines and other sorts of sanitation technology that require manual scavenging.

Gita Ramaswamy's *India Stinking* and Mari Marcel Thekaekara's *Endless Filth*

provide a survey of the legislative failures and barbarism of the practice. The former introduces the reader to the SKA, while the latter introduces the NST. Both books profile the leading forces in each of these respective organisations – the SKA's Bezwada Wilson and the NST's Martin Macwan – both of whom have fought hard to motivate civil society to push against the recalcitrance of state authorities.

"Why should we organise [the scavengers]?", Wilson asks Ramaswamy. "To demand better wages and living conditions? I am criticised for being anti-institution, anti-organisation. But our strength does not grow with a powerful organisation of manual scavengers. We can only be powerful when there are no manual scavengers." Macwan is similarly forthright in his discussions of the government's various commissions: "What totally devastated me was that they were not agitating against the practice. They were merely begging the Panchayat to give them more brooms to prevent their hands from being soiled with shit. They didn't dream of eliminating scavenging."

Ultimately, however, humanism alone fails the scavengers, offering no programme for their liberation.

Scavenging, after all, cannot be reformed; it must be abolished. But not only has it not been abolished, it has been strengthened. While both Ramaswamy and Thekaekara indict the Indian civil society and government on moral grounds, that is not enough: one has to seek out the problem elsewhere than morality. In both books, abolitionists enter a neighbourhood to break down a pit latrine. There, they are confronted by the residents of the area, who remonstrate with them because they have no access to any other toilet, a particular problem for the women. "You people have big houses, so you can have toilets inside your homes," one person tells the SKA in *India Stinking*. This is typical, and it is meaningful. To moralise against scavenging does not address the fundamental questions of uneven access to public facilities, or the use of labour as a cheap substitute for technology.

Caste and economics

This tendency towards morality comes about because of a lack of linkage between Brahmanical ideas about pollution and the political economy of sanitation. If the problem was only in Brahmanical prejudice, then a moral condemnation of the ideas might produce an ideological shift. The problem vests equally in the ideology of pollution-purity, however, and on the state's reproduction of caste oppression through its agencies like the sanitation department. As such, it is worth taking seriously the complaints of those who rely upon the degradation of other humans for their own cleanliness.

To moralise against one section of the poor to help another is insufficient. The state neglects the sanitary needs of the working poor, and then provides them with bare-minimum services on the backs of the manual scavengers. Rather than spend money on technologies that can remove humans from direct contact with the excreta of others, the local government relies on human beings from certain caste communities to bear the social costs. Municipalities spend far more on water supply than on sewage removal, and disproportionately more on the enclaves of the wealthy than on the slums of the poor. These economic decisions are rife with caste implications, because to run sewage removal on the cheap means that administrators replace available technology with human labour. This is the inhumanity of the political economy of scavenging, and it has a long history. In 1912, an English officer suggested that the colonial municipality must be "guided not by what is the best system of sanitation, but by what is the best system which the Municipal funds can afford." This logic continues.

In 1993, the Lok Sabha finally took up the matter and passed a stringent law banning the use of manual scavenging. The SKA and NST act on the basis of that law, but they have found that only a statutory agency would be able to break the very pit latrines that are now illegal. Indolent, insolvent and caste-ridden governmental agencies, however, have not taken this initiative. The law also passed just as the Indian state began to liberalise. How will Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) funding create water-seal latrines, when HUDCO and its ilk are under their own financial constraints? Liberalisation has meant the decline of the state's regulatory capacity. The 1993 act defrayed the abolition of scavenging onto the individual states of the union at a time when government agencies and state budgets were being scaled back. This needs to be part of the context of any discussion of abolition, and explains why almost a decade-and-a-half later, there are still over 1.3 million people who work in this sector. The "worst kind of oppression and indignities," according to the 1994 National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, continues. For neither the first time nor the last would this government body call the practice of manual scavenging "a blot on the face of the nation."

The moral voice is necessary. The realist descriptions of the inhumanity are compelling. Both of these are well provided for in *India Stinking* and *Endless Filth*. Ultimately, however, humanism alone fails the scavengers, offering no programme for their liberation. Such a plan would require a forthright look at the nexus between the political economy of scavenging and the pollution-purity ideology of Brahmanism. Anything less makes us, the bourgeois reader, feel better, but does little for the objects of our concern.

The Pakistani Dalit

by | **Yoginder Sikand**

The hierarchical and discriminatory caste system, legitimised by Hinduism, is so deeply entrenched in Southasian societies that it has even affected the adherents of theoretically egalitarian religions like Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Buddhism. With the highest Hindu concentration in India and Nepal, the exploitation of Dalits is often believed to be limited to these countries. As this remarkable book explains, however, caste discrimination against Dalits is a social reality in Pakistan as well, where over 95 percent of the population is Muslim.

Pirbhu Lal Satyani knows of what he speaks: a Pakistani Hindu social activist based in Sindh, Satyani works with his country's Dalits. In this slim volume, he claims that of Pakistan's roughly 3 million Hindus, over 75 percent are Dalits of various castes, including . Meghwals, Odhs, Valmikis, Kohlis and Bhils. They reside mainly in southern Punjab and Sindh and seem to suffer the same dismal plight as their counterparts in India.

In a 1944 speech, Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared that the Muslim League would protect the rights of the Dalits, assuring them of full security. Soon after, Jogendra Nath Mondal, a Dalit from East Bengal, was appointed as the leader of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and the country's first law minister. With increasing intolerance towards minorities in post-Jinnah Pakistan, however, Mondal resigned from the cabinet and migrated to India in 1953. Today, Satyani argues, the religious minorities are at the bottom of the heap in Pakistan's social hierarchy, and among them, the worst sufferers are the country's Dalits.

In the aftermath of Partition, the majority of Hindus who stayed back were Dalits. The migration of Hindus to India continued, especially after the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, when they felt an enhanced sense of insecurity. Those fears reappeared when Muslim minorities in India were attacked by Hindu extremists, in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in 1992. Hindus worried that such activities would be used as a pretext by Islamic extremists in Pakistan to target them.

Lacking money and resources, Dalits in Pakistan were unable to make the same choice of migration available to upper-caste, more well-off Hindus. Satyani writes: "The Dalits are so caught up with mere day-to-day survival issues that Hindu-Muslim conflicts or Pakistan-India disputes are not as important for them as they are for rich 'upper'-caste Hindus." The fact that, for Dalits, life in India is hardly better than in Pakistan, might also have deterred migration.

Hamey Bhi Jeeney Do: Pakistan Mai Acchoot Logon ki Suratehal
(Let Us Also Live: The Situation of Pakistan's Untouchables)
by Pirbhu Lal Satyani
ASR Resource Centre, Lahore, 2005
Price: PKR 20

Lowest of the low

Dalits in Pakistan are caught in a quagmire. Being a part of the Hindu fold, they have to face the same discrimination that minorities in general are subject to in Pakistan. The fact that they are the 'lowest of the low' even within this minority makes their position all the more vulnerable. The scourge of the caste system, coupled with their position in the class matrix, have together made Dalits one of the most deprived communities in the country. Any analysis of the situation of Pakistan's Dalits would have to locate them in the context of these multiple identities: of being poor, 'low-caste' and minority.

Satyani brilliantly narrates the structural violence that Dalits are subjected to. While there is immense diversity in their living patterns, what is common is their marginalisation and deprivation. In rural areas, most Dalits work as landless agricultural labourers and sweepers, with their huts located in separate settlements outside of the main village. They generally earn a pittance and are often forced into free labour by powerful Muslim and Hindu feudal lords. Those heavily indebted to landlords and moneylenders can expect little support from the state justice system, and have to submit to a miserable existence as bonded labourers. Land mafias in rural Sindh regularly grab lands on which Dalits have set up their huts. In most places, Dalits have no temples of their own and local Muslims often illegally occupy the few places where they can cremate their dead. In towns and cities, Dalits generally live in the poorest,

most squalid slums. Discriminated against by Muslims and upper-caste Hindus alike, many Dalits have converted to Islam or Christianity.

Efforts are rarely made to ameliorate the plight of Pakistan's Dalits, and the few initiatives that have been taken seldom reach the intended beneficiaries. Many Dalits do not possess national identity cards and so cannot access various government developmental schemes. With the country's more influential and organised Christian and upper-caste Hindu communities monopolising state-sanctioned facilities for minorities, Dalits are deprived of even the basic rights meant for them.

Political marginalisation

Unlike in India, where Dalit activism is slowly finding its feet and the state system has been somewhat responsive to the plight of the 'oppressed' castes, there is hardly any organisation working for Dalit welfare in Pakistan. In the absence of strong political leadership of their own, Dalits have failed to effectively demand their rights from the state or from the larger society. Even in the most blatant cases of human rights violations, they generally do not protest. Satyani traces the inadequate political mobilisation to acute poverty, rampant illiteracy and discrimination. In many places, Dalits are not allowed to freely vote for candidates of their own choice, often forced by powerful Hindu and Muslim landlords to vote for particular candidates. The acute division among Dalits, with various Dalit castes practicing untouchability amongst themselves, has further added to the political marginalisation.

For its part, the Pakistani state prefers to promote the more influential upper-caste Hindus as 'leaders' of the Hindus, rather than also consider an alternate Dalit leadership. The state's commitment – or lack thereof – to the Dalit cause is apparent in the Punjab. Despite a population of almost 350,000 Dalits in southern Punjab (mainly in the Rahim Yar Khan and Bahawalpur districts), there are no reserved seats for either Dalits or Hindus in the Provincial Assembly. Christians occupy all the seats reserved for minorities in the Assembly.

Affirmative action policies meant especially to encourage Dalits in government employment have been discontinued. While decades ago, M A Jinnah had provided a six percent job quota for Dalits in some government services, in 1998 the Nawaz Sharif government, assisted by some upper-caste Hindu and Christian leaders, changed the Dalit quota to a general minority quota, thus effectively denying Dalits assured access to government jobs.

Combating the oppression

The caste system is a Southasian problem, given its transborder existence across India and Nepal – and, as this book shows, in Pakistan. Satyani recommends that the issue of Dalit human rights and amelioration of their pathetic conditions be placed as part of the SAARC agenda. This would, he hopes, force all SAARC members to take the issue more seriously.

The author presents an exhaustive list of social, political and religious recommendations, meant to eliminate inequities that burden Pakistani Dalits. These include: the setting up of a national commission devoted exclusively to Dalit issues; proportional reservations for Dalit seats in the national and provincial assemblies; adequate representation for Dalits in all government services; and the revision of educational curricula to delete negative portrayals of non-Muslim communities. Recognising that class and caste issues converge against Dalits, Satyani suggests that landless labourers be granted land titles.

The author also advocates for Dalit rights within the context of the larger Hindu community, calling for the repeal of all 'black laws' against religious minorities. If Pakistan wishes to emerge as a multicultural country that respects diversity, he says, it must also give Hindu employees – including Dalits – holidays for their festivals. Dalit communities that do not have access to cremation grounds should be provided such facilities. Finally, Hindu temples presently under the control of the Waqf Department should be given back to the community. Whether Pakistan's state authorities would be willing to accede to such demands, of course, is another question.

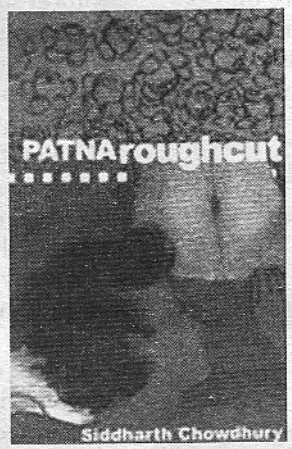
Given the near total absence of literature on Pakistan's Dalits, this slim book is nothing less than pioneering. It is not without its limitations, however. The author could have provided district-wise figures for the Dalit population and a list of various Dalit castes in Pakistan (reportedly over two dozen). Some oral narratives would also have added value. Relations between Hindu Dalits and other similar 'low'-status groups among the Muslims and Christians in Pakistan might have been discussed, as also inter-Dalit differences, which have impeded efforts to promote a broad-based Dalit alliance.

Another dimension missing from the account are the rich religious traditions of the Dalits, which have historically sustained them over the centuries. The author also ignores the efforts being made by some individuals and groups in Pakistan, including several of non-Dalit background, to work for Dalit emancipation. In the course of this writer's recent visit to Pakistan, he met several such people, whose efforts need to be documented and highlighted in order to serve as a source of inspiration for others. This work by Pribhu Lal Satyani deserves to be translated into English and other languages, for it would be of considerable interest to people outside of Pakistan as well.

Political is personal

by | **Ira Singh**

If you grew up in a small town in the 1970s, studied in a convent school, and later wended your way to college and hostel in Delhi University, this book will be a nostalgic one – whether it is for the smell of Lakme egg shampoo (long ago swamped by L'Oreal), choir practice, or parathas at the P G Women's hostel canteen. Yet this is a novel more ambitious than a coming of age saga, the usual *bildungsroman*; it is also a *kunstlerroman*, a portrait of an artist. This accounts for the book's structure: the first three sections are in the protagonist's voice, the next are extracts from his first book, and the last section is from the point of view of his ex-lover. These narrative strategies, though simply constructed, invest the protagonist with a certain significance.



Patna Roughcut
Siddharth Chowdhury
Picador India
Price: INR 250

Ritwik Ray grows up in Patna, and will eventually make a choice to return and work there. In some ways, it is Patna that is the protagonist of this book. However much you can imagine transposing the action onto another small town or city, Chowdhury's strength is his sure and concrete relationship with the place where he locates his novel. While he peels away the layers of the pretensions and hypocrisies of the benighted middle classes, he also sketches, with compassion, a portrait of a place sunk in cultural torpor and riven with caste antagonisms. Simultaneously, the author charts some of the major political movements in this country since the 1970s: that of Jay Prakash Narayan, the Naxal revolution, the Mandal agitations.

The book ends around the time Laloo Prasad Yadav, having come to power in Patna, arrests L K Advani and stops his Ram *rath yatra* from entering Bihar. The 'political' in this book is the personal, and at no point do we feel Chowdhury is merely using it to form a 'turbulent' backdrop to a saga of 'small-town' life. That too is a strength. Chowdhury seems to get every nuance right: the Bengali-Bihari confluence, the upper-caste response to Mandal, and the casual violence against a Muslim boy from Bangladesh.

Ritwik's world is defined by the characters who people it. Harryda is the film buff who invites fate after flouting convention by living with a lower-caste woman, and who is a direct counter to the hearty youths with whom Ritwik went to school and played cricket. Mrinal Babu is the local zamindar, and his loyal minion, Saifu Mian. Most importantly is Mrinal Babu's granddaughter, Ila Lytton Mowbray. Ila will decide what Ritwik reads; this, in turn, becomes a central shaping experience for both protagonist and reader. This is a book about books, their power to transform us and to define us.

Ila, beaten to death by right-wingers while performing a street play, continues to haunt and shape Ritwik's life. This is resented by his lover, Mira Verma, who will eventually marry the urbane Samar Sinha. The last section of the book, recounted by Mira, delivers us a Ritwik seen through her eyes. Both Mira and Ritwik are writers now, but Ritwik does not particularly want to be published in New York; he is content with his Patna audience.

In a book that is intelligent and dense with observation and recall (even though the prose is occasionally clumsy), a few things do seem odd. There is no interiority – we do not really 'know' the characters well, for observation takes the place of interior growth. In that sense, the characters tend to be flat, particularly the protagonist, who is too much the author's mouthpiece. The other is the somewhat mannered way in which the women characters are developed. This reviewer was, in fact, reminded of another Ila: in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. That's a praiseworthy book, too, but with the same problem. Both Mira and Ila here are deeply and problematically romanticised; in turn, Ritwik becomes a darkly glamorous character in Mira's narrative. This, perhaps, lends a somewhat precious air to the sections detailing Delhi University and the return to Patna (the setting is the Patna cine society, the film *Godard*, the section of the novel rather awkwardly called 'Waiting for Godard').

Yet these remain minor quibbles. This is not another dreary growing-up novel, but is highly recommended. *Patna Roughcut* charts the history of a generation with both credibility and passion.

Registering in Lahore

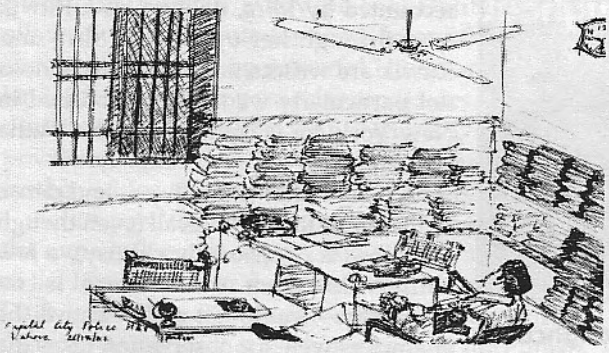
An Indian Bangalee finds a welcoming face at Pakistan's front door.

by | **Rinku Dutta**

Not even my arch-enemies will accuse me of being lily-livered – least of all, the Foreign Registration officers at the Lahore Police Headquarters. In fact, some of them are reluctantly appreciative of my holding-my-own as an Indian woman before the overbearing, muscled-moustachioed-macho Pakistani law-keepers.

As I strode into the Foreign Registration (FR) office this time, I glanced around, checking for the faces, objects and arrangements of re-association in potentially hostile territory. The clock that used to be on the right wall, I noticed, was now above the door.

"Arre Professor Saheba! Aap kab ayeeN? Itne maheenoN ke baad hume yaad aaye?" ("Oh, hello Professor Saheba! When did you arrive? You remember us after so many months?")



The officer rising to welcome me 'home' looked familiar from my last visit, almost a year earlier, when I had come to report my exit from the country. Then too he had touched me with his genuine warmth. "Professor Saheba, why are you leaving?" he had teased. "Are you upset with us?"

I was touched. I smiled and assured him that his apprehensions were misplaced – I was leaving because of other reasons. Over my year's stay and three-monthly visits to extend my visa, the officers and clerks at the FR office and I had become well-acquainted with one another. So Chief Officer K didn't probe. He ordered tea.

I had to politely refuse. "When I return, *inshallah*."

God-willed or otherwise, I went back to Lahore less than a year later. Chief Officer K looked quizzically at me as I inspected the office's changes. "I was looking for the clock," I explained. "It was on that wall when I first came here in December 2002."

"You remember?"

"Yes. And besides, I had made a sketch."

I happened to be carrying my sketchbook in my bag, and I showed him the pen-drawing I had made of the FR office the first time that I had come to 'police report'. Officer K showed it around appreciatively to the others in the room, and each guessed as to the identity of the snoozing officer depicted.

I had made the drawing sitting in the same chair in which I was currently seated, but Officer K had not been present. Waiting for the clerks, I had busied myself sketching the office, until I was shooed out by an officer suspicious of my busy pen. Sometime during my subsequent visits to the FR office, however, my presence must have been accepted as benign. Refuting my misgivings, they have proven to be respectfully courteous and proactively helpful.

Chief Officer K has been particularly impressive – dealing every day with aliens, especially the 'enemy' Indians, compassionately and considerately. Knowing that he was in the FR office eased much of the anxiety that I had suffered the first two times I was in Lahore.

The day I was leaving, while sipping a Mirinda in his office, in tottered two old gentlemen. Indians. Octogenarians. Chief Officer K looked at me and commented disparagingly: "Old people above 65 years of age were to have been given 'police-reporting-free' visas. That was the supposed understanding between our countries. Look at these two – one 87-year-old Indian has come to visit his 83-year-old Pakistani blood-brother, and the two have traveled all the way here to report the Indian elder's arrival!"

Looking through the documents, he addressed the younger brother, who was helping the older one into a chair: "Please, next time neither you nor he needs to come here to report. Just send the relevant papers through someone else. We will take care of it."

Officer K is all for peace between India and Pakistan. Visa procedures have become stricter these days, sometimes cutting the number of applicants the Lahore office processes by two-thirds.

To have a peace-loving chief officer at the Lahore Foreign Registration office is an enormous blessing. To express my gratitude, I gave him a framed, enlarged copy of the sketch that he had admired. He wanted to hang it on the wall of the renovated office, but I gave him one to stand on his less obtrusive side-cabinet instead.

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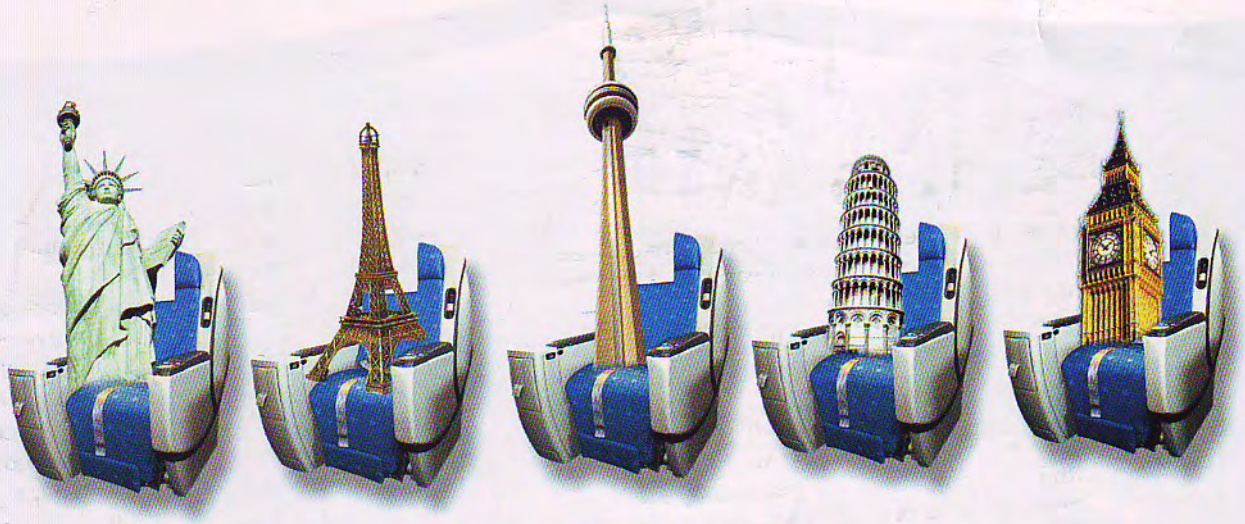

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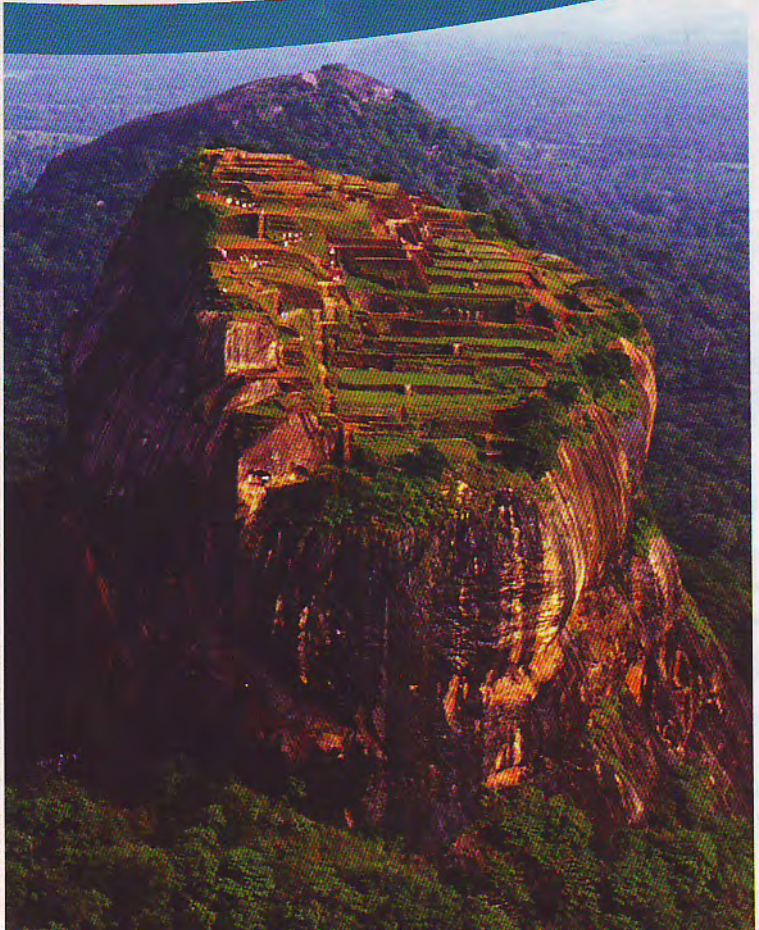

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